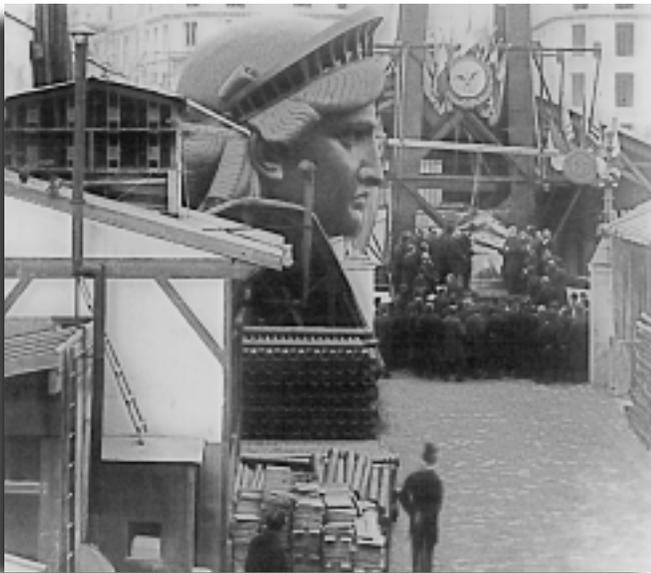


# AN AMERICAN SYMBOL: THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

*A Historical Perspective*

June F. Tyler



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# History of the Statue of Liberty

June F. Tyler

Edouard de Laboulaye (1811–1883) was a key figure in the building of the Statue of Liberty as a gift from France. He was an influential Republican politician in France, a man known for his written history of the United States and for his knowledge of American constitutional history. Laboulaye despaired of the French nation ever developing a stable government. He believed that the great ideals of democracy had come to fruition in the United States. He often used American incidents to criticize French political actions.

According to Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, designer of the Statue, it was first discussed at a dinner at the home of Laboulaye in 1865. Laboulaye suggested that the building of a monument to independence in the United States would be a wonderful thing if it demonstrated the common bond between the two nations and was a joint project. In actual fact, the French and the Americans were not the greatest of friends at this particular historic moment, but this was not important. Those present were seeking to serve their own purposes and to stir French sentiments by using an American event—the coming centennial of American independence.

The French people had been deeply moved by the death of Abraham Lincoln. The Republicans thought that this provided an opportunity to point out to the people then in power that some symbolic gesture could be made. First, a medal was struck in Lincoln's honor.

After the Franco-Prussian War, there was a struggle between the Monarchists and the Republicans for control of the government. In 1875 the Republic finally was re-established. The time was ripe to press Republican ideas about a Statue of Liberty as well.

In 1871 Bartholdi had made a journey to the United States. He traveled extensively, visiting many parts of the country and meeting many dignitaries, including President Ulysses S. Grant. At this time Bartholdi selected the site, Bedloe's Island in New York harbor. He even thought that Congress might support his plans. On returning home, Bartholdi enthusiastically proposed a monument so gigantic that it would be the biggest since ancient times.

It was nearly five years later before the project was made public. In 1875 the French-American Union



*Edouard de Laboulaye*

Committee was established to build the Statue. Laboulaye naturally headed the organization in France. Liberty, in fact, was a password for the French liberals. The Republicans hoped to persuade other Frenchmen of the Statue's importance by making it a gift to America. Eventually the French wished they had not decided to erect the Statue in the United States at all. After it was displayed in Paris, they wanted to retain it, but it was too late. Instead, they had to be satisfied with a quarter-size copy.

This was a time when making large monuments was somewhat fashionable. Bartholdi certainly enjoyed the creation of large works of art. He did not imitate the great Egyptian sculptures directly, but he did consider them in his planning. Although he devoted two years to designing a statue for the new Suez Canal, it was never built and he used the work by converting it for the new project.

Comparison of the face of the Statue to the face of Bartholdi's mother shows the clear resemblance of the

two. The Statue was based in the classical tradition but was not a direct copy of it. The use of seven rays in the crown probably referred not only to the seven seas, but also to the seven continents and to the seven planets known at the time. In addition, Bartholdi's family emblem was a sunburst. The arm held at various times a broken vase and broken chain before it held a tablet.

The best vantage point for viewing the Statue is from a ship in the harbor moving toward the port of New York. The island vantage point is too close; the back is not very exciting. The Battery Park view is too far away. Indeed, it is a colossus designed to be viewed from a ship's deck. Although the Statue does not really face Europe, it seems to—one reason the site was selected by Bartholdi.

Construction of the Statue was a complex process. First a clay model was made and then enlarged three times in plaster. The final enlargement was full-scale components for the Statue. Using large wooden forms, workers hammered copper sheets into the shape of the plaster molds. The problems were so immense that Bartholdi called in a structural engineer for guidance. His first choice was not successful, so he turned to Gustave Eiffel. Eiffel viewed the Statue as a challenge to engineering technology, one that he was happy to meet. His interior structure design was much in advance of his time. Eiffel's design called for an exceedingly strong interior truss structure attached to a pylon and a type of floating connection of the skin to this structure with ever lighter trusswork. This became the curtain style of architecture.

