

Reexamining the Statue of Liberty: Different Perspectives on History and the Promise of America

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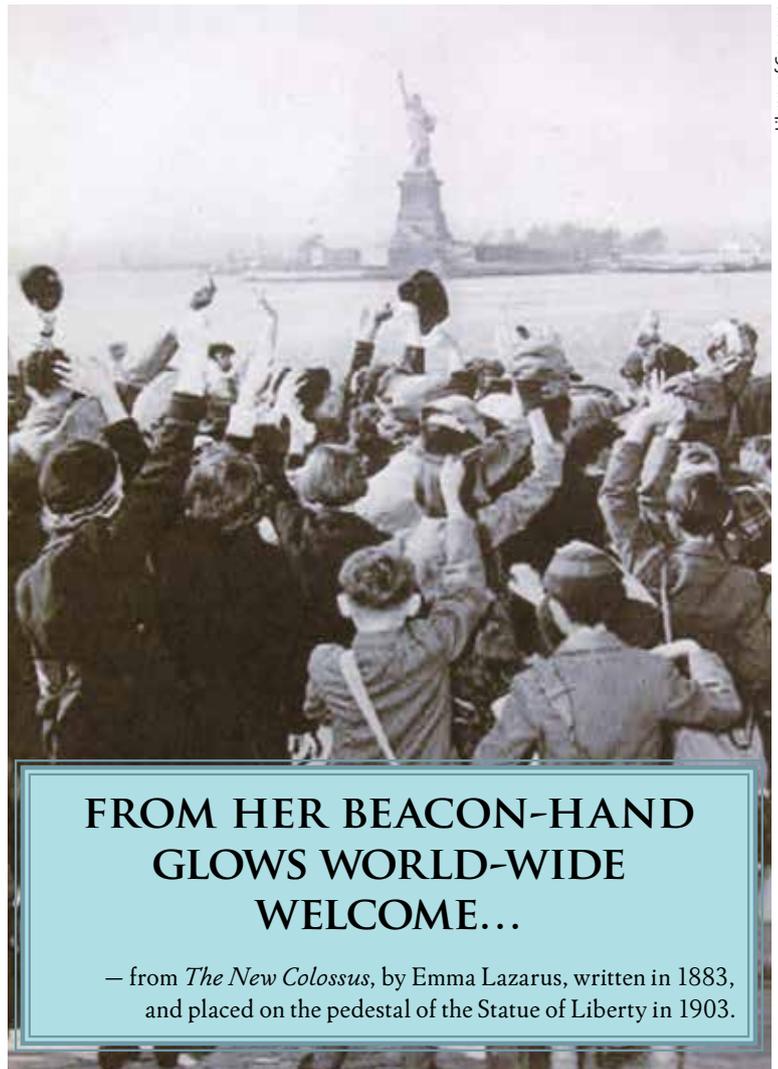
The Statue of Liberty has traditionally served as a symbol of freedom and liberty for citizens in the United States and around the world. Lady Liberty was often the first symbol European immigrants saw as they arrived in New York Harbor. Many of them were escaping dire conditions back home and seeking a better future for themselves and their families.¹ Immigrants often viewed the statue as a symbol of the freedom and liberty they hoped to find in the United States. History, however, reveals that realizing these ideals has been a struggle for many individuals and groups.² This article describes a fourth grade social studies lesson that encouraged students to re-examine the Statue of Liberty and the claim that freedom and the pursuit of happiness were available to all Americans in the late 19th century.³

In this lesson, we asked students to examine primary source texts and images to better understand how, for certain groups of people (for example, African Americans, women, Native Americans, and often immigrants), the guarantees made in the Constitution did not apply to them. In this proposed lesson, students worked collaboratively in one of two groups—either a “traditional group” or a “critical group”—to better understand conflicting views towards the Statue of Liberty and its enshrined ideals of freedom and liberty for all. Finally, students were asked to re-examine a local symbol in their community and describe how different audiences might interpret this symbol differently.

Pre-assessment: What do Students Know About the Statue?

We began by using a “graffiti wall” activity to determine what background knowledge our students (class size of 21) had about the Statue of Liberty. We displayed a picture of the Statue of Liberty on the front board. Each student wrote down on a Post-It note anything he or she knew about the statue. Students’ written responses included, “In New York City,” “It’s Green,” “I like her smile,” and “It’s [an image of the statue is] on money.” We invited students to share what they wrote with the rest of the class, and then place their Post-It notes on the picture of the Statue of Liberty.

