

# Houston, TX



## Origins of Juneteenth

The history of Juneteenth in the City of Houston is closely connected to the announcement of emancipation announced a few miles south on June 19, 1865. Once liberated, many formerly enslaved men and women on Galveston Island journeyed inland to Houston to start new lives and seek opportunities. Those seeking a fresh start trekked over 50 miles from Galveston to Houston. The freed people who settled in Houston took with them their hopes for the future and continued remembrance of the feelings they had upon the first Juneteenth.

Today, Houston continues to celebrate Juneteenth with annual events hosted at Emancipation Park, parades, community and family gatherings, and educational opportunities throughout the city.

## Celebrations of Freedom in Houston

### Houstonians Celebrate Juneteenth

Following emancipation in June of 1865, large numbers of newly freed African Americans fled plantations in East Texas and Galveston, with Houston as their final destination. Freedmen created a settlement in Houston located along the southern banks of the Buffalo Bayou. Nestled in the swamp lands and floodplains, Freedmen's Town, later known as Fourth Ward, would be the home of notable founding "Black Houstonians" including Jack Yates, Richard Brock, Elias Dibble, and Richard Allen. These founding fathers of "Black Houston" wanted to place to call their own and worked together to purchase a 10 acre tract of land valued at nearly a \$1000 in 1872. The land was dedicated as a park, named Emancipation Park, and was used for annual remembrance day celebrations on Jubilee Day - later referred to as Juneteenth. It was due to the economic ambition of these freedmen of Houston and their dedication to their community that Emancipation Park exists today, as the first and oldest park in the state of Texas.

### First Juneteenth or "Emancipation Day" Legislation

In 1979, Al Edwards, a Texas State Representative, sponsored the first legislation to recognize June 19th or Juneteenth as a state-paid holiday in Texas. On January 1, 1980, Texas became the first state to establish Juneteenth as a state holiday. Al Edwards' work is still commemorated annually across the city through prayer breakfasts and celebrations in his name.

## Trailblazers of Freedom

### John Henry "Jack" Yates

Jack Yates was born into slavery in Virginia, but later became a successful businessman, community leader, minister, and educator. In January 1866, he founded Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, which was the first Black Baptist church in Houston. Yates was also a pioneer in education and volunteered his church to serve as one of the first schools for Blacks established by the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction. He was also one of the founders of Emancipation Park. After his death in 1897, Yates was remembered in Houston with a school named in his honor - Jack Yates High School, located in Third Ward. He is buried in the historic black cemetery, College Park Cemetery, alongside other notable black Houstonians of his time.

### Alexander K. Kelley

Born into slavery in 1847, as a freedman A.K. Kelly became a notable philanthropist, businessman, and railway employee. With limited education, he first worked as a railway porter and coach cleaner. Using his savings, he purchased property in Houston's Fifth Ward and was a founding member of one of the oldest black places of worship - Mount Zion Baptist Church. He was an investor in Houston's first bank for blacks and helped found Evergreen Negro Cemetery. Today, he is honored with his namesake associated with Kelley Street in Houston, and Kelly Court Housing complex.

### Political Titans: Barbara Jordan & Mickey Leland

Two political titans - Barbara Jordan and Mickey Leland were Houston natives. Both Jordan and Leland, were amongst the first black legislators to serve at the state and national level since Reconstruction. As leaders, they fought for social justice and minority rights in Texas, the U.S., and even abroad. Today they are remembered with the Barbara Jordan - Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University dedicated to advancing their work through public policy.

## The Path to Absolute Equality

### A City Incorporated

The city of Houston was established in 1836 by Anglo settlers who were seeking to claim land grants from Stephen F. Austin. When these settlers arrived, they were accompanied by a large number of enslaved Africans and African Americans. By 1860, there were over 1000 enslaved people in Houston. Most black people living in areas near Houston worked on plantations, cultivating crops like cotton and sugar. In contrast, those who lived within the city often worked in artisan trades or domestic jobs. Houston continued to have one of the largest populations of African Americans throughout the history of Texas.



Juneteenth Celebration at Emancipation Park

### Free Settlements and Black Communities Emerge

Immediately following Emancipation, black communities emerged across the Houston area. Freedman's town, once on the edge of the city along the bayou's edge, was one of the most notable black communities. During the century following emancipation, Houston became home to some of largest black communities in Texas including Independence Heights, Fourth Ward, Third Ward, Fifth Ward, Sunnyside, Acres Homes, and South Park.

### Great Migration to Houston

Houston was a symbol of hope for many during the years 1914-1945, as it welcomed over 44,000 new black residents. These families migrated to Houston from East Texas and South Louisiana to escape racial oppression and to seek better socio-political and economic conditions for themselves and their children. While some black migrants settled in established communities like Freedmen's Town and Independence Heights, many from Southwest Louisiana established new communities such as Frenchtown (1922) in Fifth Ward.

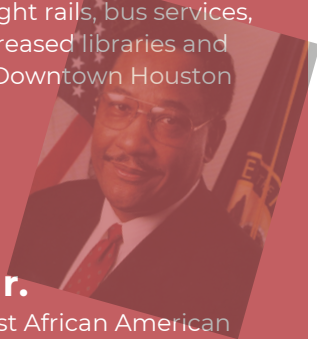
### Houstonians Battle Jim Crow

Houston was a major battle ground during the Civil Rights movement, having a long history of racial violence and segregation. In 1960, students from Texas Southern University organized the city's first protest, a sit-in at Weingarten grocery store. The demonstration sparked other a series of protests across the city, including boycotts and violent encounters between TSU students and law enforcement.



## Lee P. Brown

Brown was the first African American police chief in Houston and would later serve as the first African American elected mayor in Houston from 1998-2004. Lee Brown is attributed to making major advancements in the city's infrastructure, including light rails, bus services, and roadways. He also increased libraries and worked to revitalize the Downtown Houston area.



## Bernard Harris Jr.

Bernard Harris Jr. is the first African American man to go into outer space as a part of NASA's research team. Graduate of University of Houston, Harris was a qualified and trained astronaut who worked on the construction of space rovers. As an astronaut for over nineteen years, he has longed more than 438 hours in space and has traveled over 7.2 million space miles.

## Lauren Anderson

Native Houstonian, Lauren Anderson is best known as an American ballerina and dancer. In 1990, she became the first African American Principal Ballerina in the major dance company, the Houston Ballet. Since retiring in 2006, Anderson has dedicated her time to lecture and teach ballet classes at the Houston Ballet.



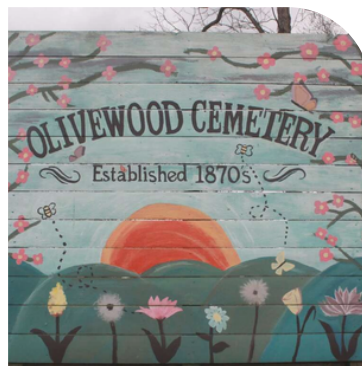
EMANCIPATION PARK

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NATIONAL BUFFALO SOLDIER MUSEUM

TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY



HISTORIC OLIVEWOOD CEMETERY

## Historical Resources and References

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<https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2023/06/19/juneteenth-jack-yates-and-the-power-of-fatherhood/>

### Houston Public Library Digital Archives

<https://cdm17006.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17006coll47/id/77/>



[www.absolteequality.org](http://www.absolteequality.org)