

# THE BLACK STATUE OF LIBERTY RUMOR

An Inquiry into the History and Meaning of Bartholdi's *Liberté éclairant le Monde*

FINAL REPORT

by

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#### Note

Since this manuscript was completed in September of 2000, the NPS hired professional editors on two occasions to improve the organization and writing style of the report, which was a recommendation of peer reviewers, without altering the results and findings. However, each effort introduced changes to the report that ultimately were considered unsatisfactory by the NPS. In making the report available in its original form, the NPS seeks to preserve the nuances and details of the research as they were presented by the investigators. The information discussed in this report is an important addition to the more conventional understanding of the origin and meaning of the Statue of Liberty, and it has been used to help formulate significant new research and planning projects that are ongoing at the present time.

The manuscript has been modified by the NPS in the following areas:

1. The Introduction has been edited to improve readability.
2. Appendix D was added to provide a selected list of scholarly literature on the Statue of Liberty's history and symbolism, for additional reading.
3. Two footnotes were added. Footnote 106 was inserted to identify scholars by name who have stated that the design for the Statue of Liberty evolved from the sculptor's earlier concept of a similar figure entitled, "Egypt Bringing Light to the Orient." Footnote 102 expresses a reservation about the author's identification of Egyptian fellah as "black."

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 1998, the Statue of Liberty National Monument staff began receiving inquiries about rumors that the Statue of Liberty was originally meant to be a monument to the end of slavery in America at the end of the Civil War. In response, the Monument's Superintendent launched an intensive, two-year investigation of the rumors and the truth about the statue's early history. The research reported here is based on investigations conducted on the internet, through personal interviews and in public and private library and archival collections in the U.S. and France.

The rumors have been circulating on the Internet, through e-mail networks and in telephone calls. In their totality, the rumors constitute a counter-narrative about the origin and development of the statue that preserves and transmits valuable information about its early history (discussed in Part I of the report). Parts II and III of the report examine four specific claims that are made in the multiple and often overlapping versions of the rumors. Part III also includes a discussion of the roles of African Americans in the statue's early history (1876-1886) and race relations as an enduring theme associated with the monument. A Chronology of American Race Relations for the Statue of Liberty is presented here. Following the Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research, appendices present additional information about research methods, specific research findings concerning the rumors' Proof of Documents, a chronology of internet and media dissemination of the rumors, and a list of further readings about the meanings and interpretations of the statue.

### **The Rumors**

Claim 1. The Statue of Liberty was conceived at a dinner party in 1865 at the home of Edouard de Laboulaye, a prominent French abolitionist, following the death of President Lincoln.

Finding: This story is a legend. All available evidence points to its conception in 1870 or 1871. The dinner party legend is traceable to a single source --- an 1885 fund-raising pamphlet written by the statue's sculptor, Auguste Bartholdi, after the death of Laboulaye.

Claim 2. Edouard de Laboulaye and Auguste Bartholdi were well-known French abolitionists who proposed the monument to recognize the critical roles played by black soldiers in the Civil War.

Finding: No evidence was found to support the claim that the Statue of Liberty was intended to memorialize black combatants in the Civil War. Edouard de Laboulaye was a prolific French abolitionist who believed that the end of slavery marked the realization of the American democratic ideal embodied in the Declaration of Independence. His use of references to the French role in the American Revolution to generate support for his efforts on behalf of American slaves and freedmen are critical to understanding his conception of the Statue of Liberty. Auguste Bartholdi was largely apolitical and adapted

his self-presentation to advance his career as an artist. His frequent references to race-related subjects during his 1871 visit to the United States reflect the influences of his French patrons and American contacts.

Claim 3: The original model for the Statue of Liberty was a black woman, but the design was changed to appease white Americans who would not accept an African-American Liberty.

Finding: The statue's design almost certainly evolved from an earlier concept Bartholdi proposed for a colossal monument in Egypt, for which the artist used his drawings of Egyptian women as models. Bartholdi's preliminary design for the Statue of Liberty is consistent with contemporary depictions of Liberty, but differs markedly from sculptures representing freed American slaves and Civil War soldiers. Bartholdi changed a broken shackle and chain in the statue's left hand to tablets inscribed "July IV, MDCCLXXVI" (July 4, 1776) at Laboulaye's request, to emphasize a broader vision of liberty for all mankind. There is no evidence that Bartholdi's "original" design was perceived by white American supporters or the United States government as representing a black woman, or was changed on those grounds.

Claim 4: By the time of its dedication in 1886, European immigration to the United States had increased so substantially that earlier meanings associated with the statue were eclipsed, and this association has continued to be the predominant understanding of the statue's meaning from then until now.

