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### TABLE

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISSUED TO</th>
<th>Year Used</th>
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<td>RETURNED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Immigration and Citizenship

Rosie McCormick
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Table of Contents

Chapter 1  Why People Came to America ..........  2
Chapter 2  Arriving in America ....................  7
Chapter 3  Living and Working in America ..........  11
Chapter 4  A Success Story ..........................  19
Chapter 5  Becoming an American Citizen ..........  26
Why People Came to America

In the 1800s and early 1900s, millions of immigrants came to the United States. They came from countries in Europe, from China, and from other parts of the world. Many came to the United States because they wanted a better life, freedom, and jobs and opportunity. Some came because they were hungry and poor. And for many, the United States was simply a safer place to be.
For those who wanted to farm, there was more land in the United States. In Europe, most farmers did not own the land they farmed. Farmers had to give part of the crops they grew to the landowner. By the time they paid the landowner, there was hardly enough food left to feed themselves.
In Europe during the 1800s, bad weather and diseases damaged harvests and some crops failed. As a result, many people had to struggle to get enough to eat.
In Ireland, the main crop grown by farmers was potatoes. Beginning in 1845, a disease began killing the potatoes. During the first years, people were hungry. But as the potato crop continued to fail, people in Ireland began to starve. More than a million people died. More than a million others fled to America.
In some European countries, there was little or no religious freedom. For example, millions of Jewish people who lived in Russia were mistreated because of their religion. They were attacked, and their homes were burned. Those who could left Russia, and many moved to America.
Arriving in America

The Statue of Liberty in the New York City harbor is a symbol of welcome. The statue was placed there in 1886, and from then on it was one of the first things many immigrants saw as they sailed into the harbor.

The statue was a gift to the United States from the people of France. It was built by a French sculptor, broken up into pieces, and shipped to the United States. It was then put back together on an island in New York Harbor.
Lady Liberty, as the statue is also called, holds a torch in her right hand that stands for freedom and liberty. She holds a stone tablet in her left hand. On that tablet is a very important date in American history: July 4, 1776.

Do you remember what happened on that date? It is the date that the Declaration of Independence was signed.
In 1903, a poem by the American poet Emma Lazarus was added to the base of the Statue of Liberty. The poem imagines America speaking to people all over the world and saying, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” What do you think those words mean?
Beginning in 1892, Ellis Island was the first place that immigrants went to when they arrived in New York. When immigrants arrived on Ellis Island, doctors and health inspectors checked to see that they were healthy. If an immigrant had a serious disease, that person was sent back home. If they were healthy, they were allowed to enter the United States. About twelve million men, women, and children passed through Ellis Island between 1892 and 1924.
Living and Working in America

Many immigrants who came to the United States stayed in the big cities in the eastern part of the United States. A large number arrived in New York City, and many settled there. Immigrants helped make New York the biggest city in the United States. But thousands of others traveled to such cities as Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago.
Immigrants lived in cities because they could get jobs there. Living in a city was hard. Many poor immigrants lived in crowded neighborhoods. Large families lived in small apartments with only one or two rooms and no hot water. Many immigrant apartments were in overcrowded buildings called tenements.
As more and more immigrants poured into American cities, neighborhoods sprang up full of people that mostly came from the same country. For example, in many American cities there was a neighborhood called Little Italy and one called Chinatown.

The immigrants who lived in these neighborhoods could buy the kinds of food they were used to eating. They could celebrate holidays as they did back home. Many of these neighborhoods still exist today.
The United States needed all of these immigrants. During a time known as the Industrial Revolution, more and more people were needed to work in factories, making all kinds of things that could be sold in stores. Even children worked in the factories!

Immigrants were especially needed to work in coal mines, digging for coal that would be used as fuel to power the factories. Once again, children worked alongside adults in the mines.

And immigrants were needed to build roads, bridges, tunnels, and railroads. Some started their own businesses. Immigrants helped to make the United States rich and powerful.
Immigrants helped build the first railroad that went all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The Union Pacific Railroad began near Omaha, Nebraska, and put down railroad tracks going west. The Central Pacific Railroad began in Sacramento, California, and put down tracks going east. The Union Pacific hired Irish and German immigrants. The Central Pacific in California hired Chinese immigrants. The railroads met in Promontory Point, Utah, in May 1869.
Thousands of immigrants who didn’t work in factories or stay in the cities headed west to farm. The U.S. government promised free land to anyone who went west and farmed for five years. Free land sounded good to many European immigrants.

