The Inaugural Southwest Juneteenth Festival: History, Heritage, and Hope

by Jackie L. Williams, Ph.D.

The inaugural Southwest Juneteenth Festival takes place in an enclave in southwest Washington, D.C. on Saturday, June 17, 2023 from 12:00 noon to 3:00 p.m. on the site of the historic Carron Baptist Church at 1354 First Street. This festival engages city-wide residents along with James Creek Drillings, Syphax Gardens, Greenleaf Gardens, Greenleaf Gardens Middle Rise, and Greenleaf Gardens Annex communities. Descendant communities remember the storied past of the enslavement of Africans and African Americans and the celebration of their freedom. This outdoor festival is a celebration through music, a DJ, food, children activities, and reflective conversations about Juneteenth.

Historian Louis C. Hicks, Jr. will lead the festival goers in dialogue about Juneteenth National Independence Day - also known as Jubilee Day, Emancipation Day, Freedom Day, and Black Independence Day. He is a renowned community historian with a focus on the intersection of Black history and public interpretation. He currently serves as Executive Assistant for the Association for the Study of African American History (ASALH). He has held leadership positions at the George Washington Carver Museum, Austin, Texas; Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Alexandria Black History Museum, Alexandria, Virginia. His academic background includes a B.A. in Psychology and B.F.A. in Studio Art, University of Texas and a M.A. in African Art History, Howard University.

Hicks, a native Texan who resides in Washington, D.C., celebrated Juneteenth during his formative years in Austin, Texas. This is significant because June 19, 1965 or Juneteenth marks the date when those who were enslaved in the state of Texas learned that they had been freed – two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, which freed only those enslaved in the states fighting with the Union. However, the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution abolished slavery.

“Watch Night” or “Freedom’s Eve” originated in the Black church on the night of December 31, 1862 as those who were enslaved and freed African Americans watched and waited the signage of the Emancipation Proclamation. This tradition continues today in many historically Black churches on the last day of each calendar year – seeing the old year out and the new year in.

Celebrating 95 years of serving the Washington, D.C. community, Carron – a 14th Century Gothic style architect brownstone - is a few walking blocks from National and Audi stadiums and three historic landmarks. The former home site of native Washingtonian soul singer Marvin Gaye at 1617 First Street. In the same block is the location of the James C. Dent House at 156 Q Street. Born enslaved in 1855, Reverend Dent was founding pastor, along with his wife Mary, of a Baptist church and he was a notable community leader advocating social and economic justice. Across the street is Fort McNair, the site where the Abraham Lincoln assassination co-conspirators were hanged 158 years ago.

Carron’s community-centered outreach strategy engages local residents in walks with the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, U.S. Marshal Service, and U.S. Secret Service. Addressing food deserts, community feed events are held to ensure that families and individuals fight hunger.
“Community outreach, civic engagement, and cultural identity are ways that we facilitate change in the surrounding neighborhoods,” said Reverend Peter J. Spann, a Howard University School of Divinity alumni. “The inaugural Southwest Juneteenth Festival aligns with Carron’s mission and vision beyond the walls of the church as a faith-based anchor for local and community-wide residents.”

This annual Southwest Juneteenth Festival serves as a beacon of hope to bring together a cross-section of people from all D.C. communities to heal from our past and celebrate freedom for the future.

For more information about the Southwest Juneteenth Festival, contact: Rev. Peter J. Spann at (240) 601-7137.

Credit: Carron Baptist Church