Finding: The conventional interpretation of the statue as a monument to American immigrants is a twentieth-century phenomenon. In its early years (1871-1886), that view was only rarely and vaguely expressed, while references to the Civil War and abolition of slavery occur repeatedly from its first introduction to the United States in 1871 up to and including the dedication celebrations in 1886. Immigrants did not actually see the Statue of Liberty in large numbers until after its unveiling. In the early twentieth century, the statue became a popular symbol for nativists and white supremacists. Official use of the statue's image to appeal to immigrants only began in earnest with public efforts to Americanize immigrant children and the government's advertising campaign for World War I bonds. The "immigrant" interpretation gained momentum in the 1930s as Americans prepared for war with Hitler and by the 1950s, it had become the predominant understanding of the statue's original purpose and meaning.

### **The Role of African Americans in the Statue's History**

Although African Americans played no active role in the statue's conception or design, they contributed to the main fund-raising drive for the statue's pedestal, participated in public celebrations during its dedication in New York City, and conducted their own celebrations at that time as well. African American newspapers throughout the country covered those events extensively. Yet for black Americans the Statue of Liberty has also long symbolized America's failure to protect their civil rights. In the early 1900s, many African Americans were victims of white supremacists and nativists who used the statue

to represent their exclusionary views. Since then, continuing ambiguity among African Americans about whether to embrace "Liberty" hopefully or scorn it as a symbol of American hypocrisy has been expressed in numerous works of art, political debates, and, on at least one occasion, violent protest. Planning and construction of an Immigration Museum at the Statue of Liberty took seventeen years (1955-1972); and the effort involved a fierce public debate about how African-Americans who were brought involuntarily to America as slaves could or should be presented as "immigrants" and, if so, how their history and contributions to American society should be told.

## **Conclusions**

- **Was the original model for the Statue of Liberty a black woman?**

Most versions of the Black Statue of Liberty rumor refer to a cast (c. 1870) of a no longer extant maquette owned by the Museum of the City of New York as proof that "the original model" for the Statue of Liberty was a black woman. The temporal proximity and aesthetic overlap between Bartholdi's Egyptian proposal and the Statue of Liberty project, and the preliminary nature of the statue's study models, makes it impossible to rule out an 1870-71 Liberty model that has design origins in Bartholdi's drawings of black Egyptian women in 1856. Based on the evidence, the connection is coincidental to the development of the Statue of Liberty under Laboulaye's patronage. We found no corroborating evidence that Edouard Laboulaye or Auguste Bartholdi intended to depict Liberty as a black woman. Laboulaye's intent was to present a monument that would commemorate the fulfillment of America's commitment to universal liberty established by the Declaration of Independence, and set an example for other nations. Liberty depicted as a freedwoman would have represented his strong anti-slavery convictions, but it would not have fulfilled this broader vision.

- **Is the Statue of Liberty a monument to the end of slavery in the United States?**

The Statue of Liberty would never have been conceived or built if its principal French and American advocates had not been active abolitionists who understood slavery as the cause of the Civil War and its end as the realization of the promise of liberty for all as codified in the Declaration of Independence. But the Statue of Liberty was not intended entirely as a monument to the end of slavery. The statue's form after June 1871 clearly embodies Laboulaye's views on the two-part realization, in 1776 and 1864, of his ideal of liberty. The centennial of the American Revolution was significant to the French sponsors because the Civil War ended slavery and preserved the Union at a time when the France's future was still uncertain. For the American republicans, it was a timely opportunity to erect a monument to their efforts and worldview. Laboulaye and his French colleagues also wished to send a political message back to France. Bartholdi cast the project in the broadest terms, hoping to encourage additional commissions.

- **What roles do African Americans have in the Statue of Liberty's history?**

The black press championed the French-American project; and African Americans contributed to the pedestal fund, participated in the public celebrations for its unveiling in New York City and conducted their own. Blacks were among the immigrants whose first sight of the United States was the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. In the early 20th century, African Americans died because of the perverse appropriation of the statue's symbolism by white racists. They were targeted by and responded to the government's Liberty bond campaign during World War I. Racial justice, particularly for African Americans, has been a recurrent theme ever since the Statue of Liberty's inception as evidenced by political cartoons, poems written for the 50th anniversary, debates over the content of the American Museum of Immigration's exhibits, and acts of civil disobedience in the 1960s and '70s. Along with recent work by African American artists, the Black Statue of Liberty rumor extends this tradition of active engagement with this American icon.