

# Nellie Bly on the Move

By Anne Madarasz, Director  
of the Curatorial Division

Keep an eye out for a new neighbor to the History Center's Franco Harris and George Washington life figures at the Pittsburgh International Airport. The History Center recently developed a Nellie Bly figure in partnership with the Allegheny County Airport Authority as part of its arts and culture program. During this centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gave women the vote, Bly was an obvious choice.

Born Elizabeth Jane Cochran in 1864 in Armstrong County, and taking the pen name of Nellie Bly, she is best known as a world traveler and so it's appropriate to craft her that way for the airport. However, staff faced a few challenges. Several images and photographs exist of Bly from different points in her life, but almost all of them are black and white. In most, she also stands alone. We relied on her writings and period accounts of Bly to determine her height (5' 5") and weight (112 lbs.) as well as her complexion and clothing.

Staff studied period fashion books, which often illustrated fabrics in color to determine the shade and fit of Nellie's traveling outfit. Most important was to account for the bustle in back. This padded undergarment, worn under the skirt, draped the fabric and prevented it

from dragging. It took a couple of tries to get Bly's hat right—the first made Nellie resemble a Lawrenceville hipster. We pored over fabrics to find one that complimented, but did not match, her coat. Staff also worked on the style of her hair since most photographs show Nellie from the front. We crafted some wavy bangs to mimic her original style and for the back of her head we relied on drawings from the period in sources such as Godey's fashion books, that showed how long hair was pulled back and arranged.

To begin the figure, we had to choose a pose for Nellie—several photographs exist that show her dressed and ready for her trip around the world. In one she is waving with her hat in hand. It is an exuberant image, but not practical for the airport. With thousands of people streaming by the figure each day, we needed to design with long-term maintenance in mind. For the long-term stability of the figure, we used a pose from a photograph that shows Bly in her traveling coat and hat, with suitcase in hand, ready to set off on her journey. We also crafted the figure to be more durable than most of the figures we have at the History Center. Working with LifeFormations in Bowling Green, Ohio, we had them mold the head and cast it in resin for durability so it would be harder and able to stand up to the crowds at the airport.

Perhaps the most difficult part? Trying to craft a text panel of 75 words or so that encapsulated Nellie Bly's entire life and career. Knowing that people are moving quickly through the airport, we tried to keep the words to a minimum. As a crusader for equality and human rights, a pioneer in journalism, and perhaps the world's best-known traveler, she was not an easy personality to capture in so few words. Please look for Nellie at the airport later this summer and see how we did! 🌞



Nellie Bly

Senator John Heinz  
**HISTORY CENTER**  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

heinzhistorycenter.org

Smithsonian Affiliations