

The Fifth of July: New York's Forgotten Black Emancipation Celebration

How a People Claimed Its Own Day of Freedom



A Freedom Day the Calendar Forgot

Consider what it means when a people, handed their freedom on someone else's chosen date, decides instead to claim a day of their own.

Two days stand side by side on the calendar. July 4 and July 5. They are separated by a single sunrise, yet between them stretches the whole distance between a nation's promise and a people's reality. One day belonged to fireworks and proclamations of liberty. The other belonged to those whom that liberty had so long left out.

This essay sets out to recover a tradition nearly lost to memory. In New York, generations of Black families and freedom-minded leaders marked their emancipation not on the Fourth of July, but on the Fifth. It is easy to read that gap as a small thing, a footnote, a matter of one day's delay. It was nothing of the sort.

The Fifth of July was never simply a postponed celebration. It was a decision - a community writing its own meaning onto the calendar, refusing to borrow a freedom that had never been built to include it. To understand that choice is to witness a people authoring its own story, and to learn something enduring about how memory survives when those in power would rather it disappeared.

The Long Road to 1827: New York's Slow Surrender of Slavery

We tend to picture slavery as a Southern story. The truth is closer to home and far less comfortable. Slavery lived in New York for two centuries, woven into the colony's founding under Dutch rule in 1626 and carried forward without pause under the British. The hands that built early New York included many that were never free.

The road toward abolition was long, and it was grudging. New York did not abandon slavery in a single act of conscience. It surrendered the institution slowly, measure by measure, on terms designed to protect the comfort of enslavers as much as to liberate the enslaved.

- **1799** - New York passed a gradual emancipation law. Read honestly, it freed almost no one immediately. Children born to enslaved mothers after that date were declared free in name, yet they were bound to long terms of indentured service that stretched deep into adulthood. Freedom arrived with strings attached and a clock that ran for decades.
- **1817** - A second law finally named a date certain. Slavery in the state would end on July 4, 1827, for those who still remained in bondage.
- **July 4, 1827** - The legal end of slavery in New York.

There is a hard lesson folded into the word gradual. A freedom meted out across a generation is a freedom shaped by those who hold the power, not by those who carry the chains. The pattern is worth naming plainly: liberation offered slowly, on someone else's schedule, framed as generosity rather than justice. To grasp the Fifth of July, we first have to feel the weight of how that freedom finally came.

The Distance Between Two Days

Here the essay turns on a single question. When freedom arrived on July 4, why did so many Black New Yorkers choose to celebrate on July 5 instead?

The answer holds two truths at once - one practical, one profound.

The first was safety. The Fourth was a day of white revelry, and that revelry often turned hostile. Black communities understood the danger of celebrating openly amid crowds primed to pick fights. To step into the streets on the Fourth was to risk violence. Choosing the Fifth was, in part, an act of wisdom and self-protection - the careful judgment of people who had learned to read the temper of the world around them.

The second reason ran deeper. The Fourth of July had long belonged to a national independence that excluded Black people entirely. To celebrate it as their own would be to accept a borrowed story, to stand inside a house built without a room for them. The Fifth offered something cleaner and truer: a day that was theirs from the first breath, unshadowed by the contradiction of the day before.

This was not retreat. It was authorship. A people declined to perform gratitude inside someone else's celebration and stepped instead onto ground they could call their own. In

that single step lay an early and quiet form of self-determination - the refusal to let others define the meaning of one's freedom.

A Resolution to Remember: The Choice Made in Community

What makes the Fifth of July so striking is that it was not an accident or a scattering of private preferences. It was named aloud, in gathering, by leaders speaking on behalf of their people.

In 1827, a meeting in Albany led by Nathaniel Paul put the decision into words. Since the Fourth was the day white citizens recognized national independence, the community resolved that it was proper to celebrate the Fifth. Plainly stated, deliberately chosen, recorded as the will of a people deciding for themselves.

Word of these preparations traveled through the Black press. Freedom's Journal, the first Black-owned and operated newspaper in the country, newly established that very year, carried reports of the coming observances as early as March 1827. A community was not only choosing its day; it was telling its own story in its own pages, to its own people.

There is real significance in a community putting its choice into formal words. To resolve, together, to mark a different day is itself a form of governance - a people deciding the terms of its own remembrance. This is what self-rule looks like when official power offers none: neighbors gathered in a room, naming what they will honor and when, and then holding one another to it.

It echoes a truth that runs through all of this work. Memory and meaning are not always kept by institutions. Often they are held by the gathered voice of a community choosing for itself, building from shared conviction the very structures that systems refuse to provide.

The Celebrations of 1827: Freedom Made Visible

From decision, we move to scene. What did this self-claimed freedom look like when it spilled into the streets?

On **July 4, 1827**, Black churches held quiet services of prayer and thanksgiving. At Mother AME Zion Church, **William Hamilton** rose to speak, naming the emancipation as a redemption and declaring that "no more shall negro and slave be synonymous." The mood was careful and watchful. Worshippers dispersed quietly afterward, mindful of the danger that surrounded any open gathering on that particular day.

