



Juneteenth and the
forgotten black playwrights

Description

New York's Mint Theater celebrates lost African-American theatrical writing talent

By **Byron Toben**

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"The Mills of the Gods grind slowly," wrote Plutarch in the first century C.E. Indeed they do but finally patience is rewarded.

On June 17, 2021, U.S. president Joe Biden finally declared June 19 to be an official national holiday to be called Juneteenth, the first new national holiday since Martin Luther King's in 1966.

Writers Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Arthur Conan Doyle, Somerset Maugham and Agatha Christie all invoked the phrase, as did politicians Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in respect to various issues of concern.



African-American poet Georgia Douglas Johnson was one of the earliest African-American female playwrights and an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance – Image: Public Domain

On June 17, 2021, U.S. president **Joe Biden** finally declared **June 19** to be an official national holiday to be called **Juneteenth**, the first new national holiday since Martin Luther King's in 1966. Juneteenth celebrates the official end of slavery in the USA.

Here's a timeline of its slow emergence:

1619 – The first shipment of 20 black slaves to North America arrives in the colony of Virginia.

1808 – Slave trade (but not slavery itself) ended in the British Empire.

1834 – Slavery was abolished in the British Empire, which then included Canada.

1860 – The number of slaves in the USA had grown to 3,953,760, mostly in the South.

1861 – On April 12, eleven Confederate states began a civil War of Secession from the remaining 23 Union states.

1863 – On January 1, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation immediately freed slaves in the Union-controlled Rebel States (Freeing those in non-rebel states required a lengthy changing of the U.S. constitution.)



Willis Richardson was awarded the prestigious AUDELCO prize posthumously for his contribution to American theatre – Image: Public Domain

1865 – April 9 brings the surrender of the Confederate Army, which freed slaves in the balance of formerly Confederate-controlled states.

1865 – April 15 – Assassination of Lincoln

1865 – June 19 – Texas was finally informed of the end of war and freedom of slaves by the arrival of Union troops in Galveston. Many Southern slave owners, sensing their defeat, had moved with their slaves to Texas.

1865 – December 6 – 13th Amendment to U.S. Constitution abolishes slavery in the United States

1866 to 1966 – Juneteenth, under various similar names, was celebrated in black communities and slowly adopted by some states as state holidays or days of observance in a century of Jim Crow laws and other attempts to suppress voting.

However, the emergence of Women's Lib and Black Lib led to advances that slowly picked up steam during the past 55 years as persons of colour are slowly recognized for their talents and contributions to sports, politics, business, the military, education and entertainment. All of which leads to my usual focus on theatre.



American author, anthropologist and filmmaker Zora Neale Hurston wrote more than 50 short stories, plays, and essays – Image: Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

There are several black playwrights of note. Six are **Lorraine Hansberry, Terrill Alvin McCraney, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange** and **August Wilson**.

However, 12 others have been forgotten or never fully appreciated. To remedy this, the unique **Mint Theater** in New York City, which specializes in such plays, has compiled a list of a dozen such playwrights. Here is a [link](#) to its descriptive list.

If and when the pandemic ends and life returns to “normal,” I would like to organize a dramatic reading of one or two plays by these “forgotten” playwrights.

Readers' suggestions or comments welcome.

Feature image: Juneteenth flag, National Juneteenth Celebration Foundation

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