

A belated happy birthday



Liberty by night, 1918. (Library of Congress photo)

Carrying a torch for Lady Liberty

by Rebecca C. Robbins

Although the gala 100th birthday celebration was held on 4 July 1986, the actual centennial of the dedication of the Statue of Liberty was 28 October. Much has been written about Lady Liberty in connection with these events and her recent renovations. Less well-known is the part played by the Army and, in particular, the Signal Corps, which was responsible for the care and lighting of the statue during several years early in this century.

The Army's connection began with the choice of the statue's location. When its creator, the French sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, visited the United States in 1871, he selected Bedloe's Island, located along the approach to New York Harbor. Because of the island's strategic position, Fort Wood had been built there in the early nineteenth century as part of the harbor defenses. In 1877 a congressional resolution authorized the President to accept the statue as a gift from France, and Gen. William T. Sherman, of Civil War fame and then the Commanding General of the Army, was designated to officially determine the site. Apparently aware of Bartholdi's preference, he chose Bedloe's Island. Old Fort Wood, in the shape of an eleven-pointed star, became the base from which the statue's pedestal rose.

The Army's influence continued during the building of the pedestal and the statue's reassembly after being shipped from France in over two hundred crates. The supervisor of the project was Brig. Gen. Charles P. Stone, a military engineer and a graduate of West Point. After the statue's completion and the dedication ceremonies on 28 October 1886, an Army unit was stationed on the island to guard the colossus.

While it may seem hard to believe today, the statue was originally intended to serve as a lighthouse. (Her full title is "Liberty Enlightening the World.") Gen. Stone made plans for the initial lighting system after consulting with several electrical companies. The American Electric Manufacturing Company of New York, which donated the equipment, placed electric lamps in the torch as well as in the salients of the fort.⁴ Although the sculptor had left a hole

in the top of the torch from which light could escape, two rows of circular holes were cut in the sides of the flame for better visibility. The work was hastily completed in about a month, and the electric plant was ready for operation on the night of the dedication. However, bad weather postponed the display of the lighting until 1 November. The plant was operated without charge to the government through the night of 6 November after which, Congress having made no provisions for permanently lighting the statue, the Lady was left in the dark.

Ten days later, President Grover Cleveland transferred custody of the statue to the Light-House Board, a division of the Treasury Department. The War Department, however, controlled Bedloe's Island except for the small portion set aside for the board. Although Liberty's lights were relit under the board's supervision, the effect was less than satisfactory due to the primitive state of electrical technology at the time. Today we are familiar with the Lady clad in a soft, green patina, but in her youth her dark, copper color absorbed light, presenting a difficult lighting problem. Bartholdi suggested that the statue be gilded, but the engineer in charge of the lighting considered such a solution impractical as well as too expensive.⁵ Congress eventually appropriated money for lighting purposes, and in 1890 the Light-House Board placed in operation a new electric plant for illuminating the interior of the statue and its pedestal.⁷ In 1892 the board oversaw further improvements in the lighting of the torch to include the replacement of the circular windows with a band of plate glass. At the same time, lights were also added to the crown. Covered with globes of red, white, and blue, they were intended to resemble crown jewels of rubies, diamonds, and sapphires.⁸ Despite these efforts, Lady Liberty remained little more than a glimmer in the harbor.

By 1901 the Treasury Department was ready to relinquish control of the statue, and the Secretary of the Treasury suggested to the Secretary of War that the War Department assume custody. Upon Secretary of War Elihu Root's recommendation, President Theodore Roosevelt signed an executive order on 30 December 1901 effecting the change. The War Department, which had increased its presence on Bedloe's Island after making Fort Wood a recruiting station in 1899, assigned responsibility for the statue to the Quartermaster Department. Civilians continued to operate the lighting plant but as employees of that department.

Meanwhile, events were taking place that would eventually bring the Signal Corps to Fort Wood. The War with Spain had brought the Corps many new duties, including the operation and maintenance of telephone and telegraph lines in the former Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. In 1900, while the Corps was still operating nearly 900 miles of military telegraph lines in the northwest and southwest, it took the additional task of constructing the Alaska communications system. Yet another major mission was the installation of electrical fire control systems for seacoast artillery. The Signal Corps needed adequate depot facilities for handling the large amounts of equipment involved in these operations, and Bedloe's Island provided a suitable location due to its proximity to New York City, where the Corps purchased many of its needed electrical appliances. When the War Department offered Fort Wood to the Signal Corps, the chief Signal officer, Brig. Gen. Adolphus W. Greely, accepted, and on 25 February 1904, Company G, Signal Corps, moved there from Fort Trumbull, Connecticut. Capt. George C. Burnell commanded the company and also assumed the position of post commander.¹² Along with the duties of setting up a supply depot, Company G acquired responsibility for the care and lighting of the Statue of Liberty.¹³

