The story behind one of our Nation's most epic, but under celebrated holiday – National Freedom Day, is one of valor, empowerment, and determination, seeded in the unrelenting efforts of "a most extraordinary slave-turned-citizen", Richard Robert Wright Sr.

Public commemoration traditions have long been an important part of African American history and culture. The commemoration of freedom has been long used to influence various social, political, economic, and cultural principles, because it elicits a sense of empowerment, assertion, and identity among black Americans. So, it is no surprise that a day such as National Freedom Day came into fruition. However, its existence did not come into being without a struggle. Attempts at creating a national holiday to commemorate the end of slavery was met with much resistance from white America, hence, failure was the outcome of many of these efforts, until 1949.

During the 1940s and 1950s, "freedom" was the keyword that became a metaphor for the "ongoing realities of racial injustice". The 13th Amendment, Article XIII Section 1 states "Neither slavery or involuntary servitude except as punishment . . . shall exist with in the United States, nor any place subject to their jurisdiction", yet, the struggle for equality is as real now as it was then. What do we, black Americans, and America as a whole, have to show for our struggles? What changed during the time period when the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed by a joint congressional resolution on January 31, 1865, officially signed by President Abraham Lincoln on February 1, 1865, and since President Harry Truman's signing of the National Freedom Day bill on June 30, 1948? During those 83 years (1865 – 1948) what, or who, "put the medal to the pedal"? It was the recognition of a movement spun into action by Major Richard Robert Wright.

Richard Robert Wright was a "Tiger" – "You can get anywhere from here", and he did. Wright born in the South (near Dalton, Georgia in1855) to enslaved parents made tireless journeys by foot traveling over 200 miles in pursuit of advancing his life and education. He saw no limitations. Wright's ambition shined through at a very young age. During a visit by Commissioner Oliver Otis Howard of the Freedmen's Bureau to his high school, in 1868, General Howard asked what message would they like him to deliver to the children up North, the then 12 year old Wright stood up and stated "Sir, tell them we are rising". This phrase became the anthem "for the postwar black middle class", and has since been memorialized in the 1869 poem written by John Greenleaf Whittier's *Howard to Atlanta*:

> "…Who hears can never fear for or doubt you;
> What shall I tell the children up North about you?
> Then ran round a whisper, a murmur, some answer devising:
> And a little boy stood up: General, Tell 'em we're rising…"

Making this his self-made mantra, little Richard Robert Wright rose. Wright went on to receive various accomplishments, recognitions, and accolades some of which include: one of the first graduates of Atlanta University and valedictorian receiving his BA (Atlanta, GA 1876), Principal of Howard Normal School (Cuthbert, GA ~1878) and Ware High School (Augusta, GA 1880), founded the first association of African-American teachers (GA), selected by the Georgia legislature to head the Georgia State Industrial College (Savannah, GA 1891), and appointed to a U.S. army paymaster with the rank of Major (1898) during the Spanish – America war. His longest stint in the south was his very active role as Principal at the Georgia State Industrial College, in Savannah, GA (now Savannah State University), where he served for 30 years "and

developed one of the first state-supported institutions for the higher education of African Americans in the South"; It is because of him, we, the Savannah State Tigers, are rising. Major Wright resigned as principal of the College, and at the age of 67 left the South to continue, what may be considered his greatest pursuit and 'rise'

New found motivation saw Major Wright moving to the city of Philadelphia, where he was determined to open his very own bank; so said, so done. Wright was determined to establish an enterprise where all persons, regardless of race and creed, were treated with fairness and respect. He also saw the ideal opportunity "to improve the social and economic opportunities available to black Philadelphians". Once again, Wright did not give into the oppression or the limitations of his time; he learned to "negotiate a perilous racial terrain". During the years of the Great Depression, Wright's bank, the Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company of Philadelphia was among the 16 banks nationwide to absorb the effects economic decline that swept through the country. He was again rewarded and recognized for his magnanimous efforts, eventually receiving Philadelphia's highest award for distinguished citizenship.

As Wright continued his tremendous works in the historic city of Philadelphia, he was reminded of the 70th year of Negro Emancipation. In 1933, emancipation celebrations were reignited in Philadelphia thanks to Major Wright. That same year, Wright organized a "70th Anniversary Celebration of Negro Progress". By 1935 the event was receiving both national and international recognition from persons including, city officials, national black leaders, and representatives from Haiti (a country with which had established and promoted trade. After much lobbing for having "a roll of honor… of which we [Black Americans] are not ashamed", and receiving support from President Roosevelt and First Lady, the commemorative postage stamp honoring Brooker T. Washington (first such honor of an African American) was much celebrated at the 1939 event. In these his final years, Richard Robert Wright emphasized and nationalized his ideal of the 13th Amendment being the door to "our" freedom. He believed that freedom was "the corner stone of our liberty…" . Wright, in his 80s led the effort to create National Freedom Day, in commemoration of the signing of the 13th Amendment by President Lincoln on 1st February, 1865. In 1941, Major Wright gathered national and local leaders to assemble in Philadelphia in order to "formulate plans" for having February 1st, of each year, recognized as National Freedom Day. The following year (1942), Major Wright was the founder and President of the National Freedom Day Association.

Wright was working in hopes of "One Freedom", and National Freedom Day would be the essence of promoting "good will and harmonious cooperation among the citizens throughout the country". Wright believed in National Freedom (one freedom), which "implies that all men are not only equally entitled to all freedoms but … in practice, they must prove that our declaration of freedom includes all men". President Roosevelt supported the idea of a National Freedom Day, and in his 1943 letter to Major Wright expressed that freedom was a movement that consecrates the maturing of the American democracy, it exemplifies "The steady progress of our Negro citizens … they have come a long way… a race which has achieved so much in a few years will go forward to even greater accomplishments in the years and generation ahead". Wright felt that the 13th Amendment should be celebrated because it can bring people together, and would prove utterly important with regards to national defense; he wanted to show that the Bill of Right was a "living thing". From 1940 until his death in 1947 (age 94), Major Wright expended his energies on forming the necessary connections with congressmen and majors who

supported and understood the importance of having a National Freedom Day. Although the National Freedom Day bill was defeated by congress a few weeks after his death in 1947, the bill was reintroduced in 1948, "this time it swept through both the House and Senate Judiciary Committees". On June 30th, 1948 the National Freedom Day bill was signed into law by President Truman making the following year (1949) and all years thereafter a National Holiday. This commemoration represents what Major Wright spent near 91 years living, teaching, and fighting for – equality and justice for all men; freedom.

So, where we are now? It has been149 years since the singing of the 13th Amendment, and 65 years since National Freedom Day has been commemorated, but are we yet free?

> "Today Thank God, the Negro stands upon higher ground where the light of liberty shines upon him steadily. Standing upon this vantage ground he has new duties, new responsibilities. In this brighter day the demand is for men of thought, men of action"
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> (Richard Robert Wright, as cited in Haynes, 1952)

What does freedom mean to me? It means we are no longer holstered by the oppression and prejudice of a soiled past, or by mental limitations. Rather, we are open to expression, understanding, and elevation, for ourselves and all others. We are at liberty to choose not to choose or to choose whatever we want! Our capacity becomes as unknown, extensive, and unchartered as the universe that embraces us so indiscriminately. Freedom is what freedom wants . . . The right, the choice, the will to be ourselves, uninterrupted.

Are YOU free?