

Advocates for ‘open borders’ have been able to use the venerable Statue of Liberty as a symbol of a welcoming attitude toward mass immigration. This was not the monument’s original purpose – when and how did matters change? After extensive research, Elizabeth Koed gave this cogent account for our Spring 1992 issue.

A Symbol Transformed: How ‘Liberty Enlightening the World’ became ‘The Mother of Exiles’

by Elizabeth Koed

The question is to elevate in commemoration of the glorious anniversary an exceptional monument. In the middle of the New-York harbour, on a little Island belonging to the Union, facing Long Island where the first blood has been shed for the Independence, will be raised a colossal statue, showing its grand figure in the space, horizoned by the large cities of New-York, Jersey City and Brooklyn. At the entrance of that vast continent, full of new life, where ships meet from all points of the world, it will look as springing from the bosom of the deep representing: Liberty Enlightening the World.¹

The Statue of Liberty as the “Mother of Exiles” beckoning the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” is a symbol so firmly entrenched in American mythology that few question how that symbol was born. When French sculptor Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi assembled his 152-foot statue atop a pedestal on small Bedloe’s Island in 1886, however, the symbol we so readily acknowledge today did not exist. Rather, this gift from the French nation celebrated the successful American experiment in republicanism. It was a gesture of friendship and alliance. It commemorated the ties that bound the two nations together as they strove to achieve their goals of

liberty and equality. But over Liberty’s first century, this original intent has been transformed into quite a different symbol. Although attributed to the familiar sonnet by Emma Lazarus, the “Mother of Exiles” symbol has been largely the product of, first, coincidence, and then of many decades of gradual incorporation as the statue became a familiar image that could be used for many purposes. The symbol has strayed far from the original idea. As historian David McCullough explained, “The idea, of course, is liberty, and liberty is what we Americans have always wanted first of all. It was what the Revolution was fought for, what the country was founded for. ‘Hail, Liberty!’ was the cry on the day the statue was unveiled.” Unfortunately, by the time *Liberty* turned 100 those lofty ideals were all but lost, replaced in the ceremonial pomp by glitzy tributes to America’s immigrant population and the “golden doors.” Despite the commendable achievements of so many immigrants, the original idea of *Liberty Enlightening the World* should not be forgotten.²

During America’s struggle for independence, France had been a staunch ally. French funding, ships, armaments, and military know-how aided the colonial rebellion. The Marquis de Lafayette, celebrated French general, became an American hero and confidante to George Washington. In turn, the American experiment served as inspiration to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French republicans on their own quest for a more democratic government. “The Frenchmen who fought in the United States spilled their blood for the principles they hoped to see prevail in France...” said Edouard-Rene Lefebvre de Laboulaye, the man who became *Liberty*’s patron. “In that struggle for independence [there was] a fraternity of feelings, a

Elizabeth Koed at the time of this writing was a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has since located to the Washington-D.C. area to work as an historian.

community of efforts and of emotions, and when hearts have beaten together, something always remains among nations as among individuals.” In the years leading to *Liberty’s* creation, war tested the shared goals and ideals of both nations. This monument was “born out of the despair of two of the most devastating conflicts of the mid-nineteenth century:” wrote Christian Blanchet and Bertrand Dard in *Statue of Liberty: The First Hundred Years*, “the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War.”³

A group of elite French republicans conceived the

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idea of a monument to liberty in 1865, when the United States was emerging from its bloodiest conflict that cost over 600,000 American lives. The very fact that there was a United States that year could be seen as a triumph for republicanism everywhere. By 1870 France’s Emperor Napoleon III had taken his nation into war with the newly unified and powerful Prussia. Not the military genius his namesake had been, he led France to a devastating loss. With Napoleon exiled in 1871, France began its tenth governmental change in little over a half century, beginning yet another stage of its own republican experiment. French republicans hoped at last to secure a democratic government in France, driven by the example of the United States which had not only wrenched itself from British control, but established a republican government that survived a divisive and violent war.

