

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, Esq.

LD 183 - Ought To Pass

An Act To Establish Juneteenth as a Paid State Holiday

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

February 17, 2021

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am Policy Counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, I urge you to support LD 183.

Regardless of your ethnicity, you have ancestors who were living somewhere in the world on the historic day of June 19, 1865. For the black residents of Galveston, Texas, however, the day was like no other. On that day, a Union general arrived in Galveston, making the belated announcement that slavery had ended in the former Confederate states, including Texas—two and a half years prior.

The Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order authored by President Abraham Lincoln with input from Frederick Douglass, was issued on January 1, 1863, purporting to instantly free enslaved people in the Confederate states. In all of American history, no other single political gesture—including the signing of the US Constitution itself—marked a more significant step toward fulfilling the nation’s promise of freedom for all.

However, the black residents of the island city of Galveston, on the gulf of Texas, did not learn this news for more than two years after the signing of the order. Upon hearing the deferred news, the nearly 250,000 formerly enslaved people of Texas broke into jubilee and celebration. The date would be remembered every

year and would soon be called Juneteenth—a contraction of the words ‘June’ and ‘nineteenth’.

Historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reflects on the history of Juneteenth, noting that “by choosing to celebrate the *last* place in the South that freedom touched...we remember the shining promise of emancipation, along with the bloody path America took by delaying it.”¹ For generations thereafter, hundreds of communities across the U. S. celebrated June nineteenth as a holiday. Those of us committed to advancing civil rights—to promoting the core principles of justice, fairness and freedom—have much to learn from that memorialized day of June 19, 1865.

While we have come a long way from June 1865, we must still confront oppressive conditions today: police violence, voter suppression and mass incarceration, to name just three. Many of these harmful systems carry echoes of slavery, from which our own state’s economy reaped enormous benefits.² This bill would enshrine annual recognition of part our country’s sordid past. But, as the sponsors of this bill would be the first to argue, true justice requires both recognition and redistribution. To that end, I urge you all to learn about and support HB 40, a federal bill that continues the long-halted process of making reparations for slavery. Juneteenth reminds us that in any arena of life, almost free is unfree, and delayed emancipation is denied emancipation. We urge you to support this bill.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *What is Juneteenth?*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-is-juneteenth/>

² Cindy Han, *Maine’s Role in the Slave Trade: Little-Known History of Slave Trading in New England*, Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.mainepublic.org/post/maines-role-slave-trade-little-known-history-slave-trading-new-england>