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## Juneteenth and Slavery in Brooklyn

A long forgotten story of bondage and liberation retold through art and revived traditions.

By [Jonathan Mandell](#) | [Email the author](#) | June 17, 2011

Pia Murray did not know what Juneteenth was until she left her Crown Heights home for college in Oberlin, Ohio, a town that had been one of the final stops on the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves. Since 1995, Oberlin has annually celebrated Juneteenth, the day marking the end of slavery in the U.S.

Brenda Brunson-Bey had known about Juneteenth all her life when she moved from Augusta, Georgia to Brooklyn, although she knew it by a different name; her community called it Family Day.



“It was almost a hush-hush thing,” says Brunson-Bey, the owner of the Tribal Truths Collection store on South Oxford Street, who believes the African-Americans in her hometown had celebrated with a picnic and holiday festivities every year for generations.

As far as she knows, there were no Juneteenth celebrations anywhere in Brooklyn until 2000, when she herself decided to create one in Fort Greene. Some 150 people attended — a few actually knew what Juneteenth was — and an annual tradition was born.

Last year, the Fort Greene Juneteenth Arts Festival attracted more than a thousand people.

“We hear less and less ‘What is Juneteenth?’ and more and more ‘How are we going to celebrate it this year?’” says Spring McLendon, who along with Brenda Brunson-Bey, is a member of the Cooperative Culture Collective that organizes the Fort Greene festival.

Co-producing the event this year is the dance troupe Urban Bush Women, with Murray serving as program manager. This year, the festival will be full of music and dance performances, film screenings, museum exhibits, presentation of community awards and historic tours.

Juneteenth celebrations have spread throughout Brooklyn (see for example, [Soul of Brooklyn Week](#)) and [throughout the U.S.](#)

The Fort Greene festival takes place every year on the Saturday closest to June 19 — the date in 1865 when Union Army Gen. Gordon Granger arrived in Texas with his regiment and proclaimed that all slaves in the U.S. were free. This was some two and a half years after

President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, a document that the Confederate states had ignored.

When Brunson-Bey was growing up “a lot of black folks thought slaves were freed on July Fourth,” she said. “There were so many things that happened that were never recorded.”

Actually, the slaves were freed on the Fourth of July – in New York State, that is.

July 4, 1827 was the culmination of an emancipation process that took almost three decades. As early as March 1799, the New York State Legislature passed a law that declared that any child born to a slave after July 1799 would be considered free — except they weren't really; they had to remain a “servant” of their mother's owner until they were in their 20s.

The convoluted legislation was enacted largely to placate the farmers of Brooklyn. It may be shocking to learn that at the time, according to the Brooklyn Public Library, [Brooklyn had the highest proportion of slaves](#) of any area in the North, thanks in part to farmers such as Robert Benson — whose farmland became Bensonhurst — who used them as agricultural workers.

However, the majority of Brooklyn slave owners used their captives as household servants.

Information about slavery and abolitionism in Brooklyn is sprinkled in exhibitions throughout the Brooklyn Museum.

“It's not obvious, but if you look for it, it's here,” says Kevin Stayton, the museum's chief curator, as he walks past the institution's long-standing exhibition of a house built around 1775 by Nicholas Schenck in what is now the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. It was a household with slaves.

On another floor, Eastman Johnson's 1862's “A Ride for Liberty -- The Fugitive Slaves” is said to be one of the few paintings at the time directly depicting the plight of the slaves. Based on what Johnson said was something he witnessed directly, it shows a black family desperately riding a horse to make it through the Union lines and to freedom.

There is a punch bowl from 1792 used on a Hudson River packet boat in which is carved an abolitionist message: “Freedom To The Slave. GW.”

Elsewhere in the collection, sculptor Hiram Powers' “The Greek Slave” is a nude woman in manacles carved in marble in what is considered to be an abolitionist statement making the connection between the horrors of the Turks enslaving the Greeks with the contemporary scourge of American slavery.

Current exhibitions by artists Skylar Fein (“Black Lincoln for Dooky Chase,” which overlays a silhouette of Abraham Lincoln with a menu from a New Orleans soul food restaurant) and Kara Walker continued the conversation about slavery into the 21st century.

Walker, who is well known for her silhouettes of historically taboo images, said “I find that I am rewriting History, trying to make it resemble me, Kara (and me, negress) but doing it in little bits and pieces.”

<http://fortgreene.patch.com/articles/juneteenth-and-slavery-in-brooklyn>

But the most startling object connected to slavery in the Brooklyn Museum's collection may be a wooden walking cane, carved with tiny scenes in bands from bottom to top.

In the first band at the bottom, an image of invaders carrying crosses to enslave Africans can be seen. Then there is a slave ship traveling to America. A female figure brandishes a sword; an eagle holds a banner inscribed "Liberty"; Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation. At the very top, a man raises his hands in celebration after being freed from a whipping post, holding a banner that reads, "Be it known that all men shall be free!"

The museum bought the cane in 1996 from a collector. Nobody knows the identity of the artist, undoubtedly an ex-slave, who with such painstaking care carved in miniature the history of slavery and liberation.

*The [11th annual Fort Greene Juneteenth Arts Festival](#) will take place at Cuyler Gore Park on Sat., June 18 between noon and 6 p.m. All activities are free.*