

Richmond Juneteenth parade draws thousands

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Richmond residents Demesha Johnson, 20, left, Jaychelle Price, 19, and their uncle Albert Lee

In a diverse city that prides itself on its ethnic festivals, Juneteenth may be the granddaddy of them all.

Richmond's ninth annual Juneteenth Parade and Festival on Saturday drew thousands of revelers, who lined the parade route and massed at Nicholl Park for live music, youth performances, ethnic foods, craft vendors and community booths.

"It doesn't get any better than this," said Charles Evans, owner of CJ's BBQ & Fish Restaurant, a longtime local favorite, as celebrators lined up for ribs and catfish at his stand in the park. "This event is special because it brings together all the different neighborhoods. You can see the pride in people's faces."

Juneteenth is a tradition dating back to the end of the Civil War and celebrates the end of slavery in the United States. The day commemorates June 19, 1865, when Union soldiers landed at Galveston, Texas, with news that the war had ended and that the slaves were free.

Saturday's parade began at 10 a.m. near the corner of Cutting Boulevard and Marina Way, then proceeded east on Cutting. Among the parade participants were members of the Richmond Youth Academy, a Corvette car club, African-American cowboys on horseback, African-American firefighters, the NAACP's Richmond chapter, and various city and county agencies.

Thousands of residents, many on lawn chairs on their front porches or sidewalks, lined the route and cheered the parade. The parade turned north on 37th Street and west on Macdonald Avenue before ending at Nicholl Park.

Richmond hosted civic-sponsored Juneteenth festivals as far back as the 1970s, but tough budget

times put the funding on hold in the 1990s, said Jerrold Hatchett, one of the festival's chief organizers.

About 10 years ago, "The National Brotherhood Alliance," a group of residents that Hatchett chairs, succeeded in getting city funding and an assortment of private sponsors to restart the festival, which has grown to become one of the largest in the state.

"It's important to celebrate this great day in a great way," said Joe Fisher, a longtime resident and member of the Black American Political Action Committee (BAPAC). "And this turnout is bigger than last year, it seems to me."

Police Chief Chris Magnus, on hand at Nicholl Park, said the crowd numbered "thousands and thousands."

Among the celebrity guests scheduled to perform on stage in Nicholl Park late Saturday afternoon was George Clinton and his legendary band Parliament Funkadelic. U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, county Supervisor John Gioia, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and several council members were on hand and addressed the crowd.