One Frenchman thoroughly committed to following the American example was Laboulaye, professor of law, historian, and defender of democracy in France. He was fascinated by the United States and had written many works about its history and heroes, as well as an in-depth analysis of the constitutional

system. As French republicans gathered around him to plan their own future actions, the U.S. dominated their discussions. At a fateful dinner party at his Versailles home, Laboulaye suggested a monument to celebrate the independence America had fought so hard to win, a gift to be presented to the U.S. at age 100. Among the guests at that dinner party was a young French sculptor, a man already obsessed with monuments of colossal size, Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi.⁴

No immediate action followed the dinner. Events in France proved to be more urgent for the French patriots. Bartholdi served in the military, and Laboulaye turned back to politics and law. With the end of the war, however, both were ready to see their idea come to fruition, and France’s new Third Republic infused the project with a heightened sense of urgency and patriotism. The time was perfect to strengthen ties with the U.S., and so *Liberty* could also serve political purposes. As John Russell pointed out in *Smithsonian*, the “funding and building of the statue...were not so much a matter of warmhearted charitable activity as of political maneuvers in which timing was paramount.” This monument “would commemorate the completion of a hundred years of American freedom,” Bartholdi wrote Laboulaye, “but it would also celebrate Franco-American friendship and the common values of both republics....The monument would be called *Liberty Enlightening the World*.”

Laboulaye was largely responsible for the idea of the monument, but Bartholdi was the man behind the design. He had visited the great pyramids of Egypt, studied the legend of the Colossus at Rhodes, and marveled at the technology involved in the excavation of the Suez Canal. His fascination for large-scale works was complemented by the late nineteenth-century obsession with huge structures built through the magic of modern technology — massive railway networks, the Suez and Panama canals, and the Brooklyn Bridge. Bartholdi wrote his friend and patron on May 8, 1871, that he intended to visit America to pursue their shared dream. “I will try especially to glorify the Republic and Liberty over there,” he wrote Laboulaye, “hoping that I will one day find them back here, if possible.”⁵

So, armed with letters of introduction, Bartholdi embarked on a nation-wide tour of the U.S., meeting

such luminaries as President Ulysses S. Grant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His trip had two purposes: to drum up support for the monument, and to find a site. In fulfilling the latter goal, no aspect of his trip proved as important as the landing. When he sailed into the busy harbor of New York City, crowded with steamships and trading vessels, Bartholdi was immediately convinced that he had found *Liberty's* home. It "is certainly here that my statue must rise;" he wrote Laboulaye, "here where people get their first view of the New World, and where liberty casts her rays on both worlds." His artist's eye had spotted tiny Bedloe's island, an old fort at the mouth of the straights leading into the harbor. "The island belongs to the government;" he continued, "it's on national territory, belongs to all the States, just opposite the Narrows, which are, so to speak, the gateway to America." There could be no better situation than this busy harbor for *Liberty*, for nowhere else could it be seen by so many people.⁶

It took fifteen long years for Bartholdi's dream to be realized. In France the project was hindered by political turmoil, funding problems, and the practicalities of design. (Bartholdi's sculpture would be held up by an ingenious skeleton created by Gustave Eiffel.) By 1884, nearly twenty years after that dinner party at Versailles, *Liberty* was completed and ready for shipment to her new home. America, bogged down in its own funding problems, delayed her departure for another two years. Finally, on October 28, 1886, *Liberty Enlightening the World*, meticulously designed and built, took up her new home on Bedloe's Island in the midst of great pomp and ceremony.

The inauguration, held in fog so dense that *Liberty* could barely be seen, was elaborate and formal. Thousands of people streamed through New York's streets seeking the proper vantage point. Beginning in Madison Square, the official procession that took hours eventually landed on Bedloe's island, at the foot of the new colossus. President Grover Cleveland hosted a French delegation. Speaker after speaker rose to honor the new lady of the harbor. As cannons blasted and sirens screamed, they shouted to be heard over the roar. Cleveland accepted the statue on behalf of the American people, while Albert LeFavre, Consul-General of France in New York,

spoke for his nation. The commemorative address came from popular politician and businessman Chauncey M. Depew. "We dedicate this statue to the friendship of nations and the peace of the world..." Depew told his distinguished audience. "To-day, in the gift of the one, and the acceptance by the other, of this colossal statue, the people of the two countries celebrate their unity in republican institutions, in government founded upon the American idea, and in their devotion to liberty." It was a tremendous day — a celebration of liberty beyond anything seen before. These two great nations had cooperated to make a symbolic gesture that would tie them even more closely together. All those present, including honored guest Bartholdi, understood the meaning of the event, and hailed liberty.⁷

