'Liberty's Torch,' by Elizabeth Mitchell
The head of the Statue of Liberty on display in the garden at the Champ de Mars at the World's Fair in Paris to drum up support and contributions for the completion of the great project, 1878. (Photo by FPG/Getty Images)
Liberty's Torch

The Great Adventure to Build the Statue of Liberty

By Elizabeth Mitchell

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When he returned to France after a trip to Cairo in 1856, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, a 22-year-old sculptor, apparently told a friend, "When I discover a subject grand enough, I will honor that subject by building the tallest statue in the world." Before long, he found his subject, and his Statue of Liberty became an iconic monument, visited by millions of tourists each year.

In "Liberty's Torch," journalist Elizabeth Mitchell tells the story of Bartholdi's decades-long struggle to build a symbol of freedom "and gain thereby the reward that all true artists seek - the kindly remembrance of posterity."

Although she does not address the relationship between France and the United States in the second half of the 19th century, Mitchell casts doubt on several myths about the genesis of and inspiration for Lady Liberty. She deems it unlikely that Édouard Laboulaye, the French poet and politician, encouraged the young Bartholdi to create a work to celebrate the 100th anniversary of American independence. She does not believe that Bedloe's Island was his first choice for the lighthouse. Quite certain that the sculptor did not use his mother as the model for the statue's face, Mitchell speculates that he may have had his deceased brother Charles in mind. And she suggests that there may be something to rumors, circulated at the time, that the body of Lady Liberty resembled Bartholdi's paramour, later his wife.

"Liberty's Torch" is at its best describing the fundraising challenges Bartholdi faced. In 1875, he estimated that France and the United States should each be responsible for $250,000 - about $4.8 million in 2014 dollars. The French got the job done in 1880. Americans were far less successful, despite a campaign pushed in newspapers owned by Joseph Pulitzer. And the government of the United States offered virtually no financial support. Unimpressed by President Grover Cleveland's endorsement, Mitchell indicates, the House of Representatives failed to appropriate $100,000 in 1886 for the pedestal and inaugural ceremonies. Animus against the statue's host city had something to do with it. New Yorkers "had been begging throughout the lengths and breadth of the land for that pedestal," Charles Brumm of
Pennsylvania declared. And now "they want a grand spree" and "go down on your marrow-bones" pleading with the federal government to pay for it. At the last moment, Mitchell writes, the Senate snuck an amendment into an appropriations bill, switching a $65,000 allocation to repair the Washington Monument to Lady Liberty, with a proviso that no money could be used for wine or liquor.

Mitchell sheds light as well on Bartholdi's "savvy and ingenious" plans to profit from Lady Liberty. Although he repeated that his work on the statue was a labor of love, and won praise from Americans for his generosity, Bartholdi, it turns out, had applied to the U.S. Patent Office for the exclusive right to produce the image (or collect a royalty from those who did so) in all materials, including statuettes; plaster of paris or other plastic compositions; terra-cotta; engravings on metal, wood, and stone; and photographs. He would collect as well from companies using Lady Liberty in advertisements. The patent was granted in 1879, for an initial period of 14 years.

And Mitchell indicates that Bartholdi did not initially intend to link Lady Liberty with immigration. In 1883, in fact, James Russell Lowell wrote Emma Lazarus that her poem, "The New Colossus," with its stirring lines, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses, yearning to be free," gave the statue "a raison d'être which it wanted before much as it wanted a pedestal." Even so, well before Lazarus' death from Hodgkin's disease, the year before Lady Liberty's inaugural, the poem had been forgotten. In 1903 a bronze tablet with the poem engraved on it was placed on the pedestal; another three decades passed before it was brought to the attention of the public.

By then, Bartholdi, who had contracted tuberculosis in 1901, was gone. He did not live to see the installation of a generator to light Liberty at night. Nor did he hear President Woodrow Wilson reflect on the thrill each immigrant felt as he or she thought about the meaning of the statue and wonder "if after he lands he finds the spirit of Liberty truly represented by us. I wonder if we are worthy of that symbol ... if we remember the sacrifices, the mutual concessions, the righteous yielding to selfish right that is signaled by the word and the conception of Liberty."

Such rhetoric, Mitchell adds, "would often find safe harbor in Liberty." And the Lady would often evoke the emotion, vision and "potent whimsy" that led a young Frenchman to "dream that he, too, could achieve immortality."
Elizabeth Mitchell

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