



A Common Core State Anchor Standards & Standards-Aligned Discussion/Project Guide

# THEY BUILT ME FOR FREEDOM: THE STORY OF JUNETEENTH AND HOUSTON'S EMANCIPATION PARK

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“... [A] moving tribute to Houston’s Emancipation Park.” - Publishers Weekly (starred review)



“Ellis compresses a lot of history into a flowing narrative...” - School Library Journal (starred review)

“A moving portrayal of community and appreciation for the past, this book is a fine addition to all collections.” - Booklist

“A beautifully layered story just as rich as the history it represents.” - Kirkus Reviews

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Written by Tonya Duncan Ellis

Illustrated by Jenin Mohammed

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*On June 19, 1865, the 250,000 enslaved people of Texas learned they were free, ending slavery in the United States. This day was soon to be memorialized with the dedication of a park in Houston. The park was called Emancipation Park, and the day it honored would come to be known as Juneteenth.*

*In the voice and memory of the park itself—its fields and pools, its protests and cookouts, and, most of all, its people—the 150-year story of Emancipation Park is brought to life. Through lyrical text and vibrant artwork, Tonya Duncan Ellis and Jenin Mohammed have crafted an ode to the struggle, triumph, courage, and joy of Black America—and the promise of a people to remember.*

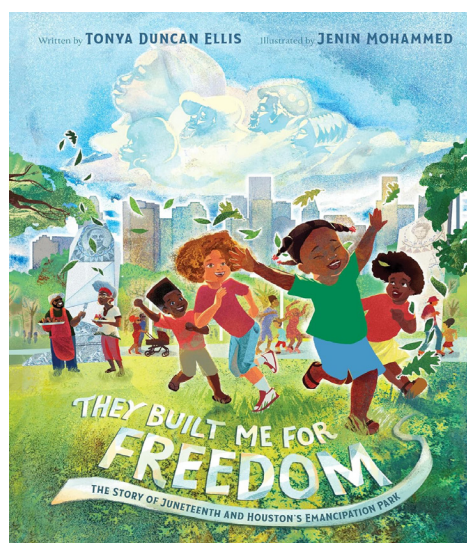
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Guide created by  
Debbie Gonzales, MFA



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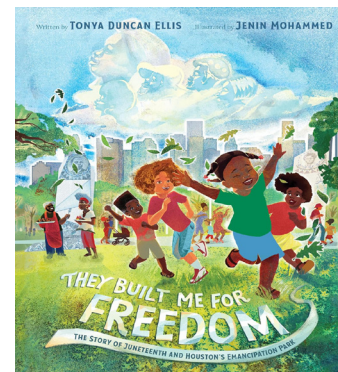
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## Pre-Reading Discussion

- Notice the people featured in the illustration on the cover of the book. What are they doing? How are they feeling? How do you know?
- The place people are gathered is Emancipation Park, a special place established to commemorate the freedom granted to enslaved people on June 19, 1865, the day General Gordon Granger issued General Order, No. 3, which ended slavery in Texas. The word *emancipation* means being set free from something that is holding you back. What does the phrase “being set free” mean to you?
- The word *commemorating* means to remember and show respect for something important that happened in the past. Emancipation Park is a special place established to commemorate the freedom granted to enslaved people on the day the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. Explain how the people featured in the illustration and in the clouds above are joined in celebration and gratitude for being emancipated and set free.
- Predict what this book is going to be about.



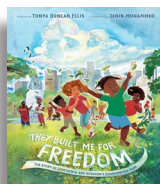
### Meet the Author - Tonya Duncan Ellis:

Tonya Duncan Ellis is the author of the hit “Sophie Washington” series, which has sold over 175,000 copies. Her debut picture book, “They Built Me for Freedom,” was released by HarperCollins in May 2024. A dedicated diversity advocate, Tonya is a member of the Brown Bookshelf’s Amplify Black Stories cohort and serves on the Highlights faculty. Tonya lives in Houston, Texas.



