





BRIA

Bill of Rights In Action

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Emancipation Day: Past and Present

The holidays a country celebrates reflect a lot about its values, ideals, demographics, and of course, its history. In Australia, for example, the National Day of Healing, also known as Apology Day, is intended to acknowledge the harm and mistreatment suffered by indigenous Aboriginal people. In the United States, the Fourth of July commemorates the ratification of the Declaration of Independence; Presidents Day celebrates the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln; and Memorial Day honors those who have

perished while serving in the military.

Similarly, the way in which we celebrate holidays demonstrates society's understanding of their significance and the emotions associated with them. A holiday like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, for example, is often thought of as a "day of service" to commemorate Dr. King's dedication to fighting for the rights of Black Americans. Those who volunteer on this day might see themselves as honoring his legacy by volunteering to help others.

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Celebration of the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia by the colored people, in Washington, April 19, 1866" (cropped)



FREEDOM'S JOURNAL.

"RIGHTHOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION."

BY JNO. B. RUSSWURM.

NEW-YORK, FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 1828.

VOL. I.—NO. LL

THE COLORED AMERICAN.

SAMUEL E. CORNISH,
Editor.

New-York, Saturday, May 13, 1837.

PHILIP A. HELL,
Printer.

Combination image of *Freedom's Journal* co-editors Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm. The *Freedom's Journal* masthead of March 14, 1828, and the masthead of *The Colored American*, which was edited later by Cornish, from May 13, 1837.

The Juneteenth Holiday

In June 2021, President Joe Biden signed a bill to make Juneteenth, also known as Emancipation Day, a federal holiday. This new civic holiday is meant as a day to mark the end of slavery in the United States. Though several states already officially recognized Juneteenth, this federal designation elevated and confirmed its significance on a national scale.

Historically, Juneteenth commemorated the day that enslaved people in Texas finally learned of their freedom on June 19, 1865. On that day, Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, after traveling around the country to Confederate states, notifying enslaved peoples of their freedom. This was two years after the ratification of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln in 1863. No one knows how long it might have taken for these individuals in Galveston to find out about the abolition of slavery had the troops not reached them.

It is crucial to remember that the legal status of slavery was determined by states before the enactment of the

13th Amendment, which ended slavery in the entire United States (allowing only for "involuntary servitude" as a just punishment for a crime). It was ratified on December 6, 1865. Before that date, enslaved people gained freedom at different moments in time, often gradually, and with different stipulations and clauses to "phase" slavery out. For example, Pennsylvania had passed a law in 1780 that gradually ended slavery in the state, and Massachusetts passed a similar law in 1783.

Before Juneteenth

Before Juneteenth was made a national holiday in 2021, Black communities throughout the country commemorated the end of slavery on different dates. They did so with parades, church services, and musical performances. But how was emancipation celebrated by Black communities historically, *before* the American Civil War? We can look closely at the example of the State of New York.

New York passed a gradual emancipation law in 1799, but the law did not apply to all enslaved people in

the state. With another law in 1817, New York set the date for slavery to end completely in the state. That date was July 4, 1827.

In early 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, the United States' first anti-slavery newspaper created by Black Americans for Black Americans, was founded in New York City. John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish were its editors. The *Journal* chronicled discussions and debates within the Black community about how the abolition of slavery in New York state should be celebrated and commemorated. By looking at some of the letters written to the *Journal's* editors, as well as the *Journal's* own articles, we can get a glimpse of the varying opinions and concerns that existed at the time regarding how to commemorate the end of slavery.

One significant point of contention that was discussed in *Freedom's Journal* was whether or not the commemoration of the end of slavery should take place on July 4 or July 5. As noted, July 4, 1827, marked the date that the gradual emancipation law would come into effect. Because of this, some people believed that July 4



was a better day to celebrate, noting also that it coincided with Independence Day. Others, however, argued that abolition merited its own standalone day. They did not want to associate a celebration of the end of slavery in their state with a day to celebrate a nation where slavery was still widespread.

Another aspect of this debate centered on *how* emancipation should be celebrated. Some felt that a public procession might invite harassment or violence from white racists. In its place, they preferred a more “respectable” event, such as an oration.

In the end, there ended up being two celebrations: one on each day. *Freedom’s Journal* published an announcement stating that it was their “duty to state” that there would be two celebrations. The celebration on July 4 would not have a procession, but the celebration on July 5 would feature a procession, oration, and public dinner.

