

June 17: Statue of Liberty Arrives in New York

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On June 17, 1885, the French steamer *Isère* entered New York Harbor, carrying with it one of the most enduring symbols of democracy and freedom: the disassembled parts of the Statue of Liberty (*La Liberté éclairant le monde*). This transatlantic gift from France to the United States marked the culmination of years of political idealism, diplomatic collaboration, and artistic ingenuity. As a monumental symbol of liberty, the statue would eventually become an icon of American identity, immigration, and transnational friendship. Its arrival not only heralded a new era of Franco-American relations but also embodied broader 19th-century ideals of republicanism, enlightenment, and modern engineering achievement.

Statue of Liberty

Édouard René de Laboulaye

United States

1. Origins and Conceptualization

The conception of the Statue of Liberty is rooted in the shared revolutionary heritage of France and the United States. The idea for such a statue was first proposed in 1865 by Édouard René de Laboulaye, a French jurist, historian, and liberal thinker. Laboulaye, an ardent admirer of American democracy and a vocal critic of Napoleon III, envisioned the statue as a commemoration of the enduring alliance between the two republics, especially in light of the centenary of American independence in 1876. According to Laboulaye, the statue would celebrate “the alliance of liberty and progress between two great nations” and serve as a critique of authoritarianism in France ^[1].

The idea found artistic expression in the hands of Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, a French sculptor known for his large-scale public works. Bartholdi embraced the project with great enthusiasm, drawing inspiration from classical representations of liberty and enlightenment. His initial sketches in the early 1870s depicted a colossal female figure robed in classical garments, bearing a torch in one hand and a tablet inscribed with the date JULY IV MDCCLXXVI in the other. The seven rays of her crown symbolized the seven continents and seas, reinforcing her universal message ^[2].



Source: AP.

2. Design and Engineering

The statue was not only a monumental sculpture but also a feat of modern engineering. Bartholdi collaborated with Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and, after his death, with the celebrated engineer Gustave Eiffel, who designed the innovative internal support system. Eiffel's solution—a central iron pylon with a secondary support structure of flexible iron armature—allowed the thin copper plates of the statue to move with the wind and expand or contract with temperature changes without cracking, ensuring the statue's longevity ^[3].

The outer shell of the statue was made from hammered copper sheets (about 2.4 mm thick) using the repoussé technique. The entire statue stood 151 feet (46 meters) tall from base to torch, and when placed on its pedestal, its total height would reach 305 feet (93 meters). Weighing over 200 metric tons, the statue was built in sections, allowing for its eventual disassembly and transatlantic shipment ^[4].

3. Fundraising and Public Support

Despite the idealism behind the statue's creation, funding the project proved arduous on both sides of the Atlantic. The French people were responsible for financing the statue itself, while Americans were tasked with funding the pedestal. In France, the Union Franco-Américaine organized public lotteries, theatrical performances, and subscription drives. By 1880, these efforts had raised over 1 million francs, and the statue began taking form in Bartholdi's Paris workshop ^[5].

In the United States, however, fundraising was far less successful. By 1884, the pedestal's construction on Bedloe's Island (now Liberty Island) had stalled for lack of funds. In response, Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of *The New York World*, launched an innovative grassroots fundraising campaign. He appealed directly to the American public, promising to publish the name of every donor, regardless of the amount given. Over 120,000 individuals contributed, often with small amounts, demonstrating mass public support for the project.

4. Transatlantic Journey and Arrival (June 17, 1885)

The statue was completed and assembled in Paris by early 1885 and subsequently disassembled into 350 individual pieces, packed into 214 crates, and loaded aboard the French naval transport vessel *Isère*. The journey across the Atlantic took nearly a month, with the ship departing Rouen on May 21, 1885, and arriving in New York on June 17, 1885. Despite a storm that nearly capsized the vessel, *Isère* completed its voyage safely ^[6].

The arrival of the crates was celebrated with public festivities. Thousands of New Yorkers lined the docks, and the French tricolor was raised alongside the American flag. The crates were transferred to Bedloe's Island, where work on the pedestal resumed. President Grover Cleveland would later recall this as a "moment of fraternal triumph," reflecting the deepening bonds between France and the United States.

5. Construction and Dedication (1885–1886)

Following the statue's arrival, attention turned to completing the pedestal. The American architect Richard Morris Hunt had designed a classical pedestal made of granite, standing approximately 89 feet tall. Construction resumed in earnest with the influx of public donations and was completed by April 1886.

Bartholdi himself oversaw the statue's reassembly, which took about four months. The final piece, the torch-bearing arm, was installed on October 25, 1886. Three days later, on October 28, 1886, the statue was formally dedicated in a grand ceremony attended by tens of thousands. President Cleveland officiated the event, and Bartholdi climbed inside the statue to unveil the face. The dedication was accompanied by a military parade and speeches extolling liberty, democracy, and international friendship ^[7].

6. Symbolism and Cultural Evolution

Originally conceived as a symbol of Franco-American friendship and shared republican ideals, the Statue of Liberty quickly took on broader meanings. With its prominent position in New York Harbor, it became a visual marker for

millions of immigrants arriving through Ellis Island, which opened in 1892. The statue came to embody the spirit of welcome and opportunity, a symbol reinforced by the later inclusion of Emma Lazarus's sonnet, *The New Colossus* (1883), inscribed on a plaque inside the pedestal in 1903:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

This poetic invocation of refuge and hope cemented the statue's role in the collective immigrant experience ^[8].

7. Political and Historical Significance

The statue's political significance has evolved in tandem with global and national events. During World War I, it was used in Liberty Bond drives; during World War II, it symbolized freedom in contrast to totalitarian regimes. It also became a focal point during civil rights movements, invoked by activists as a reminder of America's unfulfilled promises of liberty and justice for all.

In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge designated the statue a National Monument, and its administration was later transferred to the National Park Service. In 1984, the United Nations declared it a World Heritage Site, recognizing its universal significance ^[9].

8. Restoration and Preservation

By the early 1980s, the statue had suffered significant deterioration. In preparation for its centennial in 1986, a major international restoration project was launched. The torch, which had been modified and poorly maintained over the years, was replaced with a replica. Corroded iron elements were removed, and structural reinforcements were added. The restored statue was unveiled on July 4, 1986, with a massive celebration, including Operation Sail and fireworks visible across the harbor ^[10].

Ongoing preservation efforts continue, including climate control installations, corrosion monitoring, and digital scanning for future restoration work.

9. Legacy in the 21st Century

Today, the Statue of Liberty remains one of the most visited landmarks in the United States, attracting over 4 million tourists annually. Its image is reproduced in textbooks, political campaigns, popular culture, and global media. Yet its symbolism is increasingly contested. While many still view it as a beacon of freedom and opportunity, critics highlight the tensions between its idealistic message and ongoing issues such as immigration policy, racial inequality, and civil liberties.

Nonetheless, the statue endures as a powerful symbol of aspiration. Its arrival on June 17, 1885, represents more than a historical event; it is a testament to the enduring potential of collaborative human endeavor, the power of ideals, and the role of art in shaping national identity.

References

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