### Meet the Illustrator- Jenin Mohammed:

Jenin Mohammed, born and raised in Miramar, Florida, has a rich African American and Caribbean heritage. After graduating from UCF’s Character Animation program, she relentlessly pursued her dream of storyboarding for TV, landing a position at a studio in Burbank, California. However, Jenin soon discovered her true passion, writing books for children.



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## Post-Reading Discussion

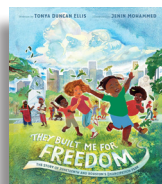
### *When people visit me, they are free...*

- In the spread depicting a crowd of people happily enjoying themselves in an inner-city park, notice the park sign in the lower right corner of the illustration. The name of the park is Emancipation Park. The word *emancipated* means free, released, and unchained. Why would a park be named for the notion of emancipation or for freedom?
- A *literary device* is a special way of using words to make stories more interesting and fun. *Personification* is a literary device used by authors in which they refer to something that is not a person, like an animal or an object, as if it can do things that people can do. Explain how the phrase “When people visit me...” personifies Emancipation Park.
- Why do you think the illustrator drew the tall buildings in the background of the illustration?
- Describe the smells and the sounds of Emancipation Park.
- How do the people in the picture look like they feel at Emancipation Park? How do you know? Why do you think that is?
- Can you think of a place where you feel happy and free? What do you like to do there?
- Tell why is it important to learn about places like Emancipation Park?

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### *They built me to remember.*

- Define the word *remember*.
- Tell how remembering events that happened in the past might help us understand the present and guide us to make better choices in the future. Why is this type of remembering important?
- Describe the cloud-like images featured in the background of this spread. What is happening in this scene?
- Emancipation Park was built to remember. Why would a community of people want to build a park to remind people of things that happened in the past?
- Tell why looking back at important history helps us understand and celebrate being free, showing us why it’s so special.





***They built me to show that they were strong.***

- The word *resilient* means strong, tough, tenacious, and persistent. Consider how the enslaved people, who were once beaten, placed in chains, and sent away from loved ones, had to be resilient to survive. How did their resilience help them overcome these hardships?
- *Perseverance* is defined as having grit, determination, and persistence. Explain how the perseverance of once-enslaved people helped them work together to raise money and buy land to establish a place for their community to flourish.
- Describe how working together to build a place to celebrate, play, and give thanks honors the memory of those who struggled and fought for freedom.
- Notice the clusters of butterflies featured in the illustrations highlighting people who are celebrating and playing. The butterfly is a symbol of *transformation*, which means changing from one thing to something very different, like when a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. Make a connection between the symbolism of the butterfly and the historic events taking place in the story.
- Predict why the illustrator featured butterflies on the spread depicting people challenging discrimination and demanding equal rights. What type of transformation and fight for change is being explored in this illustration?



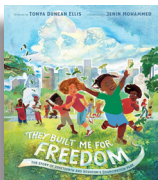
***As the years passed, some forgot.  
Skyscrapers replaced the trees that once hugged my fields.  
Trash scurried across the ground.  
Broken chains sagged from swing sets.***

- Tell why there are no butterflies featured in this illustration.
- Recall that the author is using personification to tell the story of Emancipation Park. If so, explain how the park feels about being neglected and uncared for.
- Emancipation Park stayed in a state of disrepair for almost 30 years before undergoing revitalization, which means renewal, restoration, and rebirth. Make a connection between the revitalization of the park and the transformation of the butterfly.
- Tell why it is important to restore and protect a special place like Emancipation Park. Who benefits from the rebuilding? How so?



*While they enjoy my beautiful grounds,  
they recall their ancestors and all they overcame.  
Standing strong.  
Walking proud.  
Singing songs of jubilee...running free.*

- List the struggles that the ancestors overcame. Describe what they fought against, persevered, resisted, and eventually defeated. Explain how renovating Emancipation Park celebrates their accomplishments.
- Juneteenth is a holiday celebrating the end of slavery in the United States on June 19, 1865. Describe the energy and feeling of the renovated park during Juneteenth celebrations. Predict how the new park sounds. Explain how the changes in the park celebrate the triumphs of the emancipated ancestors.
- “Songs of jubilee” are happy songs that people sing when they are celebrating something very special, like being free or having a big party. These songs make everyone feel joyful and excited. Explain how these acts of celebration honor the trials and successes of the ancestors.
- List ways that you might be able to honor the spirit of Juneteenth and Emancipation Park all year long.



