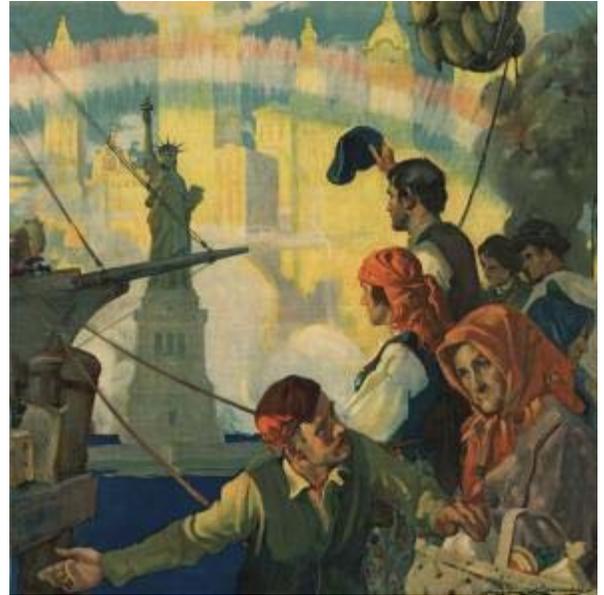


"The New Colossus": Emma Lazarus and the Immigrant Experience

By Julie Des Jardins

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If you aren't familiar with "The New Colossus," perhaps you've heard references to the tired and huddled masses, which have inspired everything from show tunes to calls for immigrant rights. For decades, children have taken field trips to Upper New York Bay to find this famous sonnet engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. And yet this poem did not always appear there. When the French gifted Lady Liberty to the Americans, she was to be a symbol of the republican ideals both nations shared, not an emblem of the immigrant experience. Nevertheless the significance of the statue changed after Emma Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus" to raise funds for its pedestal in 1883. Twenty years later, in 1903, her sonnet was finally engraved on a plaque and placed on the very pedestal she helped to endow, bestowing the statue with the popular meaning it has had ever since.



World War I poster showing Statue of Liberty and recent immigrants, published by the U.S. Food Administration, ca. 1917

Lazarus may not have been the obvious person to write these famous words of welcome. Her contemporaries might have preferred a prestigious male literary light, if not an authentic immigrant with firsthand recollections of coming to America's shores. And yet Lazarus, a Sephardic Jew, was a woman without an immigrant past. She was not among the two million Jews who had fled Russia during the pogroms of the late nineteenth century, many

of whom voyaged to Ellis Island. Her ancestors had been some of the first Jewish settlers in the English colonies and quickly established themselves among the nation's economic elite. Her father, Moses, became a successful sugar refiner who hobnobbed in Newport and Manhattan's most reputable social clubs with the Astors and Vanderbilts. Lazarus grew up with her six siblings in Union Square, hardly the tenement existence of many Russian Jews. At 17, she had already published her first book and soon reaped the mentorship of the great Ralph Waldo Emerson, enjoying literary connections most Jewish Americans would never know. A patron of New York's finest galleries and concert halls, she hardly seemed one to identify with the plight of downtrodden immigrants.

And yet Lazarus took pains to understand the immigrant experience and link it to her own. Eventually she saw that her Jewishness had given her outsider status in American life, albeit in other ways. More and more, she wrote about international anti-Semitism and cultural chauvinism against Jews in America, contributing pieces to *The Century* and *American Hebrew*. She also helped to establish the Hebrew Technical Institute and promoted Russian immigrant rights. During the pogroms of the 1880s, she was articulating Zionist sentiments before the word "Zionist" was officially coined. Her best-known collection of poems on Jewish American identity was *Songs of a Semite*, published in 1882, the year before "The New Colossus." She never suspected that the poem she wrote to raise funds for the Statue of Liberty would become so famous.

Of course it is not just Jews about whom Lazarus wrote in her sonnet. She understood that other immigrant groups identified with the Jewish experience, in America and elsewhere. "Until we are all free, we are none of us free," she said famously of Jews of all classes and nationalities, espousing universalism over "tribalism" in her writings. In the 35 years before Ellis Island even opened, eight million newcomers to New York were largely Irish and German Catholics, not Jews, but in Lazarus's mind their suffering was the same. State officials

processed this wave of immigrants at Castle Garden Immigration Depot in lower Manhattan until 1890, when Congress appropriated funds to build a federal immigration station on the landfill known as Ellis Island. The station opened on January 1, 1892. By its closing on November 12, 1954, twelve million immigrants had passed through its doors, the busiest activity occurring in 1907, when over one million immigrants were processed there. Unlike in the nineteenth century, these newcomers to New York were predominantly southern and eastern Europeans, namely Italians and Russian Jews, fleeing rural poverty and religious persecution. Some of them settled and laid roots for their children; many experienced poverty and persecution similar to that which they had left behind.

Today, nearly a third of the American population can trace ancestors to Ellis Island, and yet sadly, Emma Lazarus never lived to witness the passage of a single immigrant there. She died in 1887 at the age of 38, possibly from cancer, and had only just started to write about the first wave of Jewish immigrants to flee the Russian pogroms. Had she lived into the twentieth century, she might have written about the immigrants to Ellis Island who were denied admittance into America once they arrived. "The New Colossus" depicts Lady Liberty lovingly taking in the needy, but immigration authorities were not always so welcoming once immigrants debarked the ships. Newcomers suspected of being ill, criminal, or insane were denied entry. Horror stories abound of loved ones wrongly diagnosed, unfairly judged, and sometimes forced to return home rather than stay in America. Some never made it past the Ellis Island hospital or detention rooms; three thousand hopefuls died in medical facilities before stepping foot on American ground.

After 1924, inspections were made more rigorous with the passing of legislation further restricting immigration. The "golden door" of which Lazarus wrote served more often as a pathway to detention and deportation by the time Ellis Island closed in 1954. "The New Colossus" conveyed the optimism of new beginnings; its America was a refuge for the

downtrodden. And yet over the years this portrayal often proved more wishful than real. Immigrants left their homelands to arrive in New York, only to be made to feel like refuse on teeming shores. Even immigrants admitted into the country often felt like outsiders in the land that took them in. Still, "The New Colossus" reminds us of the opportunities promised by the elusive American Dream.

Julie Des Jardins is a professor of history at Baruch College, City University of New York, and the author of *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (2003), and *The Madame Curie Complex: The Hidden History of Women in Science* (2010).

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Emma Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus" which is engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. According to the text, whom does the sonnet depict Lady Liberty lovingly taking in?

2. Read these sentences from the text.

"'The New Colossus' conveyed the optimism of new beginnings; its America was a refuge for the downtrodden. And yet over the years this portrayal often proved more wishful than real."

Explain why this optimistic portrayal of America as a safe place for the needy and downtrodden turned out to be more wishful than real.

Support your answer with evidence from the text.

3. What is a main idea of this text?

4. The text states that "Lazarus may not have been the obvious person to write the famous words of welcome" that make up "The New Colossus". Why might Lazarus not have been the obvious person to write "The New Colossus"?

Support your answer with evidence from the text.

5. Emma Lazarus wrote the famous sonnet "The New Colossus" with compassion and understanding towards immigrants.

Support this conclusion with evidence from the text.