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Statue of Liberty's Crown Will Reopen July 4

By Sewell Chan



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Closed after 9/11, the Statue of Liberty's crown will reopen on July 4.

Updated, 10:20 a.m. | The Statue of Liberty's crown, which was closed after the 9/11 attacks, will reopen to the public on July 4, the White House announced on Friday morning. The decision, by the Obama administration, is a reversal of the previous policy.

Under the Bush administration, the Interior Department, which includes the National Park Service, had insisted that visitors could not be permitted because the crown — reachable only by a very narrow, 12-story-high spiral staircase with a low guardrail — did not meet modern fire, building and safety codes.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar formally announced the decision at a news conference at 9 a.m. on Ellis Island. "On July 4, we are giving America a special gift," Mr. Salazar said.

Ten people will be allowed to occupy the crown at any one time, he said, and they anticipate that will allow for 30 visitors an hour. He estimated that 50,000 people would be able to visit the crown in the first year and that the number would be increased later to 100,000 a year. The visitors to the crown will be chosen by lottery.

The decision to reopen the crown is a significant victory for Representative Anthony D. Weiner, a Queens Democrat who has been arguably the most vocal proponent of giving the public access to the crown. The statue's torch was closed in 1916 after being damaged by a saboteur's bomb. The entire statue, including the crown, was closed after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The base of the statue reopened to the public on Aug. 3, 2004, after a \$20 million effort to improve fire safety, security and evacuation routes. (The park service faced criticism for its delays in reopening the base and for relying heavily on a private group, the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, to raise money for the project.) But federal officials said the crown could not be safely reopened because of the difficulty of evacuating people in an emergency.

In a five-page letter in August 2006, Fran P. Mainella, the director of the park service at the time, told Mr. Weiner that federal experts had been concerned, as early as 2000, that allowing the public in the crown was unsafe because of the lack of exit options. Ms. Mainella told Mr. Weiner that the park service was committed to expanding the number of visitors to the monument and to broadening access to an interpretive program about the statue.

Nonetheless, Mr. Weiner continued to press his case, calling for hearings and using the appropriations process to try to cajole the Park Service to take up the matter.

At a Congressional hearing in September 2007, Daniel N. Wenk, a deputy director of the Park Service, said the statue's creator, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, "never intended or designed the Statue of Liberty as something to enter or climb." Only after it opened in 1886 did the War Department — the predecessor to the Defense Department — begin letting "curiosity seekers" inside the sculpture, Mr. Wenk said.

When the park service began administering the statue in 1933, Mr. Wenk said, there were fewer than 200,000 visitors. In 2006, more than 2.5 million people visited Liberty Island.

The narrow spiral staircase leading to the crown was intended for periodic use by maintenance workers, Mr. Wenk said at the time, "not for heavy, daily use" by the public.

Even for people in peak physical condition, climbing the 12-story-high staircase is a challenge, he said, adding: "A key danger is that once a visitor begins the climb, turning back before reaching the crown is nearly impossible. Each person is blocked by hundreds of people in front and behind."

Mr. Wenk even invoked several catastrophic fires in the past — at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York in 1911, the Cocoonut Grove nightclub in Boston in 1942, and the Station nightclub in West Warwick, R.I., in 2003 — to argue that the federal government must put public safety first.

Short of building a 22-story tower with a new staircase next to the statue "and cutting through the Statue of Liberty's copper skin to build a bridge" to the tower, there is no way to provide a safe exit from the statue's interior consistent with fire and building codes, Mr. Wenk said at the hearing. He called such a tower an "unacceptable option."

Despite those concerns, in June 2008, the Park Service put out requests for bids to assess the safety concerns and to determine what kinds of alterations and restrictions, if any, would make the crown safe for visitors.

And in January of this year, Mr. Salazar climbed the 146 steps to the crown himself, joined by Mr. Weiner, and Representative Albio Sires of New Jersey and Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey. When Mr. Salazar came down, he said of the experience: "One word: Awesome." He noted that the study, still under way, was to be completed by mid-April.