Across the North and South, African American communities celebrated Emancipation from 1864 onward. For decades after the Civil War, the black community commemorated freedom annually with Emancipation Day celebrations. Although not a legal holiday recognized by the government, it was a day to celebrate liberation and mark the progress of African Americans since the end of the war. Due to the different pace of liberation across the states, various days served as “emancipation day.” While in some locations, it was January 1, the date of the Emancipation Proclamation, other communities celebrated on September 22, the date of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and still others celebrated on July 4 (American Independence Day) or August 1 (West Indian Emancipation Day). Another common day of celebration was Juneteenth, June 19, marking the date of the announcement of slavery’s abolition in Texas in 1865. Most Emancipation Day celebrations were sponsored by black churches. Festivities accompanied such celebrations, including a reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, sermons and speeches, music, barbecues, and parades. Below, a newspaper reports on the celebration held in Charleston, South Carolina, on March 27, 1865, after the Confederate Army fled. The black community organized a parade that numbered thousands of marchers and included dramatic tableaux, banners, and songs.

There was the greatest procession of loyalists in Charleston last Tuesday that the city has witnessed for many a long year. The present generation has never seen its like. For these loyalists were true to the Nation without any qualifications of State rights, reserved sovereignties, or other allegiances; they gloried in the flag, they adored the Nation, they believed with the fullest faith in the ideas which our banner symbols and the country avows its own. It was a procession of colored men, women and children, a celebration of their deliverance from bondage and ostracism; a jubilee of freedom, a hosannah to their deliverers.

The celebration was projected and conducted by colored men. It met on the Citadel green at noon. Upward of ten thousand persons were present, colored men, women and children, and every window and balustrade overlooking the square was crowded with spectators. This immense gathering had been convened in 24 hours, for permission to form the procession was given only on Sunday night, and none of the preliminary arrangements were completed till Monday at noon.

Gen. Hatch, Admiral Dahlgren and Col. Woodruff gave their aid to the movement; and thereby the 21st Regiment of U.S.C.T., a hundred colored marines and a number of national flags gave dignity and added attractions to the procession.

The procession began to move at one o’clock under the charge of a committee and marshalls on horseback, who were decorated with red, white and blue sashes and rosettes.

First came the marshals and their aid[e]s, followed by a band of music; then the 21st Regiment in full form; then the clergymen of the different churches, carrying open Bibles; then an open car, drawn by four white horses, and tastefully adorned with National flags. In this car there were 15 colored ladies dressed in white, to represent the 15 recent Slave States. Each of them had a beautiful bouquet to present to Gen. Saxton after the speech which he was expected to deliver. A long procession of women followed the car. Then followed the children of the Public Schools, or part of them; and there were 1,800 in line, at least. They sang during the entire length of the march:

John Brown’s body lies a moulding in the grave,
John Brown’s body lies a moulding in the grave,
John Brown’s body lies a moulding in the grave,
His soul is marching on!
Glory! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
We go marching on!

This verse, however, was not nearly so popular as one which it was intended should be omitted, but rapidly supplanted all the others, until at last, marching two abreast, no other sound could be heard than

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We'll hang Jeff. Davis on a sour apple tree!
We'll hang Jeff. Davis on a sour apple tree!
We'll hang Jeff. Davis on a sour apple tree!
As we go marching on!

....Very few of these children had ever been at school before; not one of them had ever walked in a public procession; they had had only one hour's drill on their playground; and yet they kept in line, closed up, and were under perfect control and orderly up to the last. They only ceased to sing in order that they might cheer Gen. Saxton, Col. Woodford, various groups of Union officers or sailors, or one or two Northern men whom they recognized as their friends. Gen. Saxton and lady were in a carriage at one street where the procession passed, and Col. Woodford and lady at another; and one continuous cheer greeted them, mingled with cheers for an officer whom they supposed to be Gen. Hatch. The colored people know all these officers as their friends. Gen. Saxton is their favorite everywhere in the Department, and they have all learned that Gen. Hatch and Col. Woodford gave them equal rights in the public schools, an advantage which they prize next to freedom.