Coverage of the Celebrations

Similar to the debate about when the commemoration should take place, *Freedom’s Journal’s* coverage after the celebrations also reflected strong opinions. One *Freedom’s Journal* reader who wrote a letter to the board was critical of the newspaper’s coverage of the July 4th event. The letter was published on July 13, 1827. This reader, identified as “Auditor,” highlighted different aspects of the celebration that they felt the newspaper neglected to cover. They wrote about an oration given by someone named Mr. Hamilton. Auditor believed the *Journal* “has hardly done justice” to Mr. Hamilton. At the event, there was also a musical performance by one young female singer whom Auditor noted “thrilled the hearts of the audience.”

In an article about the July 5th event also published on July 13, 1827, the *Freedom’s Journal* reported on the day’s events. The author of the article wrote, “we cannot but express our satisfaction, at the great degree of order observed throughout the day.” This celebration was highly attended, with nearly 2,000 people participating in the procession. The article ended by noting that the day went off “without disturbance.” These statements echo the caution some Black New Yorkers felt about the potential negative attention such a public event might draw. In addition to the procession, a local abolitionist delivered an oration, and bands from across the city gave musical performances.

In these two instances, we see the different ways in which Black New Yorkers commemorated the abolition of slavery in New York. The discourse within the Black community around the questions of when and how the abolition of slavery in New York should be celebrated played out in the pages of *Freedom’s Journal*. These events were also moments for the community to discuss the continued push for abolition at the national level. It is important to understand that there was no single way to celebrate and commemorate the abolition of slavery. Likewise, there is no single way to celebrate Juneteenth today.

The emancipation commemoration events in New York in 1827 certainly were joyous occasions. However, many Black New Yorkers were concerned about the state of abolition across the nation and acknowledged the pain and suffering that the Black community endured under enslavement. They worried about discrimination, the lack of equal rights, and the threat of violence they continued to experience despite their status as free people. Thus, these commemoration events were just as much necessary gathering places to discuss next steps for the abolitionist movement as they were celebrations.

Writing & Discussion

1. In your own words, what do celebrations of national holidays say about our society? Give one example of a national holiday and describe what its celebration means.
2. What does establishing Juneteenth as a national holiday tell us about America’s values? What else should the government do to commemorate the abolition of slavery?
3. What were the concerns of Black New Yorkers in deciding when and how to celebrate emancipation in New York? Cite at least two examples described in the article.
4. Why was *Freedom’s Journal* such an important document of the emancipation celebrations in New York?

Author: Lisa Gomez is a writer and educator with over 10 years of experience working with students and teachers. She is currently a curriculum writer at the New York Public Library.

New York Public Library’s Center for Educators and Schools’ curriculum, “To Make Public Our Joy: Black New Yorkers Commemorating Emancipation, 1808-1865” covers this moment in time as well as important historical moments on the road to Emancipation both nationally and in New York, with an emphasis on the perspectives of Black New Yorkers. To access the entire curriculum, visit us at www.nypl.org/ces.



ACTIVITY: READING FREEDOM'S JOURNAL

As a warm-up, work with a partner to think about and answer the following questions:

What does it mean to celebrate? How do you celebrate special occasions?

How would you describe the difference between a *celebration* and a *commemoration*?

What public celebrations are you familiar with?

How do we, as a society, determine what holidays to celebrate? What do these celebrations indicate about the values of those who participate?

Using the selected *Freedom's Journal* newspaper articles [below and on page 5], form small groups of four students each. Your teacher will tell you if your group reads *St. John's Day* or the *Auditor's Letter* excerpt.

Read your assigned newspaper article. Within your group, use the following guiding questions to discuss your article. Be ready to have a spokesperson share your group's findings with the rest of the class:

1. What words are unfamiliar to you? Jot them down and look up their definitions.
2. Was there anything that surprised you about this article? Explain.
3. What 1827 celebration is the article describing: July 4 or July 5?
4. How is the newspaper article helping the public in planning emancipation celebrations?
5. Did the article raise any questions that you would like to research?

After hearing from a group that used a different article than yours, write a paragraph answering the following question:

What were the differences between the celebrations and why was there a difference in opinion over how to mark the 1827 emancipation?

St. John's Day excerpt:

Transcription (with some terms in bold defined):

We should before this have noticed the Celebration of the Annual Festival of St. John's Day, by the Boyer Lodge, No. 1, City of New York, but for the Secretary's delay in furnishing the Toasts. And as his avocations still prevent his complying with our requests, we proceed to inform our readers that, that intent, yet prosperous institution met in their **Masonic-Room** [men's social and charitable club], on the morning of the 25th **ult.** [a term meaning "of the previous month"] and moved in to Zion Church, where a large and attentive audience were highly entertained by a very appropriate and eloquent address from the Rev. B.F. Hughes, and by excellent Music. After which, the Brotherhood partook of an elegant Dinner. We are not members of the fraternity, and therefore know nothing of their mysteries. Yet from that very respectable institution, we anticipate the most happy result.

