

The American Dream

January 22 & 23, 2025

The Golden Door

Primary Source Activity

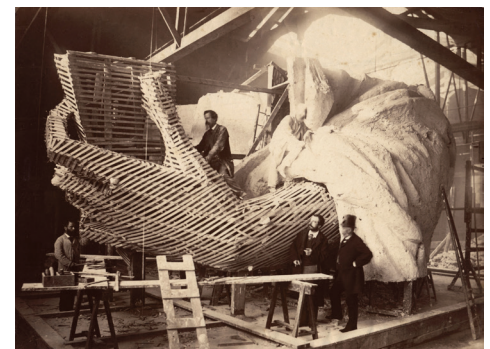
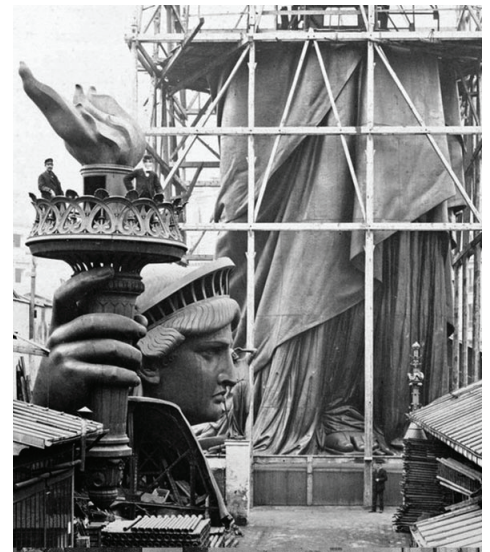
This activity interrogates five primary sources from the 1880s to draw conclusions about what they mean. After reading the introduction, use the questions below to guide analysis of each source and reflection on their collective meaning.

Step 1: Introduction

In 1865, French scholar Édouard René Lefèvre de Laboulaye proposed that France present the United States with a monumental gift to commemorate the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence and to celebrate the close relationship between the two countries. The project would be a joint effort: France would pay for the statue and the United States would pay for the pedestal. Fundraising campaigns in the United States encouraged citizens to donate whatever amount they could to help pay for the pedestal to hold this national symbol of freedom.

The fundraising appeal was not persuasive to everyone. In 1882, during the pedestal fundraising campaign, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first U.S. law to ban immigration based on race or nationality.

One year later, American poet Emma Lazarus wrote “The New Colossus” as part of an art and literary auction to raise money for the pedestal. The poem would eventually be engraved on a plaque on the pedestal holding the Statue of Liberty.



Two years after Lazarus wrote her poem, Saum Song Bo, a Chinese American student, wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Sun* articulating what he perceived as the hypocrisy of fundraising for a Statue of Liberty in a country that was barring the immigration of Chinese people. He argued that the fundraiser was a reminder that “liberty” was not offered to all.

Step 2: Review Primary Sources

1. Begin by analyzing the symbols of the Statue of Liberty. What do the torch, crown, tablets, and broken chains represent?
2. Read and discuss Emma Lazarus’s poem, “The New Colossus.”
 - What is a Colossus?
 - What does Lazarus suggest that makes her version new?
3. Analyze Thomas Nast’s cartoon “The Bartholdi Statue” in support of the pedestal fund.
 - Describe the image: What is in the foreground? The background?
What other details do you notice?
 - Read the text in the image. What is the purpose of this cartoon?
Who is the intended audience?
4. Analyze George Frederick Keller’s “A Statue for Our Harbor,” a political cartoon published in *The Wasp*, an anti-Chinese newspaper from San Francisco. The cartoon was published in 1881, while the Statue of Liberty was still being constructed in France.
 - Describe the image: What is in the foreground? The background?
What words are included as part of the image?
 - How does this statue differ from the statue in Nast’s cartoon?
 - What is the purpose of this cartoon? Who is the intended audience?
5. Read Saum Song Bo’s 1885 letter in *The New York Sun*. What hypocrisy does his letter articulate? Why did Saum write this letter? How does he interpret the meaning of liberty? Are his opinions fair?

Step 3: Reflection

Choose one of the following prompts. Write down your thoughts and how you would respond.