It would not take long, however, for *Liberty Enlightening the World* to take on a new meaning that would slowly gain official sanction. Eventually, it would all but erase Bartholdi's and Laboulaye's original intent. Surprisingly, the new symbol of the "Mother of Exiles," so taken for granted now, resulted from a mere accident of propinquity. As Cleveland and Depew accepted the magnificent gift, another smaller, and yet more consequential, drama was being played out at *Liberty's* feet. Unseen and unheard by the day's illustrious speakers, there passed a steamship loaded down with the newest batch of European immigrants. "From her decks," editorialized *The New York Herald*, "the eyes of the strangers were fixed upon the wonderful drama in progress before them...they saw before them the mighty figure of Liberty." As newcomers streamed through America's busiest harbor, past *Liberty's* location, the symbol of *Liberty Enlightening the World* slowly transformed into the "Mother of Exiles." Although the statue received scant attention for the next few years, it "did have a powerful future ahead of it," Blanchet and Dard explained in *Statue of Liberty*, "mainly because of its location.... [Bartholdi] had placed it at the very focal point of one of the greatest of those transforming forces that swept over the late nineteenth-century world — immigration."⁸

America entered a period of immigration of unprecedented scale in the 1880s. In the first half of the nineteenth century, five million Europeans came to America, mostly from Ireland and Germany. After the

Civil War those numbers expanded, and the ethnicity changed as well. The “new immigrant” of the 1880s and 1890s was more likely to be from Southern Europe, of Italian, Jewish, or Slavic descent. In 1881 the numbers entering the U.S. reached 669,000; in 1882 the numbers climbed to 788,000. By 1905, the yearly influx passed the one million mark. Of the millions of new Americans, most of them entered the U.S. through that busy New York harbor.⁹

In an attempt to accommodate the vast numbers, the federal government turned *Liberty*'s neighbor, Ellis Island, into the official immigration inspection station in 1892. New York had long been the most common site of arrival. Its enlarging industrial endeavors promised jobs — relatives and friends began seeking each other out to settle among familiar faces. For the millions of immigrants entering the U.S. via Ellis Island, their first sight of America, and all that it promised, was *Liberty*. Standing 305 feet high at the mouth of the harbor, she could be seen for miles. For ocean-weary travelers, and especially those in steerage, *Liberty* meant a long-awaited end to a difficult and sometimes dangerous crossing. For millions of immigrants, the sight of *Liberty* meant a new land, a new home, a new opportunity. “For such people,” wrote Oscar Handlin, “*Liberty* was not an abstraction, it was the life-giving shelter that gave them air to breathe.”¹⁰

This popular interpretation of *Liberty* was unintentional. It was a product of coincidence and location, not of design. No one involved in the original plan could have foreseen such an event. “Neither Bartholdi nor Laboulaye had ever suggested associating the statue with the American promise of new life for the downtrodden of the earth,” wrote Blanchet and Dard. It became a symbol, albeit a powerful symbol, that emerged from a simple accident of location. Had Bartholdi placed his monument in Philadelphia, as he threatened to do once when frustrated with the slowness of New York’s fund-raising campaign, *Liberty*'s history might have been very different indeed. Nevertheless, he chose Bedloe’s Island. The closeness to Ellis Island gradually changed *Liberty Enlightening the World* into the “Mother of Exiles,” but any official connection was slow in coming. “Only after the turn of the century was the connection established,” wrote Oscar Handlin,

“between the monument and the massive flow of immigrants who landed at nearby Ellis Island.” In 1903 a small plaque was placed inside the pedestal. This gesture, carried through by private funds and efforts, accompanied by no ceremony or publicity, would eventually give the statue a voice — one

“In 1903 a small plaque was placed inside the pedestal. This gesture ... would eventually give the statue a voice — one provided by a young Jewish-American poet named Emma Lazarus.”

provided by a young Jewish-American poet named Emma Lazarus. Even this important step in the transformation of *Liberty*'s symbol was the product of coincidental timing more than anything else. As explained in *American Heritage* in 1966: “Had Czar Alexander II not been assassinated by Russian revolutionaries in 1881, the Statue of Liberty might have meant something quite different from what it actually has signified to the world in the...years since its dedication.”¹¹

Many artists decided to contribute to the campaign to raise money to build *Liberty*'s pedestal in 1883. Manuscripts were received from such literary giants as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, to be auctioned off at a fund-raising event. Lazarus, budding poet and one-time protege of Ralph Waldo Emerson, agreed to join the effort with a sonnet of her own.