This introductory activity, which lasted for five minutes, allowed us to better understand the back-



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FROM HER BEACON-HAND
GLOWS WORLD-WIDE
WELCOME...

— from *The New Colossus*, by Emma Lazarus, written in 1883,
and placed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

ground knowledge, experiences, and interest students had regarding the Statue of Liberty. After students shared their responses, we helped students define a symbol as something used to represent something else. Finally, we asked students to identify other symbols they were familiar with in their school and community (i.e. stop signs, image of a bald eagle, police siren, etc.).

Brief History: A Statue and Her People

We shared some important facts about the Statue of Liberty with students.⁴ A gift given to America by France in 1886, the statue is located on Liberty Island in New York Harbor. This gift acknowledged the friendship established between France and the United States during the American Revolution. People from both countries were united in their love of liberty, democracy, and freedom. French sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi provided the vision and rallied U.S. and French support for construction of the colossus. Working alongside renowned engineer Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, Bartholdi was able to create and present to the people of the United States the world’s largest statue (including its base, about 305 feet high). It was one of the most astonishing engineering feats of its time.⁵

Liberty was constructed and assembled in Paris, France, then disassembled for transport to the United States. While the people of France generously donated the funds to build the statue, the people of the United States were left to pay for the costs of building the statue’s foundation and pedestal. The United States government was facing difficult financial times, and with governmental funding for Liberty being reduced, the hopes of erecting the statue soon dissipated. However, the American people were committed to the project and determined to give Liberty a home. Joseph Pulitzer, a famous publisher and editor, pleaded on the front page of his newspaper, the *New York World*, for people to donate what they could, regardless of the amount, to pay for Liberty’s pedestal. Ordinary Americans (school children, the elderly, struggling artists, laborers, etc.) made thousands of small donations—in pennies, nickels, dimes, and dollar bills. On August 11, 1885, Pulitzer announced that more than \$100,000 had been contributed by more than 120,000 U.S. citizens. At last, enough money had been raised for Lady Liberty to come home to New York Harbor.⁶

A Matter of Perspective: Whose Freedom?

After this introduction, we encouraged students to think about how the Statue of Liberty has traditionally served as a symbol

of freedom and liberty for citizens in the United States and around the world. The Statue of Liberty was often the first symbol of the United States immigrants saw as they arrived in New York harbor in the late 19th century. Immigrants often viewed the Statue as a symbol of freedom, prosperity, and liberty—but not all people in the United States were free and equal.

Even though all enslaved Americans had technically been freed by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the period 1875–1900 brought poverty, Jim Crow laws, forced prison labor, and a reign of terror to many African Americans. Other minorities suffered various forms of discrimination during this period as well. Once arriving to the U.S., Catholics were often shut out of jobs and housing. Women did not have the right to vote nationwide until 1920. Native Americans, stripped of their traditional lands and culture, were treated as second-class citizens. More than 300 Sioux, mostly women and children, were killed during the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890.⁷ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended immigration from China for a decade. Thus, as the nation was raising and praising a statue that was a symbol of freedom, liberty, and democracy for all people, a sizeable percentage of its population struggled for the rights and privileges associated with being a full citizen.

Bartholdi included symbols (broken chains and shackles, the “torch of enlightenment, and the forward stride of the figure) within the Statue of Liberty that gave some hope to those disenfranchised people in the United States and around the world “yearning to breathe free.”⁸

A Picture Walk in Two Parts

In the next section of the lesson, we divided students into groups to think about what the Statue of Liberty represented to an increasingly diverse nation, still struggling through reconstruction after a fratricidal war. In particular, this section of the lesson helped students investigate two different perspectives—a traditional and a critical perspective—on whether the Statue of Liberty stood for liberty and justice for all upon its dedication in 1886.

We divided students into two groups: the “Traditional Research Group” and the “Critical Research Group.” The first group looks at how a particular symbol or artifact has been consistently interpreted over time (traditional), while the other group judges the merit and accuracy of this traditional, unchanging interpretation (critical). This approach inspires students to think through multiple perspectives, and it ex-

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poses popular stereotypes and misinformation. For example, students can compare the United States government’s rationale for westward expansion with the actual consequences on Native peoples.

