

# Juneteenth: Celebrating freedom and history for 26 years in Alton

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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**ALTON** - Alton is one of the few towns outside Galveston, Texas, in which Juneteenth is celebrated.

It was brought to the community by Joyce Elliott in 1991 after she went on vacation to the Texas town. In Galveston, it is a large celebration - especially for the African American community. It celebrates the day the last slaves in the United States were alerted to their freedom by Union soldiers on horseback. That day of freedom has been

commemorated ever since in Galveston. Elliott wished to bring that spirit of freedom to Alton, and began the first Juneteenth celebration in her own backyard.

After that first year, the celebration was expanded from her backyard to James Killion Park at Salu, where it will be held again this year on June 17 from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. One of the organizers, Abe Barham, said this year should be even larger than previous incarnations of the event.

"We're trying to make Alton's celebration as grand as Galveston's," Barham said. "It's not just a celebration of Alton's black heritage, it's a celebration of all of our history. Alton has a lot of history here."

Events to celebrate that freedom, history and community at large will be offered to the general public at this month's celebration. Barham said Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White - an Alton native - will visit yet again this year.

"He's very laid back, and super approachable," Barham said of the secretary of state and basketball Hall-of-Famer. "When he comes to Alton, he tells his people around him working security to relax a bit, because he's home."

The Jesse White Tumblers will also be at the celebration. That entertainment was sponsored by Simmons Hanley Conroy Law Firm.

Musical performances will also be provided by Alton High music group, 618, and recording artists Saman and Picture This. There will also be a motivational speaker, Calvin Payne, from the Sweetie Pies restaurant as well as from Kendra Stiff from Women Restoration Entering Stability, Tolerance, Love and Esteem (WRESTLE).

Another aspect of the celebration, which contributes to the value of the community at large is a health fair. Barham said several organizations will be on site with the goal of encouraging a healthy community. Representatives from OSF St. Anthony's Health Center, Alton Memorial Hospital, Safari Dental, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Dental College, Madison County Health Department and the Madison County Mobile AIDS Van will be on site to assist people with health education.

Several food vendors will also be at the event, which will feature a climbing wall for children as well as a petting zoo. Barham said several people are contacting the event's organizers for further vending. He said people are welcome to call him at (618) 799-9157, or contact fellow organizers Anne Johnson at (618) 466-9369 or Marquato Rattler at (618) 910-7422.