The design for the base was the responsibility of the Americans, because this was a joint project. General Charles P. Stone, a Civil War veteran, was in charge of developing and building the pedestal for the colossus. He used concrete and iron in new ways to build a foundation to support it. The design of the actual pedestal was created by Richard M. Hunt, who had associations with both France and the United States.

Of course, payment had to be made for all of this glory. Americans had a great deal of difficulty raising the funds for the pedestal. Congress barely accepted the gift and the idea of providing a site for it, let alone donating any money for the cause. The state of New York donated \$50,000, which Governor Grover Cleveland vetoed. Ironically, as United States president, he gladly presided over the unveiling just two years later. The public was no more enthusiastic. All types of fundraisers were tried—an auction of art objects, a poetry contest, the sale of signed models of the Statue and private appeals. Although more than one-half the funds had been raised by 1883, the project came close to failure. People generally believed that the monument was a gift to New York rather than to the United States as a whole. Joseph Pulitzer finally rescued the project by using the *New York World* to stimulate



*Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and the Statue of Liberty*

interest and raise funds. He first blasted the rich for not paying for the pedestal themselves. Using his other newspapers, he stressed that this was a symbol for all America. Finally, he published the names of every contributor, more than 121,000 of whom had a part in the final effort.

The Statue almost immediately lost its original meaning of "Liberty Enlightening the World." The Emma Lazarus poem was just one expression of what seemed to be the most significant role of the Statue, that of being a symbol of the United States as an open door for people from the rest of the world. It remains such a symbol today.

### ***The New Colossus***

*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 lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow 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-tossed to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

—Emma Lazarus

# Restoration of the Statue

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Two rock climbers from San Francisco climbed the Statue of Liberty in May 1980 as a form of political protest. When the National Park Service checked the condition of the Statue after that event, staff discovered to their horror that the Statue was in deep trouble. A group of French engineers and technicians led by Philippe Vallery-Radot and Philippe Grandjean confirmed that the Statue of Liberty was approaching its hundredth birthday with as many symptoms of old age as might be expected in a human. Therefore, a French-American Committee for the Restoration of the Statue of Liberty was formed in 1980.

After careful studies, the committee's researchers discovered many problems. In their report they stated that the exterior skin had suffered corrosion, but it was not really more than anticipated considering the environment of the Statue. The torch was in very bad condition. Water had leaked through the glass and caused so much corrosion that the structure might fail. The decorative elements of its gallery also had been severely damaged. Although a number of protective coatings had been applied to the interior skin, this, too, had suffered the effects of corrosion and the paint was peeling badly. The drastic temperature changes had caused several additional problems, and interior supports had been damaged. The armature had both rib and saddle corrosion. Many secondary frame bars were found to have been put in place improperly and to have warped. This was particularly true in the area of the misplaced arm and head. Although the central pylon appeared in good condition, even it needed some work. Both the staircase and the observation platform in the crown were considered unsafe by today's standards. The interior environment of the Statue was felt to need some sort of controls to make air quality and temperatures more acceptable and the entire area watertight.

The French-American committee proposed a plan to solve the problems by the Statue's hundredth birthday. On the exterior, the copper plates were to be replaced, restored or refastened. Between 20,000 and 25,000 rivets needed to be replaced. New plates and rivets would be artificially oxidized to match the Statue's patina. The torch was beyond repair, and it would be replaced with a new one built to the original design but constructed to be watertight. The interior skin and armature would be repaired and restored, with better provisions made for inspection and

maintenance in the future. The skin support system would be repaired and replaced where necessary with exact replicas built of superior metals, such as stainless steel. The armature and pylon would be cleaned and repaired. A ventilation and air-conditioning system was to be installed in the interior of the Statue to protect it in the future.

Another problem addressed by the committee was the existing facilities for visitors at the Statue. It is one of the most visited parks in the nation, and the facilities were just not up to the numbers who wanted to see the interior of the Statue. The lines are long during the height of the tourist season. Four proposals were made by the committee to remedy the problem. Proposal 1 kept the existing elevator and the stairs and redesigned the crown platform and the rest areas on the staircase. Proposal 2 retained the elevator and added a new staircase as far as the lower shoulder. The existing stairs would be used from there to the new crown platform (and could be used for descent in an emergency). This plan would require some minor



