

# Juneteenth: It's a Family Affair!

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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ALTON – At the time the final shots of the Civil War were fired, and their echoes gone silent, news traveled slowly through the North American continent.

After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which freed all slaves in Confederate territories, and General Ulysses S. Grant accepted the surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse, not everyone knew they were free. In June 1865, a Union cavalry unit met with some of the last slaves of African descent in Galveston, Texas, and delivered the news that justice had come – they were free at last after two centuries of forced capture and enslavement.

That event has been commemorated every since. It is a huge festival in Texas, and is becoming a bigger deal in Alton, Illinois, as well. For going on three decades, the Alton Juneteenth Festival has been growing with attendees and vendors. Each year, it adds to the celebration as well.

This year's celebration, which will be held this Saturday, June 16, at James Killion Park at Salu, will begin with a performance of local singing group, Picture This, who will also be giving away two free downloads of their songs, “Simile” and “Nobody But You,” to all those in attendance.



Abe Barham, who has worked on the committee to establish Juneteenth as a pillar of celebration in Alton, said he wished the city would embrace local artists like Picture This in more events.

“I wish the city would embrace its local artists,” Barham said. “Who was that group who canceled at the amphitheater? Huey Lewis and the News? They could have had an Alton opening act and Picture This and Dib Calwell would have been perfect for that.”

Local music will also be on display at a pre-Juneteenth Gospel music festival held the night before (this Friday, June 15) at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Alton. That event will feature musicians from the Riverbend area, as well as other parts of Illinois and the



St. Louis Area. Performers will include Jesse Prather, Paul Pitts and the Riverbend Choir.

Both the Gospel night and Juneteenth are free and open to the public.

Other events at Juneteenth, its chairperson, Marquato Rattler, said would include a petting zoo, rock-climbing wall, a gaming truck for kids, various food vendors, horseback rides, the Jesse White Tumblers, and various other vendors from across the area. Rattler said 90 percent of those vending at the celebration are from the Alton-Godfrey area.

“The majority of vendors are from Alton, but some are from St. Louis,” Rattler said. “As the event has grown, we have more of an impact and footprint, and people are coming to join it, but we keep it as local and Alton-centric as we can.”



“It's a celebration of cultures, and the revival of this park this year,” Barham added.

Barham has been a part of the Killion Park Restoration Committee. Through some of that committee's efforts, an apparent litter problem in the park brought to the public's attention by the city's controversial removal of the basketball rims, has been somewhat alleviated by the placement of vividly-painted trash receptacles painted by local

elementary and middle school students in the park. That committee has also added a new pavilion to the park and hopes to get the long-defunct water features working again in the near future.

“This park is the first park people may see coming into Alton from that new train station we're boosting,” Barham said. “If we showcase this park, we're showcasing Alton. It's not about the different entities in this city, it's about how all of them work together to take care of the city.”

The theme of this year's Juneteenth celebration will be “It's a family affair.” The event will begin in the park this Saturday at 10 a.m. with an opening ceremony at 11:30 a.m. The celebration will last until 5 p.m.

Both Rattler and Barham are beyond grateful for the celebration's many sponsors, who they credit with keeping it growing and able to get great attractions. Those sponsors include, Alton Section NCNW, Alton YWCA, Karen Wilson of State Farm Insurance and Simmons Hanly Conroy National Law Firm.