

A Night to Remember-December 31, 2012: 150th Anniversary of Freedom's Eve

Written by Dr. Artika Tyner and Beatriz Espinoza
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This year, New Year's Eve has a special historical significance as we celebrate the 150th Anniversary of "Freedom's Eve." On December 31, 1862, the African American community, slave and freed, gathered together in anticipation of the realization of their future freedom, hence the name -Freedom's Eve. They were waiting for the clock to strike midnight in order to seize the promise of freedom outlined in the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln declared that on New Year's Day, January 1, 1863 all slaves would forever be free in the rebellion states. Only 3.1 million of the country's four million slaves were declared free from the bondages of oppression with the issuance of this decree. As the African American community prepared to embark on this journey to freedom- the tradition of celebrating Freedom's Eve became a custom and cultural ritual.

Freedom's Eve is a celebratory occasion which was inspired by the Watch Night Service tradition. The history of the Watch Night Service tradition can be traced back to the Moravians, Christian denomination from the Czech Republic during the mid-1700s. It was later adopted by the founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley. Each year on New Year's Eve, members of the Methodist faith community gathered together to reflect on the previous year with a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving for God's grace. In 1770, the first Watch Services were held in America at the St. George's Methodist Church. Two slaves, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, were a part of this congregation and they later left the church after experiencing racial discrimination. Today, they are renowned as the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). The A.M.E. Church tradition subsequently inspired the celebration of Freedom's Eve as African Americans gathered together to celebrate the progression of freedom's journey.

Frederick Douglass, A.M.E. member and pioneer abolitionist, shares the jubilant sentiments of this occasion when he declared, "We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree." This was indeed a time to rejoice within the African American community. For many, the prayers of their ancestors had finally come to fruition as they reached towards a future of freedom and liberty.

While for others, Freedom's Eve was a call to action, a moral imperative to fight for the full realization of freedom for their brothers and sisters united in the struggle. The Emancipation Proclamation did not abolish slavery nor free slaves but served as a catalyst for change since

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many slaves decided to seize their own freedom. 200,000 freed slaves joined the Union Army and left their mark on history. 103 of these soldiers were from Minnesota. These men fought for the realization of freedom for hundreds of thousands of African-Americans in several border states that had not seceded in the South. African Americans throughout the United States had become united in the struggle to preserve freedom, liberty and justice for all as the foundational pillars of our Nation's identity. Their victory was manifested with the Union winning the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment which abolished slavery on December 18, 1865.

Today, Freedom's Eve is a symbol of not only the struggle of African Americans for freedom from slavery but also a symbol of tenacious courage. Yet, Freedom's Eve also connects history with the present since it informs our struggle today to secure the promise of freedom for our future generations. This year-on the 150th Anniversary of Freedom's Eve, African Americans across the Nation will come together for a time of fellowship, prayer, and reflection; and offer tribute to our ancestors for their courage and strength.

Additionally, local churches will also commemorate their roles in continuing the legacy of Freedom's Eve and enriching Minnesota's history. When former slaves reached the shores of the Mississippi River's shores with Robert Hickman, they were separated due to their large numbers. Some stayed in Saint Paul, some were sent to Minneapolis, some to Duluth and while others were sent to Hastings. Churches were established by these former slaves who migrated to Minnesota. Pilgrim Baptist Church was founded in 1863. That same year, St. James A.M.E. was established and held a Watch Night Service. St. James A.M.E. it is the oldest known church in Minneapolis that originated the Minnesota concept of Watch Night among A.M.E. congregations locally. In 1890, St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church was established and has served for generations as a community hub for economic, political, and civil rights discourse.

In the Twin Cities, the Minnesota African American Museum (MAAM) in conjunction with local faith communities will celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Freedom's Eve. Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church will hold a Watch Night service from 9:00 p.m. to midnight (2600 East 38th Street, Minneapolis, MN 55406). Pilgrim Baptist Church will hold a Watch Night Service from 10:00 p.m. to midnight (732 West Central Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55104). Also, St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Cathedral will hold a Freedom's Night Watch non-denominational service on December 31, 2012 from 6:00 to 8:00 pm. (530 N. 5th Avenue E., Duluth, MN 55805).

Additionally, there are many ways that you can honor the 150th Anniversary of Freedom's Eve. Start by sharing the story of Freedom's Eve with your family, friends and youth in your community. This is an opportunity to reclaim history with a sense of great pride and celebrate this missing chapter of African American history. According to Roxanne Givens, MAAM Director, knowledge of history within the African American community is a great source of transformative power. She shares "nothing is more powerful than a People seeped in the knowledge of its inclusive and authentic history." Share the gift of knowledge today. You can also host a Watch Night Service within your church/congregation and a how to guide is available at MAAM's website. For more information about Watch Night Services and other 150th Anniversary Emancipation Proclamation activities, please visit the MAAM website: <http://www.maamcc.org>

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