

Memorial Day and Juneteenth: The Past as Prologue

W.E.B. DuBois raised the issue in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pertaining to Negroes being the unsolved problem of white folks. The book was originally published in 1903, but it provides the framework to understand how the perceptions of the past are constantly shaping the narrative for the future. Rayford W. Logan, *The Betray of the Negro*, stated, “The problem of determining the place that Negroes should occupy in American life was the most difficult of the racial problems that confronted the American government and people after the Civil War” (p. 3). More recently, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, in [The Cross and the Lynching Tree: A Requiem for Ahmaud Arbery](#), examined how the sins of the past have become the prologue of modern-day lynchings. To understand the magnitude of the recently celebrated Memorial Day Holiday, as well as to appreciate Juneteenth celebrations throughout the country, one must rethink the narrative related to both celebrations as our past is the prologue for today’s practices and beliefs. The history of [Memorial Day](#) provides some interesting facts pertaining to the celebration. The Civil War ended during the spring of 1865, and “Decoration Day” became a day for locals to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers. “Decoration Day” later was renamed Memorial Day, and it became an official holiday in 1971.

[Juneteenth](#) celebrates the ending of slavery and dates back to 1865. The date, June 19th, records the arrival of Major General Gordon Granger in Galveston, Texas, in which he informed the enslaved that they were now free. It must be noted that it was two-and-a-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation signed by President Lincoln. The Emancipation Proclamation became official on January 1, 1863; however, the news of freedom did not reach the enslaved in Texas until 1865. Both the Memorial Day and Juneteenth Celebrations date back to the fights and struggles of folks of color to be free in the United States. The narrative that has been taught in history books is that of a race of inferior people, in order to justify the treatment of black and brown folks.

Hughes, Meltzer, and Lincoln (1983), dispelled the inferiority theory in *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*. They trace the history of a number of superior civilizations in West Africa long before the founding of America. These African cultures were operating with their own language, customs, procedures, monetary system, and trade. The authors cited research pertaining to thirty black men accompanying Balboa in 1513, as he discovered the Pacific Ocean. The narrative began to change, and a century later, Africans were being labeled as inferior, branded, and traded in Spanish-controlled American waters. In 1619, a cargo of twenty Africans on a Dutch ship, were traded in Jamestown, Virginia, for fresh provisions. The authors stated, “These twenty ‘negars’ were destined to become the first black slaves in English America.” The practice of

announcing the arrival of slave ships became popular by the “town crier” making public announcements in the center of the colonial ports.

The struggle of the black race continued after the original Juneteenth Celebration as the fight was only commencing around the “problem” as identified by W.E.B. DuBois and Rayford W. Logan. To fully understand “the problem,” one must trace the historical content of slavery. The intent is not to provide a history lesson, but a brief list of events that legalized the concept of inferiority of people of color. Hughes, Meltzer, and Lincoln (1983) reported the following facts:

- When the first Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, the Northern delegates contended that slaves were property, therefore should not be counted in apportioning representation.
- A compromise was reached: “Representatives and direct taxes shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons ... three-fifths of all other persons.”
- The slave trade was then extended for twenty years and Article XI, Section 9, of the new Constitution of the United States read, “The migration or importation of such person as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a tax or duty may be imposed on such importation.”
- And Article IV, Section 2, provided for the return of runaway slaves, “No person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall ... be discharged from such Service of Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.”
- Black gold shaped the invention of the Cotton Gin. In 1803, less than ten years after the invention of the Cotton Gin, more than 20,000 Negroes, many of them supplied by New England slave traders, were brought into Georgia and South Carolina to work in the cotton fields.
- As long ago as 1819, the South Carolina courts held that a Negro was a slave, or subject to becoming a slave was ipso facto a Negro.
- The Mississippi Supreme Court said that in the eyes of the law, “A Negro is prima facie a slave.”
- Civil War Timeline: Began, April 12, 1861- Ended, May 9, 1865

As Juneteenth celebrations commence, the call to action is to help change the lasting impressions of a cultural narrative that is not based on the true heritage of African Americans, but rather created institutional racism, system biases, implicit biases, and inequities.

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