After being placed in their respective groups, we asked students to reflect on a series of primary sources and images, selected by the teacher, which presented a particular perspective on whether the Statue of Liberty stood for liberty and justice for all upon its dedication.

In order to allow for ample reflection and conversation on each primary source and image, we decided to have students participate in a picture walk. On one side of the classroom we displayed the pictures for the Traditional Research Group members to review. These pictures consisted mostly of immigrants eagerly coming to the United States, some of them with the Statue of Liberty in the background. (HANDOUT 1, page 13) On the other side of the classroom we displayed the pictures for the Critical Research Group members to review. These images made reference to inequality and injustices that shut some people out of the dream of a free and just society. (HANDOUT 2, page 14).⁹

Group members were instructed to look at, reflect on, and discuss their group’s images. Students were given 10–12 minutes to review the picture walk artifacts, and were encouraged to think about and discuss questions as they apply to each artifact (which could be text or an image):

1. What is the image or text, and what is being depicted or described?



The John Brown Memorial in Perkins Woods on the hill above the Akron, Ohio Zoo.

2. What does this image or text tell you about the United States at this time?
3. What can you infer from each item concerning freedom and liberty?
4. How might this symbol be interpreted by varying audiences?

During the picture walk, students participating in the Traditional Research Group commented, “Immigrant children

are looking at the statue smiling”; “On the boat, immigrants were happy to see the Statue”; and “Everyone’s happy to be in America and be free.” However, during the picture walk, students participating in the Critical Research Group had different thoughts. These comments included: “The Statue has a broken chain on her ankle!” “African Americans weren’t citizens and weren’t free.” “The Statue’s eyes are covered and that slave is being whipped!”

Then we paired students from opposite research groups. While in these pairings, students reflected on how their original research groups (traditional or critical) viewed the Statue of Liberty and its enshrined ideals of freedom and liberty. Students had 10 minutes to collaboratively complete a Venn diagram, outlining the similarities and differences in perspective between the traditional and critical research groups. During this collaborative activity, students comments included: “The Statue stood for freedom even though many people weren’t free”; “Maybe, she inspired people to work to create a better country”; and “She’s literally walking forward—like America, slowly moving forward to extend rights and freedoms to certain groups of people.”

Familiar Symbols and Multiple Audiences

We asked students to apply these newly gained understandings and skills to symbols and landmarks in their local community. We asked them to describe how a familiar symbol might be interpreted differently by observers today. One of our fourth graders selected the John Brown Monument visitors might see on the property of the Akron Zoo.¹⁰ John Brown (1800–1859), the abolitionist who took up arms to abolish slavery, was a resident in the Akron area for much of his life. We asked this student to think about how this local monument (erected by German immigrants in 1910) could be interpreted differently by varying audiences and groups. The student concluded that “Some citizens could view John Brown as a hero and others view him as evil.”

Students selected various placards, monuments, statues, and landmarks in the Akron area, such as the Vietnam War Monument. Some questions that arose included: How do Vietnam Vets view this memorial? Is this recognition “too little too late?” How do returning soldiers from Afghanistan [our nation’s longest running war] view this memorial? Other symbols were our city’s flag, the school’s mascot, and an Akron-area holiday display. A local historian came into class to discuss some of the symbols.

Once students located a local symbol of interest, they were asked to take a photo or sketch the symbol they selected and conduct research on its history. Then, students presented their pictures and research at a class picture walk that was open to members of the community. During their presentations, students discussed:

1. What is their artifact, and what is being depicted?

2. What does this artifact tell you about our community and the United States?
3. What can you infer from this artifact concerning freedom and liberty?
4. How might different audiences interpret this local symbol?

We publicized this event by distributing posters to students’ parents and members of the community. During the event, we played music and served light appetizers to set the mood—like a typical art walk.

During this art walk, one of our students commented to a guest, “There’s a lot more to symbols than what’s engraved on them or portrayed on TV. These stories aren’t told, and a lot of times you have to go looking for them.”

