

# What Do Butler, N.J. and The Statue of Liberty Have In Common?

by Joel Messeros



Lady Liberty has been stationed on Bedloe's Island, faithfully standing sentry to all who see her since 1886.

What most do not know however, is that at one time, her arrival in New York Harbor was in jeopardy of not occurring at all as she was almost awarded to another American city. As it turned out, if it were not for Joe Pulitzer, New York World publisher, Lady Liberty would not have taken her place against the Manhattan skyline at all.

The idea of a colossal statue to be presented by the people of France to the American people commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the declaration of independence was born in 1865 at a dinner party hosted by the French scholar and biographer Eduard day.

Among the guests in attendance was a 31-year-old Parisian sculptor named Frederick Auguste Bartholdi. Bartholdi accepted the challenge even though there was no financing.

"They were confident that the French people would contribute the funds for the statue", explained The Butler Museum Curator, Alan Bird, adding, "The American people would provide a site and the pedestal required to hold her."

It all sounded good in theory, but the idea took years to pick up momentum and it wasn't until six years later that the plan was taken to the next level.

In May of 1871 Bartholdi sailed for America to win support for the project. Immediately upon arriving in New York Harbor Bartholdi could see where his statue would stand, against the magnificent backdrop of the greatest city in America.

After arriving, the Frenchman traveled across the country sharing his vision for a magnificent lady towering over the harbor. Among those with an interest in the project was a New York industrialist named Richard Butler.

Bartholdi continued to campaign for his sculpture and was finally invited to speak to a group of American businessmen and financiers on January 2, at the Century Club in New York City. Bartholdi was convincing and by the end of the evening the American Committee on the Statue of Liberty was formed.

According to Bird, the Century Club meeting was likely engineered by Richard Butler himself. “Butler had lived in New York City but was president of the American Hard Rubber Company in the New Jersey Hills of West Bloomingdale”, he mused. “As a matter of fact, he traveled out to the factory so often on the New York Susquehanna and Western Railroad that the stop in West Bloomingdale, now home to The Butler Museum, was informally and unofficially named Butler.”

Of course, Butler would go on to become the namesake of Butler, N.J.

Butler willingly assumed the position of staff secretary to the Statue of Liberty committee, a significant office. In this role, he became the American on whom Auguste Bartholdi depended on the most in times of trouble. As Bartholdi toiled in his Parris studio it was Butler who saw to every detail of Lady Liberty’s eventual arrival in New York Harbor and cemented a relationship with Bartholdi that would last for the rest of his life.

As secretary of the American committee of the Statue of Liberty Richard Butler played a critical role in the campaign to raise the funds to erect the pedestal for Lady liberty on Bedloe’s Island. Money also rolled in from wealthy donors and from the sale of miniature statues.

Cost overruns occurred in the late 19th century much the same as they do today and construction costs eventually exceeded expectations, forcing the committee to warn that failure to complete the pedestal might lead the French government to agree to erect the statue in some other American city. That simply could not be permitted to happen. The committee turned to an unlikely hero!

Joe Pulitzer, Publisher of The New York World, came to the rescue! He offered to print in his newspaper the names of every single person who became a donor in the Statue of Liberty Fund no matter how small a donation that they made. And it worked!

He was able to raise an astounding \$100,000, enough to finish the pedestal. It was enough to convince the French that New York City was a worthy destination for Lady Liberty. There were no remaining barriers for Bartholdi and in 1886, The Statue of Liberty was completed and ready for dedication.

It was October 28, 1886 and at long last, Bartholdi peered through the crown of the Statue of Liberty. Bartholdi had asked that his friend and confidant, Richard Butler, president of The American Hard Rubber Company in Butler, N.J. be present in the crown when he pulled the cord to drop away the tricolor banner that hid part of the statues face, 300 feet above the stormy fog and the shredded waters off of Jersey City.

“To think that the namesake of our town, had such a pivotal role in bringing the Statue of Liberty to America is quite amazing”, Bird said, adding, “It is just one more example of something so iconic having roots right here in our small part of the World, Butler.”

From their vantage point above it all Bartholdi and Butler watched as boats edged close to the island in anticipation of the long-awaited ceremonies. Naval vessels were aligned in formation at Center Harbor. It had all the makings of the classic American celebration.

Although only military bands were permitted on Bedloe’s Island for the dedication ceremony, The Butler Silver Cornet band, most of whom were Richard Butler’s employees at the rubber mill, played for the crowd from a boat anchored just off the island.

Richard Butler died on November 12, 1902. Upon his death a life-sized bronze bust was designed and cast by Auguste Bartholdi and presented to Mary Butler in honor of his friend. Although efforts to locate the original bust have been unsuccessful, copies made from Bartholdi’s original mold are on display in the Borough of Butler Council Chambers and in the museum at the Statue of Liberty.