

Whose Independence?

In America each year, on July 4th the country celebrates its independence from the oppression of the British Empire. This liberating event is known around the world as the American Revolution, which set the New World free. The ideas of freedom and independence were fundamental to the founding of America. The desire to throw off a repressive and oppressive regime was profoundly accepted among colonies. Ironically, in the midst of these same enlightened peoples was an evil that stormed through the hills, valleys and plains of America, and that even shocked the British. The evil of slavery cried out for justice, beckoned for freedom and for liberty, and no one heard it. The revolution's power of freedom fell only on a selective group.

It would take another eighty-seven years and a Civil War before revolution's power purged the evil from the shores of America. January 1, 1863 is widely known for being the great day that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. What is not common knowledge is that this document only set free the slaves in the territories under Union forces. Slavery persisted in many other parts of America; most notably, Texas. It is well documented that slavery did not end until June 19, 1865. The last slave in America took his first breath of freedom 29 months later.

As most Americans remember their independence day annually, we must also remember the misfortune of those lost slaves in Texas. Each year, June 19th is celebrated as "Juneteenth" day. It is commemorated in cities across America like Detroit, Minneapolis, Washington D.C., Kenosha, Racine, Milwaukee, and most notably, Galveston, Texas. This day celebrates Black independence because on this date, federal troops arrived in Galveston and announced that all Texas slaves were free, ending the battle with slavery.

Each year thousands of people travel to Texas for a three-day celebration in the town of

Mexia. It was here, in 1898, that freed slaves bought thirty acres of land to commemorate the history and heritage of emancipation. The land now is the site of the annual three-day celebration. On this occasion, there are parades, cookouts, beauty and dance contests, and black churches offer up prayers of thanksgiving for their independence. Over the last decade, Juneteenth has gained in popularity, and all peoples are coming out to celebrate this humble day.

Sadly, this wonderful celebration has eluded many in America. Unaware of a history tainted with the blood of her own children, America must remember. The flags fly high on July 4th, giving life to patriotism. Everything that is “America” appears in its red, white and blue décor, which can be seen from house to house. These colors are worn as a badge of honor. But what about those faces peeking through these radiant colors? Don’t they deserve the same day of honor and patriotism? How can we honor those forgotten slaves if we don’t teach it in our homes or classrooms? The Son of God once said, “Only the truth can set you free.” Only the truth can wash away the pain of the past, and usher in true liberty among all Americans.

The next time the calendar rolls around to June 19, I hope that you will be cognizant of a separate “Independence Day” in America. Many strive to see that this day receives recognition, affirmation, and induction into the consciousness of all Americans. Blacks all around the country cry, “Whose Independence?” on July 4th. They do celebrate America’s freedom with cookouts, and by attending parades, but there is longing in their hearts. The longing for a united America, one in which all stories are told. An America that stands to admit its mistakes and seeks reconciliation for its atrocities. But until then, Blacks will cry, “Whose Independence?”

Michael Eric Owens