The spirit of Juneteenth: The freedom to self-determine

June 19 2023

Juneteenth Celebration in Emancipation Park in Houston's Fourth Ward. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

To be able to self-determine is to be able to control one's own life and tell one's own story—an ability that people who were enslaved in the U.S. did not legally have before the Emancipation Proclamation (1862) or the 13th and 14th amendments. The ability to purchase land, not just

work it, represented Black Americans' hard-won and newfound ability to self-determine.

With that freedom, Black community members purchased Emancipation Park in Houston for the explicit purpose of celebrating Juneteenth. This day commemorates the moment when the Emancipation Proclamation was enforced in Galveston, Texas—2 years after it was issued.

Although, land ownership of Emancipation Park has since changed hands, it is still a historical embodiment of Black Americans' autonomy. Contemporarily, the spirit of Juneteenth and self-determination continue to be expressed in the work of Black scientists, and all who use their skills to contextualize the history of the Black community while conceptualizing and realizing their futures.

The application of modern scientific techniques is helping scientists gain a better understanding of the lifestyles, cause of death and long-term global and environmental impact of slavery. A few of these findings and ongoing research efforts are detailed here, along with a history Emancipation Park.

The Emancipation Proclamation and origin of Juneteenth

On Sept. 22, 1862 during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued a preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation, which abolished the practice of chattel slavery in states that seceded from the Union, if those states were still in rebellion as of Jan. 1, 1863.

While this was an important step to ending chattel slavery across the nation, the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to people enslaved in sovereign Native American nations, slave-holding states within the

Union or free states within the Union, like New York. Therefore, Confederate states, if they did rejoin, would not have slavery abolished.

Furthermore, people enslaved in Confederate states had little recourse to act on the knowledge that slavery had ended until Union soldiers arrived to enforce the proclamation. As a result, various emancipation days are celebrated in different regions throughout the U.S. The District of Columbia celebrates April 16, Tallahassee, Florida honors May 20 and Tennessee and Kentucky commemorate August 8 (known as the Eighth of August).

In Galveston, Texas, Union General Gordon Granger and his troops issued General Order No. 3 on June 19, 1865—2 1/2 years after the official issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. That is why Texans, and now the entire country, celebrate Juneteenth (a combination of June and 19th).

Land ownership

Although acts of resistance and rebellion occurred throughout the history of slavery in the U.S., Juneteenth brought about the political freedom needed to self-determine. Land ownership was an integral part of that process as demonstrated, in part, by the purchasing of Emancipation Park.

After receiving news of their freedom, many Black people from Galveston settled in Third and Fourth Ward, 2 of the 6 wards that divided Houston at the time, so that was a natural location for the park. Emancipation Park, which is located on 10 acres in Third Ward (unceded Coahuiltecan land) was purchased for about $1,000 in 1872 by Richard Allen, Jack Yates, Richard Brock and Elias Dibble with donations from community members.

A charter was created under the name Colored Emancipation Park Association (CEPA) with the purpose of purchasing this land for public enjoyment and celebration for Black people.

The importance of land ownership was communicated through Special Field Order No. 15. This order, issued in January 1865, made land available to newly-freed Black people through The Freedmen's Bureau.

However, the 400,000 acres of land that were confiscated from Confederate planters, then earmarked for redistribution, were given back by President Andrew Johnson in the Fall of 1865 to the slaveholders who previously owned the land. Still, land ownership among Black people grew exponentially in the 1800s and peaked in 1910.

By 1997, however, most of that land no longer belonged to Black people. This was the case for Emancipation Park, which became the only available park to Black people during segregation after it was donated to the City of Houston in 1916 in order to clear the debts associated with unexpected property taxes.

Today, land ownership among Black people remains a token of their ability to self-determine as documented by historian Adrienne Monteith Petty, Ph.D. Petty and her team conducted over 300 interviews with Black farmers from the South and their descendants, which are available as the "U.19. Long Civil Rights Movement: Breaking New Ground" project through the Southern Oral History Program.

These interviews contain information from Black people who grew up on 100 acres of farmland, owned land and rented land as sharecroppers and discussed discriminatory loan practices. These interviews provide insight into what land ownership meant to Black people, particularly as it relates to the ability to keep families together and earn income. Even though about 90% of Black-owned land was lost by 1997, landless

farmers still considered the ability to produce their own food a tenet of self-sufficiency, contends Petty in her book, "Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina since the Civil War."

Furthermore, books like "Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement," written by Monica M. White, Ph.D., reinforce this feeling about the desire land ownership and food production. It additionally centers the role of community and highlights contemporary discrimination that prevents land ownership.