## Historical Timeline

**Objective:** To analyze and categorize the key events that led to the establishment of a federal holiday, using a historical timeline to understand the sequence of events, the impact of each milestone, and the broader social and political context.

### Materials:

- THEY BUILT ME FOR FREEDOM, the book
- The Historical Timeline Template (Guide, pg. 8)
- The Historical Timeline Cards (Guide, pg. 9)
- The Historical Timeline Answers (Guide, pg. 10)
- Cardstock
- Scissors
- Glue stick
- Markers

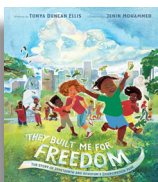
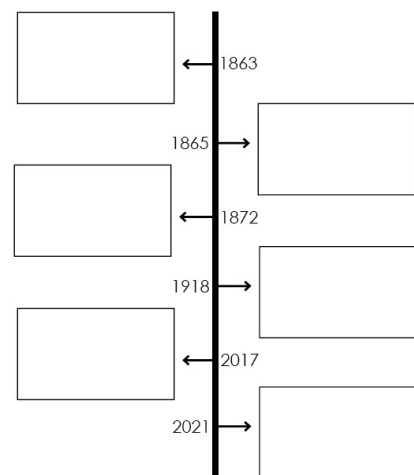
### Procedure:

- Tell the students that in this lesson, they will explore the important events that led to Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday. Let them know that there is extra information about the story in the backmatter, which is found at the end of the book.
- Print a copy of the Historical Timeline Template and the Historical Timeline cards on cardstock. Use scissors to trim around the Historical Timeline cards.
- Using the Historical Timeline Template and Cards, read the information in the backmatter. Identify the dates mentioned in the backmatter, and match each Historical Timeline card with the corresponding date on the Historical Timeline Template.
- Use glue sticks to attach each Historical Timeline card to the matching date on the Historical Timeline Template.
- Have students check their work using the Historical Timeline Answer guide.

