



## Juneteenth

By Susan Gill Orange

“[What does it all mean beyond a glad noise for Juneteenth Day?  
What does freedom, what does emancipation mean?”

—Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*

On a Saturday in 1865 on June the 19th, plantation owner Logan Stroud stood on the porch of his Texas home surrounded by more than 150 of his enslaved workers and pulled out a dispatch from U.S. Maj. General Gordon Granger. It was an order issued that very day from the Union Army’s Texas headquarters which read, “The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States of America, ‘all slaves are free’”. It also indicated that there was “absolute equality” of personal rights and that the relationship between masters and slaves was now to be that of employer and employee. Thus, the late compliance with Lincoln’s earlier 1863 proclamation on the freedom of slaves was finally the law of the entire land. The date would be recognized as Juneteenth commemorating both the month and the day in the blending of words.

But what did this mean to the countless former slaves that suddenly found themselves free? During the years 1936-1940, the Federal Writer’s Project (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/voices-remembering-slavery/about-this-collection/?loclt=blogloc>) sought to chronicle the voices of former slaves for posterity. Thousands of interviews and recordings were made with men and women now in their 90s whose remembrance of slavery was still fresh and vibrant. From these reminiscences we have received a wealth of primary source material from the people who lived through this extensive period of our history.

*Uncle Billy McCrea* was a slave on a Texas plantation as a boy. In 1940 at the age of 89 he gave a recorded interview recounting bits and pieces of how enslaved people lived. One of the most poignant and haunting recollections was his telling of how runaway slaves were punished, “Right at the creek there, they take them (runaways) and put them on... a log, lay them down and fasten the and whup them,” McCrea tells interviewer Ruby Lomax. “You hear them (runaways) hollering and praying on them logs.... Now I see all of that when I was a boy.”

Another former slave, Fountain Hughes, tells an interviewer in the 1940s, “We belonged to people. They’d sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that. Have a auction bench, and they’d put you on, up on the bench and bid on you just same as you bidding on cattle, you know...selling women, selling men.” After the war ended, he said, “We was just turned out like a lot of cattle. You know how they turn cattle out in a pasture? Well, after freedom, you know, colored people didn’t have nothing.”

The late arrival of the news of freedom to the Texas enslaved was a time of celebration despite the fear of the unknown and the uncertainty of what freedom would mean to a people who had never known it in this country. Yet that glorious message brought to a ravaged people on that long ago June 19<sup>th</sup> resonates even today where the meaning of freedom brings both rights and responsibility to all Americans.



**On Saturday, June 19, 1865, in Limestone County, Texas, plantation owner Logan Stroud stood on the front porch of this house to tell more than 150 of his enslaved workers that they were free. Photo: Historic American Building Survey. Prints and Photographs Division.**



**Uncle Billy McCrea, former Texas slave**