

The Conway Daily Sun

Liberty Island in full glory

By George Cleveland
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For most of my life I've been asked what it's like being the grandson of a president of the United States. And for most of that time, I really haven't had a snappy answer. I probably rebelled against it for awhile because I didn't have a snappy answer and because there wasn't anything "special" about it. But over the last decade I stopped thinking about it and that's when the real fun started.

I've now gone from Harwichport to Honolulu to talk about and learn about my distant grandfather, Grover Cleveland. I love doing this because I love history. And Grover has provided me with a great entrée into a lot of bizarre and incredibly fun adventures.

In May of this year I heard through the grapevine that the National Park Service wanted me to go to New York City and speak at the 125th birthday celebration for the Statue of Liberty. Grover Cleveland spoke at the dedication of Liberty on October 28, 1886. This was a no-brainer.

As with any great event, everything toppled together at the last moment. My two sisters and two children had rallied to the cause and we'd all be headed to New York from all compass points with a couple of nephews sprinkled in for good measure.

The morning of October 28th was clear and crisp. Ranger Steve Buccellato met my son Aaron and me at our hotel at the crack of dawn. Ranger Steve had given me a complete tour of Liberty Island and the museum the day before. This man has a passion for Liberty and for history in general, so we hit it off right away. We walked the few blocks to the ferry in Battery Park. The boat seemed a Tower of Babel; dozens of languages lifting into the sky. And every third person was from a news organization. This was the prelude to the day's naturalization ceremony: 125 new citizens on Liberty's 125th birthday.

It must be impossible to look at Lower Manhattan without noticing the glaring absence of the towers of the World Trade Center. The new 1 World Trade Center is well on its way to completion and on a beautiful day like this one, it is stunning. It never looks the same twice; even a slight movement changes the perspective. But there is an inevitable moment when your breath catches in your throat and you have to swallow hard. The natives tell me it happens to them as well.

Liberty played a significant role on September 11, 2001 besides her presence in many gut-wrenching photographs. We don't hear much of the "boat lift" that took place that day. For many people in Lower Manhattan, the only escape was by water. Nearly every tour boat and ferry took turns docking and leaving, carrying literally thousands to safer ground. There was no plan, no contingency. The captains and crews just showed up and kept showing up. And they did this without knowing if they were potential targets. The Statue of Liberty ferries were in the thick of it.

But on this day, Liberty Island was in full glory. Overwhelming. Band uniforms. Military uniforms. Park Service uniforms. EMS uniforms. Next to the huge tent was a gleaming copper motorcycle created by Orange County Choppers of "American Choppers" fame. The carburetor is designed to resemble Liberty's torch and actually lights up.

The naturalization ceremony was simple, direct, moving and fun. One of our new citizens led us in the Pledge of Allegiance. At the conclusion was much cheering, hugging, flag waving and the new citizens proudly displayed their official certificate for anyone with a camera. About a dozen of the new Americans were already members of the U.S. armed forces, which seemed odd to me but is apparently not that unusual. A military website suggests that one may join a branch of the armed forces if one is a card-carrying legal immigrant with permanent residence in the United States. Until becoming a citizen, one cannot be a commission or warrant officer. In our earlier history, there are many instances of foreign nationals fighting for the United States within our borders.

Party time! The tent refilled to a patriotic serenade from one of the West Point bands. Our emcee was Michael Feinstein, generally regarded as the Keeper of the Great American Songbook. We had music that curled your toes. The West Point Glee Club gave a definitive "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Actress Sigourney Weaver gave an understated and flawless reading of Emma Lazarus' The New Colossus, the poem she wrote about Liberty.

I was in awe through all of this. And then park superintendant David Luchsinger (now that's a great job!) called me up for "Gifts of Friendship" with a representative of the French government. He and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar gave me a "plaque" commemorating my grandfather's part in the 1886 dedication. It's inscribed with the words from his speech that day which he concluded by saying, "A stream of light shall pierce the darkness of ignorance and man's oppression, until Liberty enlightens the world." Incredibly, bolted to the plaque is a 10-inch piece of iron that was part of the original framework of Liberty as designed by Gustav Eiffel. Basically, it's a piece of Liberty's corset. And it's really heavy.



George Cleveland, center, with children Jessie and Aaron at a ceremony marking the 125th anniversary of the dedication of the Statue of Liberty..