A large number of our brethren, who had deemed it proper to celebrate the final **Abolition of Slavery**

[the movement to end slavery] in this State, by a public Procession, assembled on the morning of the 5th inst. in the **vicinity** [surrounding area] of St. John's Park. The **procession** [a parade] was joined by several Societies from Brooklyn, together with a number of newly liberated slaves. The several coloured bands in this city and Brooklyn, were employed upon the occasion. About noon, the whole Procession, under the command of Mr. Samuel Hardenburgh, marshal of the day, took up the line of march, and after passing through some of the principal streets, proceeded to Zion Church, where an **oration** [a formal speech usually given for a special occasion] was delivered by Mr. *John Mitchel* Not having been present, we can say nothing of its merits. We cannot but express our satisfaction, at the great degree of order observed throughout the day. The procession was very large, numbering near two thousand, and notwithstanding the great concourse from the neighbouring places, the day passed off without disturbance.

"No Title." *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY), July 13, 1827, 6.



Auditor's Letter

Transcription (with some terms in bold defined):

FOR THE FREEDOM'S JOURNAL.

MESSRS: EDITORS –

I think you have hardly done justice, to Mr. HAMILTON'S Oration, delivered on the 4th **inst.** [a term meaning "of the current month"]. Without pretending to superiority of judgment, I cannot but think it merited a higher character, than that of a *plain, sensible piece of composition*. It indeed lacked a classical finish, and *one or two positions assumed by him*, might be objected to, but certainly few Orations exhibit more mind. It was distinguished throughout for originality and beauty and in some passages was truly **sublime** [beautiful beyond description]. He was peculiarly happy, in the tribute of respect and gratitude, which he paid to the founders of the **Manumission Society** [an organization of white New Yorkers for emancipation] in general, and to the memories of John Murray, jun., and Robert Browne.

This reasoning upon the inconsistency of men holding slaves, and at the same time declaring the most solemn manner, that they hold as *self-evident truths, that all men are created equal, and are endowed with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*, was masterly. I hope the oration will

be published. It was listened to with such interest, and has been spoken of in such strong terms approbation, that I am sure every one who heard it, would be glad to procure a copy. For myself, I was too much gratified to sit down quietly, and let the public suppose, as I feared they would from your notice that it was but an indifferent performance. It was indeed *highly creditable* to him, and to all the people of colour; and showed that if Mr. H. had had the benefit of a **liberal education** [a broad education, including the humanities, arts, and sciences], he would have ranked among the first class of learned men.

I think also, that the musical performance of the day, deserve honourable notice.

The pieces were well adapted to the occasion and performed, (considering the deficiency of instruments) very finely. The young woman, who sung the solos, has a voice exceedingly clear and powerful. The sentiments of the piece as sung by her, thrilled through the hearts of the audience. I understand she is not yet 16 years of age. She should be encouraged to cultivate her talents. No doubt with suitable instructions, she would make a first rate vocalist.

AUDITOR

Auditor. "Letter to the Editors," *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY), July 13, 1827, 2.

Standards Addressed

Emancipation Day: Past and Present

California History Social-Science Standard 8.9: Students analyze the early and steady attempts to abolish slavery and to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. (6) Describe the lives of free blacks and the laws that limited their freedom and economic opportunities.

California History Social Science Framework (2016), Ch. 16, p. 379 – Grade 12: Students may wish to participate in any number of Constitution Day activities on September 17. Students address the question What are key tenets of American democracy? Teachers may want to highlight the emergence of a free, democratic system of government alongside an entrenched system of chattel slavery that lasted for nearly a century. The question How have American freedom and slavery coexisted in the nation's past? reminds students of the parallel—and seemingly paradoxical—relationship.

C3 Framework Indicators (National)

D2.His.1.9–12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.12.9–12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.15.9–12. Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.

Common Core State Standards: RH.6–8.4, RH.6–8.10; RL.8.10; WHST.6–8.10.

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Sources

Emancipation Day: Past and Present

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About Teach Democracy

BRIA is published by Teach Democracy, a nonprofit, non-partisan civic-education organization whose offices are in Los Angeles, California. Learn more at <https://teachdemocracy.org>.

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