Lazarus was a Sephardic Jew from a wealthy New York family. Despite her Jewish heritage, she had remained uncommitted religiously in her early years. “I shall always be loyal to my race,” she said, “but I feel no religious fervor in my soul.” She also had no commitment to politics. Her passion, from an early age, was poetry. But in the 1880s, events across the Atlantic shook her indifference. “The shock of remote events in Russia,” explained Oscar Handlin, “had

broken the crust of genteel sentiment that until then had guarded the sheltered young woman's emotions." The Russian pogroms that followed the assassination of Alexander II moved Lazarus to political and religious activism. Becoming involved in the New York Jewish community, she aided refugees and supported the small but growing Zionist movement. Her *Songs of a Semite* brought a new voice to her poetry, leaving behind the flowery romanticism of her youthful verse. Her new religious conviction, and the painful sight of persecuted Jews seeking asylum, prompted Lazarus to pen "The New Colossus."¹²

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to
 land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall
 stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightening, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
 command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"
 cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your
 poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

"The words breathed passion," wrote Handlin. "The message was direct. Liberty's name was Mother of Exiles...." Lazarus responded to a specific and personal cause, but the linking of *Liberty* with refugees and immigrants expressed a concern that would be echoed many times in the years to come.¹³

No one noticed the sonnet at the time. It was never mentioned at the inauguration, never printed in the press reports. James Russell Lowell commented to Lazarus that her sonnet gave the monument its *raison d'être*, but no one else seemed to take it seriously. She offered the emotional verse as a token of respect and sympathy for the plight of Russian Jews, but the "Mother of Exiles" so gracefully described in "The

New Colossus" was not on the minds of the celebrants, nor on the lips of New Yorkers in 1886. Lazarus herself was in Paris when the statue was unveiled, and when she returned home the next year she was too ill with cancer to give it any attention. She died that year. Had it not been for the fond gesture of a friend, paying homage to a poet whose creativity was cut so short, the sonnet no doubt would have died with its author.

For nearly two decades Lazarus' poem remained in obscurity. Her reputation, growing at the time of her death, suffered its own demise. But the times were changing, and impersonal events and haphazard forces have their own way of shaping history. Prompted by the opening of Ellis Island in 1892, combined with the

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massive immigration around the turn of the century, "The New Colossus" saw a rebirth in 1903. It was Georgina Schuyler, a friend of Lazarus, who gave legitimacy to *Liberty's* changed role as a new symbol. It was merely a gesture of friendship, not of politics or of any great commitment to America's "golden doors." Through private efforts, Schuyler arranged to have a small plaque, engraved with the sonnet, placed inside the pedestal. It was done quietly with no ceremony. The press ignored it. And yet, this trivial act by one patron of art shaped *Liberty's* future as much as if a public proclamation had been issued. With Lazarus' poem tucked away inside the pedestal where thousands of tourists, many of them immigrants, could read it, the "Mother of Exiles" symbol grew. As Blanchet and Dard explained, "the poem took hold. Reprinted, anthologized, assigned to students, the

sonnet gradually became as familiar as the statue itself and has remained so.”¹⁴

The timing was perfect, although not deliberate. Lazarus wrote her sonnet out of sympathy for Russian Jews, but millions of immigrants subsequently found comfort in those words. As Hertha Pauli and E.B. Ashton explained in *I Lift My Lamp: The Way of a Symbol*, Lazarus’ sonnet “had become truth.” With each passing decade, the “Mother of Exiles” symbol increasingly overshadowed the original idea of *Liberty Enlightening the World*.¹⁵

As *Liberty* entered this new stage of her career, many forces worked toward making the new symbol an indelible part of American myth and memory. During the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, an average of one million people a year entered the U.S., three-fourths of them through Ellis Island. These large numbers spurred concerns over assimilation and Americanization in reasonable people, and feelings of nativist hatred in the extremists. *Liberty*, more and more, became a symbol of tolerance and welcome to the newcomers. World War I brought her image home to all Americans, even those who had never been to New York City, when she became the symbol of the Liberty Bond. The statue soon became one of the most recognizable sights in the world. In 1924 the twelve-acre island and the statue became a national monument. During the 1920s and 1930s it gained new significance as journalists and politicians called for tolerance and rejection of extremist forces. Popular journalist Louis Adamic, himself an immigrant from Yugoslavia, frequently invoked this image. “I am an ex-alien who became an American citizen...,” he wrote in *My America*. “I represent no one and nothing — except, I hope, a certain emotion for this land of my adoption which is an amalgam of love and hope....In a way perhaps this emotion is a logical extension and revision of the feeling and thought expressed in the inscription of the Statue of Liberty.”¹⁶ As the statue’s fiftieth year approached, many Americans began to assess *Liberty*’s place in their nation’s history and memory. L.H. Robbins wrote in the *New York Times* of the many momentous sights *Liberty* had witnessed. “If she...had a tongue what she could tell!” This prompted an editorial from a fellow New Yorker who explained that *Liberty* could speak, for Emma Lazarus “did give

