Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus" (1883)

Emma Lazarus' famous words, "Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses
yearning to breathe free" may now be indelibly engraved into the collective American
memory, but they did not achieve immortality overnight. In fact, Lazarus' sonnet to
the Statue of Liberty was hardly noticed until after her death, when a patron of the
New York arts found it tucked into a small portfolio of poems written in 1883 to raise
money for the construction of the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. The patron, Georgina
Schuyler, was struck by the poem and arranged to have its last five lines become a
permanent part of the statue itself. More than twenty years later, children's textbooks
began to include the sonnet and Irving Berlin wrote it into a broadway musical. By
1945, the engraved poem was relocated--including all fourteen lines--to be placed
over the Statue of Liberty's main entrance.

Today the words themselves may be remembered a great degree more than the poet
herself, but in Lazarus' time just the opposite was true. As a member of New York's
social elite, Emma Lazarus enjoyed a privileged childhood, nurtured by her family to
become a respected poet recognized throughout the country for verses about her
Jewish heritage. A reader and a dreamer, Lazarus had the good fortune to claim Ralph
Waldo Emerson as a pen-pal and mentor. Before her death at age 37, Lazarus grew
from a sheltered girl writing flowery prose about Classical Antiquity to a sophisticated
New York aristocrat troubled by the violent injustices suffered by Jews in Eastern
Europe.

In "The New Colossus," Lazarus contrasts the soon-to-be installed symbol of the
United States with what many consider the perfect symbol of the Greek and Roman
era, the Colossus of Rhodes. Her comparison proved appropriate, for Bartholdi
himself created the Statue of Liberty with the well-known Colossus in mind. What
Bartholdi did not intend, however, was for the Statue of Liberty to become a symbol
of welcome for thousands of European immigrants. As political propaganda for
France, the Statue of Liberty was first intended to be a path of enlightenment for the
countries of Europe still battling tyranny and oppression. Lazarus' words, however,
turned that idea on its head: the Statue of Liberty would forever on be considered a
beacon of welcome for immigrants leaving their mother countries.

Just as Lazarus' poem gave new meaning to the statue, the statue emitted a new ideal
for the United States. Liberty did not only mean freedom from the aristocracy of
Britain that led the American colonists to the Revolutionary War. Liberty also meant
freedom to come to the United States and create a new life without religious and
ethnic persecution. Through Larazus' poem, the Statue of Liberty gained a new name:
She would now become the "Mother of Exiles," torch in hand to lead her new children to American success and happiness.

The full text of the poem is as follows:

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 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-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

by Emma Lazarus, New York City, 1883