Because of the Corps' experience with electrical work, the assignment of the lighting to Company G made sense. By July 1904, members of the company had replaced the civilian electrical engineers.¹⁴ But the condition of the power plant was far from ideal. Herbert J. Brees, a Signal Corps lieutenant and post quartermaster, inspected it and declared that it was in "a very precarious condition and . . . liable to break down at any moment." He stressed the need for a duplicate plant in case of a breakdown.¹⁵ Additionally, the Lady herself needed major repairs, and Fort Wood required considerable construction, including officers' quarters, barracks, a hospital, and storehouses, to make it a suitable location for Company G.¹⁶

Because of the lack of space, Company G stored cables, telegraph poles, and other types of equipment in the moat that ran in back of the statue. Certainly that could not have presented a very pleasing sight for visitors to the island! The Signal Corps also established a school for enlisted men at Fort Wood for which adequate facilities were a necessity.

In 1906 Congress appropriated \$62,800 to light the statue and make other necessary repairs, and construction continued over the next several years.¹⁷ In addition to the new buildings mentioned above, other major improvements included the installation of an elevator in the pedestal, repairs to the inside of the statue and pedestal, landscaping of the grounds (which included filling in the moat), and the strengthening of the light in the torch.¹⁸ The Signal Corps added a wireless station to the post, and its transmission tower, while offering no competition to the statue for attention, was nonetheless a symbol of the new technological age.

During the period of World War I, Company G continued to maintain the statue as part of its regular garrison duties. A major event of those years was the flight over the statue by the Wright Brothers in October 1909 following their successful testing of the first military airplane at Fort Myer, Virginia, that summer. The Army purchased this plane, built according to specifications issued by the Signal Corps, and it became the genesis of today's Air Force.



ABOVE: Fort Wood, circa 1926. Ellis Island can be seen to the upper left. (National Archives photo) **LEFT:** Liberty emerges from the smoke of an artillery salute welcoming president Grover Cleveland to the dedication ceremonies, 28 October 1886. (Library of Congress photo)

With the outbreak of World War I in Europe, the nation's years of peace were coming to an end. In July 1916, nine months before America entered the conflict, German saboteurs bombed a munitions depot at Black Tom Island in New Jersey, just across the harbor from Bedloe's Island. While several buildings on the post sustained severe damage, the statue emerged virtually unscathed.¹⁹

The patriotic enthusiasm aroused by the nation's entry into the war gave rise to a campaign by the *New York World* to raise funds to upgrade the statue's lighting, which, despite the improvements over the years, was still inadequate.²⁰ The *World* raised thirty thousand dollars, and Gutzon Borglum, later the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, undertook the task of redesigning the torch. He did so by inserting 600 pieces of tinted yellow glass to create a more flame-like effect. The General Electric Company also installed a permanent floodlighting system.²¹

In the post World War I era, the care of the statue passed from the hands of the Signal Corps and, furthermore, from the custody of the War Department. With the postwar reduction of the Army, the Signal Corps depot at Fort Wood was closed, and an infantry company and military police troops thereafter garrisoned the post.²² A major shift away from military control came in

1926 when the statue was placed under the administration of a civilian body, with the post commander retaining overall supervision. The War Department's guardianship of Lady Liberty came to an end in 1933 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt transferred her to the National Park Service.²³ Fort Wood remained an Army post until the War Department declared it abandoned in 1937 and turned the remainder of Bedloe's Island over to the Park Service.²⁴

In preparation for her 100th birthday, the statue has undergone extensive renovations costing millions of dollars. Among the major undertakings was the installation of a new torch, crafted by a team of French workers to replicate the original sculpted by Bartholdi. The new copper flame is gilded as Bartholdi had once suggested.²⁵ For a century, Liberty's lamp has been a beacon of freedom. Once lit by Company G, it has even further significance for today's Signal soldiers. These men and women, like the Lady herself, proudly carry a torch as part of their branch insignia.

