

# Lady Faith

by Jack DesBois

The National Monument to the Forefathers is a magnificent, 81-foot-tall granite tribute to the Puritan faith that founded America—and it took me completely by surprise.



My brother, sister, and I packed away the remains of our picnic supper in Pilgrim Memorial State Park. A gibbous moon was slowly appearing in the early evening sky, peeking through the rigging of the Mayflower II bobbing beside us. Across the park, the Neoclassical portico housing Plymouth Rock suddenly glowed like a jack-o-lantern, the automatic lights in the ceiling of the temple switching on to illuminate the fabled boulder for the tourists leaving seaside restaurants. Inland, to the west, an orange glow of sunset lit a low strip of sky below clouds that had been threatening all afternoon. Heat lightning periodically flashed.

After a pleasant afternoon seeing the sights in Plymouth, Massachusetts, my siblings and I were nearly ready to head home. The life-size replica of the Pilgrims' ship had seemed impossibly small for their 17th-century transatlantic voyage. The Rock, with its seam of mortar patching up the crack it sustained during one episode of its exciting (for a rock) past 400 years, had struck us as looking a bit sheepish under the lights of its own personal temple. Chief Massasoit had graced us with his benevolent, bronze-cast presence high up on a hill across the street. And Plymouth's downtown, with

its meandering public parks, historic grist mill, and charming Colonial architecture, had left us feeling revived as with a draught of bygone innocence and hope.

But there was one more sight to see.

## **In Search of the Lady**

“I’d think we would be able to see it from here,” my brother Andrew said, looking west over the waterfront shops from our vantage by the Mayflower II. “It should be big enough.”

Andrew knew of a monument off the beaten path in Plymouth, a tribute to America’s founders that I had never heard about. He told me it was an 81-foot-tall statue of Lady Faith, carved of solid granite, erected on a hilltop a couple blocks inland from the harbor—though hidden from view, we concluded. We determined to spend the last hour of daylight in search of the Lady.

Driving up a steep hill in a residential neighborhood a few minutes later, we found her. There, in the middle of a circular clearing reminiscent of Stonehenge, rose the monolithic figure, made mystical by the fading light and the intermittent bursts of yellow-orange heat lightning behind her. We were the only souls in sight. We parked, and as we started walking up the path to the statue’s base, we began to realize just how big she was.

The Statue of Liberty is a sight to behold in person; viewing it across New York Harbor, you feel the majesty of its size across distance. And knowledge of Eiffel’s ingenious skeleton beneath Lady Liberty’s copper facade adds dimension to one’s experience of her.

But nothing could have prepared me for the sheer solid-ness of Lady Faith. Built entirely of premium Rhode Island granite (with the exception of four white marble bas-reliefs), the mass of Lady Faith’s 81 vertical feet imposes itself on the mind upon approaching. It is impossible to imagine any thing existing so tangibly, so solidly in the world of material reality, as this lady of symbols.

And at the same time, the genius sculptors who created her have endowed Lady Faith with a lightness, a living energy present most strikingly in her masculine arm gesturing above her to things greater and more fundamental even than she.

## **The Making, and Hiding, of the Monument**

The National Monument to the Forefathers began around 1820 as an idea of the newly formed Pilgrim Society to commemorate the landing of the Mayflower in Plymouth 200 years earlier. The resulting monument would take nearly 70 years to complete—due to fundraising struggles, a civil war, and the sheer magnitude of the project—and was dedicated finally on August 1, 1889. More than 11,000 individuals contributed to its \$150,000 cost.

Today, another 200-odd years since its inception, the monument stands apart from the bustle of historic Plymouth; it struck me as forgotten, though far from forlorn. The state of Massachusetts, on its State Parks website, describes the statue briefly as “an impressive 81 foot, granite monument that memorializes a Victorian era interpretation of the pursuits that motivated the Pilgrims to leave England and start their own colony.” This dissociating description corresponds with the monument’s complete absence from my Massachusetts grade-school education and with the deserted feel of the location when my siblings and I visited it. Why hide this powerful paean to our nation’s founding? Was there something wrong with the “Victorian era interpretation”?

## The Symbols

In the fading light, I craned my neck to take in this mass of Victorian symbolism. A classically-proportioned, mildly androgynous-looking woman, clad in flowing robes and carrying a book under one arm, gestured to the sky with that peculiar hand signal—thumb outstretched, index finger pointing up, the other three fingers curled naturally inward, all digits relaxed and caught as if in the middle of a supple motion—that I associate with Renaissance depictions of Jesus and the saints. Her hair, pulled back in a loose bun and crowned with a single, five-pointed star, framed a gentle yet confident female face.

Her bare feet stood atop an eight-sided granite shaft, each side alternating an allegorical statue with an inscription. The east-facing inscription (Lady Faith was facing the sea, the Pilgrims' point of arrival, and the rising sun) read: "National Monument to the Forefathers / Erected by a Grateful People in Remembrance of Their Labors, Sacrifices and Sufferings for the Cause of Civil and Religious Liberty." Another side held a blessing from William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Colony, and the remaining two sides displayed the names of the passengers on the Mayflower's historic voyage.

The four lower statues took my attention for the remainder of daylight. I circled Lady Faith counterclockwise and met Morality, a young woman holding a tablet like those of Moses, inscribed with the word "God"; Law, a stern and heavy-browed man balancing a closed book on his knee and holding out a hand in an arresting gesture; Education, a middle-aged woman with a laurel headdress, pointing to a passage in her open book; and Liberty, a Roman centurion, bare-chested and helmet-clad, with the skin of a vanquished lion draped over his shoulder.

I circled the monument again, squinting into the darkness to catch the endless detail in these four pillars of the Pilgrims. As their faces melted into the gloom, I peered at the monument's third layer of symbolism: The buttresses that formed the seats of these four allegorical figures each held two more figures. Youth and Wisdom held up Education, I observed, and Tyranny resided beneath Liberty, in the form of a king-clad man grinding another man's chest into the granite with his foot.

But the light was fading fast now, and I failed to catch the other allegories. As darkness fell, I trained my eyes on the four scenes carved in front of the four figures, their white marble still somewhat visible in the gloom. I saw a band of European settlers clambering from a boat on a foreign shore, exchanging greetings with sparsely-clad native men. There was a chamber in which the Europeans seemed to be signing a document, and another in which they were debating with the natives.

By the time I had reached the fourth bas-relief, night had truly fallen, and I could make out no more than a crowd of indistinct figures as though rubbed away by time rather than darkness. Reluctantly, my brother, sister, and I made our way back down the path, walking backward most of the way to behold Lady Faith's giant shadow in the sky. We drove home with sore necks and renewed spirits.

I am grateful to those farsighted Victorians—or, rather, Americans—who persevered through 70 years to memorialize their values in granite, just as they were grateful to the Pilgrims who braved the Atlantic in a too-small ship to freely live out their values on new shores. Though seemingly ignored by the sightseers in Plymouth today, Lady Faith is here to stay. I look forward to paying her another visit soon.



Details of the National Monument to the Forefathers: “Education” and “Liberty”

*Inscription on the National Monument to the Forefathers, attributed to Governor William Bradford:*

“Thus out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by His hand that made all things of nothing, and gives being to all things that are; and, as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all the praise!”



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