

# Celebrating Freedom on Juneteenth

Inez Sadler



*“Juneteenth at Oak Bluffs” by Sonia Sadler. Used with permission from Inez Sadler.*

## PRE-READING:

1. The U.S. Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865. Share what you know about it. What were the two sides? What were some of the key issues?
2. Share what you know about U.S. slavery.
3. Looking at the two images and the title, what do you think this article will be about?
4. What is oral history? Why might it be particularly important in African American culture?

**NOTE:** This is a Level 7 version of an article that appeared in the print version of the magazine as Level 10. A Level 4 version is also available on our website.

On June 19 (“June-teenth”), 1865, a general from the north arrived in Galveston, Texas. He told the people of Texas: The president of the United States says that all slaves are free. Former slaves and masters are now equal.

My great-grandmother Mariah Johnson was a slave in Texas during this period. Mariah said that one day the “ole master” told the slaves to come to his house. Mariah did not want to go because she thought he wanted to whip them. She hid behind a tree. After a while, her mother came running to tell her that they were free.

The picture on the previous page is called “Juneteenth at Oak Bluffs.” It was painted by my daughter, Sonia Sadler. In this picture, my

daughter showed one of the types of celebrations that took place in Texas during my childhood in the 1940s. In our town, we celebrated Juneteenth with plenty of barbecue, ice-cream, watermelons, and red soda pop. We got new play clothes, and we were so proud of them. There would be celebrating all over our part of town. We hardly ever celebrated the 4th of July.

Juneteenth was important during my



“Jubilee” by Sonia Sadler. Used with permission from Inez Sadler.

childhood. But then people stopped celebrating it so much. Recently, however, black people started to focus on Juneteenth again. We realized that our children need to know and celebrate that history.

Mariah Johnson was my mother’s great-grandmother. She told my mother stories about her life as a slave. Thanks to her, our family has some oral history of what happened during slavery and at the time the slaves in Texas were freed.

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Sonia wanted people to remember this history. After her older relatives died, Sonia decided to tell their stories through her art. She made a series of paintings that showed the end of slavery, reunions, and Juneteenth celebrations. For example, the painting above shows former slaves celebrating their



Do an internet search of the artist, Sonia Sadler. View more of her art work. Find interviews with her and learn more about her.

freedom. Sonia wanted others, especially youth, to understand that out of the darkest circumstances can come light, happiness, and even humor. She did not want people to look negatively at this part of our history. As a people who have suffered and survived, we have accomplished so

much in spite of those circumstances, and sometimes because of them.

**Sources:** Handbook of Texas <tshaonline.org/handbook>; “The Overstreet Family Reunion Booklet,” 2012.

*Inez Sadler lives in Maryland. She is the mother of Sonia Sadler (1958-2013). Find more of her art at <sonialynnsadlerarts.com>.*

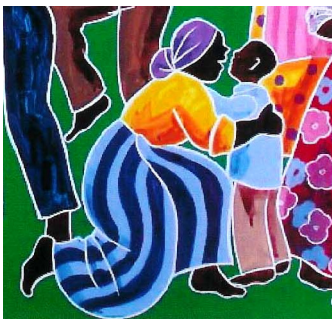
**POST-READING:**

**RESEARCH SOME OF THE HISTORY**

1. In the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln declared that all slaves in the Confederate states were free. Look up the date of the Emancipation Proclamation and compare it to the date that Texas slaves were freed. What might explain the difference?
2. Read several sources on the Emancipation Proclamation. What questions does your research raise? What would you like to know more about?
3. Research Juneteenth. Can you confirm the author’s claim that people’s interest in celebrating it has gone up and down over time?

**THINK MORE DEEPLY ABOUT THE TEXT AND ART**

4. According to the author, what does Sonia Sadler celebrate with her paintings?
5. Study the images and discuss the artist’s message. What details does she incorporate to express herself? What drawing and storytelling techniques (color, style, content) does she use to convey her message? Be specific and detailed in your answer.



6. What is Sonia Sadler’s connection to slavery, freedom from slavery, and celebrations of community resilience (such as Jubilee and Juneteenth)? How does history inform her art?

**HOW DO YOU CONNECT TO THE STORY?**

7. Have your ancestors struggled for freedom? If so, how do you celebrate it?



**MECHANICS AND VOCABULARY**

8. *Passive voice:* In the fourth paragraph, the author says, “It was painted by my daughter...” What does “passive voice” mean? Why might the author be using it here? Re-write the sentence to be in the active voice. Re-write other sentences from active to passive voice. What changes when “voice” changes?
9. *Conditional tense:* Also in the fourth paragraph, the author says, “There would be celebrating all over our part of town.” In this case, she is using the conditional tense to express the “habitual past.” What does that mean? Make your own sentences using the conditional tense to express “habitual past.”
10. *A pronoun that packs meaning:* Notice the author’s use of “our” in the same sentence. What does “our” refer to in this context? Why does it matter?
11. *Slave vs. enslaved person:* Some people argue it is dehumanizing to use the term “slave.” Using “enslaved person” reminds us that this was a *person* and that being a slave was not the sum total of his/her existence. What do you think? Google the terms and read various opinions on the question.