tongue to the statue in ‘The New Colossus.’”¹⁷

Liberty marked her fiftieth birthday in 1936, a time of national and international crisis. Immigration, curtailed in 1924, had all but ceased during the Great Depression, but the new symbol was quickly co-opted for another cause. A new crisis had arisen. Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies greatly multiplied the numbers of refugees seeking asylum. The liberal press seized the “Mother of Exiles” symbol as a means of criticizing the Roosevelt administration’s refugee policy. In one such criticism printed in *The New Republic* and entitled “Mother of Exiles,” it can be seen how far the transformation had progressed. “No doubt,” James Benet wrote of the crowd gathered at the birthday celebration, “it is thinking of Thomas Jefferson’s remarks about the particular liberty to which this statue is dedicated, the freedom of asylum....” How can Roosevelt discuss ideals of liberty, asked Benet, when so many of Hitler’s expelled victims were being denied a new home in America. Why were the “golden doors” not opened wide to accept the refugees?¹⁸

In October of 1936, just a few days before an important election, Roosevelt was treading delicate ground. Trying to stave off such criticism from the Left while seeking solutions to the growing refugee crisis, he also had to juggle the complaints of disaffected Democrats like Al Smith and business tycoons like John Raskob who created the American Liberty League. In the void of the beaten and leaderless Republican party, the Liberty League became one focus of heated anti-New Deal rhetoric. The League’s complaints also brought new connotations to “liberty” — freedom from regulation, from government intervention, and from the encroaching welfare state — that Roosevelt, as presidential candidate, was careful to avoid. Speeches about the lofty ideals of liberty became political mine fields. Instead, while keeping an eye on original intent, Roosevelt’s speech at *Liberty*’s birthday celebration addressed other political problems, particularly the need for peace. “Today the symbolism should be broadened,” Roosevelt said. “To the message of liberty which America sends to all the world must be added her message of peace.” Probably seeking safe political ground, Roosevelt also gave the first presidential recognition to the “Mother of Exiles.”

Perhaps Providence did prepare this American

continent to be a place of the second chance. Certainly, millions of men and women have made it that....The immigrants brought to us strength and moral fiber developed in a civilization centuries old but fired anew by the dream of a better life in America....They adopted this homeland because in this land they found a home in which the things they most desired could be theirs — freedom of opportunity, freedom of

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thought, freedom to worship God. Here they found life because here there was freedom to live.¹⁹

Roosevelt eloquently incorporated all of *Liberty’s* symbols, intended and unintended. He “took a long view of the significance of the statue,” explained Oscar Handlin, “and, though an amateur, he was enough of an historian to appreciate its place in the national past, its possible meaning for the future.” *The New Republic* was less charitable to Roosevelt’s remarks at the time, criticizing him for avoiding the central issue of refugees, complaining that the speech, although discussing immigration, was just “hope, symbols, faith, concerning liberty.” And yet, this was a transitional moment in *Liberty’s* career. While still expressing Bartholdi’s original idea, Roosevelt summed up the popular image that had been developing since that shipload of immigrants sailed past the statue on her very first day.²⁰

During the 1940s Roosevelt’s and America’s attention were turned to another European war — a far more pressing matter than *Liberty’s* transforming symbol. Only in the case of refugees did the statue continue to hold center stage. Wartime activities on the island, frequently sponsored by the American

Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, or the Emma Lazarus Division of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, examined U.S. refugee policy. Louis Adamic continued to use *Liberty* to stir emotions for war-time refugees and immigrants in his *Common Ground* paper. Of course, *Liberty* also welcomed home hundreds of thousands of service men and women.²¹