Then came **July 5, 1827**, and with it the fuller celebration. Thousands gathered at St. John's Park, led by marshal **Samuel Hardenburgh**. A great parade wound through the city - to Zion Church, and onward to City Hall, where the marchers were met by the mayor himself. A people once counted as property now moved through the public square as citizens claiming their place.

One detail deserves special attention. The first group in the procession line was the **New York African Society for Mutual Relief**, an institution of communal care. A freedom march led by a mutual aid society is no small thing. It binds this celebration directly to a

long tradition of Black communities pooling their resources, protecting their own, and building collective strength from the ground up. The day's joy rested on a foundation of mutual care.

The crowd itself spoke to the breadth of who claimed this freedom. It drew celebrants across the African diaspora, from the Caribbean and from Africa, a reminder that this liberty was held in common across a scattered people. This was no mere party. It was a public declaration of personhood - a community making its own emancipation visible to a city that had long worked hard not to see it.

Douglass and the Fifth of July Conscience

The tradition did not end with that first generation. It found its most famous echo a quarter-century later.

On **July 5, 1852**, in Rochester, New York, **Frederick Douglass** delivered his searing address, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" His words still carry their full weight across the years:

"This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice; I must mourn."

The date itself belongs to the meaning. Whether by direct inheritance or by shared instinct, Douglass spoke on the Fifth - the very day Black New Yorkers had claimed as their own a generation earlier. He gave voice to the same conviction those Albany leaders had resolved in 1827: that the Fourth could not be claimed honestly by people whose freedom it had never included.

In Douglass we see the tradition come to maturity. The Fourth held for honest, bitter reflection on a nation's broken promise. The Fifth held for a freedom told in the people's own voice. Douglass gave that distinction its sharpest and most enduring language, and in doing so he carried a community's quiet choice into the conscience of the whole nation.

The Fading and the Return

A tradition this meaningful deserves the truth of its decline, told without softening.

After 1834, the celebrations diminished. The anti-abolitionist riots of that year spread fear, and fear has a way of pressing public joy back into private spaces. The observance gradually folded into the broader August 1 commemorations of British emancipation and grew quieter still. It survived as a living memory as late as 1859, then slipped from public view, the way so many threads of Black history have been allowed to thin and vanish.

There is a lesson in that fading. Memory grows fragile when the systems around it prefer forgetting. The thread of a people's story does not hold itself. It must be carried deliberately, hand to hand, generation to generation, or it frays into silence.

And yet the story does not end in silence. In 2020, New York recognized **Abolition Commemoration Day**, observed on the second Monday in July, alongside Juneteenth. This was not the invention of something new. It was the recovery of something always there - a remembering of what had been waiting beneath the silence to be reopened. The thread, picked up again, proving it had never fully broken.

A Freedom of Their Own Making

We can see clearly now that the distance between July 4 and July 5 was never about the calendar. It was about who held the pen.

The Fifth of July was a people writing its own freedom into being. Not waiting to be included. Not borrowing a celebration built without them in mind. Stepping forward, instead, to claim what was theirs and to name it in their own voice. The choice itself is a kind of liberation, perhaps the truest kind - the moment when a community stops waiting to be written into someone else's story and begins to write its own.

This is continuity made visible. Memory held by community, resolved aloud in a meeting hall, marched through the streets behind a mutual aid society, voiced by Douglass before the nation, and finally revived in law nearly two centuries on. It is one unbroken practice of remembering, recovering, and refusing to let the thread go slack.

For those who organize, gather, and build today - who hold communities together with limited means and unlimited conviction - the Fifth of July offers something more than history. It offers a model. It shows that the work of naming what matters, of preserving it together, and of carrying it forward against forces that would erase it has always been the quiet engine of change. The same hands that pooled coins in a mutual relief society are the hands that march, that organize, that keep faith with what came before.

To remember this day is itself an act of continuity, a way of keeping faith with those who marched first through St. John's Park and on to City Hall. Their choice still speaks to us, inviting every community that gathers in conviction to do the same - to hold its own memory, to honor its own milestones, to refuse the slow erasure that silence brings.

For freedom is not only given. Sometimes it is claimed, named, and carried forward by the very hands it was always meant to hold.

A Note on Sources

This essay draws on the documented history of New York's "Fifth of July" emancipation tradition, including the state's gradual emancipation laws of 1799 and 1817 and the final abolition of slavery on July 4, 1827. It reflects the 1827 Albany resolution led by Nathaniel Paul and the reporting of Freedom's Journal; the 1827 celebrations, including William Hamilton's address at Mother AME Zion Church, the St. John's Park gathering led by marshal Samuel Hardenburgh, and the New York African Society for Mutual Relief leading the procession; Frederick Douglass's address "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" delivered July 5, 1852, in Rochester, New York; and the tradition's decline after the 1834 anti-abolitionist riots and its modern recognition as Abolition Commemoration Day in 2020.

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