*Renovation of the Statue of Liberty*

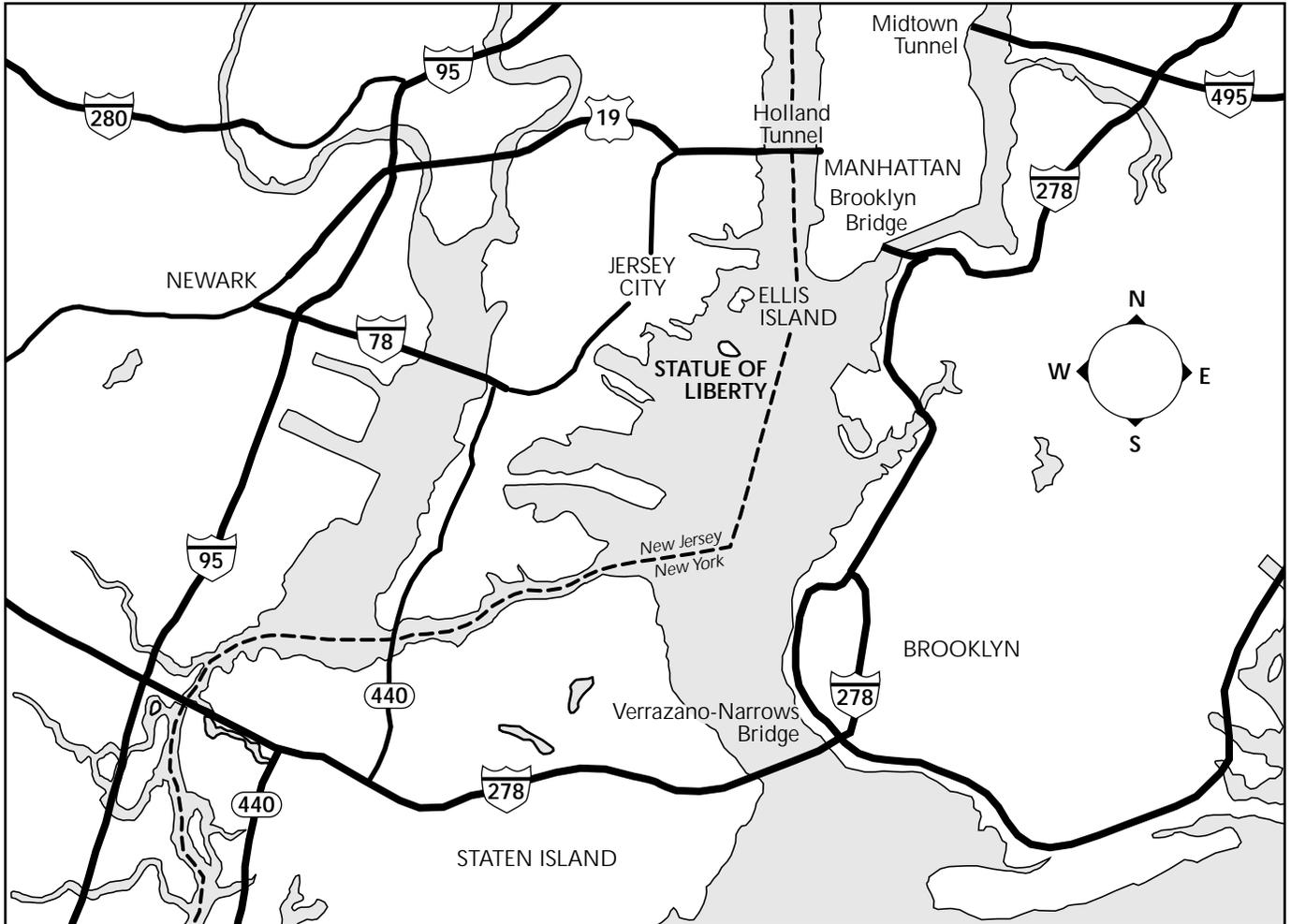
alterations, but provided a much more easily climbed staircase. Proposal 3 included a new elevator and a new staircase. It suggested a glass-enclosed elevator so people could observe how the Statue was constructed. Proposal 4 retained the existing elevator and provided an inclinator to the lower shoulder level in the Statue itself. From there, people could use the existing staircase to get to the platform in the crown. Glass-enclosed cabs would move slowly to minimize vibration.

The solution to the problem was twofold. A new double-deck hydraulic elevator was installed to replace the old electric elevator, and a small service elevator was inserted in the Statue itself to go directly to the shoulder area. The double-deck elevator would speed the flow of visitors through the monument; the service elevator would be used, first, as an emergency device to facilitate the removal of visitors quickly in the event anyone in the crown suddenly became ill, and second, to provide the maintenance crews with easy access to the crown with-

out having to contend with the crowds of visitors. In addition, the spiral staircases were refurbished and enclosed with glass for both visitor comfort and safety.

Funds for this project, estimated to cost \$30 million, were raised by a special federal advisory commission headed by Lee Iacocca, chairman of the Chrysler Corporation. The Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Centennial Commission, Inc., which collected the donations, also sought an additional \$20 million to improve Liberty Island itself and \$20 million for special events and celebrations. In addition, this group sought the funds needed to refurbish nearby Ellis Island in time for its centennial in 1992.

By July 4, 1986, all work was completed and a great celebration, rivaling the one at which the Statue was originally dedicated, was held. Another ceremony in October marked the actual centennial. Part of the restored Statue of Liberty is a new museum tracing the history of this important symbol.



*Aerial view showing Ellis Island (top right) and the Statue of Liberty (bottom).*