

## Have you heard of Emancipation Day?



Photo by [Lucian Osorio](#) licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Besides Christmas and Easter, name another holiday that is celebrated in the Caribbean, parts of the United States and in Ontario, Canada? Halloween? Nope. Family Day? Guess again. When you get to Emancipation Day, you can give yourself a pat on the back because you're right!

## What is it?



*Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe (left) ended most slavery in Upper Canada (now Ontario). American President Abraham Lincoln (right) ended slavery in the United States.*

Emancipation Day is when the government declared that it would be against the law to make the people or the *descendants* (the children, grand children

and great-grand children) of the people that were taken from Africa continue to work as slaves. In Ontario and many of the islands in the Caribbean, the holiday marks the end of slavery for people who were taken from Africa to places that were part of the British Empire. In the United States, the celebration marks president Abraham Lincoln's announcement of the end of slavery and the end of the Civil War.

## When is it?



*At many celebrations you can hear steel drum bands play. (Photo by [Eric Parker](#) licensed [CC](#)*

*[BY-SA 2.0](#))*

In **Ontario**, Emancipation Day is celebrated on August 1, right around the Simcoe Day long weekend. In many countries of the **Caribbean** such as Antigua, the Bahamas and Grenada, it's celebrated on the first Monday in

August. In the **United States**, it varies from state to state: in Washington, DC, it's the weekend closest to April 16; in Florida it's May 20; and in Texas and many other states it's June 19 (and called Juneteenth).

## Why is it important?



*Family of black American slaves picking cotton in a field in Georgia, around 1850.*

For nearly 400 years, millions of children, women and men were taken away from their homes in Africa and brought to the Americas to work as *slaves* (people who are forced by other people to work for no money at all). They were given lots of work to do, and much of it was very hard and dangerous. They were forced to change their names, their religions and beliefs, stop speaking their languages and they were almost never given

permission to go anywhere. Many were beaten and starved and forced to do things they didn't want to do.

Celebrating Emancipation Day helps us to remember that all people deserve to be treated fairly and with respect.

## How is it celebrated?



*In Toronto, one of the ways Emancipation is celebrated is with the Caribbean Festival (also known as Caribana), which is held the first Monday in August. It's become the largest Caribbean festival in North America and includes a big parade. (Photo by Eric Parker licensed CC BY-SA 2.0)*

The holiday is celebrated in many ways, but it is mostly a time for people to remember and honour the struggles for freedom that people experienced in the past. In **Canada**, people play African drums, sing songs, recite poems and listen to speeches about respect for all people and unity. — Copyright © CBC 2020