These aforementioned scholarly works are significant in their own right; moreover, historical records and oral accounts are key resources in scientific study like that conducted at the Critical Ecology Lab. Critical Ecology is an emergent field of environmental research that "seeks to empirically and mechanistically define the social precursors and consequences of climate change and anthropogenic environmental harms." Scientists at the Critical Ecology Lab, led by ecosystems ecologist and biogeochemist Suzanne Pierre, Ph.D., are using oral histories of plantations in St. Croix to fill in gaps about land use and answer the following questions:

1. What unique impacts did the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade have on soil and plant communities?
2. Did plantation agriculture and the logic and system of slavery leave an ecological signature that can be detected in the present?

Answers to these questions can provide insight into social, political and economic systems that contributed to the current environmental crisis and empower marginalized communities to implement customized solutions.

Using spectrometry and eDNA to connect the past to

the present

Many states have a complex history that stems from their participation in the practice of slavery at one time or another. New York, for example, is home to the National Park Service's African Burial Ground, the nation's earliest and largest known Black American cemetery.

Members of the W. Montague Cobb Research Lab, including former Director, Fatimah Jackson, Ph.D., as well as alum and incoming Assistant Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at North Carolina State University, Carter Clinton, Ph.D., used modern scientific techniques to reconstruct the lifestyle of people buried in the African Burial Ground.

Portable X-ray Fluorescence (pXRF) spectrometry is a technique for chemical compositional measurement. Energy is directed toward a sample displacing the electrons in the elements. When the electrons are restored, the energy signature of specific elements can be quantified. Using this technique, the Cobb Research Lab analyzed the trace metals of 65 soil samples from the African Burial Ground and found interesting results related to strontium and calcium.

Strontium is a mineral found often in seafood and root vegetables, such as carrots and potatoes. Concentrations of strontium were elevated in the human remains, supporting the hypothesis that people buried in the site had a largely vegetative diet. Calcium was also prevalent in soils, and researchers determined that its concentration was dependent on several factors, including climate.

Calcium was the least abundant element measured in the study, and historical records implicated sea level rise for that phenomenon. Investigators proposed that increased atmospheric temperatures and rising water tables may be leaching calcium from the soil and human

remains. Calcium is an important soil nutrient so its removal from soil suggests a potential negative impact of climate change.

Forthcoming research by Clinton and scientists in the Department of Anthropology at Penn State uses bacterial DNA to characterize the microbiota associated with the humans at the gravesite to identify causes of death that are potentially due to bacterial pathogens.

Ultimately, this work with ancient and modern DNA will be used to connect Black people to their ancestors. Similarly, Jackson is currently working with a local Black-owned data company, QuadGrid Data Lab, to develop algorithms to reconnect Africans of the various diasporas with Africans on the continent.

The work that is being done in New York, and genetic research being conducted across the country, provide clarity about the lifestyle of a group of people who endured forced obscurity as a norm.

Emancipation Park today

Throughout its history, Emancipation Park has been a site of significance, self-determination, fellowship and recreation. Today, Emancipation Park is managed by a conservatory and is the only park in Houston with a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) site of memory designation.

It is also part of the Emancipation National Historic Trail. In 2017, $33 million was used to revitalize the park, and it currently has an aquatic center, baseball field, amphitheater, cultural center, fitness center, gymnasium, pavilion and more. Several events take place in the park, including the historic Juneteenth celebration, exercise aerobics and family fun days, and there are plenty of ways to get involved. Emancipation Park volunteers can be virtual ambassadors and tour

guides or help with fundraising, landscaping, special events, teaching, event planning and marketing.

Under the helm of its first executive director, Lucy Bremond, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic Emancipation Park Conservancy hosted virtual development courses and digital campaigns that provided meals, money and information to tens of thousands of people. Now, under the direction of Jennifer Spriggs, Emancipation Park continues to facilitate the self-determination of the community members it represents.

Celebrating Juneteenth

While applauding what this day means to so many, it is important to remember that all enslaved people in the U.S. were not freed on this date. Some African-Americans remained in forced servitude until the 1960s, and the 13th amendment states that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime...shall exist within the United States."

Still, Juneteenth is a communal holiday that commemorates the ending of slavery in Texas and can be enjoyed by spending time with friends, family and loved ones. Furthermore, donations can be made to mutual funds that support marginalized groups, groups that preserve the history of Black Americans and organizations that improve career outcomes for people that were formerly incarcerated. Rest and resource sharing are both ways to celebrate Juneteenth while embodying the values of freedom, autonomy, community and self-determination it represents.

Provided by American Society for Microbiology