June 19, 2020

Dear Members of the HSAS Community:

Although President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863, there were many parts of the country in which the order either did not apply or could not be enforced.

On June 19, 1865, General Gordon Granger, accompanied by Union troops, entered the city of Galveston, Texas. He announced the end of the Civil War and issued General Order No. 3, which read in part:

“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer.”

The newly freed men and women celebrated and, the following year, proclaimed June 19 as “Jubilee Day.” Over time, the event became known as “Juneteenth.”

While Juneteenth is intended to be a happy day that celebrates freedom and the achievements of African Americans, I urge you to re-read General Granger’s order and realize that our nation has not yet fulfilled its promise. Though slavery was formally abolished by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865, we are far from having achieved “an absolute equality of rights and rights of property.”

On this Juneteenth, I send you the words to “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” which is often called the Black National Anthem and sung on days such as this. It was written by James Weldon Johnson, a school principal (yay for principals!) who went on to serve as the first black professor at NYU, as a diplomat in Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, and eventually as a leader of the NAACP. His brother John Rosamond Johnson set the poem to music. It was first performed on February 12, 1900, in honor of Lincoln’s birthday.

Lift ev’ry voice and sing
’Til earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on ’til victory is won
Stony the road we trod
Bitter the chastening rod
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered
Out from the gloomy past
Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast

God of our weary years
God of our silent tears
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light
Keep us forever in the path, we pray
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee
Shadowed beneath Thy hand
May we forever stand
True to our God
True to our native land

On this Juneteenth, 2020, I encourage you to reflect both on the path that has brought us to the present and on the work that we still have to do in our country, in our city, and at our school.

Best regards,
Alessandro Weiss

You can read more about the history of Juneteenth at these sites:

http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2020/jun/18/juneteenth-african-american-holiday/ and


You can learn more about the history of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” at these sites:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38sxYtHRGGw and