

departments * accent on venues

by Carl Sacks

Iconic Venues

The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island offer a unique experience

In event industry usage, a destination venue is a site that will draw guests because of its location. Some of these are truly iconic sites, instantly recognizable by all. Possibly the highest profile destination venue is the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, one of the most familiar monuments in the world. The Statue of Liberty and nearby Ellis Island have hosted a large number of high visibility events over the years.

Providing catering services for events on the islands, particularly with the strict security requirements put in place after 9/11, is a complex undertaking. Access to Ellis Island for staff and supply vehicles is across a bridge, but all supply access to the Statue of Liberty is via barge. The National Parks Service has made a concerted effort to facilitate events on both islands, however.

The only concessions and catering operator ever to operate on Liberty Island is the Evelyn Hill Company. U.S. Army veteran Aaron Hill, who had been stationed on the island during his time in the service, founded the company in 1930. After mustering out, he and his wife Evelyn opened a gift shop near the Statue and actually lived on the island for their first several years in business.



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The Evelyn Hill company has been in operation on Liberty Island continuously for the past seventy-eight years, and is still owned and operated by the Hill family. The Hill family's business has lasted through the Great Depression, World War II and 9/11 and even through a two-year hiatus during the 1980s when the Statue was closed for refurbishment.

In contrast, Ellis Island has been open to the public for a much shorter period of time. As the main processing point for refugees and immigrants to the United States, its location next to the Statue of Liberty could hardly have been more symbolic. By the late 1940s, the Coast Guard had taken over the island. In 1954, it was abandoned and fell into disrepair. A limited part of the island reopened for public tours during the Bicentennial in 1976. After a major fundraising effort, a larger part of the island was rehabilitated and reopened in 1990.

Until recently, the Ellis Island and Statue of Liberty concession contracts were separate.



WILLIAM HAVILAND OF BESTEK

The contract foodservice giant Aramark has operated the Ellis Island concession, including gift shop, snack bar and catering, since the island reopened in 1990.

The combined revenue for sales on the two islands is among the largest in the National Parks Service system, exceeding \$22 million in 2006. That, along with the visibility and prestige of the contract, brought a lot of interest when the contracts were put out for bid. Even more compelling from the operator's perspective is the fact that the decision was made to combine the Ellis and Statue contracts into one master contract. The bid process started in 2006, and the contract award announcement was made in December 2007, when the Evelyn Hill Company was awarded the exclusive contract for both islands.

The exact details of the new contract are not available, though the minimum concession fee stipulated in the bid documents is 17 percent. According to representatives of the Evelyn Hill organization, the strength of their bid was



based on several factors: the history of the company and its stability, the emphasis on green and sustainable operations, the generous benefits package offered to all full-time employees and a commitment to make both Ellis and Liberty Island more accessible for public and private events.

Of the two islands, Ellis Island is the more functional, with the Great Hall suitable for

a sit-down meal for up to 1,200 guests, and pre-function space for cocktails on the lower level. Several smaller indoor spaces are available and there are tented outdoor spaces with a spectacular view of the Statue and the Manhattan skyline. The total capacity for a stand-up event is close to 5,000.

Liberty Island events are all outside and tented. The space available for tenting offers a capacity of 750 for a seated event or 3,000 for a stand-up event on the entire island. The cost of tenting and the complex logistics of supplying the island make for a costly event. However, the proximity of the guests to the world-famous Statue makes it a desirable location.

Most of the events on both islands tend to be either corporate or non-profit, with a smaller number of political and social events. Even though the Evelyn Hill Company has an absolute exclusive for catering on both islands, the company is willing to work with qualified outside caterers who may wish to bring events to the islands. This offers caterers and event planners an event opportunity that is truly one of a kind. **CS**



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