

# Celebrating Freedom on Juneteenth

Inez Sadler



*“Juneteenth at Oak Bluffs” by Sonia Sadler. Used with permission from Inez Sadler.*

## PRE-READING:

1. What important event happened in the United States between 1861 and 1865? Share what you know about it.
2. Also, share what you know about U.S. slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation.
3. What is another name for the Executive of the United States?

On June 19 (“Juneteenth”), 1865, Union general Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, and issued General Order Number 3, which read in part:

“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Execu-

tive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.”

My great-great-grandmother Mariah Johnson was a slave during this period. She had come to Texas from Tennessee with her slave master in what they referred to as tent wagons. Mariah said that one day the “ole master” sent for the slaves to come to his house. Mariah did not want to go because she thought he wanted to whip them. She lagged behind the rest and stood behind a tree. After a little while, her mother came running to her shouting and singing that they were free.



“Jubilee” by Sonia Sadler. Used with permission from Inez Sadler.

The picture on the front cover, “Juneteenth at Oak Bluffs” (painted by my daughter, Sonia Sadler), symbolizes one of the types of celebrations

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that took place in Texas during my childhood in the 1940s. In our town, Lubbock, we celebrated Juneteenth with plenty of barbecue, ice-cream,

watermelons, and red soda pop. We got new play clothes, and we were so proud of them. There would be celebrating all over our part of town. We hardly ever celebrated the 4th of July.

Juneteenth was a big thing during my childhood. However, it became less important as time went on. I think it was because of integration and people wanting to “move forward.” During the 1990s, there was again focus on Juneteenth. Many people realized that our children need to know and celebrate that history.

Mariah Johnson was my mother’s great-grandmother. My mother was fortunate enough to know and spend time with Mariah and Cornelius Johnson (her great-grandfather). Both had been slaves. Thanks to this close relationship, our family has some oral history of what happened during slavery and at the time the slaves in Texas were freed.

Sonia had a passion for preserving her family and cultural history.

After a number of her older relatives passed away, Sonia decided that the stories they told would best be preserved through her art, especially her scratchboards. She knew the power of her heritage and wanted to embrace it artistically. Among her paintings in this genre is a series depicting the end of slavery,

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reunions, and Juneteenth celebrations. For example, the painting “Jubilee” shows former slaves celebrating their freedom. Sonia wanted others, especially youth, to understand that out of the darkest circumstances can come light, happiness, and even humor. She did not want this part of our history to be viewed with total disdain or negativity, because as a people who suffered and persevered, we have accomplished so much in spite of those circumstances, and sometimes because of them.

**Sources:** Handbook of Texas <tshaonline.org/handbook>; “The Overstreet Family Reunion Booklet,” 2012.



*Do an internet search of the artist, Sonia Sadler, and learn more about her.*

*Inez Sadler lives in Maryland. She is the mother of Sonia Sadler (1958-2013). Find more of her art at <sonialynnsadlerarts.com>.*

**POST-READING:**

**RESEARCH SOME OF THE HISTORY**

1. In the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln declared that all slaves in the Confederate states were free. Look up the date of the Emancipation Proclamation and compare it to the date that Texas slaves were freed. What might explain the difference?
2. Read and synthesize several sources about the Emancipation Proclamation. Did it free all the slaves? Explain.
3. What is the author talking about when she refers to “integration.” What time period is this? What social movements were active?

**THINK MORE DEEPLY ABOUT THE TEXT AND ART**

4. According to the author, what does Sonia Sadler celebrate with her paintings?
5. Study the images and discuss the artist’s message. What details does she incorporate to express herself? What drawing and storytelling techniques (color, style, content) does she use to convey her message?
6. Unpack the paragraph that starts “Juneteenth was a big thing during my childhood.” What changes happened in how Juneteenth was celebrated? Explain the sequence of events.

**HOW DO YOU CONNECT TO THE STORY?**

6. Have your ancestors struggled for freedom? If so, how do you celebrate it?

**MECHANICS AND VOCABULARY**

7. Look at the word “heretofore” on the first page. Based on the context, what does it mean? How would you say it in plain English?
8. Translate this excerpt of the General Order on p. 1 into plain English. Why are legal documents written like this? What strategies can you use to interpret them?
9. Using context clues, what do you think these words mean: lagged, heritage, genre, depicting, jubilee, disdain. Check your answers by looking them up in a dictionary or online.
10. Find sentences that start with the subject of the sentence. Then find sentences that start with a clause or dependent phrase. How does it affect the writing to mix up the format of the sentences in this way? Notice which sentences you particularly like or that resonate for you. What about them works? Are there any that don’t work so well? How would you re-write them?
11. *Slave vs. enslaved person:* Some people argue it is dehumanizing to use the term “slave.” Using “enslaved person” reminds us that this was a *person* and that being a slave was not the sum total of his/her existence. What do you think? Google the terms and read various opinions on the question.

**NOTE:** This article is the same as the one that appeared in the print version. It is Level 10. A Level 4 and Level 7 version are also available on our website.