

# Becoming an American

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## IX.

IN THIS, my last letter in this series I shall write upon the significance of American citizenship. Surely everyone who is a citizen or plans to become a citizen is deeply interested in knowing what his citizenship means,—that is, the duties and responsibilities such position demands of him. It is this meaning that I shall try to give you.

There was a time, many years ago, when an active citizenship was expected from only a few people of each country. These people belonged to what was called nobility,—that is, they belonged to a class of people who were set aside from other people because of title and wealth. The offices of the government were filled with men from this small group. They voted the taxes, they made the laws, they administered the government. Without doubt some of them took their duties seriously and earnestly desired to render to their country helpful service. Others, however, prostituted their positions and exploited those over whom they were placed for their personal advancement. Among these nobles, the phrase “Noblesse oblige,” the obligation of nobility, was often used. This meant that their position as nobles required from them noble conduct,—that is, an active, loyal, devoted citizenship in their country.

In America, we have no nobility, no selected few who rule. The citizens are the rulers. Citizen is our highest title. Hence those who are citizens belong to the nobility of America and when the judge confers citizenship upon an alien he is making that person a member of the governing nobility of our country. Moreover he is conferring on the newly made citizen a noblesse oblige, the obligation of nobility.

And what are these obligations which constitute American citizenship?

In the first place, the citizen is expected to vote. By means of the franchise he takes his part in the government. He thus rules; hence he should consider the right a sacred one, never to be neglected, always to be held as a proud privilege.

We hear now and then of men and women who boast that they never go to the polls; they say that they are lowering themselves by such action. Such persons are not only foolish, they are disloyal in that they often thus contribute to the election to office of weak, bad men and to the enactment of harmful laws, and surely anyone who, directly or indirectly, helps to put into office bad men and to put into effect bad laws, is helping to tear down his government just as is he who acts the traitor in time of war. The first obligation, then, we place upon our citizens is that they hold the vote as a sacred, never-to-be-neglected duty.

In the second place, citizens must serve their country when service is needed. In times of peace, jury service may be asked. Law enforcement being absolutely necessary for the protection of our country, the citizen has here his finest opportunity to help preserve and strengthen his country. The unwillingness of many business men to do jury service has long been a point of weakness in our country. How often weak,

incompetent men must be used as jurors and consequently law is unenforced and brought into disrepute. And who is responsible? Certainly the competent, busy man who is unwilling to give to his country the time for this slight service.

Another service is that of holding public office when needed. There are men who seek office and to some of these men office is not a public trust but, instead, no more than a job. How much better it would be if our most successful and capable men would now and then take such offices as a means of paying their debt to our country! During the Great War, many of our most capable men gave their time and labor freely to their country out of love for it. One of America's greatest needs is more of such service given in time of peace. By this statement, I do not mean that office seekers, as a class, are incompetent. Many of them render the finest service. I mean merely to emphasize the fact that office is a public trust to be entered into with the motive of serving the country rather than of earning money.

In the third place, the citizen should know something of the history of his country. He should know how the wilderness was conquered and settled, how independence was gained, how the early settlers labored long and arduously to build a government, and how the country slowly developed into one of the world's greatest nations. He should know of America's eminent men and women and of their accomplishments. He should know of the trials of the pioneer and should learn to appreciate fully the courage, the faith, the

## The Foundation

In many an American city today tall structures stand on foundations that were planned by their architects to support the weight of extra stories if the future's needs should call for such additions. Their very existence is proof of the vision of men who provided for that which they could not definitely foresee.

Similarly capable of meeting the future's needs was the foundation upon which the Bell System has been reared. At a time when a few miles was the greatest distance over which man's wire-borne voice might travel, the telephone pioneers could not, of course, foresee in detail the problems of invention, manufacture, construction and operation which future expansion might involve.

They could, however, and did catch the vision of a national growth which would necessitate a service continent-wide in scope. They could and did provide the foundation for a structure capable of growing with the nation. The proof of their vision lies in the fact that America today has a nation-wide, universal telephone service.



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