

The Delray Democrat

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President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. with an effective date of January 1, 1863. Enslaved Texans would not learn of their liberation for nearly two and a half more years, on June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas.

His soldiers circulated through town reading an order informing the populace that henceforth there would exist “an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.” Now, 260 years later, descendants of the formerly enslaved are still waiting.

The Unrealized Promise of “Absolute Equality”

Since 1865, there have been brief periods when absolute equality seemed to be on the horizon, only to be brutally squashed.

The first such period was the Reconstruction Era that followed ratification of the Civil War Amendments: the Thirteenth Amendment formally ended slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship rights and equal protection of the law to anyone born in the United States (that’s the one that Donald Trump says doesn’t say what it says); and the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited the states from denying or abridging the right of US citizens to vote “based on race, color, or past servitude.”

Formerly enslaved people were elected to local, state, and national offices. At one point, 15% of the office holders in the South were Black, a higher percentage than in 1990. The backlash was swift and sustained, launching a century of terrorism and oppression.

Paramilitary groups of heavily armed Civil War veterans attacked Republican officeholders and suppressed the Black vote through violence and intimidation. Democrats ran nakedly racist races, winning elections by framing the choice as between [“white supremacy” or “Negro rule.”](#)

After federal troops left the South, the losers of the Civil War regained control of their legislatures. They passed a series of “Jim Crow” laws that enforced segregation and amended their Constitutions to “legally” disenfranchise Blacks.

And they rebranded, creating and perpetuating the lie that the Civil War was about “States’ Rights.” The only “States’ Right” at issue was the right to own another and persecute another human being,

In 1896, in one of the most shameful decisions in its history, Plessy v. Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of segregation, provided that the separate facilities were “equal”

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), June 2025, page 1.

in quality. Anyone with eyes could see they not.

It took over 60 years for the Court to rule that “separate but equal” is unconstitutional as applied to education. Even then, *Brown v. Board of Education* did not explicitly overrule *Plessy*, as it ignored segregation in other contexts.

And *Brown* had only limited impact on school segregation because towns across the South created inexpensive private schools to keep Whites from having to attend integrated schools. According to a 2020 [study](#) by the National Center for Education Statistics’ National Assessment of Educational Progress, Black children are “five times as likely as white children to attend schools that are highly segregated by race and ethnicity” and more than twice as likely to attend “high-poverty schools.”

It was another decade before Congress dismantled de jure segregation by passing the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. De facto segregation is still alive and sick.

Reaction to these laws led directly to Nixon’s election, Reagan Democrats, Northern racism (exposed only when integration threatened their de facto segregation).

Barack Obama

The final era of dashed hopes began with the election of Barack Obama and the ludicrous claim that we had become a “colorblind” society. What actually happened was that the election unleashed an unapologetic racism not expressed since the heyday of Bull Connor and George Wallace.

President Obama may have been right when he said “things do get better,” but that was before things became a whole lot worse as Donald Trump was elected (and re-elected!).

So we celebrate Juneteenth with the same mixture of jubilation and solemnity that attended the earliest celebration. We will know that we have arrived at “absolute equality” only when, as Bob Marley sang, “The color of a man’s skin is of no greater significance than the color of his eyes.”