

Chicago, IL



Origins of Juneteenth

The history of Juneteenth in Chicago has many uncertainties surrounding when the holiday officially made its way to the city. Despite these uncertainties, it is documented that celebrations of freedom and emancipation took place at various times throughout the city's history. Some of the earliest Juneteenth celebrations in Chicago are documented as taking place in the late 1960s, after the holiday spread across the nation following the Poor People's March on Washington on June 19th, 1968. At the highly attended event, thousands of people were made aware of Juneteenth, the Texas-born holiday marking the official ending of slavery in the state following General Gordon Granger's declaration of Order No. 3.

Celebrations of Freedom in Chicago

Early Illinois “Emancipation Day” Celebrations

Chicago has a rich black history, particularly related to Emancipation events. It is noted that September 22 was recognized as the first Emancipation Day in Chicago, commemorating the day President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. Following the Civil War, African Americans in Chicago would come together for Emancipation Day celebrations in September, which included food, games, music, and dancing. Additionally, on January 1st, marking the day the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, Chicagoans would gather in churches and community spaces to honor the fight for freedom of black Americans.

Chicago Embraces Juneteenth During the Civil Rights Movement (1966)

In July 1966, leaders of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized an event known as "Freedom Sunday" as part of the Chicago Freedom Movement. The event was attended by approximately 30,000 people from across the country, including Dr. Martin Luther King, who served as the keynote speaker. In his speech, Dr. King declared Freedom Sunday as "Our Emancipation Day."

Juneteenth Officialized in the “Windy City” (1990's)

It is uncertain when Juneteenth was officially first celebrated in Chicago, but many attribute the resurgence of the holiday to writer and community organizer William Wiggins. In 1990, Wiggins, a Texas native, lived in Chicago at the time and he sought to bring Juneteenth customs and traditions with him to Chicago. He successfully organized a Juneteenth celebration at the Chicago Historical Society, which was covered by The Chicago Tribune. The article written about the event stated, "This year Chicagoans will have their own public Juneteenth celebration for the first time." Throughout the 1990s, Juneteenth spread across the state, and other cities hosted events and celebrations. The African-American Cultural & Genealogical Society of Illinois hosted an annual Juneteenth celebration in Decatur, Illinois, including a Juneteenth pageant. In 2002, Chicago Mayor Daley Jr. officially recognized the holiday in the city.

Trailblazers of Freedom

John W.E. Thomas

John Thomas was born into slavery in 1847, in Alabama. Being highly literate, he taught other enslaved people how to read and write during the Civil War. He moved to Chicago in 1869 where he started a school for blacks and owned a grocery store. During the period of Reconstruction he was elected as the first African American elected official in the Illinois as part of the Illinois House of Representatives. He proceeded to have a successful political career and legal practice.



Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells was born in 1862 in Mississippi during the Civil War. Her parents were politically involved during Reconstruction, which influenced her love for education. As a young woman, she pursued a career as a teacher after moving to Tennessee. Utilizing her knowledge and skills, Wells established herself as a journalist and activist dedicated to exposing the atrocities of lynching in America. After moving to Chicago, she met and married Ferdinand Barnett. Ida Wells-Barnett traveled the world, raising awareness about the lynchings of Black Americans and publishing works about their mistreatment in America.

Lorraine Hansberry

Hansberry was born and raised on the south side of Chicago. She was the first African American female playwright and author to have her work performed on Broadway. Her most acclaimed play, "A Raisin in the Sun," portrayed the impact of racism and segregation on Black Chicagoans.

Jessie Owens

Jesse Owens, was an Olympic gold medalists in Track and Field in 1936. He is known for his "Black Power" salute he displayed during the Berlin Olympics of 1936. Although he was not a native of Chicago, he relocated there following the end of his athletic career. He played a major role in the Chicago Boy's Club and other civic initiatives. Upon his death he was buried in Oak Woods Cemetery in Hyde Park, Chicago.

The Path to Absolute Equality

A City Made by Freedmen and Formerly Enslaved

In recent years, it has been officially recognized that the earliest founder of modern-day Chicago was a man of color. Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a native of Haiti with African and French ancestry, settled and established a trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River in the 1770s. By 1840, the city saw an influx of fugitive slaves from the South and freedmen from the Northeast. By 1860, there was a well-established black community in Chicago, with an estimated population of 1,000 black residents. During the period of Reconstruction, the population exploded as more African Americans rushed into Chicago, as Illinois was the first state to ratify the 13th Amendment. Chicago was considered a "promised land" for many black Americans, which resulted in more than 500,000 new black residents during the Great Migration of the 1920s.

A Black Cultural Revolution in Chicago

With the arrival of Black residents in Chicago, the city experienced a surge of black culture. Chicago adopted the southern sounds of Jazz and Blues and adapted them to create a distinctive Chicago-style genre. Music halls began to appear throughout the city, and local performers gained nationwide popularity. Artists such as Nat King Cole, Muddy Waters, Sam Cooke, Dinah Washington, Lou Rawls, and Chaka Khan are among the many musicians who contributed to Chicago's musical success.



Chicago, IL Freedom Festival, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Martin Luther King Jr. (pictured center), Al Raby, Mahalia Jackson 1966.

(Photo: Bob Fitch Photography Archive, Stanford University Libraries).

Chicago Freedom Festival

The Chicago Freedom Movement was launched with the Chicago Freedom Festival on January 7, 1966. Organized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, the event was also attended by several politically active celebrities including Mahalia Jackson, Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte. The goal of the campaign was to expand civil rights demonstrations into northern cities to combat racial housing discrimination and violence.



www.absoluteequality.org



Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman was the first woman of African American descent to earn an American pilot's license, as well as an international pilot's licence. She was known as "Brave Bessie" for her aviation skills and tricks. Her goal was to establish a flight school for black aviators. Coleman passed away at the age of 34 years old during a flight accident.



Barack Obama

Barack Hussein Obama II, trailblazed American politics when he was elected as the 44th President of the United States of America. Prior to serving as the first black President, Obama served as U.S. Senator of Illinois from 1997 to 2004. His career began as a community organizer, civil rights lawyer, activist, and lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School.

John H. Johnson

John H. Johnson is regarded as the most influential black man in publishing history. Johnson founded the Johnson Publishing Company in 1942, which headquartered in Chicago. His two publications "Jet Magazine" and "Ebony" elevated his business and earned him a place on the Forbes 400 list. Additionally, he owned Fashion Fare cosmetics, radio stations, and a television production company.



MONUMENT TO THE GREAT MIGRATION

EIGHTH REGIMENT ARMORY



BRONZEVILLE WALK OF FAME

SOUTH SIDE COMMUNITY ART CENTER



BLACK METROPOLIS DISTRICT

Historical Resources and References

Black History Month: Notable Leaders with Illinois Ties

<https://www.thecaucusblog.com/2016/02/black-history-month-notable-leaders.html>

"Our Emancipation Day": Martin Luther King Jr. in Chicago. Schlabach, Betsy. 05, April 2018.

<https://www.aaihs.org/our-emancipation-day-martin-luther-king-jr-in-chicago/>

Kemp, Bill. "Emancipation Day once Black community's July 4th." McLean County Museum of History, 21 May 2017.

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