ENDNOTES

1. Fort Wood is named for Lt. Col. Eleazer D. Wood, who was killed during the War of 1812. For background on the fort see: Robert B. Roberts, "Liberty Island and Old Fort Wood," *Periodical* 8 (Summer 1976): 31-33 and Hannah M. Zeidlik, "Old Fort Wood—A Postscript," *Periodical* 9 (Summer 1977): 53-56.



2. Benjamin Levine and Isabelle F. Story, *Statue of Liberty National Monument, Liberty Island, New York*, National Park Service Historical Handbook Series No. 11 (Washington, D.C., 1952; revised edition, 1957), p.13; Christian Blanchet and Bertrand Dard, *Statue of Liberty: The First Hundred Years*. English language version by Bernard A. Weisberger. (New York: American Heritage, 1985), p.77.

3. During the Civil War, Stone commanded a Special Corps of Observation on the Upper Potomac, elements of which were involved in the Union's defeat at Ball's Bluff, near Leesburg, Virginia, in October 1861. Stone was blamed for the disaster and, ironically, was imprisoned in Fort Lafayette in New York Harbor for a time without any pretense of a trial. For details of Stone's military service see George W. Cullum, comp., *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy . . .* 2 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1891), pp.214-215. A recent article on Stone's involvement with the statue is that by Gerald Weland, "The Lady and the General Who Put Her on a Pedestal," *Army* 36 (April 1986): 42-49.

4. These were arc lamps, then the type commonly used for outdoor lighting. Incandescent lighting was still in its infancy, as Thomas A. Edison had only recently perfected the light bulb in 1880. The American Electric Manufacturing Company was, however, an early producer of incandescent lamps. See Arthur A. Bright, Jr., *The Electric-Lamp Industry: Technological Change and Economic Development from 1800 to 1947* (The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint edition: New York: Arno Press, 1972), p.73. The steam power plant was furnished by E.P. Hampson and Company, also of New York.

5. The shortage of funds is a continuing thread through the statue's early history. Sufficient funds to complete the pedestal were donated only after Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World*, launched a fund-raising campaign through his newspaper. Congress had refused to appropriate enough money for the inauguration ceremonies to cover the expenses of lighting the statue. See Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, pp.91-92.

6. U.S. Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Light-House Board, 1887*, Appendix 1. This is a report by Lt. John Millis, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who was placed in charge of the lighting project as assistant to the engineer of the Third Light-House District.

7. U.S. Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Light-House Board, 1890*, p.64 and Appendix 3. The appendix is Millis' second report. Millis made some modifications to Stone's lighting plan to include cutting holes in the sides of the torch. See also Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p.100.

8. See U.S. Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Light-House Board, 1892*, Appendix 4. The nine arc lamps originally placed in the torch were replaced with a single lamp of 5,000 candlepower. The report does not state whether it was an arc or an incandescent lamp. Fifty incandescent lamps were placed in the crown. For a discussion of these early efforts at lighting, see Jennie Holliman, *The Statue of Liberty, Part II: The American People Receive the Statue of Liberty From the French* (Washington: Civil Works Administration, 1934), pp.84-92.

9. See letter, Secretary of War to the President, 28 December 1901, quoting the Secretary of the Treasury's letter of 5 November 1901 recommending the transfer. Office of the Quartermaster General, Document File, 1800-1914 (hereafter cited as OQMG Doc. File, 1800-1914), 177699, Record Group 92, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as RG 92, NA). The transfer was announced in War Department General Orders 40, 30 April 1902 (hereafter called as WDGO).

10. Apparently there was a period of darkness following the transfer, as the Light-House Board, in its annual report of 1902, reported that the lights were extinguished on 1 March 1902 (page 78). Authority to hire civilian electrical engineers was given by the quartermaster general on 21 April, and the lights were probably relit soon thereafter. See endorsement, Capt. Traber Norman, Office of the Quartermaster, Governor's Island, 15 March 1904, on letter, Lt. Col. James Allen, chief Signal officer, Department of the East, to the Adjutant General (hereafter cited as AG) Department of the East, 7 March 1904, OQMG Doc. File, 1800-1914, 177699, RG 92, NA. The Fort Wood post returns do not account for the civilian employees until January 1903. The actual transfer of the lighting plant to the War Department was made at that time after its purchase from the Treasury Department for \$1,349.53. See endorsement, quartermaster general, 23 March 1904, on (?), OQMG Doc. File, 1800-1914, 177699, RG 92, NA. Fort Wood, New York, Post Returns, 1837-1916, RG 94, NA (rolls 1457-1461, microcopy 617).

