

A Century Later, Statue of Liberty Still Attracts Millions This Is America Visits "Lady Liberty"



Lady Liberty in New York harbor
(Steve Ember)

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This is America. I'm Steve Ember.

Today we tell about the Statue of Liberty. The huge, green statue celebrates American freedom. It has served as the guardian of New York Harbor for more than a century.

Come along with us as we visit "Lady Liberty."

The Statue of Liberty may be one of the most often photographed works of art in the world. A French sculptor, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, designed the statue in the late 1800s. Today the monument continues to present a beautiful sight on the New York skyline. But it came close to never arriving in the United States.

The materials required for building the Statue of Liberty were almost lost at sea. In 1885, the ship carrying those materials almost sank in stormy seas. Bartholdi's dream of a huge sculpture might never have been fulfilled.

She's a survivor...

Luckily, the ship survived the rough seas. It arrived safely in June of 1885. By the next year, the Statue Liberty had arisen on what was then called Bedloe's Island. The statue was officially opened that year. Many years later, the island was given a new name: Liberty Island.

The Statue of Liberty has survived damage caused by time, visits by millions of people and the weather. It stood firm during a destructive storm, Hurricane Sandy, which struck the East Coast in October of 2012. But Liberty Island suffered damage, requiring major repairs.

"Lady Liberty", as many people call the statue, was a gift from the people of France. Its full name is "Liberty Enlightening the World."

The United States and France have been friends and allies since the American Revolution. France helped the American colonial armies defeat British forces. The war officially ended in 1783. A few years later, the French rebelled against their king.

A French historian and political leader, Edouard-Rene Lefebvre de Laboulaye, had the idea for the statue. In 1865, he suggested that the French and the Americans build a monument together to celebrate freedom. Bartholdi agreed to design it.

In 1875, the French established an organization to raise money for Bartholdi's creation. Two years later, an American group was formed to raise money to pay for a pedestal. American architect Richard Morris Hunt was chosen to design this support structure. The pedestal would stand 47 meters high.

In France, Bartholdi designed a model of the Statue of Liberty. Then he built a series of larger copies of the very small model statue. Workers created a wooden form covered with plaster for each part. They placed 300 pieces of copper on the forms. The copper skin was about two and a half millimeters thick, the same as two American pennies placed back-to-back.

The statue also needed a structure that could hold its weight -- more than 200 tons. French engineer Alexandre Gustave Eiffel created the new technology. Later, he designed the famous Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Eiffel and others worked in Paris to produce a strong support system for the statue. The design also had to have the ability to move a little in strong winds. Lady Liberty has continued to stand during many a storm, including Hurricane Sandy.

France had wanted to give the statue to the United States on the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence -- July fourth, 1876. But technical problems and lack of money delayed the project. France finally officially presented the statue to the United States in Paris in 1884. But the pedestal being built in New York was not finished. Not enough money had been donated to complete the project.

The publisher of the "New York World" newspaper came to the rescue. Joseph Pulitzer used his newspaper to persuade Americans to give more money to finish the pedestal. His efforts brought in another \$100,000. And the pedestal was finished.

In France, workers separated the statue into 350 pieces, put them on a ship and sent them across the ocean. After surviving the rough seas, the statue arrived in New York in more than 200 wooden boxes. It took workers four months to build the statue on the pedestal.

On October 28th, 1886, President Grover Cleveland accepted the statue in a ceremony. He said: "We will not forget that Liberty has here made her home; nor shall her chosen altar be neglected."

Throughout history, the idea of liberty has often been represented by images of a woman. Historians say the statue's face was created to look like Bartholdi's mother. Her right arm holds a torch high in the air. Her left arm holds a tablet with the date of America's Declaration of Independence -- July fourth, 1776.

On her head, the Statue of Liberty wears a crown with seven points. Each point is meant to represent the light of freedom as it shines on the seven seas and seven continents of the world. The 25 windows in the crown represent gemstones found on Earth. A chain that represents oppression lies broken at her feet.

Lady Liberty's message of hope...

In 1903, a bronze plaque was placed on the inner wall of the statue's pedestal, or support structure. On it are words from the poem "The New Colossus," written by Emma Lazarus in 1883. The marker represents the statue's message of hope for people seeking freedom. One memorable line reads "I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

*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
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!"*

Lady Liberty was officially named a National Monument in 1924. The Statue of Liberty monument now includes nearby Ellis Island, the former federal immigration processing center. Millions of immigrants, after their ships passed the Statue of Liberty, were examined on Ellis Island between 1892 and 1924.



This helicopter view shows the nearness of Ellis Island to Lady Liberty (Steve Ember)

[Tour boat announcement]

"This view is similar to the one seen by immigrants as they entered the US by steamship. When the ships neared New York, the shining torch of the Statue of Liberty rose from the bay. Shouts and cries of joy would erupt from the steamer decks. For many, Liberty Enlightening the World, as the Statue is officially titled, symbolized the freedom and opportunity that awaited them in their new land."

More than 40 percent of Americans have at least one ancestor who passed through the processing center. Through the years, many of these people have continued to visit the Statue of Liberty. Some people say a trip to New York City does not seem complete without it.

By the 1980's, however, the statue was old and becoming dangerous for visitors. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan asked businessman Lee Iacocca to lead a campaign to repair it.

The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation raised about 100 million dollars in private donations to do the work. The repairs included replacing the torch and covering it with 24 carat gold. On July fourth, 1986, New York City and the nation celebrated a restored and re-opened Statue of Liberty.

New York was one of the targets of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. The statue remained closed for security reasons until August 2004. At that time, officials limited visits to the pedestal and lower observation area. But that fact did not seem to keep too many people away. The statue continued to attract visitors -- more than three million a year.

Finally, in 2009, the statue above the pedestal re-opened. Limited groups of energetic people climbed the many steps leading to Lady Liberty's crown.

On October 29th, 2011, the Statue again closed the inside of the pedestal for restoration purposes. It opened on October 28th a year later -- for exactly one day. The next day, Hurricane Sandy struck.

About 75 percent of the island was under water during the storm. Flood waters entered the administration building and a structure filled with electrical equipment. The waters came close to the bottom of the statue, yet did not touch it. Trees fell and waste cans flew from one side of the island to the other. Bricks broke away from walkways. But hundreds of Park Service employees worked hard to help re-build the island.

Today, people can again explore Lady Liberty. But as usual, she is extremely popular. Sometimes crowds wait for hours to get on a boat to visit America's big copper statue honoring freedom.

This program was written by Jerilyn Watson. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for another This is America program from VOA Learning English.