When they got to the Great Plains, they saw an endless sea of grass. Of course, the land that was being given to the new settlers was land that Native Americans had lived on for hundreds of years!
The farmers grew wheat. Wheat is important because it is used to make flour. Flour is used to make bread, cake, cookies, cereal, spaghetti, and many other things. The farmers worked very hard in blazing hot summers and freezing winters. The land was difficult to farm. The farmers battled with insects that tried to eat their crops.
Farmers built homes. Some were made from sod, or earth and grass. The farmers bought machines that made farming easier. A new kind of steel plow that cut through the soil was invented, making it easier to plant crops. These farmers turned the Great Plains into a very rich farming area.
A Success Story

Andrew Carnegie and his family came to America from Scotland in 1848. Andrew was thirteen years old at the time. In Scotland, his father had been a weaver, or someone who makes woolen cloth. When Andrew’s father lost his job, the family fell on hard times. The Carnegies decided to leave their home in Scotland and sail to the United States.
The Carnegies arrived in New York and traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They were so poor that Andrew had to get a job. When he was still only thirteen, Andrew began working in a cotton mill—a place where cloth is made. Although the boy in the photograph is not Andrew, this boy did the same kind of work as he did.
Andrew was a hard worker and a smart boy, and soon he got a better job as a messenger. Sometimes he delivered messages to a theater. He often stayed to watch the plays being performed. Andrew also began visiting a library and reading books there. Andrew began to educate himself.
Then, when he was seventeen, Andrew got a job with the Pennsylvania Railroad. The man he worked for was named Tom Scott. When Tom got better jobs in the railroad, he took Andrew with him. From Tom Scott, Andrew learned a lot about running a business.
After a while, Andrew decided that he was ready to do something by himself. He started a business that made iron railroad bridges. His business did well, but Andrew wanted to do more. So, he borrowed money and opened a factory that made steel. By 1890, his business was making a lot of money! Andrew sold his business for millions of dollars.
But Andrew Carnegie was not finished with his plans. He remembered how much he had learned in the library as a young man. Andrew gave money to build public libraries. He also built the famous Carnegie Hall in New York City for concerts. Andrew’s money also helped found a college and an organization dedicated to world peace.
People say that Andrew Carnegie is an example of what a hardworking person can do in America. He proved that America was a place where even the poorest immigrants could succeed.
Becoming an American Citizen

You do not have to be born in America to be a citizen. Many people who have come to live and work in the United States become American citizens. But there are certain things they have to do first. To begin with, a person must be at least eighteen years old.

He or she must have lived in the United States for at least five years. To become an American citizen, a person has to be able to read and write English and to know some facts about American government, history, and laws.
To become a citizen, a person must take a test that checks their knowledge of English and of American history and government. People study hard for the test. If they pass and all of the other rules are met, they can become citizens.
The final step is a citizenship ceremony. The ceremony sometimes takes place in a courtroom. There, a judge asks people to say the oath of allegiance. This means people promise to be loyal citizens and obey American laws.

Some of the words of the oath are: “I . . . declare . . . that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America . . . “ After the immigrants say the oath, the judge congratulates the new American citizens!
Voting in an election is one of the rights and duties that citizens of the United States have. Citizens can help make the laws of the country by choosing public officials.
American citizens all have the same rights, whether they are rich or poor and whether they were born here or are immigrants who became citizens. There is only one exception. To become the president or vice president of the United States, a person must be a natural-born U.S. citizen.

American citizens have responsibilities too. That means there are things they have to do. For instance, they may have to serve in the armed forces if they are asked. They have to pay taxes. And they have to obey the laws of this country.
Over time, millions of immigrants have come to the United States. Many of today’s immigrants come from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. The reasons why people still come to the United States have hardly changed. They come to find freedom, opportunity, and a better life for themselves and their children.
Look at the coin on the page. There on the top are the Latin words *E pluribus unum*. The words mean “out of many, one.” *E pluribus unum* means that the United States has taken people from many different countries and made them part of one nation: one people working together for a bright future.
Subject Matter Expert
James S. Todd, JD, PhD, University of Virginia

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A Wagon Train on the Plains (oil on board), Whittredge, Thomas Worthington (1820–1910) / Private Collection / Photo © Christie’s Images / Bridgeman Images: 16b

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