



Unit I: Symbols and Their Meaning - The Statue of Freedom Worksheet



Statue of Freedom

The 19 1/2 foot, 7 1/2 ton bronze figure reigns atop the Capitol Dome. Sculptor Thomas Crawford planned Freedom's headdress to be a soft cap of freed Roman slaves. He substituted a helmet with eagle head and feathers to meet the objections of Jefferson Davis, who left the Senate in 1861 and then led the Confederacy.

(excerpt from We, the People pages 54-57)

Despite the war, some work was done on the Capitol extensions. Construction of a vastly enlarged Dome--authorized by Congress in 1855 to replace the one dwarfed by the new wings--continued.

Designed by Architect Walter, the big Dome is a masterpiece of 19th-century engineering skill. It has outer and inner cast-iron shells, trussed to withstand the strains of contraction and expansion. Intricately girded and bolted together, it weighs nearly nine million pounds. Between the shells winds a narrow staircase of 183 steps.

To raise the heavy iron parts to their lofty places, construction superintendent Montgomery C. Meigs built a scaffold tower from the floor of the Rotunda up through the Dome. It served as a base for the hoisting devices used to lift the materials on the outside.

The great bronze goddess that crowns the Dome's lantern structure was the work of an outstanding American sculptor, Thomas Crawford. He referred to her as "Freedom triumphant," and shaped her as a classical figure, with one hand on a sword, the other holding a wreath and resting on a shield.

Her feathered headdress has led many to believe that the statue represents Pocahontas or some other Indian. Actually, Crawford had designed the headdress as a liberty cap, after those worn by Rome's emancipated slaves. He substituted a helmet with eagle head and Indian feathers to meet the objections of Jefferson Davis, future President of the Confederacy, who had charge of Capitol construction as Secretary of War from 1853 to 1857.

Modeled in Crawford's Rome studio, the statue's plaster cast was imperiled by a leaky ship, heavy gales, and other hazards on an eight months' journey to the United States. By October 1862, the bronze form was cast at Clark Mills' foundry in Washington and the city's residents had an opportunity to inspect the 19 1/2-foot figure temporarily displayed on the grounds of the Capitol.

Finally, at the appointed hour of 12 noon, *December 2, 1863*, the giant head of Freedom--last of the statue's five sections--was raised and bolted into place.

The U.S. flag, bearing 35 stars for all the states, Northern and Southern, fluttered overhead. Spectators cheered.

Capitol Hill's field battery boomed a 35-gun salute, one for each state. In turn, a dozen Union forts rimming Washington roared back a pledge of 35-gun responses.