



## IN HISTORY: IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC HERITAGE

# Time Line

## How Did Newcomers Become American Citizens?

For nearly two hundred years, immigrants were naturalized—that is, became United States citizens—in any court of record. Typically, naturalization was a two-step process that took at least five years to complete. After living in the United States for two years, a prospective immigrant could file a “declaration of intent” to become a citizen. After three additional years, he or she could “petition for naturalization.” When the petition was granted, a certificate of citizenship was issued by the court.

There were of course several exceptions to the five-year rule. The first major exception was that a “derivative” citizenship was granted to wives and minor children of naturalized men. This meant that from the year 1790 to 1922, wives of naturalized men or women who married American citizens automatically became citizens themselves. For nearly 150 years, children under the age of twenty-one also automatically became naturalized once their fathers gained citizenship. On the other hand, an American woman who married an alien lost her U.S. citizenship, even if she never left the United States. An 1862 law allowed honorably discharged veterans of any war to petition for naturalization without previously having filed a declaration of intent after only one year of residence in the United States. An 1894 law

extended that same privilege to honorably discharged five-year veterans of the navy or marine corps. As a result of their military service during World War I, more than 192,000 aliens were naturalized between May 9, 1918, and June 30, 1919, under an act of May 9, 1918. This act allowed veterans to file a petition for naturalization without making a declaration of intent or proving five years’ residence. Laws enacted in 1919, 1926, 1940, and 1952 continued to offer these benefits to war veterans.

According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, many immigration records from the nineteenth century contain mistakes. In that era, forms often were not completely filled out or citizenship documents were lost because there was not an effective record-keeping system in place. There were no standards to prove eligibility for citizenship and immigration fraud was common. To remedy these problems, Congress passed the Naturalization Act in 1906, which laid out the basic rules for applying for citizenship. Many of these rules are still in effect today. As part of this act, the federal government officially took over responsibility for granting citizenship. The government also created the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization to administer and enforce policies. Federal courts, however, still retained the power to grant or deny citizenship.

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