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### Celebrating Juneteenth

Lewis Shepherd

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Photo 1 Ouachita's Multicultural Student Programs Gospel Choir performs in Berry Chapel. Lead photo by Hannah Adamson

For immediate release

**Celebrating Juneteenth**

*By Lewis Shepherd*

June 10, 2024

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at [comm-mark@obu.edu](mailto:comm-mark@obu.edu) or (870) 245-5206.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. -- Today we pause to celebrate one of the most recently acquired federal holidays; yet, it has been in the making for 156 years. What created the first Watch Night Service was the same event that declared all African Americans free from bondage. That service was held on Dec. 31, 1862, just a few hours before midnight.

The purpose of this initial Watch Night Service was to pray, sing and fellowship, as people who were in bondage for so many years would gain their freedom on Jan. 1, 1863, by way of the Emancipation Proclamation. Today, there are African American congregations that still celebrate this tradition, and with fervor and thanksgiving.

While the Emancipation Proclamation became effective that day, it could not be implemented in those states still under Confederate control. The last Confederate state to receive the announcement that slavery had ended was Texas.

It was Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger who arrived in Galveston towards the end of the war to announce slavery had ended. That was accomplished June 19, 1865. For many, the endeared term “Juneteenth” — a combination of June and nineteenth — was birthed.

For the next century and a half, this obscure celebration remained unobserved in mainstream America and even in some African American communities. But one lady, the “Grandmother of Juneteenth,” Opal Lee, was determined to make Juneteenth a federally recognized holiday.

Opal Lee was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on Oct. 7, 1926, and she still lives there today. In her drive for this recognition, she secured more than 1.5 million signatures to present to President Joe Biden. And on June 17, 2021, her dream became reality as President Biden signed the proclamation and made it official.

While we celebrate a difficult part of the history of America, we must remember the words of the prolific poet and author Katharine Lee Bates who wrote, “America! America! God shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!”



*Dr. Lewis Shepherd is vice president for community & intercultural engagement at Ouachita.*