

Celebrating freedom: Juneteenth celebrates silver anniversary in Alton

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ALTON - For 25 years, the African American community of Alton has celebrated Juneteenth at James H. Killion Park at Salu.

"Juneteenth" refers to the news of freedom reaching slaves in Galveston, Texas, long after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln on Jan. 1, 1863. The final slaves were alerted to their freedom by a Union officer in Galveston in June of 1865. Historians were not certain about the date of the news, but think it was either June 13 or June 19, hence the title, "Juneteenth." Juneteenth celebrations are popular in southern states and Texas African American communities. Alton's, however, is well-known in the region for hosting a great and worthy celebration.

"It is an honor and great pleasure to bring this many people together," said **Juneteenth Committee co-chair Abe "Lee" Barham**. "We have vendors from all over. Word is out Alton has a Juneteenth celebration worth being a part of."



The event featured vendors from across the area, including a handmade world apparel vendor based from Indianapolis. There was also a petting zoo sponsored by **Mungenast Toyota** featuring llamas, ducks, chickens and rabbits. A rock climbing presentation and horse rides were also on-hand for children.

Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White returned to the Juneteenth celebration for the third consecutive year. White is an Alton native. He also came with the **Jesse White Tumblers**, who are world-class acrobats. The tumblers were sponsored by the **Simmons Hanley Conroy Law Firm**.

"He walks through the crowd and mingles with everyone," Barham said of White. "He feels at home here. You can see it on his face."

African American history was also a focus at the event, with a special presentation of both national and local African American history done by the **Juneteenth Commission**. **Juneteenth Co-Chair Marquato Rattler** said this is also the fourth year in which the event is sponsored by the **National Council of Negro Women**.

Juneteenth was brought to Alton 25 years ago by Joyce Elliott, a minister.

"This is a day to bring everyone together to recognize our history and past, while looking at our present and toward our future," Rattler said. "We have a lot of stories and newspaper articles posted from the Freedom Riders to Rosa Parks to display our history."

Food was also served at the event, with one vendor called "40 Acres and a Mule" referring to a forgotten promise to African Americans following emancipation of attaining 40 acres of land and a mule from the U.S. Government.