



Rhonda Grayson and Jeff Kennedy pose for a portrait on Monday, June 16, 2025 in Moore, Oklahoma. (AP photo/ Nick Oxford)

Tribal Slavery Descendants' Fight for Recognition!

Juneteenth Highlights Fight for Full Citizenship in the Tribal Nations

Juneteenth may mark the day in 1865 when enslaved people in Galveston, Texas found out they had been freed, but thousands of people in Oklahoma are still fighting for full citizenship in the tribal nations that once held their ancestors in bondage.

Several tribes practiced slavery, and five in Oklahoma — The Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Muscogee nations — signed reconstruction treaties with the U.S. in 1866 abolishing it three years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. They granted the formerly enslaved, known commonly as Freedmen, citizenship within their respective tribes.

Only one of those tribes, the Cherokee Nation, continues to fully grant the rights of citizenship.

For descendants of people who were enslaved by tribal nations, Juneteenth is both a celebration of freedom for people of African descent and a reminder of their struggle to

be fully embraced by the Indigenous communities with whom they share history and in many cases ancestry.

Traditionally, Freedmen in the Muscogee Nation celebrate Emancipation Day on August 4, marking when the tribe's council drew up a law to declare them free, said Rhonda Grayson, the founder and director of the Oklahoma Indian Territory Museum of Black Creek Freedmen History.

She traces her lineage to formerly enslaved people listed on a 1906 U.S. census of Native Americans who had been forcibly removed to Oklahoma. Known as the Dawes Rolls, the census created two lists - those who appeared Native and those who appeared Black. Those with African ancestry were put on the Freedmen rolls, although many also had Native ancestry.

Last week, the Muscogee Nation Supreme Court heard arguments in a case brought by Grayson and Jeff Kennedy, who are fighting for their citizenship rights and recognition within the Muscogee Nation.

"Our ancestors were Muscogee people of African descent," said Damario Solomon-Simmons, an attorney representing Grayson and Kennedy whose ancestor was also a Freedmen in the tribe. "We were transformed into 'Freedmen' by the Dawes Commission."

Their ancestors were also forced on the Trail of Tears, and after the Civil War they

were granted citizenship and served in the tribe's legislative bodies, Kennedy said.

"We believe that the (Muscogee) Nation would not be what it is today without the bloodshed and tears of those African people," he said.

But, in 1979, the tribe adopted a new constitution restricting citizenship to Muscogee people "by-blood." Grayson and Kennedy's lawsuit countered that citizenship requirement is a violation of the 1866 treaty, and in 2023 a Muscogee Nation district court agreed. The Muscogee Nation's citizenship board appealed and is asking the Supreme Court to overturn that decision.

"That provision has guided our Nation for decades and reflects the will of the people through a democratic process," Jason Salsman, a spokesperson for the Muscogee Nation said in a statement. "We believe that any change to our citizenship laws must come from our own citizens—not from outside interpretations."

The court's ruling is expected later this year, and it could open the door for thousands of new members to the tribe.

For Grayson, the legal battle is about more than their birthright to citizenship she said, it's also about setting straight the historical record.

"We weren't just slaves," Grayson said. "Our people need to know that. Our young people need to know that."

A Juneteenth & Pride Celebration

RACE TALKS

Hosts 4th Annual History of Black Drag in Portland

Uniting to Break the Chains of Racism, founded in 2011 by activist and educator, Donna Maxey, and led today by Dr. Shaina Maxey Pomerantz as Executive Director, is proud to present the Fourth Annual History of Black Drag in Portland. This powerful event serves as a celebration of both Juneteenth and Pride Month, highlighting the rich legacy and contemporary brilliance of Black drag performers in Portland.

Originally launched in 2022 as a response to increasing political and cultural attacks on drag queens, this event has become a vital space for community education, celebration, and resistance.

This celebration serves as a vital platform for Black and Brown queer communities in Oregon, especially as they face systemic exclusion and violence.

The event honors the cultural and political contributions of Black trans women and femmes, whose leadership helped establish Pride as we know it.

It also recognizes Juneteenth, the time the last enslaved Black people in Texas learned of the Emancipation Proclamation, marking a symbolic end to slavery in the U.S.

In a political climate where drag and trans communities are increasingly targeted, this event stands as a bold act of joy, resistance, and solidarity. As a Black femme-led organization, RACE



Isaiah Esquire – Acclaimed Portland-based dancer and choreographer

TALKS recognizes Black Americans' pivotal contributions, specifically Black trans women whose struggle is commemorated in the establishment of Pride.

"This event is more than entertainment—it's a celebration," says Dr. Shaina Maxey Pomerantz. "It uplifts Black queer and trans voices, reclaims space, and creates a safe, inclusive environment where families and allies can come together in collective joy and resilience." The Juneteenth & Pride Celebration will be held at McMenemy's Kennedy School on Thursday, June 19, 2025. Doors Open at 6:30 pm and the show Begins at 7:00 PM. All ages and allies are welcome. Children under 12 attend free (must be accompanied by an adult). Email info@racetalkspdx.com for more information.