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There is an irony to Grover Cleveland's involvement with the Statue of Liberty. When he was governor of New York, he vetoed a \$50,000 appropriation to help fund the pedestal on which the statue stands. He did this because he believed that this was not the way New Yorkers wanted to spend their tax dollars. This attitude is one reason why Cleveland is a favorite among Libertarians, not the least of whom is presidential candidate Congressman Ron Paul of Texas. By doing this, Cleveland helped unleash a fund-raising campaign of massive proportions. And with pennies and nickels, school children and grandmothers helped build the massive foundation.

In a related irony, my nephew Tom is a good friend of the owner of the Branford, Conn., quarry that today works the same deposit of granite from which the base was constructed. They arrived with beautifully-crafted cutting boards made from this same stone given as gifts to the dignitaries. A really nice touch.

At the ceremony's conclusion there were interviews. Lots of interviews. I have no idea how many I gave, but they were all with media from way away: Poland, Italy, Ukraine, France. In the background a flotilla of boats cranked on their horns and the NYFD fire boat let loose. I almost missed this while chatting with a TV crew from Somethingtan. One anticipated moment I DID miss was meeting Sigourney Weaver. She is one of my "go to" actors. If she's in a movie about which I know nothing, I will try and see it because she's a great actress and I operate on the assumption that even if the role is less than stellar, she'll pull it off. My kids Aaron and Jessie had photos taken with her that they generously shared. The bums.

Television's "Cake Boss" was one of the new citizens and definitely had the largest entourage. His New Jersey bakery created a massive cake of Liberty that was soon dissected and consumed. One of my sisters stood in line for a piece with Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the world's most astonishing "sex therapist." I did not get a report on what part of Liberty she ate. Little Known True Fact: In her youth, Dr Ruth trained as a sniper with the Israeli Defense Force.

Her 125th birthday was also the occasion for Liberty to race to the top of the technology ladder. Thanks to the astonishing work of the folks at [EarthCam](#), she is now outfitted with webcams. Just a click will give you streaming live video of New York City from a [camera in her torch](#). There are other views as well and it's well worth the visit to [EarthCam.com](#). The birthday ceremony wrapped with a countdown to the official "lighting up" of the Liberty webcams.

This small company in Hackensack has developed a worldwide following due to its innovation in the webcam business. I've been a devoted follower for years, and meeting EarthCam president Brian Cury and other company members was a real treat. I hope Mount Washington Valley will get a taste of EarthCam in the not too far distant future.

As my family trotted off for their adventure with Ranger Steve in the museum, I found a sandwich and sat under a tree to gear up for some exploring of my own.

Because of the sheer magnificence of the Statue of Liberty, she has been written about in ways I could never reach. She does not meet your gaze. But you know she's aware. She's seen thousands and thousands of men and women go off to war with thousands less returning. She's seen the skies fill with small pattering planes, great airships, supersonic airliners. She's seen buildings rise and buildings fall. And she's seen boatloads of people looking for a new life; in many cases looking for life. Her right heel is slightly raised to remind us that she is moving. Liberty is not a still life, nor is it a still concept. She invites us not to hide behind her cloak but to stand with her, walk with her and spread the light with her.

You hear a lot of "Wow" on Liberty Island. But you see a lot of tears. It's a heady sensation to realize that for a distant member of your family, this was their first glimpse of America. Ranger Steve Buccellato's family sailed by Liberty on their way from Sicily to Ellis Island. He said that thought is always with him.

Though an object may seem solid and inanimate, it is nonetheless made up of protons and electrons the same as we are. I've always believed that for that reason, an object can take on and hold energy. Liberty holds a lot of energy. She should. If your full name is "Liberty Enlightening the World," you must be packing something.

What about my family? The Clevelands were here for years, populating the East Coast with sailors and clergymen and abolitionists and more than a few bizarre characters. There are genealogical blueprints of the Cleveland family that somehow go all the way back to literally 1066. And this was done decades before Ancestry.com. But that's only half the story. I lit up my computer and went to the website for the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Foundation. There you can search passenger manifests for over 100 years. I typed in my grandfather, George Black. In 1914, a 36-year-old George Black of Dalbeattie, Scotland came through Ellis Island after sailing from Liverpool on the Cunard steamer Campania. And holy crap — he had a dragon tattoo! And there was my grandmother, Jessie Maxwell, also of Dalbeattie and arriving on the Mauretania. No tattoo mentioned.

So what's it like being the grandson of a president of the United States? It's pretty cool. What's it like being the grandson of a Scottish mariner? It's pretty cool too.

The statue itself is closed for a year for repairs and upgrades to the operations in the pedestal area. But Liberty and Ellis Islands are both open. Visit <http://www.nps.gov/stli/index.htm>

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