Our hope is that our students go beyond mere traditional notions of symbols (and the emotions that are often attached to them) to seek out critical, multiple perspectives and voices. By re-examining local and national symbols, students gain a better understanding of the importance of multiple perspectives and of our of nation’s continuing struggle to live up to the ideals that are symbolized in paint, cloth, bronze, and gold—and declared so hopefully in its laws. 🌐

Notes

1. “Creating a Symbol,” (National Park Service), www.nps.gov/stli/forteachers/upload/Celebrating-a-symbol-FINAL.pdf.
2. “Abolition,” (National Park Service), www.nps.gov/stli/historyculture/abolition.htm
3. This lesson is aligned with NCSS Themes: 1 Culture; 2 Time, Continuity, and Change, in *National Council for the Social Studies, National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
4. The teacher may also decide to present this background by having students read individually, in a group, or as a class one of the many trade books such as Mary Shapiro, *How they Build the Statue of Liberty* (New York: Random House, 1985); Betsy Maestro, *The Story of the Statue of Liberty* (New York: William Morrow Press, 1986). Students could take the National Park Service’s Virtual Tour of the Statue of Liberty, www.nps.gov/featurecontent/stli/eTour.htm
5. Sue Burchard, *The Statue of Liberty: Birth to Rebirth* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985).
6. “Joseph Pulitzer,” (National Park Service), www.nps.gov/stli/historyculture/joseph-pulitzer.htm.
7. “Massacre at Wounded Knee, 1890,” (Eyewitnesshistory.com), www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/knee.htm
8. For additional information and resources on symbols embedded within the Statue of Liberty see page seven of “Creating a Symbol,” (National Park Service), www.nps.gov/stli/forteachers/upload/Celebrating-a-symbol-FINAL.pdf.
9. Not all of the images that we used are shown in these handouts. Other excellent images on these topics can be found at the webpages of the the Library of Congress, National Archives, and US Park Service.
10. Jim Carney, “John Brown Monument is Out of Public View, but Never Out of Public Controversy,” (December 31, 2011), www.ohio.com/news/local.

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Traditional Images of Liberty in America

Library of Congress



"Liberty enlightening the world... the colossal statue." (ca. 1884)



Welcome to the land of freedom—Scene on the steerage deck from a sketch published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (1852–1922).

wikipedia.com



Ship's passengers, just arrived, step lively toward the Immigrant Building, Ellis Island, New York.

Library of Congress

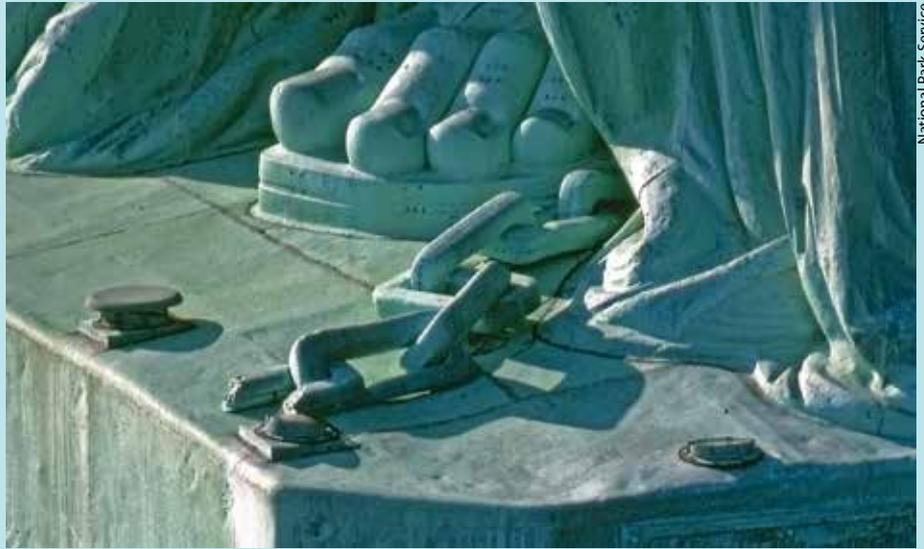
Critical and Questioning Images about Liberty in America

Douglas in 1850-60 from the Library of Congress. Excerpt of speech: "Africans in America," www.pbs.org/wgbh/aiar/part4/4h2927.html



Frederick Douglass's speech of 1852, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro." An excerpt:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.



Broken chains at the feet of the Statue of Liberty.

National Park Service



This cartoon from 1867 shows a slave being sold as punishment for crime (before Emancipation Proclamation) and an African American being whipped as punishment for crime in 1866 (after total abolition). The title "Is Slavery Dead?" and images suggest that although slavery had been abolished legally, in practice oppression and terror continued. See it at the Library of Congress website, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c08003.

Thomas Nast/Harper's Weekly/Library of Congress