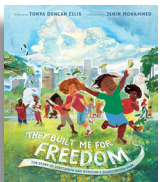
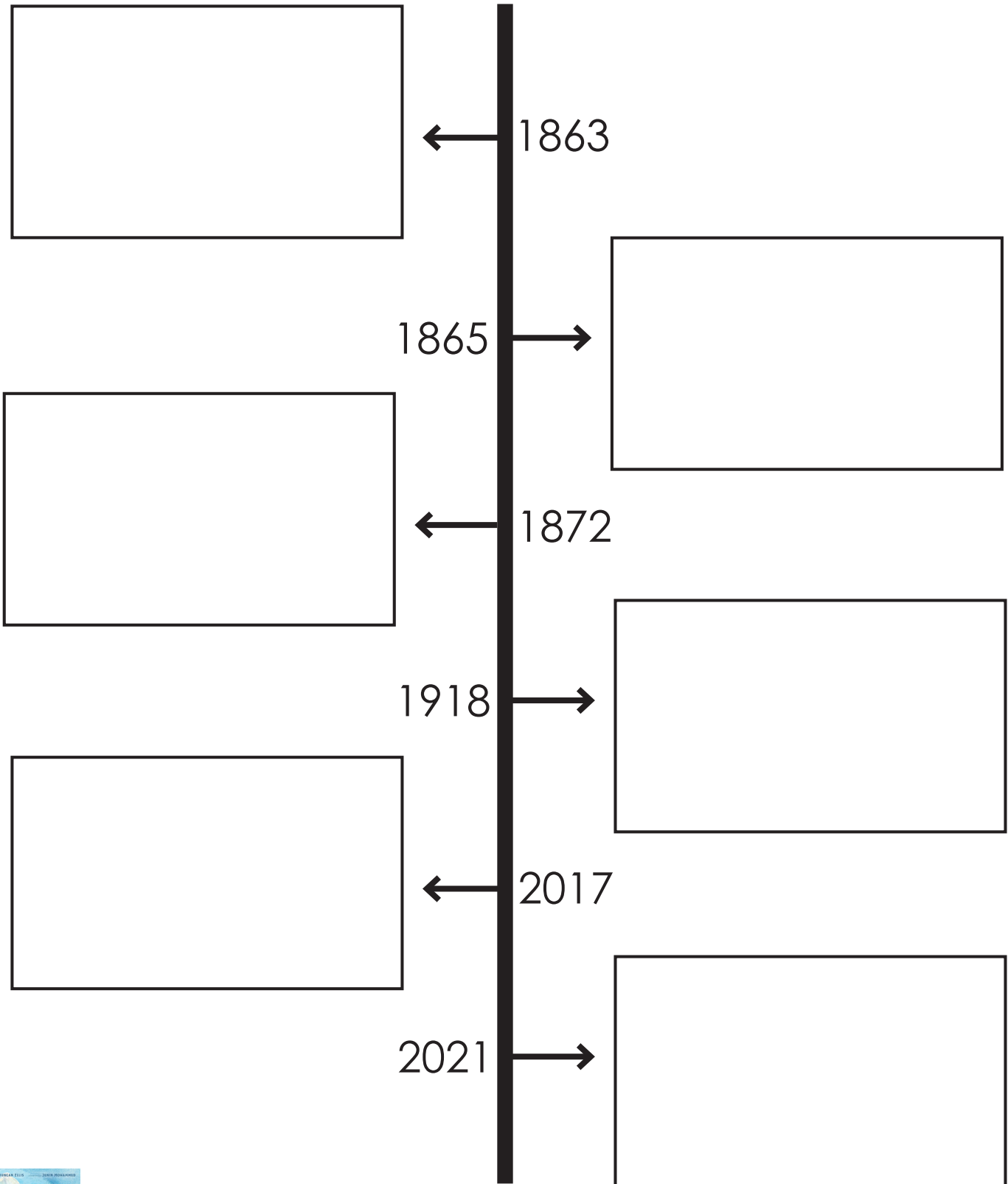
### BONUS ACTIVITIES:

- Distribute a fresh copy of the Historical Timeline Template to each student. Using the illustrations featured in the story, instruct them to retell the events of the story by sketching a scene in each dated space that shows what happened. Afterward, have them share their work with the class.
- Instruct students to compare the changes in Emancipation Park and its people throughout history to a butterfly's metamorphosis. Have them write a short essay describing this transformation, and encourage them to share their work with the class.

Historical Timeline Template



# Historical Timeline Template





### Historical Timeline Cards



President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, ending slavery in the Confederacy.

During the time of Jim Crow laws, Emancipation Park is the only public park and swimming pool facility in Houston open to African Americans.

Emancipation Park was established as a municipal park serving as a vibrant, year-round center of community activity.

