

In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty: Medical Inspections During the Heyday of US Immigration

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On Oct. 28, 1886, the Statue of Liberty was officially unveiled in a dedication ceremony on Bedloe's Island (now Liberty Island) in New York Harbor. The event celebrated the statue's creators and the people of France and the United States. French and American dignitaries, including President Grover Cleveland, were present. Over a million people lined the streets of New York to celebrate with the city's first ticker-tape parade.

The statue's sculptor, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi [Image 1], was ensconced in the crown, waiting for the signal to unveil the face of what was described as the "Goddess of Liberty." [Image 2] Bartholdi was no stranger to America's shores. In 1876 he married Jeanne-Emilie Baheux in Newport at the home of his friend and fellow artist, John LaFarge.

Six years after the statue's installation, the heyday of immigration began, with steamships arriving at Ellis Island in 1892. The island was owned by the United States government, and turned over to the US Immigration Service. A vintage photograph [Image 3] shows the entry station for immigrants arriving from Europe.

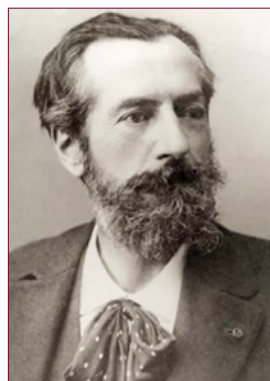


Image 1. A portrait of Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi. [NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, STATUE OF LIBERTY NM. [HTTPS://WWW.NPS.GOV/STLI/LEARN/HISTORY/CULTURE/FREDERIC-AUGUSTE-BARTHOLDI.HTM](https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/history/culture/frederic-auguste-bartholdi.htm)]



Image 2. Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor, circa 1905. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, DETROIT PHOTOGRAPHIC CO [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2008679689](https://www.loc.gov/item/2008679689)]

The National Park Service website¹ states that an immigration law passed in 1891, which created a Bureau of Immigration and a Superintendent of Immigration within the Treasury Department, mandated health inspections be given by surgeons of the Marine Hospital Service to all entering this country [Images 4,5].

According to The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation website,² first- and second-class passengers were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. "Instead, these passengers received a cursory inspection aboard the ship; the theory being that if a person could afford to purchase a first- or second-class ticket they were affluent and less likely to become a public charge in America due to medical or legal reasons. However, regardless of class, sick passengers or those with legal problems were sent to Ellis Island for further inspection."

The immigration centers were training grounds for newly minted physicians, who



Image 3. Immigrant Station, Ellis Island, NY, between 1904 and 1911. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2025672260](https://www.loc.gov/item/2025672260)]



Image 4. Physicians examining a group of Jewish immigrants at Ellis Island, circa 1907. Eye chart written in Hebrew hangs on wall. [UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2012646350](https://www.loc.gov/item/2012646350)]



Image 5. This photo shows an interview of a young immigrant and his interpreter, in the foreground, at Ellis Island. In the background are a physician and an immigration officer. [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE. [HTTP://RESOURCE.NLM.NIH.GOV/101447227](http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101447227)]

worked under the senior physicians to examine for smallpox, the plague, typhus, cholera, yellow fever, and trachoma – the latter the top reason immigrants were denied entrance – as well as separate those with leprosy. However, it was the immigration officers and not the physicians who made the determination to admit or not, send for further interviews, and isolate when deemed necessary.

Those not immediately admitted were initially sent to fenced-in enclosures or detention centers by the immigration officers [Images 6,7]. By the end of the first year, over 400,000 immigrants had been processed through the new station.¹

In 1902, a hospital was constructed on Ellis Island, and in 1906, a contagious disease ward was built, where sick passengers were sent for further treatment. Some were eventually admitted; others returned to their country of origin.

Ellis Island, which ceased operations as an immigration center in 1954, and is now a national park, was the largest inspection

center in the country, followed by Angel Island in San Francisco. Because of overcrowding at Ellis Island in the early 1900s, steamships began arriving in Providence and New Bedford on the Fabre line, from Marseilles, with stops in Portugal and Italy [Image 8].



Image 6. A man in pajamas and a robe is sitting and reading a newspaper behind a caged door in quarantine detention at Ellis Island, circa 1930. [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE. [HTTP://RESOURCE.NLM.NIH.GOV/101447216](http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101447216)]



Image 7. Immigrants in a detention pen on the roof of the main building at the Ellis Island Immigration Station. [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE. [HTTP://RESOURCE.NLM.NIH.GOV/101547032](http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101547032)]



Image 8. Panorama of the opening of the new state dock in Providence, and arrival of the first ocean steamship on December 17, 1913.

[WM. MILLS & SON, PHOTOGRAPHER. [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2007662753](https://www.loc.gov/item/2007662753)]

THE NEW COLOSSUS

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 POMPI!” 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!”

This month, 139 years after the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty, and given the current immigration turmoil in this country, the poem by Emma Lazarus, left, engraved on a plaque on the Statue’s pedestal, still captures the hopes and dreams of those who sought – and those seeking – the American dream. ❖

References

1. National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/elis/learn/historyculture/ellis-island-chronology.htm>
2. <https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island/#:~:text=Is%20the%20Statue%20of%20Liberty,Island%20National%20Museum%20of%20Immigration.>

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