The 1950s proved to be the most important decade for the emergence of the “Mother of Exiles” symbol, and once again important developments came about by accident or convenience rather than through the driving force of ideology. When William H. Baldwin of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society proposed building an American Museum of Immigration in 1951, he did so largely to stop Robert Moses’ long campaign to build the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge. Moses had already faced stiff opposition during the 1930s and 1940s from Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as the Preservation Society. He wanted to destroy small Castle Clinton, *Liberty’s* next-door neighbor, to accommodate the bridge. In order to save Castle Clinton from destruction, Baldwin and others “suggested housing a museum in the old fort, which would depict the story of the millions of immigrants who had flocked to the United States in search of liberty and opportunity.”

Like Ellis Island, Castle Clinton had been an inspection station during the peak years of immigration. Like Bedloe’s Island, it had been a military fort. Although such a plan would stop Moses from building his bridge, the museum would also destroy much of the island’s historical integrity. The National Park Service rejected Baldwin’s proposal, suggesting instead that Bedloe’s Island could serve the same purpose. There was more space to develop, and *Liberty’s* relatively small pedestal could be enlarged to house the museum. In fact, the NPS reminded Baldwin that the existing pedestal was far less grand than the original design, so this could be an opportunity to make up for that deficiency. As Barbara Blumberg explained in *Celebrating the Immigrant*

The NPS officials reasoned that placing an immigration museum in the base of the statue would serve a double purpose. The area under the existing pedestal and under the excavated

earth mound, bounded by the fort walls, would provide an ample and fitting home for the museum with at least two floors for exhibits. 'The foot of our great symbol of the American Idea was the most appropriate place,' noted their report, 'for presenting the fruits of that ideal.' At the same time, building the museum in that space would make it possible to complete the superior, stepped-terrace design from [the] original plans.²²

Due once again to convenience and coincidence of location, *Liberty* became the proposed home of the American Museum of Immigration. Completing the project, and especially funding it, would prove to be quite a problem, however, and the subsequent fund drive took two decades to complete. To get the museum completed, the "Mother of Exiles" symbol was brought home to all Americans, in print, over television and radio, and even in movie houses nationwide.

The American Museum of Immigration's chief patron, Pierre S. du Pont, received fairly enthusiastic support from Washington. President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent a hearty endorsement:

This is a nation of nations. Our forefathers came here from all the countries of the world....United as one people we have created new freedom, and new opportunity for all. There is no story like it in history, and the idea of telling it at the foot of the Statue of Liberty is a splendid one.

In 1956 Public Law 936 changed the name of Bedloe's Island to Liberty Island, and provided for the museum's creation. The Joint Resolution is a good illustration of how far the "Mother of Exiles" symbol had come. The "Statue of Liberty is to the world," the resolution read, "the symbol of the dreams and aspirations which have drawn so many millions of immigrants to America."²³

Even more important than these legislative measures, which were accomplished without much public notice, was the actual campaign to get the museum built. The new symbol of the statue was glossed, packaged, and sold to the American public in many different forms. Historian Allan Nevins helped launch the project with a feature article in the *New*

York Times. "The beacon held aloft by Bartholdi's statue cast many beams," he wrote, "but two were the brightest of all. One was the opportunity in America to gain a better economic and social footing, a fuller security, an improved status in the community. The other was liberty...." Bartholdi would no doubt have been disappointed to see his original intent relegated to second billing.²⁴

The museum project was riddled with difficulties. Plagued by indifference, allegations of corruption, and

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increasing costs, the museum committee sought any publicity it could find to aid the fund-raising efforts. In 1955 du Pont appeared on *Person to Person* with Edward R. Murrow to outline the museum design and ask for contributions. The next year he took this same appeal to Ed Sullivan's popular program. 20th Century Fox studios produced a short film in 1956, "The Lady of the Golden Door," to be shown in movie theaters across the country. But the public did not seem very interested in this immigration museum. Undaunted by failure in fund-raising, however, du Pont and his crew only expanded their efforts. As the campaign lingered into the 1960s, an hour-long television show, designed to pull on American heartstrings, and purse strings, perfectly summarized the "Mother of Exiles" symbol with "They Entered the Golden Door: The Immigrant Impact on America." In a last ditch effort for public donations, Congress even authorized the striking of bronze and silver "Liberty Medallions." They went on sale in department stores and souvenir shops in 1964, with profits to be channeled to the museum, but sales were poor. In the 1970s over \$40,000 worth of medallions remained unsold in warehouses.²⁵

