

Another Overlooked Day for Celebrating Freedom: The End of American Slavery

By John Vile, Ph.D.

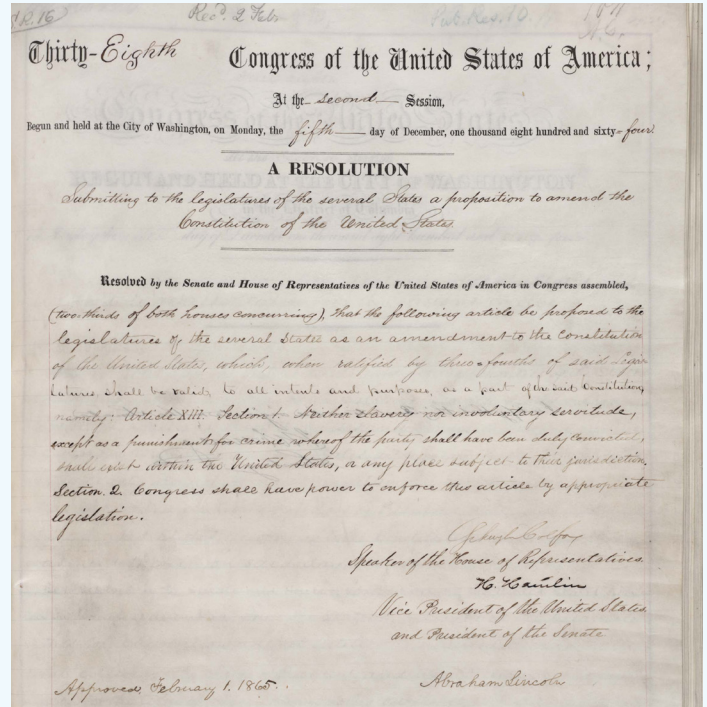
Beginning in 1942, Richard Robert Wright Sr. (1855-1947), a former slave who became a military officer, a college president, and a banker, laid an annual wreath at the Liberty Bell on February 1. He did so to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's signing of the joint congressional legislation, adopted the previous day, sending the Thirteenth Amendment to the states.

Lincoln's signature was superfluous since the U.S. Constitution does not require presidents to sign such amendments, but it was highly symbolic. It was especially so because his predecessor, President James Buchanan, had signed the proposed Corwin Amendment. Had it been adopted, it would have explicitly recognized slavery, its right to expand into U.S. territories, and the legitimacy of fugitive slave laws.

Wright laid his wreath in order to garner support to designate February 1 as National Freedom Day, which Congress approved, and President Harry S. Truman signed on June 30, 1948. It is considered to be a precursor to Black History Month, which was officially recognized in 1976. Ever since Congress designated the third Monday of each January in which Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday is celebrated (he was born on January 15, 1929) as a federal holiday in 1983, it has overshadowed National Freedom Day.

Recent events have brought national attention to yet another milestone in advancing freedom for African Americans, Juneteenth, celebrated on June 19. The importance of the date being that General Gordon Granger brought word to enslaved African Americans in Galveston, Texas, that they had been freed when Lincoln signed his Emancipation Proclamation. There is now a movement advocating for making Juneteenth another national holiday. One can only imagine the joy that African Americans shared in finding that they were no longer considered to be items of property and instead were to be recognized as human beings who could chart their own destinies. Such news is certainly worth celebrating.

Wright's annual remembrance of February 1 suggests another date worthy of remembering and celebrating. And, arguably, even more monumental, December 6, which marks the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment as part of the U.S. Constitution. Since the Emancipation Proclamation was an executive war measure that applied only behind Confederate lines, it essentially awaited Union victories before it could be enforced. This is why enslaved African Americans in Galveston did not even learn about it until almost



The Thirteenth Amendment bears the signature of Abraham Lincoln. | U.S. National Archives

two- and one-half years after Lincoln proclaimed it. The Thirteenth Amendment represented the will of two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-fourths of the state legislatures. Importantly, it abolished slavery throughout the entire United States and would require similar majorities from representatives who now represent voters of all races to repeal it.

February 1, June 19, and December 6 are all important dates in American history that should be recognized and honored. While setting aside one or more of these dates as a national holiday will certainly not address the central issues raised by the Black Lives Movement, it would be an important symbolic step. I believe, as the date that slavery really came to an end in the United States, that December 6 is perhaps the best claimant for a national holiday but appreciate both the cultural resonance and historical significance of Juneteenth and National Freedom Day.

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