

Emancipation Day Celebrated in Tallahassee

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Tallahassee, FL – Emancipation Day was celebrated Thursday in a park just a few blocks from the Capitol. May 20th was the day that enslaved Africans in Tallahassee, and soon all of Florida, learned they were free. There were hymns, prayers, and inspirational speeches as bystanders and some lawmakers looked on. Dr. David Jackson, chair of the History Department at Florida A&M University, told the crowd Florida had its share of plantations, some of which held over a hundred slaves.

"But that situation was bound to change because an inhumane and unjust system that held millions of people in bondage was destined to fall. Why? Because the system of slavery was inconsistent with the core values and principles of this nation, of freedom, liberty and justice for all."

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves held in states that were in rebellion against the union, including Florida. But without technological conveniences like cell phones and laptops, news of the edict did not get around quickly.

"Official word of emancipation spread slowly throughout the country, with people learning the news at different times. Word did not officially reach blacks in North Florida until May 20, 1865, over two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was initially issued."

Jackson compared the jubilation the slaves must have felt upon hearing the news to the way many modern citizens felt about a history-making 21st century event: the election of President Barack Obama.

"Just like the emancipated Africans, for many of us it was a surreal moment, a day many people thought they would never live to see. But it was also a day that provided people with hope: a simple four-letter word that is packed with meaning. Hope is a powerful tool that helped Africans and others that wanted to see change occur know that better days were coming. Hope gave them

the ability to pursue a brighter day. Hope gave them the ability to believe that one day American would fulfill its promise to all of its citizens."

At last, as Jackson put it, the long night was over. After nearly 250 years, African-Americans would no longer have to worry about being worked from sunup to sundown, having their families torn apart, or being whipped with leather straps and paddles. The obligation now, Jackson said, is to learn from the past, celebrate history, and try not to repeat the mistakes of the forefathers. Then came a reading of the President Lincoln's proclamation.

"And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of almighty God."

With that, as history tells it, there was much celebration and the drums sounded all over the state of Florida.