

The Augusta Chronicle

Juneteenth celebrated in Aiken

Source URL: <http://chronicle.augusta.com/news/aiken/2010-06-18/juneteenth-festivities-celebrate-slaverys-end>

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Friday, June 18, 2010

Today is a day for celebrating black Americans' independence. Called Juneteenth, it is a celebration of the end of slavery and the Civil War.

On June 19, 1865, the slaves in Galveston, Texas, received the news that the war was over and they were free, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation became official Jan. 1, 1863. They were considered to be the last slaves to be freed.

"They started their own little Fourth of July, but instead of calling it the Fourth of July, they called it Juneteenth," said Jo-Anne Saunders, the development coordinator for the Center for African-American History, Art and Culture in Aiken.

The day became an annual celebration for all black Americans as a way to celebrate their heritage.

The center will hold a Juneteenth celebration at Aiken's Perry Park today.

The free event, which begins at 10 a.m., will include inflatables, a barbecue cook-off, gospel choirs, a health fair and a step show.

Saunders said the event is larger this year, with more than 20 vendors expected.

A similar celebration was held in Augusta last year, organized by members of the African-American Association. Illnesses plaguing members have kept the organization from planning a celebration this year, but president Edythe Diamond said it held its first one in 2005.

A typical celebration by the association includes a musical performance; an awards ceremony for youth in categories such as writing, dancing or music; and a poetry reading.

Members have already begun planning next year's celebration, Diamond said.

Other Juneteenth celebrations are harder to find, often limited to small groups who are interested in history, said Corey Rogers of the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History.

He said he believes there is an ebb and flow of interest in the holiday, as new generations become interested in preserving the stories of their ancestors.

"Who knows, in the next five or 10 years you may see a resurgence," he said.

The day's significance extends beyond a celebration of freedom and beyond the parameters of black culture, Rogers said.

"Even if the holiday went away, I think the importance of it is how important it is to know your family's history," he said.