Ruleville, Mississippi

Located in Sunflower County, Ruleville became the target of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella organization of national and regional groups engaged in the freedom struggle in Mississippi. Established in 1962 to capitalize on the efforts of the **Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee** (SNCC), the **Congress of Racial Equality** (CORE), and the **NAACP**, it focused on voter registration and education. The COFO targeted Ruleville, a town of approximately 1,100 people, because black Rulevillians were drawn to the Mississippi freedom struggle there that was the result racial oppression. It was also the target of the COFO because Ruleville was the home of Senator James Eastland, the ranking Democrat in the U.S. Senate.

As early as 1960, blacks attempted to register at the Ruleville courthouse, but the highway patrol turned them away. In 1962 local resident Celeste Davis started citizenship classes under the sponsorship of the SCLC; Ruleville's mayor quickly suggested that those attending the citizenship classes would be given a one-way ticket out of town. True to his word, Mayor Charles M. Dorrough fired Davis's husband, Ruleville sanitation worker Leonard Davis, because of her attendance at the citizenship classes. In addition, Marylene Burks and Vivian Hillet of Ruleville were later severely wounded when an unidentified assailant fired shots through the home of Hillet's grandparents, who were active in the voter registration drives.

Notwithstanding threats and physical abuse, women were prominent in the Mississippi freedom struggle. **Fannie Lou Hamer**, for one, is the best known woman leader out of Ruleville. On August 31, 1962, Hamer was fired from her timekeeping job on the Marlow Plantation outside of Ruleville, the same day she attempted to register at the Sunflower County Courthouse. After enduring a brutal jail beating, Hamer became the county supervisor for citizenship training and later an SNCC field secretary. In 1964 Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention.

Linda T. Wynn

Freedom Celebrations

Black History Month/Negro History Week (est. 1926)

Negro History Week was first introduced in 1926 as a means of commemorating African American history when American history included primarily slavery as the participation of African Americans. **Carter G. Woodson** and several other colleagues saw a need to preserve the culture of their race and to make sure that persons were informed of the many contributions and accomplishments that were a part of their history. In 1912, Woodson formed the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Shortly after the formulation of the group Woodson began publishing, in 1916, the *Journal of Negro History*. As Woodson worked on matters for the organization and served in various roles in academia, he acknowledged that the average African American knew very little about their history and culture. He also knew that whites saw little value in knowing African American history and African Americans also had little interest in their past due to the indoctrination of inferiority and the humiliation surrounding the experiences of slavery. To resolve this glaring concern, Negro History Week was initiated in 1926 as a time to celebrate and commemorate African American leaders. Because **Frederick Douglass**, Abraham Lincoln, and **Booker T. Washington** all had birthdates in February, a week was selected that was in close proximity to those dates. Materials were published by the association to support lectures, exhibits, and curriculum development for Negro History Week. The celebration was so well received that it gained national acclaim. In 1976, during the

nation's bicentennial, Negro History Week was expanded to Black History Month. The annual celebrations focus on a specific theme; it 2008, that theme celebrated multiculturalism—a key concern that Woodson had early on.

Lean'tin L. Bracks

June 19 celebrations reinforce the idea that the Emancipation Proclamation did not bring immediate freedom to American blacks.

Juneteenth

A portmanteau of the words June and nineteenth, Juneteenth is considered one of the oldest known celebrations commemorating the end of the peculiar institution of slavery in America. Two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, also known as the Day of Jubilee, that became effective on January 1, 1863 (which theoretically freed only those slaves in states under the control of the Confederacy), Union General Gordon Granger's General Order Number Three finally emancipated approximately 250,000 slaves from thralldom in Texas. In addition to the slaves in Texas, those held in involuntary servitude in the states of Kentucky and Delaware were among the last to gain freedom. The few hundred slaves in Delaware and the tens of thousands of slaves in Kentucky had to wait until the **Thirteenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in December 1865 before they were freed. This tardy emancipation gave rise to the enduring American black celebration of Juneteenth.

The news of their freedom was slow to reach many slaves; plantation owners read the proclamation to their slaves over the course of several months following the end of the **Civil War**. The news evoked a range of celebrations. In Austin, the state capital of Texas, Juneteenth was first celebrated in 1867 under the direction of the **Freedmen's Bureau**; it became part of the calendar of public events by 1872. Juneteenth in Limestone County, Texas, gathered "thousands" to be with families and friends. At one time 30,000 blacks gathered at Booker T. Washington Park in Limestone County, Texas (also known as Comanche Crossing), for the event.

The modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s reinvigorated Juneteenth celebrations, as many African American youths linked the freedom struggle to the historical struggles of their ancestors. Student demonstrators involved in the Atlanta civil rights campaign of the early 1960s wore Juneteenth freedom buttons. In 1968 Juneteenth received another regeneration through the **Poor People's March on Washington,** when the Reverend **Ralph D. Abernathy** called for people of all races, creeds, economic levels, and professions to come to the nation's capital to demonstrate support for the poor. At the end of the 1970s, Representative Al Edwards, a Democrat from Houston, introduced a bill to make Juneteenth a state holiday. The Texas legislature passed the bill in 1979, and Republican Governor William P. Clements Jr. signed it into law.

Texas made Juneteenth an official holiday on January 1, 1980, and it became the first state to grant Juneteenth government recognition. Several states have since issued proclamations recognizing the holiday, but the Lone Star State remains alone in granting it full state holiday status. Today, Juneteenth is promoted not only as a commemoration of African American freedom, but also as an example of self-development and respect for all cultures. June 19 celebrations reinforce the idea that the Emancipation Proclamation did not bring immediate freedom to American blacks, but that true freedom was a protracted struggle lasting many generations.

Linda T. Wynn