

‘Sad and Joyful’: N.Y.C. Marks Juneteenth After a Month of Protest

Recent protests that have stirred a reckoning on racism helped bring thousands out to celebrate a holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

By **Nikita Stewart, Juliana Kim and Alan Feuer**

June 19, 2020

Thousands of people flooded New York City’s streets, parks and public plazas on Friday to celebrate Juneteenth, a holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States that until a recent wave of protests had not been widely recognized outside black communities.

Some participants — young, old, black, white, alone or with families — said it was their first time marking the date, suggesting that the demonstrations inspired by the killing in police custody of George Floyd had broadened into a national conversation in a country still grappling with its racist past and present.

“Moving forward it’s going to become a prominent tradition not only in my life, but in the lives of my children,” said Vladimir Clairjeune, 32, an airport worker from Queens, who was celebrating his first Juneteenth. “Today, we’re setting the precedent.”



Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

For much of Friday afternoon, peaceful marches moved down major thoroughfares in Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn as vast crowds knelt, danced and chanted, “No justice, no peace,” and “Defund the police.”

The demonstrations, which continued into the evening, unfolded in a city that has been the site of near-constant protests for several weeks and is still contending with the coronavirus crisis.

Other throngs, unswayed by the steamy summertime weather, stopped and gathered near City Hall, in Harlem and at Cadman Plaza Park in Brooklyn Heights.

In recent days, companies, organizations and several politicians have embraced Juneteenth, which has quickly gained support for becoming a national holiday.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo issued an executive order this week recognizing the date as a holiday for state employees. Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Friday that next year Juneteenth would become an official city and school holiday in New York City. Hours later, Gov. Ned Lamont of Connecticut issued an official proclamation designating June 19, 2020, as “Juneteenth Day.”

Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

“They can’t just stay home and watch it on TV,” said Melida Barbosa, a middle-school teacher from Queens who took the day off work and brought her teenage son and daughter to the family’s first Juneteenth event, in Jackson Heights. “You have to come out and be part of it.”

Cordell Cleare, a community activist and member of the Juneteenth Committee of Masjid Malcolm Shabazz in Harlem, said the group would hold its 27th celebration of the holiday on Saturday.

“I’m sorry that it took all of this, but I’m glad it’s finally being given some recognition,” Ms. Cleare said. “It’s sad and joyful at the same time.”

In one of the day’s first events, hundreds of people gathered under a Black Lives Matter sign at the Brooklyn Public Library, listening to a drum line and a DJ blasting Public Enemy’s “Fight The Power.” Among those in the crowd was Chris Legree, 64, of Brooklyn, who said he had celebrated Juneteenth privately before, but never publicly. Until now.

Amr Alfiky/The New York Times

“I’ve been asking friends of mine, ‘Is this the moment?’” Mr. Legree said. “I’m a foolish optimist by nature, but I’m old and mature enough to know people have to figure out how to cooperate to get into the power base of this country.”

Later, shortly after 7 p.m., the musician Jon Batiste took to a brightly painted upright piano on the library steps and performed a jazzy rendition of the Star Spangled Banner.

Raising his left fist in the air, Mr. Batiste called Juneteenth “the idea of us existing on our highest level” and said it was “only the beginning of a journey that we’re still on.”

After urging the crowd to vote and leading a chant of “We are done dying,” he returned to the piano to lead a singalong of “Amazing Grace.”

Earlier in the day, a motorcade composed of dozens of vehicles, some scrawled with slogans like “Black Lives Matter” and “Happy Juneteenth,” had made its way from Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn across the East River to Manhattan.

Recent Changes Sparked by the Protests

Updated June 22, 2020

- In New York, the City Council passed a bill that for the first time will require the police to reveal information about their arsenal of surveillance tools, some of which may have been used in recent days at protests in New York. Mayor Bill de Blasio and police officials have previously opposed the bill, but changing course this week, the mayor said he was now inclined to sign it.

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When the caravan reached City Hall, drivers of all races raised their fists and honked their horns at a crowd holding signs reading “Stop Police Crimes” and listening to Nina Simone’s voice over a loudspeaker.

“People are in the streets because people have had enough,” said Iman Essiet, an organizer of the City Hall rally, just one of the nearly 100 events scheduled for Friday. “This is absolutely the beginning.”

By 2 p.m., Cadman Plaza Park was filled with people and awash with the sounds of snare drums and tambourines. Standing in the crowd, Yvonne Mo, 32, a fitness trainer and a member of Asians for Black Lives, said she had come out to show support.

“I feel embarrassed that I never recognized or celebrated Juneteenth until this year because I didn’t know about it,” Ms. Mo said. “I feel like all Americans should know about this holiday.”

This year, Juneteenth comes after rolling protests against police brutality and systemic racism across the country that reached a peak in New York City about two weeks ago and still continue daily. Looting and violent confrontations between the police and protesters marred some of the early demonstrations, but the vast majority of New York rallies since then have been peaceful.

That was certainly the case on Friday, as the police seemed to take a light touch toward enforcement and there were no immediate reports of arrests.

In the crowd near the Brooklyn Public Library, Chris McCracon, 33, of Manhattan, said he had been celebrating Juneteenth for years and was hoping to make it “more mainstream.”

“It’s our moment to build from within to build out,” Mr. McCracon said.

Juneteenth celebrates June 19, 1865, when a Union general arrived in Galveston, Texas, and read aloud General Order No. 3, informing enslaved people there that the Emancipation Proclamation had freed them.

That freedom was not cut and dried. Slavery would not be abolished until the 13th Amendment was ratified later that year, and discrimination and violence against black people continued.

In an interview, Mary Elliott, curator of American slavery at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, read the order aloud and emphasized its concluding words: “Former masters and slaves” would become “employer and hired labor.”

“The Freedmen,” Ms. Elliott continued reading, “are advised to remain at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts; and they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”

“That basically says you’re free,” she said, “but you best know your place.”

The day should involve celebration, reflection and action, she said.

“I would hate for this moment to go by like, this is for the black people. No, this is for Americans,” she said. “It is very much an intimate holiday for African Americans, but stop and reflect on the meaning of freedom in this country and the application of it.”

Ronald E. Goodwin, history program coordinator at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, recalled wearing a Juneteenth T-shirt once when he visited San Antonio, his hometown.

His mother, he remembered, had recoiled.

“I always hated it,” he recalled her saying. The holiday made her remember segregation because growing up in her community, black people were only allowed in public parks for holidays like Juneteenth he said.

“Black Independence Day. Freedom Day,” he said. “All of that sounds great on a bumper sticker, but the reality is that a lot of people were not freed.”

“Just because you say I’m free doesn’t mean I’m equal,” he added. “There’s an element out here that will look at my black skin. That didn’t change in 1865, and there’s still a question of whether that will happen today.”

Desira Barnes, 36, of Brooklyn, observed Juneteenth throughout her childhood and recalled it as a joyous celebration of emancipation. In the wake of Mr. Floyd's death, however, she has discovered a new significance for the day.

This year, Ms. Barnes said, Juneteenth was a reminder that more work needed to be done.

"It's a time for more chains to be broken," she said, standing in the crowd at Cadman Plaza Park. "We're here to make sure it's just the beginning."

Melissa Guerrero contributed research. Aaron Randle, Nate Schweber, Daniel E. Slotnik and Emmett Lindner contributed reporting.