

Emancipation Day Celebration



As the name suggests Emancipation celebration was held in remembrance of and thanksgiving for the emancipation of some three quarters of a million enslaved Africans in the British West Indies on August 1, 1838. That first celebration was a day of prayer and thanksgiving. Many of the emancipated Africans went to Church services as the bells rang loud and clear on that first freedom morning. The Anglican Church offered Holy Communion to those in attendance.

In the early years after Emancipation, the first of August was more important to the black population than Christmas. Of course a number of them still went to Church. What thoughts ran through their minds as in the Established Church of England the minister read from and based his sermon on the book of Philemon? This book talks about servitude or slavery among the Jews. It is the story of how Onesimus a slave ran away from his master Philemon and found Paul who is now begging his master to forgive him and to charge Paul with any expenses that Onesimus' absence may have caused. You may make your comments as to the appropriateness or poor taste of such a choice for the sermon on Emancipation Day.

Before the 1890's the celebrations tended to be more spontaneous and organized on a community basis. There would be music and dancing and of course food! There would be a week long celebration. Five nights of all night tea meetings, though the Missionaries did not like or approve of these, picnics, concerts and so on.

During the 1890's and afterwards, some members of the black and colored middle class tried to put a structure to the festivities. They suggested that different persons such as Abolitionists and Missionaries such as Knibb and Phillipo be honored. This did not receive any kind of meaningful support from the ruling class and one can understand this. After all they still bore resentment towards them for the part they played in the emancipation process. It is no secret that there was much conflict between the ruling class (plantocracy in particular) and the Non-Conformist missionaries. This continued even after Emancipation over issues such as the Free Village Movement and the exercising of the franchise by the new black landowners (peasants).

In the 20th century the idea of an essay competition was accepted. You may well imagine that this would be best supported by the literate members of the population. The masses with whom the celebration originated would not be able to even enter a competition that was organized to celebrate 'their' event?

The winning essay argued for the involvement of the upper class in the celebrations, that there should be a service in the market place and a sports competition to follow. Clearly this was **NOT** the idea of the master mind behind the competition. The essay competition came to an abrupt end.

After the 1920's Emancipation took a backseat to the race for legalizing Trade Unions and Political Parties as the Caribbean journeyed on the long path to political independence. **Marcus Mosiah Garvey** considered Emancipation day to be a sacred day. You already know how he felt about the importance of culture to the dignity and stability of the African race.

Indeed, it was on **Emancipation Day, August 1, 1914**, that he launched the **Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)**. Through the UNIA, Garvey organized street parades and dramas to mark the day. His most notable production, in my opinion, was the drama entitled Slavery - from Hut to Mansion. This performance took place at Edelweiss Park in 1930.