Museum proponents worked tirelessly, but the fund-raising campaign was a dismal failure. Although

Americans bought the symbol, they were not willing to fund the museum. Robert Moses summed it up best: “The American Museum of Immigration has no appeal. Immigrants went through Castle Clinton and Ellis Island, not Liberty Island.” Eventually, Congress was forced to appropriate funds to complete the project. The American Museum of Immigration finally opened its doors in 1972 with the usual glitz and publicity. Once again, *Liberty* had been a convenience. The relentless efforts to fund the museum completed the transformation of the symbol of *Liberty*. Through this long and arduous campaign, with the “Mother of Exiles” symbol splashed through newspapers and magazines, and beamed into living rooms across the nation, Bartholdi’s intended symbol had disappeared.²⁶

So, by the 1960s *Liberty Enlightening the World* had become the “Mother of Exiles.” Most Americans seemed to accept the new symbol without question, and rarely if ever was a complaint heard about Bartholdi’s lost dream. Two highly public events, one momentous in its impact and the other the epitome of American commercialism, perfectly illustrated the completion of the transformation.

On October 3, 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson ceremoniously signed the 1965 Immigration Act, abolishing the national origins quota. He did so at *Liberty*’s feet. This was perhaps the most significant moment in the creation of the new symbol. Johnson’s actions illustrated how effectively the “Mother of Exiles” symbol had completely overcome Bartholdi’s dream. “Now under this monument which has welcomed so many,” he said as he signed the bill, the most important immigration legislation since 1924, “the American nation returns to the finest of its traditions...the lamp of this grand old lady is brighter today — and the golden door she guards gleams more brilliantly.” There were no lofty tributes to liberty and freedom, just applause for the re-opened “golden door.” And, in case anyone missed the connection, Lazarus’ sonnet was inscribed on a highly visible wall at John F. Kennedy airport, the new gateway to America. Johnson predicted that the 1965 act would do nothing to change America, but it actually became one of the most nation-changing acts of legislation ever passed. As with the original symbol of *Liberty*, it developed in ways no one predicted in 1965.²⁷

In 1986 *Liberty* turned 100. America celebrated

the birthday with an extravagance that surpassed even the 1886 inauguration, but Auguste Bartholdi would have been confused by the ceremony. His dream could be found, if one looked closely enough, but the elaborate celebrations honored not *Liberty Enlightening the World*, but, rather, the “Mother of Exiles.” It was a media blitz. “For four golden days and gaudy nights, [*Liberty*] was the still point of a turning, kaleidoscopic world,” reported *Time*. Elaborate ceremonies honored prominent Americans who were naturalized citizens. 16,000 immigrants gained citizenship in a nationally televised event. Ronald Reagan presented Liberty Medals to a dozen distinguished naturalized citizens, including Bob Hope and Irving Berlin. In his official proclamation, Reagan wrote that *Liberty* “is much more than her awesome dimensions and her physical splendor. For millions of anxious immigrants, the forebears of countless millions of today’s Americans, she was the first glimpse of America.” Invoking Lazarus once again, Reagan noted that the “Statue of Liberty has held high the beacon of freedom, hope, and opportunity to welcome millions of immigrants and visitors from foreign lands.” Many Americans, including contributors to *Time* and *The New Republic*, criticized the event. “Liberty Weekend, some carped, was more about profits than patriotism, more about commerce than comity. The opening-night ceremony was a sentimentalized show-biz tribute that left no cliché unturned....But what, after all, could be more American than that?”²⁸

The real tragedy of the centennial, however, was not the commercialization of the “Mother of Exiles,” but the loss of Bartholdi’s original dream of *Liberty Enlightening the World*. ■

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NOTES

¹ “Subscription for the Building of a Commemorative Monument of the Centennial Anniversary of United States Independence,” a fund-raising appeal distributed by the Union Franco-Americaine in Paris. Included in Blanchet, Christian and Bertrand Dard, *Statue of Liberty: The First Hundred Years* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986), p. 50.

² Blumberg, Barbara, *Celebrating the Immigrant: An Administrative History of the Statue of Liberty National*

Monument, 1952-1982, Cultural Resources Management Study No. 10 (Washington, D.C., National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1985), p. 1. Quote from "Introduction" by David McCullough, in Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 9.