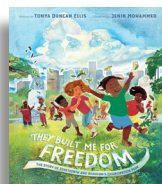
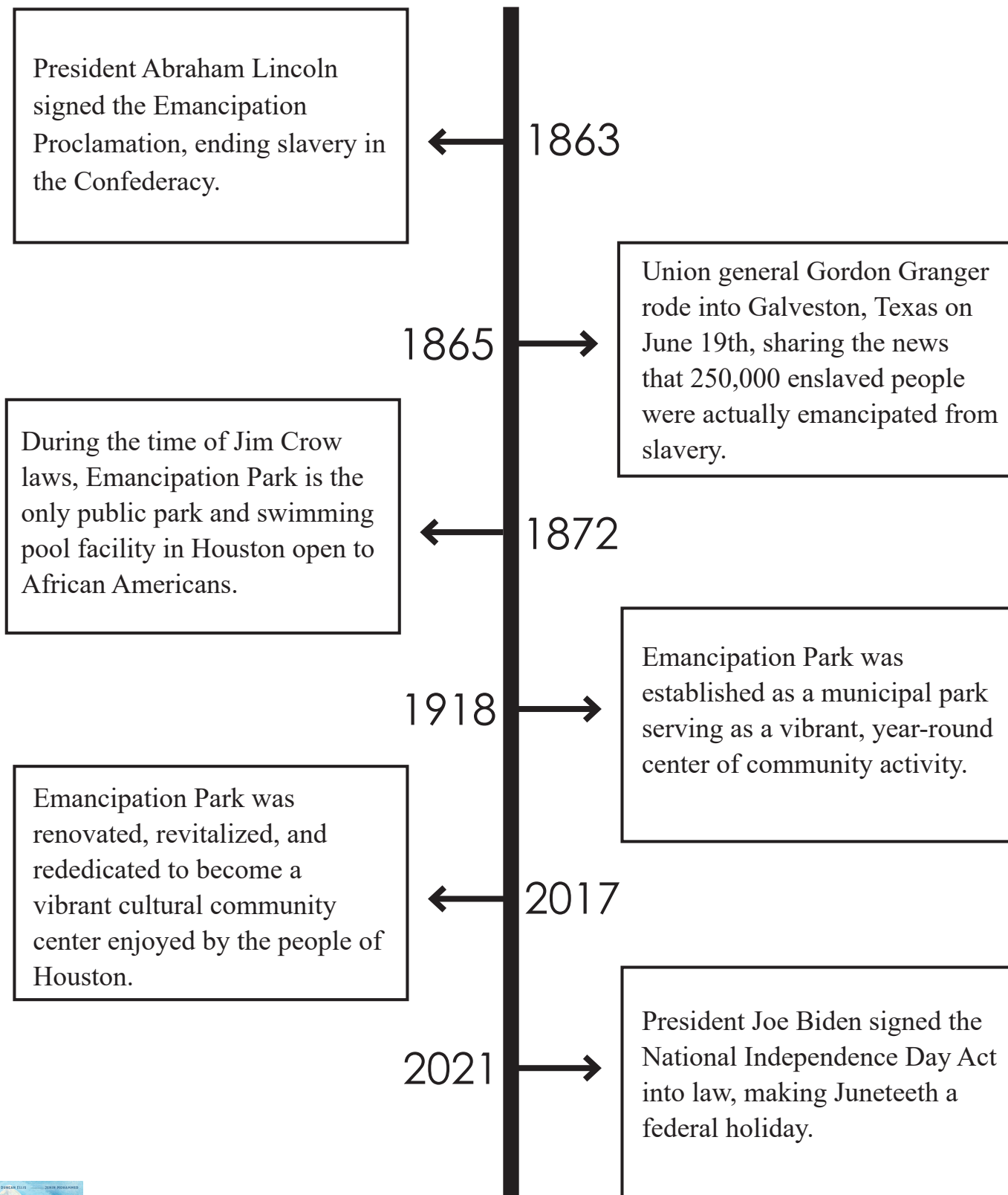
Union general Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas on June 19th, sharing the news that 250,000 enslaved people were actually emancipated from slavery.

Emancipation Park was renovated, revitalized, and rededicated to become a vibrant cultural community center enjoyed by the people of Houston.

President Joe Biden signed the National Independence Day Act into law, making Juneteeth a federal holiday.



## Historical Timeline Answers



## Freedom: A Sensory Poem

*In this story, the author explored the history of Emancipation Park to tell the story of Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day. In this activity use the senses to write and illustrate what the word 'freedom' means to you.*

**Objective:** Students will explore the concept of freedom through the use of sensory details, enhancing their understanding of Juneteenth by creating a poem that captures the essence of freedom using descriptive language related to sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

### Materials:

- THEY BUILT ME FOR FREEDOM: THE STORY OF JUNETEENTH AND HOUSTON'S EMANCIPATION PARK, the book
- The Freedom: A Sensory Poem template (Guide, pg. 12)
- The Sensory Poem Challenge (Guide, pg.13)
- Pencils
- Markers

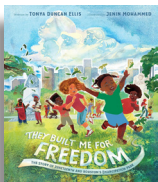
### Procedure:

- Reread **THEY BUILT ME FOR FREEDOM: THE STORY OF JUNETEENTH AND HOUSTON'S EMANCIPATION PARK** with the students, taking care to identify elements of the story that connect with the sensorial examples of being free.
- Encourage the students to identify elements of the text and illustrations where the notion of freedom is represented. Find examples of the following sensory expressions:
  - Consider how the feeling of freedom is shown in the story.
  - Identify ways that the smell of freedom is demonstrated.
  - Explore ways in which the sound of freedom is featured.
  - Tell how freedom might taste.
  - Describe how freedom looks in the story, or in one's life.
- Instruct students to use the Freedom: A Sensory Poem template to write and illustrate a sensory poem about freedom. They are free to replicate examples from the book or come up with their own examples exploring the topic.

