

**A** humming chorus of metallic engines echoed across the intersection of 22nd and Strand in March as a cadre of Kelly-green cherry pickers—each holding a painter aloft—bobbed and weaved in the air. There, under the gaze of smartphones and video cameras, a gray wall of the Old Galveston Square building was being transformed into the island's most consequential mural, *Absolute Equality*, in preparation for a Juneteenth debut.

"This may not be in a history book, but history is being made as we bring this mural to life," says its artist Reginald Adams.

Juneteenth, the oldest nationally commemorated celebration of emancipation in the U.S., has deep roots in Galveston and this site in particular—here, in a former office building and warehouse, a document was signed that helped free enslaved Texans once and for all.

Though it's a long-shared belief that Texans didn't learn about the Emancipation Proclamation until two and a half years after the rest of the nation, that simply isn't true. *The Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph* and more newspapers from the time prove Texas leaders knew of Lincoln's orders shortly after he signed them in September 1862, they just deliberately defied them since Texas was a Confederate stronghold.

That ended on June 19, 1865, when Gen. Gordon Granger arrived on the shores of Galveston to assert Union control and enforce the Emancipation Proclamation. He set up headquarters in the Osterman Building and established General Order No. 3—today also known as the Juneteenth order—which stated, in no uncertain terms, all enslaved peoples were free.

"What was key about the Juneteenth order was not that it was new news," explains Civil War historian Edward Cotham Jr., author of *Juneteenth: The Story Behind the Celebration*. "The Emancipation Proclamation said you were free; the Juneteenth order meant that you were free."

The Juneteenth order spread quickly, reaching Houston the very next day. A year later, on June 19, 1866, Galveston's Black community celebrated "Freedom Day," (Houston also celebrated that day) beginning a tradition that would continue for generations on the island and beyond the borders of Texas, known as Juneteenth. Despite the importance of the day, and recent attempts to make it a national holiday, Juneteenth went largely unnoticed by

the greater American consciousness for more than 150 years.

In 2014, Galveston historian Samuel Collins III, whose own ancestors were freed as a result of the Juneteenth order, raised funds and installed a historical marker at the former Osterman Building—ravaged by Hurricane Carla and razed in the '60s—but few people ever stopped to read it. Then, last year, amid the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and Houstonian George Floyd and massive protests over civil rights, Collins noticed a change. "All of the sudden, Juneteenth just exploded in popularity. Everybody was saying, 'I celebrate Juneteenth,' and, 'It's Juneteenth, not the Fourth of July!'

He also noticed the large, blank wall behind his historic marker and felt a lightbulb go on—why not memorialize the site in a more eye-catching way? After securing permission from the building's owners, Mitchell Historic Properties, Collins formed the Juneteenth Legacy Project and commissioned Adams, already familiar with his work.

**I**n fact, among Adam's 350 public art installations over a 25-year career in Houston (he's originally from Wyoming), his vibrant Bayou City visual histories—murals, glass and tile mosaics, and sculpture—are known to amplify Black voices and shine a light on overlooked stories. He worked on Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in the '90s and on the 2000 Mickey Leland Memorial Park. In 2006, he rose to fame with mosaic mural *Fruits of the Fifth Ward*, which pays tribute to one of Houston's oldest African American neighborhoods and the influential figures it produced—Barbara Jordan and Lightnin' Hopkins among them. *Sacred Paths*, situated along the Columbia Tap-Rail Trail since 2018, honors African American activists. *Elements of Change*, highlighting the history of Emancipation Park made

COURTESY REGINALD ADAMS  
its debut in 2020. Emancipation Park was founded by former slaves in 1872 as a safe space for future generations to celebrate Juneteenth. All of this work, says Adams, has led to *Absolute Equality*.

"I think this mural project will be a catalyst, and perhaps even a poster child for the holiday," says Adams. "I'm really excited and honored to play a part in recognizing American history through the arts."

Rather than simply depicting the story of Juneteenth as people know it, Adams and his artistic team, the Creatives, mapped out a story that recontextualizes the holiday as a defining moment in the arc of Black American history, placing it within a larger historical context that begins with the transatlantic slave trade and continues with images of modern-day marchers, while weaving in Galveston's own significant role.

"It is surreal at moments when we recognize we're actually standing on the same

