



**OREGON STATE SENATE**  
**900 COURT STREET ST NE**  
**SALEM, OREGON 97301**

**House Bill 2168** designates June 19 as an Oregon State Holiday commemorating the arrival on horseback of the news of the Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, Texas, in 1865 to the cheers of African-Americans then enslaved.



Basic historic information does not really do justice to the emotions involved here. Sometimes a picture is needed.

The Man in the center, Robert Johnson, with the hat and cane was 103 years old when this picture was taken in 1954. He was enslaved at birth. He and his parents and others who looked like him worked in the fields under the threat of death. They had no control of their family, access to food, shelter. They could not make any decisions of their own. His family was likely “sold down the river to the family of Jefferson Davis to work on the huge Hurricane or Brierfield Plantations to plant, chop, and pick the cash crop of cotton. He fought for and with the Union Army when it came through Vicksburg, Mississippi during the Civil War. He became a sharecropper and landowner after the Confederacy Lost. He raised eight children who became preachers or teachers. The woman standing next to my Great Grandfather, is his daughter, my Grandmother Mary Ellen, On the other side of him is my Father. The woman next to my Dad is my Mom. My brother, David, was born just five months later. My baby sister, Karla, is in my Dad’s arms. And that is me standing in front, likely trying to mentally move around the mathematical shapes in front of me. I still do that.

Great Grandfather Johnson was in Scotlandville, LA to see his grandson, my Dad, march with the other professors of Southern University in Commencement. It was a proud day for him. A family going from slaves in Mississippi to University Biology professor.

The Emancipation Proclamation news arrived in waves to the enslaved Black women and men of my family in Mississippi. Family stories say “Joy” was the first emotion. Next “skepticism.” Active and often deadly reactions followed against freed African-Americans by Whites fearful that they might be treated the way they treated their former slaves. “Hope” stood at the center of a possible future for my family.



The picture here is of my grandfather, my grandmother, my father, four of his siblings, and their next-door neighbor. They are standing in front of their sharecropper's house Near Hayti in the Bootheel of Missouri. My grandfather and grandmother both worked in the fields and as teachers, but in Mississippi, there were restrictions on teaching black kids to read. So they moved to Missouri where they could get books. Of course, the books were the books that had been thrown out by the white schools. But they were books.

The Hope continues to this day. So does the skepticism. The two dance together in our time. We need to understand how they fit together, and how they create a new world.

My family traveled the country attending science conventions and visiting relatives, conscious of, but not bowing to the Jim Crow laws that kept us from staying in motels in the North and South; not bothering with restaurants that might not



serve us. We stopped at every historic marker along the way. I suspect that it was also a way for Dad to rest. He made it a point to read out loud every marker so that we had in our memory his voice, the words on the marker, and a sense of being in a certain place at a certain time.

Celebrating Juneteenth is not just a legal historical marker. It is a memory that lives on in each of us.

The little boy holding the free reverend Ashton Jones sign on the far left of the picture above is me. My neighbors and my mom and my sister are visible in the picture as well. This was one of the many demonstrations that we were in Atlanta when I was growing up. Because the Jim Crow South still didn't recognize the idea of the Emancipation Proclamation.

A copy of the picture to the right hangs in my parents' house. They were most proud of it. Michelle Obama was the second first lady to speak at a Tuskegee University commencement. The first was Eleanor Roosevelt. She also, famously, rode with the Tuskegee Airmen that time. As it turns out my father, standing there on the right, was that both commencements. His sense of hope. My mom's sense of hope, (She's the one standing right next to Michelle Obama), is what keeps me going. That sense of hope keeps the community going as well despite the fact that there are folks who want to return to the deep conservative confederacy in whatever way they can. Voter suppression is one tool now used, along with fear, once again.



This year we faced the racism of the past and the racism of the present.



The murder of George Floyd in front of us, all of us, focused clearly the issues of racism and lack of personal safety. It was no longer a myth of “victimhood.”

The pandemic exposed huge holes in the fabric of our safety net for African-Americans and other minority/marginalized groups while pointing out the essential worker role praised but not compensated. The year gave us a marker, a touchpoint on other times. We now, via this bill, this proclamation, can learn from another time, and dedicate to changing the future in real-time without waiting for the news of equality to arrive on horseback.

I recognize efforts to resist the arc of history bending towards justice will always be there. This new holiday recognizes that the people of the State of Oregon, despite our past, can take the veil of ignorance away and each year celebrate Hope on Juneteenth. A marker to read and remember.



**KNOW YOUR HISTORY:** Memorial Day was started by former slaves on May 1, 1865 in Charleston, SC to honor 257 dead Union Soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in a Confederate prison camp. They dug up the bodies and worked for 2 weeks to give them a proper burial as gratitude for fighting for their freedom. They then held a parade of 10,000 people led by 2,800 Black children where they marched, sang and celebrated.

How important is Juneteenth? Here’s a picture you do not often see. But it gives a glimpse into how the Black Community felt about the hope for Freedom and the people who died to bring even the hope of that freedom to their descendants. “Memorial Day was started by former slaves on May 1, 1865 in Charleston, SC to honor 257 dead Union Soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in a Confederate prison camp. They dug up the bodies and worked for 2 weeks to give them a proper burial as gratitude for fighting for their freedom. They then held a parade of 10,000 people led by 2,800 Black children where they marched, sang and celebrated.”

In Oregon for the last 40 years, that I know about, the Peoples family, especially the legendary Miss Clara Peoples, kept alive the Juneteenth Celebration in Portland. Marsha Peoples Jack, Janell Jack, Jynnifer Robinson, Heather Cox, Maranisha Jacobs, Tim Hall, and Margaret Peoples held an event every year.

House Bill 2168 is one marker of Hope.