

The New Colossus and Statue of Liberty (1903)

This poem by Emma Lazarus was inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty and is shown here in an early film by Thomas Edison. Since the great Irish and German migrations of the 1840s and 1850s, the United States had absorbed millions of Europeans, many of whom were indeed tired, poor, and homeless in the face of economic and political oppression. The influx caused great anxiety among some Americans and inspired a series of nativist political movements, including the Know-Nothings and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. By 1924, the United States had radically curtailed immigration and had made a concerted effort to block all but the "better sort" of immigrants, usually meaning those from northern Europe. At the time this poem was written, Asian immigration had been sharply limited and the rights of Asians within the country had been severely restricted on the basis of their race.

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!"