

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

By Dawn Dailey



The Statue of Liberty has become of symbol of democracy and freedom around the world and is particularly welcoming to new immigrants arriving in New York Harbor. But the original meaning was less about welcoming immigrants and more about the emancipation of slaves in the US. The poem entitled *The Great Colossus* was penned by Emma Lazarus as part of a fundraising effort to raise money for the construction of the base of the statue. The poem was engraved on the base in 1903, after Lazarus' death. By then, millions of immigrants had sailed past the statue on their way to a new life in the US. The Statue of Liberty had become a beacon of hope to those newly arrived on American shores.

In 1865, the Statue of Liberty was the brainchild of Edouard de Laboulaye from France who was a staunch abolitionist and president of the French Anti-Slavery Society. He believed that everyone had an inalienable right to freedom and he worked most of his life to promote democracy in France. After the passage of the 13th amendment that abolished slavery in the US, De Laboulaye set about commemorating its passage and the abolition of slavery in the form of a statue visible to the world. He hoped to reinforce the bonds of friendship between the US and France as well as inspire the French to pursue a democracy of their own. When his project was announced in 1875, his original intent to pay tribute to the abolition of slavery became overshadowed by the idea that the statue's purpose was to celebrate 100 years of US democracy.

The sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi was engaged to design the statue entitled *Liberty Enlightening the World* while Gustave Eiffel was enlisted to create the iron framework under which Bartholdi's copper sheets would be affixed. Bartholdi based his design on the Roman goddess Libertas who was a symbol of freed Roman slaves. In an early model by Bartholdi, Liberty holds broken chains in her left hand to signify the emancipation of slaves. The final statue, however, holds in her left hand a book to signify the rule of law. The broken chains lie at her feet, almost completely hidden from view.

In 1885, Bartholdi completed the statue and it was deconstructed, packed in shipping crates, and loaded onto a frigate for transport to New York. After its arrival, workers spent four months reconstructing the statue and installing it on its base. President Grover Cleveland presided over its unveiling on October 28, 1886, to the cheers of thousands of onlookers.

Not all saw the unveiling of Lady Liberty as positive. It would be several more decades before white women gained the right to vote. The irony of a “Lady” Liberty was not lost on these women. For Black Americans, the irony of freedom was not lost on them either. While they may have been technically freed from slavery, they were still held bondage in the many ways slavery had insidiously infiltrated American life.

Today, there are hundreds of replicas of *Liberty Enlightening the World* and they are found literally around the world. In 1889, Bartholdi cast a 9-foot Statue of Liberty (1/16 scale) and later gifted it to the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris where it stood in the *jardin* (or garden) for over 100 years. To protect it from the elements, it was moved to the Musée d’Orsay in 2014 and a bronze replica was installed in the Jardin du Luxembourg in its place.



Statue of Liberty,
Musée d’Orsay, Paris



Replica of the Statue of Liberty,
Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris

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