

Pledge of Allegiance

Twin Lights: The Site of the First Pledge of Allegiance

I pledge allegiance to my flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

-Original Pledge of Allegiance



On April 25th, 1893, these words were uttered as the nation's official Pledge of Allegiance for the very first time. The site was the Navesink Light Station-better known today as the Twin Lights-and the occasion was the most eagerly anticipated Flag Raising Ceremony in American history.

On an overcast day overlooking the Atlantic, a robust crowd peppered with national and local dignitaries watched the stars and stripes ascend to the top of the "Liberty Pole," an impossibly massive 135-foot flagpole that seemed to dwarf the flanking light towers by a factor of two. A review of naval vessels from all over the world, invited by President Grover Cleveland, filled the horizon as it joined the U.S. Navy in providing a glorious backdrop to the proceedings.

The 1893 event was dreamed up two years earlier by a patriotic Newark businessman named William Osborne McDowell. In anticipation of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus-and the Columbian Exposition in Chicago-McDowell wanted to erect a flagpole of unusual height at the highest point of land on the Atlantic coast in the continental United States.

That is where the Twin Lights entered the equation. McDowell, the founder of Sons of the American Revolution, wanted the Liberty Pole to be the first sight to greet immigrants and travelers as they approached New York harbor.

In his two-year effort to achieve this goal, he joined forces with a highly respected and popular magazine called The Youth Companion. Frances Bellamy, a member of the magazine's staff, authored the pledge and it was first published in July of 1892. Using The Companion's considerable influence with the nation's public schools-and capitalizing on the rising tide of patriotism in the run-up to the Chicago World's Fair-the publisher's nephew, James Bailey Upham, was able to introduce the American flag along with the pledge itself into countless classrooms.

At the Twin Lights event in the Spring of 1893, Upham was one of the featured speakers. An organization he had recently started, the Lyceum League, furnished the Twin Lights with flags of many nations, which were displayed around the grounds during the event.

The first flag to climb the Liberty Pole was one of the nation's greatest treasures. It was the flag shot off of John Paul Jones's ship, the Bon Homme Richard, during a critical battle with the Royal Navy on the other side of the Atlantic in 1781. Amidst the flying cannonballs a young lieutenant leaped into the sea and recovered the flag. A descendant of this hero was present at the Twin Lights ceremony, as was the wife of Vice President Stevenson. She raised the cherished artifact.

Offshore, the Miantonomoh saluted this moment with a thundering report of its guns. The monitor-class ship was the last of its kind, a piece of floating history dating back to the Civil War. The Jones flag was then lowered and replaced by a standard-size American flag. The Pledge of Allegiance recitation followed.

At the end of the day, the flotilla of ships swung around Sandy Hook and anchored in the bay. The multinational fleet exchanged salutary shots with the big guns at Ft. Hancock on Sandy Hook.

This was the most elaborate patriotic event on the East Coast during the 1890s, and probably the largest prior to the Bicentennial celebration in 1976.