11. On the need for a new depot in the east, see the correspondence in Office of the Chief Signal Officer, Doc. File, 1897-1917 (hereafter cited as OCSO, Doc. File, 1897-1917), 12977, RG 111, NA, especially: letter, Brig. Gen. Adolphus Greely, chief Signal officer, to Lt. Col. James Allen, 23 December 1903; letter, Allen to Greely, 9 January 1903 [4]; and letter, Allen to AG, Department of the East, 11 January 1904. The date of Company G's arrival is given in the U.S. War Department's, *Annual Report of the Chief Signal Officer, 1905*, p.24.

12. Burnell had previously served in Alaska, laying telegraph lines with an officer destined to become one of the Signal Corps' most famous alumni, William (Billy) Mitchell.

13. U.S. War Department, *Annual Report of the Chief Signal Officer, 1904*, p.28.

14. See Post Returns, Fort Wood, New York, July 1904, RG 94, NA (roll 1460, microcopy 617).

15. Brees to chief quartermaster, Department of the East, 25 April 1904, OCSO, Doc. File, 1897-1917, 13389, RG 111, NA.

16. See Burnell's annual report for fiscal year 1905: report, Burnell to chief Signal officer, Department of the East, 28 June 1905, OCSO, Doc. File, 1897-1917, 15356, RG 111, NA. See also letter, Burnell to the quartermaster general, U.S. Army, 22 August 1907, OCSO, Doc. File, 1897-1917, 12977-17-1, RG 111, NA. The acting chief quartermaster of the Department of the East had submitted to the departmental adjutant general a list of necessary renovations with an estimated cost of over \$56,000. This list included a new electric plant at nearly \$10,000. See letter, acting chief quartermaster, Department of the East, to AG, Department of the East, 13 September 1904, OQMG, Doc. File, 1800-1914, 177699, RG 92, NA.

17. See extract of legislation in WDGO 135, 25 July 1906.

18. Holliman, *Statue of Liberty Part II*, pp.94-95. Although not cited by Holliman and others, a duplicate electric plant may have been built, since there are "Specifications for the Construction of an Electric Light and Power System" in OCSO, Doc. File, 1897-1917, 12977/6, RG 111, NA. Articles of agreement were also signed with the Ridgway Dynamo and Engine Company for installing engines in the power plant and with the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company to furnish two generators. See those and others in OQMG, Doc. File, 1800-1914, 177699, RG 92, NA.

19. Damage to the buildings was estimated at \$75,000. See Post Returns, Fort Wood, New York, July 1916, RG 94, NA (roll 1461, microcopy 617). See also Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, p.132, and Zeidlik, "Old Fort Wood," p.54.

20. This was actually the second campaign by the *World* on behalf of the statue. See footnote 5 above.

21. Holliman, *Statue of Liberty Part II*, pp.95-107. Subsequent improvements to the lighting were made in 1931, 1945, and 1976, the latter for the Bicentennial. Story and Levine, *Statue of Liberty, National Monument*, pp.20-24; Blanchet and Dard, *Statue of Liberty*, pp. 138-139.

22. Zeidlik, "Old Fort Wood," p. 56. As for Company G, it had been redesignated in 1914 as Telegraph Company G (see post return of 1914 in which this designation is first used with no orders cited). In April 1916 it was redesignated as Depot Company G (see returns of that month citing paragraph 15, War Department Special Orders 86, 12 April 1916). In November 1916, it became Depot Company H (see returns of December 1916 and W1GO 61, 11 November 1916). Post Returns, Fort Wood, New York, January-December 1916, RG 94, NA (roll 1461, microcopy 617). Depot companies were abolished in 1918 and Depot Company H was replaced by the 16th Signal Service Company. See WDGO 18, 14 February 1918.

23. Holliman, *Statue of Liberty Part II*, pp.108-109.

24. Zeidlik, "Old Fort Wood," p.54; Holliman, *Statue of Liberty Part II*, p.109. Bedloe's Island was renamed Liberty Island in 1956.

25. Among the best sources of information on the recent restoration are Jeremy Levensohn, "I Lift My Lamp, . . ." *American Craft* 46 (June/July 1986): 20-27, 65-66; Alice J. Hall, "Liberty Lifts Her Lamp Once More," *National Geographic* (July 1986): 2-18; Peter B. Kaplan, "Sprucing Up Miss Liberty," *Smithsonian* 17 (June 1986): 68-75; and "Special Souvenir Section," *Life* 9 (July 1986): 47-80.

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