

Vampires, Sharecropping, and the Real History of Juneteenth

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A reflection on the film Sinners, the legacy of forced labor after slavery, and why Juneteenth still matters today

About a month ago, some friends and I went to go see the Ryan Coogler film *Sinners*. On the surface, it's a Black film about blues music and vampires in Mississippi. However, if you watch with a close eye, it goes much deeper. The movie quietly (and sometimes loudly) displayed the horrors of slavery, and how even more than 50 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, many Black people in the South were still trapped in systems that felt a lot like slavery.

Instead of slavery, the new term "sharecropping" was adopted. Unsurprisingly, the effects of generations of atrocities trickled through the Bible belt and beyond. Black people who couldn't afford to leave the South after slavery ended were stuck doing the same work they had done before, now for pennies. Some were even paid in wooden nickels that could only be used at the plantation's commissary.

In *Sinners*, you really get a snapshot of what life was like for poor Black people in southern Mississippi almost 70 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. The majority of the people in that film were sharecroppers working long days in the hot sun for slave wages. And to be clear, this isn't a critique of the movie. In fact, the opposite. For me, it was a sheer reminder that although slavery ended "on paper," not all Black people were actually free. Without access to education and better opportunities, staying on the plantation was often the only choice they had.

There is a loophole in the 13th Amendment, which forbids chattel slavery across the United States – except as a form of criminal punishment. When you think about the 13th Amendment justifying slavery for criminals, a lot of petty laws regarding Black people in the southern states begin to make sense. This is the only way the South would survive, as slavery and free labor were the backbone of the economy. The Antebellum South was not going to give up that way of life without introducing anti-Black laws and additional barriers to prevent access to justice for newly freed Black Americans.

Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st, 1863, but it was not until June 19th, 1865 that this news of freedom had reached Galveston, Texas. This is the day that we celebrate – the day when *everyone* was finally free. This is why Juneteenth *is* so important to many Black Americans and *should be* important to **all** Americans. Similar to the Fourth of July, Juneteenth represents so much more than a day in history. It represents a legacy of what Black people have brought to this country.

In the wise words of the Grandmother of Juneteenth, Opal Lee, "Juneteenth is not a Black holiday, but an American holiday. It is a second Independence Day that reminds us freedom is a journey, not a destination."