³ Quoted in Bartholdi, F.A., *The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World Described by the Sculptor Bartholdi* (New York, 1885), pp. 13-14; see also Shapiro, Mary, *Gateway to Liberty: The Story of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island* (New York, Vintage Books, 1987), p. 11; Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 13.

⁴ Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 14,16; Palmer, R.R. and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 7th edition (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1992), pp. 361-452, 501-513, 527-532, and 605-617; Allen, Leslie, *Liberty: The Statue and the American Dream* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 17-21; Handlin, Oscar, *Statue of Liberty* (New York, Newsweek Book Division, 1971), pp. 22-25; Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, pp. 2-3; Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty*, pp. 11-18.

⁵ Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 16, 24, 33; Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty*, pp. 11-13, 23-27; Allen, *Liberty*, pp.21-22; Russell, John, "A face that really launched 1,000 ships — and many more," in *Smithsonian*, vol. 15 (July, 1984), p. 49.

⁶ Quoted in Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 36; Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty*, p. 13; Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 22-23.

⁷ For good coverage of Eiffel's design, see Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty*, pp. 23-24. On the inauguration ceremony, see American Committee on the Statue of Liberty, *Inauguration of The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World by the President of the United States on Bedloe's Island, New York, Thursday, October 28, 1886* (New York, D. Appleton and Co., 1887); Depew is quoted on page 54. See also Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 98; Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 56-58.

⁸ *New York Herald* is quoted in Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty*, p. 66; see also Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 107.

⁹ Statistics found in Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 110. For good coverage of these changing patterns in American immigration, see Higham, John, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988), especially pp. 3-105.

¹⁰ Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 58. For more on the traveling and arrival experiences, see Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty*, pp. 77-177.

¹¹ Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 60-61; Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 116, 62; Editors, "I Lift My Lamp Beside the Golden Door," *American Heritage*, XVII, No. 2 (February, 1966), p. 100.

¹² Lazarus is quoted in Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 117. For more on Lazarus' life and growing commitment to the Jewish community, see Vogel, Dan, *Emma Lazarus* (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1980); Levinson, Nancy Smiler, "The Lighted Lamp of Emma Lazarus," in *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1986, p. II-5. See also Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 63; Pauli, Hertha and E.B. Ashton, *I Lift My Lamp: The Way of a Symbol* (Port Washington, N.Y., Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1948), pp. 234-240.

¹³ Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 61.

¹⁴ *I Lift My Lamp*, pp. 320-321; Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 118.

¹⁵ Pauli, *I Lift My Lamp*, p. 321.

¹⁶ Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, p. 5; see Higham for more on nativism, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 68-105; *New York Times*, February 6, 1927, p. 9; Adamic, Louis, *My America: 1928-1938* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1938/76), p. 207.

¹⁷ *New York Times*, July 15, 1934, p. IV-5.

¹⁸ Benet, James, "Mother of Exiles," in *The New Republic*, November 25, 1936, pp. 108-109.

¹⁹ "Roosevelt's Address at the Statue of Liberty," in *New York Times*, October 29, 1936, p. 21. For more on the American Liberty League, see Rudolph, Frederick, "The American Liberty League, 1934-1940," in *American Historical Review*, vol. LVI, no. 1 (October, 1950), pp. 19-33.

²⁰ Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*, p. 65; *The New Republic*, November 25, 1936, p. 109.

²¹ See *New York Times*, October 29, 1944, p. 7 for one typical account of wartime activities; see also *New York Times*, July 24, 1949, p. 25.

²² For more on Robert Moses and his plan, see Caro, Robert, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, Vintage Books, 1975); Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, pp. 28-29.

²³ Eisenhower is quoted in Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, p. 30; see also Blumberg, p. 11.

²⁴ Nevins, Allan, "Epic of Liberty Island," in *New York Times*, October 25, 1956, p. 15.

²⁵ Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, pp. 42-43.

²⁶ Quoted material from Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, p. 37.

²⁷ Allen, *Liberty*, p. 259; Johnson is quoted in Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant*, p. 12.

²⁸ Allen, *Liberty*, p. 10; *Time*, July 14, 1986, p. 10; Cannon, Lou, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 655. For Reagan's official proclamation, see "Centennial Year of Liberty in the United States, by the President of the United States, A

Proclamation," included in Hayden, Richard Seth and Thierry W. Despont, *Restoring the Statue of Liberty: Sculpture, Structure, Symbol* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1987).