### EXAMPLE:

#### **Peace**

Peace looks like a blue sky.  
 Peace tastes like cool water.  
 Peace sounds like ocean waves.  
 Peace feels like a warm breeze.



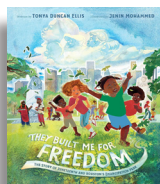
# Freedom

Freedom looks like \_\_\_\_\_

Freedom tastes like \_\_\_\_\_

Freedom sounds like \_\_\_\_\_

Freedom feels like \_\_\_\_\_



## A Sensory Poem Challenge

For a creativity challenge, choose a theme from a picture book other than **THEY BUILT ME FOR FREEDOM** to explore through a sensory poem. Consider themes such as *enslavement*, *community*, *emancipation*, *celebration*, *equal rights*, *transformation*, *thankfulness*, or *remembering*. Using the senses, bring these concepts to life in words and illustration.

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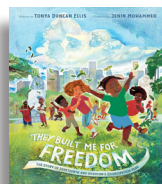
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\_\_\_\_\_ looks like \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ tastes like \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ sounds like \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ feels like \_\_\_\_\_



## Butterfly Metaphors

**Objective:** To help students understand the symbolism of butterflies in the story and encourage them to find personal meaning in the illustrations.

### Materials:

- Copies of the book
- Drawing paper
- Colored pencils, markers, or crayons
- Writing paper and pencils

### Procedure:

#### Discussion:

- Start with a group discussion about butterflies. Ask the students what they know about butterflies, especially monarch butterflies, and their life cycle.
- Explain the symbolism of butterflies in general: transformation, hope, freedom, and resilience.
- Discuss how these symbols might relate to the story of emancipation in the book. Encourage the students to share their thoughts on why the illustrator might have chosen to include butterflies and chrysalises.

#### Close Reading:

- Have the students look closely at the illustrations in the book, focusing on the butterflies and chrysalises. Ask them to note where these images appear and how they relate to the text.

#### Creative Drawing:

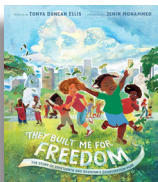
- Ask the students to draw their own illustrations inspired by the butterflies in the book. They can create scenes where butterflies and chrysalises symbolize freedom, hope, or transformation.
- Encourage them to be creative and think about how they can use colors and images to convey these themes.

#### Reflective Writing:

- After the drawing activity, have the students write a short paragraph explaining the meaning they found in their illustration. They should describe how their drawing symbolizes the themes of transformation, hope, freedom, or resilience.
- Encourage them to connect their personal experiences or feelings to the symbolism of the butterflies.

#### Sharing and Discussion:

- Have the students share their drawings and writings with the class. Facilitate a discussion where they can explain their interpretations and learn from each other's perspectives.





## Common Core State Anchor Standards

		Discussion	Historical Timeline	Freedom: A Sensory Poem	Butterfly Metaphors
<b>College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading</b>					
<b>Key Ideas and Details</b>					
	1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.	X	X		X
	2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.	X	X	X	X
	3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.	X	X		X
<b>Craft and Structure</b>					
	4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.	X	X	X	X
<b>Integration of Knowledge and Ideas</b>					
	7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.	X	X	X	X
<b>Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity</b>					
	10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.	X	X	X	X
<b>College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing</b>					
<b>Text Types and Purposes</b>					
	2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.	X	X	X	X
<b>Production and Distribution of Writing</b>					
	4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	X	X	X	X
	5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.	X	X	X	X