After the children came the various trades. First, the fishermen, with a banner bearing an emblematical device, and the words, "The Fishermen welcome you, Gen. Saxton." Second, a society with the banner, "The Union South." Third, carpenters, masons, teamsters, drovers, cooperers, bakers, paper-carriers, barbers, blacksmiths, wood-sawyers, painters, wheelwrights, and the fire companies. The carpenters carried their planes and other tools; the masons their trowels; the teamsters their whips; the cooperers their adzes; the bakers' crackers hung around their necks; the paper-carriers a banner, and each a copy of The Charleston Courier; the barbers their shears; the blacksmiths their hammers; the wood-sawyers their sawbucks; the painters their brushes; the wheelwrights a large wheel; and the fire companies, ten in number, with their banners, their hosemen with their trumpets.

The most original feature of the procession was a large cart, drawn by two dilapidated horses with the worst harness that could be got to hold out, which followed the trades. On this cart there was an auctioneer's block, and a black man, with a bell, represented a negro trader, a red flag waving over his head; recalling the days so near and yet so far off, when human beings were made merchandise in South Carolina. This man had himself been bought and sold several times and a child who sat on the block had also been knocked down at public auction in Charleston. As the cart moved along, the mock-auctioneer rang his bell and cried out: "How much am I offered for this good cook?" "She is an 'xlent cook, ge'men." "She can make four kinds of mock-turtle soup, from beef, fish or fowls." "200's bid." "Two hundred?" "250," "300," "350," "400," "450," "Who bids? who bids? 500." And so he went on imitating in sport the infernal traffic of which many of the spectators had been the living victims. Old women burst into tears as they saw this tableau, and forgetting that it was a mimic scene, shouted wildly, Give me back my children! Give me back my children! The wringing of hands seen on the sidewalks caused more than one looker-on to curse the policy that would even suggest the possibility that the wretches who had bought and sold loyal men might be or ought to be readmitted to the rights of citizenship. But there are people here who would even recommend that these persons alone should be regarded as citizens! There is no officer in all the United States who could stand up before the storm of righteous indignation which a fearless record of the lives of the oath-takers here would arouse. And that chronicle of crime is being made here. If ever they attempt to put down the true loyalists here, this record will be sent to THE TRIBUNE.

Behind the auction-car 60 men marched, tied to a rope, in imitation of the gangs who used often to be led through these streets on their way from Virginia to the sugar-fields of Louisiana. All of these men had been sold in the old times.

Then came the hearse, a comic [feature] which attracted great attention, and was received with shouts of laughter. There was written on it with chalk.

"Slavery is Dead."
"Who Owns Him?"
"No One."
"Sumter Dug His Grave on the 13th of April, 1861."

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Behind the hearse, 50 women marched dressed in black, “with the sable weeds of mourning, but with the joyous faces,” as a natural-born orator from Bunker Hill remarked on the occasion.

Various societies were represented. The procession was more than two miles and a-half in length, and officers said that it marched in better military style than the great procession on the 6th of March in New-York. There was no drunkenness, no riotous disposition, no insolent airs, no rudeness.

The banners bore among other mottoes, these sentences:
“We know no caste or color.”
“The spirit of John Brown still lives.”
“Liberty and Union, one and inseparable.”
“Our past the Block, our future the School.”
“We know no master but ourselves.”
“We are filling the last ditch.”
“Our reply to slavery, Colored Volunteers.”
“Free Homes, Free Schools, One Country and One Flag.”
“We are on the way to Bunker Hill.”
“Bunker Hill and Fort Sumter; both Shelter the Freedmen.”
“The Heroes of the War: Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Farragut, Dahlgren, Porter, Ferry, The Privates.”
“Massachusetts Greets South Carolina as a Child Redeemed.”, (Wendell Phillips)
“Freedom with Poverty, rather than Slavery with Luxury.”
“We can respect the Purity of the Ballot-Box.”

The great procession took one hour and twenty minutes to pass any point. On the return to the citadel where a stand was prepared for Gen. Saxton and the other speakers, there were at least 10,000 persons assembled. There were 4,200 men in the procession by count, exclusive of the military, the women and the children.

A shower of rain, which began to fall as the procession arrived at the citadel, rendered it expedient to postpone a speech.

Rev. Mr. French led in singing a doxology, and the great assembly dispersed in an orderly manner after enthusiastic and prolonged cheers for Gen. Saxton, the Yankees, the Star Spangled Banner, and a final, tumultuous and long continued three times three for Abraham Lincoln.

The fears so lately expressed that an outpouring of the colored people would produce a riot is thus shown to be unfounded. “Fear the slave who breaks his chain, free the slave and fears are vain,” is a truth which these modern Rip Van Winkles who take the oath here and think that they are Union men do not yet begin to suspect, far less to believe.