1. Can and should the 'golden door' be opened and closed at will? Why or why not?
2. The Statue of Liberty was originally built as a symbol of liberty. It was only after the poem "The New Colossus" was inscribed on the pedestal that the added meaning of welcoming immigrants was attached to the statue. Can one separate the two elements (statue and poem) as two individual pieces, or are they intrinsically and symbolically linked? Why or why not?
3. How does the Statue of Liberty represent the American Dream? Is that representation reflective of the immigrant experience over time?
4. What is our obligation to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers?
Who decides who is welcome? Does it differ between the categories? Why or why not?

Statue of Liberty



Anderson, Andrew. Statue of Liberty. March 2011. Photograph, State Symbols USA

"The New Colossus"

Emma Lazarus

1883

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
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" 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!"

The Bartholdi Statue

Thomas Nast



THE BARTHOLDI STATUE.

Even Liberty demands something substantial to stand upon.

Thomas Nast, "The Bartholdi Statue," *Harper's Weekly*,
December 6, 1884. New York Historical Society.

A Statue for Our Harbor

George Frederick Keller



George Fredrick Keller, "A Statue for Our Harbor," *The Wasp*, November 11, 1881. The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State University.

Letter to the Editor

Saum Song Bo

Sir:

A paper was presented to me yesterday for inspection, and I found it to be specially drawn up for subscription among my countrymen toward the Pedestal Fund of the Bartholdi Statue of Liberty. Seeing that the heading is an appeal to American citizens, to their love of country and liberty, I feel that my countrymen and myself are honored in being thus appealed to as citizens in the cause of liberty. But the word liberty makes me think of the fact that this country is the land of liberty for men of all nations except the Chinese. I consider it as an insult to us Chinese to call on us to contribute toward building in this land a pedestal for a statue of liberty. That statue represents liberty holding a torch which lights the passage of those of all nations who come into this country. But are the Chinese allowed to come? As for the Chinese who are here, are they allowed to enjoy liberty as men of all other nationalities enjoy it? Are they allowed to go about everywhere free from the insults, abuses, assaults, wrongs, and injuries from which men of other nationalities are free?...

A Chinese View of the Statue of Liberty.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SUN—Sir: A paper was presented to me yesterday for inspection, and I found it to be specially drawn up for subscription among my countrymen toward the Pedestal fund of the Bartholdi Statue of Liberty. Seeing that the heading is an appeal to American citizens, to their love of country and liberty, I feel that my countrymen and myself are honored in being thus appealed to as citizens in the cause of liberty. But the word liberty makes me think of the fact that this country is the land of liberty for men of all nations except the Chinese. I consider it as an insult to us Chinese to call on us to contribute toward building in this land a pedestal for a statue of liberty. That statue represents Liberty holding a torch which lights the passage of those of all nations who come into this country. But are the Chinese allowed to come? As for the Chinese who are here, are they allowed to enjoy liberty as men of all other nationalities enjoy it? Are they allowed to go about everywhere free from the insults, abuse, assaults, wrongs, and injuries from which men of other nationalities are free?

If there be a Chinaman who came to this country when a lad, who has passed through an American institution of learning of the highest grade, who has so fallen in love with American manners and ideas that he desires to make his home in this land, and who, seeing that his countrymen demand one of their own number to be their legal adviser, representative, advocate and protector, desires to study law, can he be a lawyer? By the law of this nation he, being a Chinaman, cannot become a citizen, and consequently cannot be a lawyer.

And this statue of Liberty is a gift to a people from another people who do not love or value liberty for the Chinese. Are not the Annamese and Tonquinese Chinese to whom liberty is as dear as to the French? What right have the French to deprive them of their liberty?

Whether the statute against the Chinese or the statue to Liberty will be the more lasting monument to tell future ages of the liberty and greatness of this country, will be known only to future generations.

Liberty, we Chinese do love and adore thee; but let not those who deny thee to us make of thee a graven image and invite us to bow down to it.

New York, June 28.

SAUM SONG BO.

...Whether this statute against the Chinese or the statue of liberty will be the more lasting monument to tell future ages of the liberty and greatness of this country, will be known only to future generations.

Liberty, we Chinese do love and adore thee; but let not those who deny thee to us, make of thee a graven image and invite us to bow down to it.

Bo, Saum Song. "Letter to the Editor." *The New York Sun*, June 30, 1885, page 2.