

# DAR and the Ellis Island Immigration Station

## 125 Years of Service to Immigrant Families

**T**his year DAR shares its 125th birthday with another important American institution: Ellis Island.

In the 35 years before Ellis Island opened, immigrants arriving in New York were processed at Castle Garden Immigration Depot in Lower Manhattan. Ellis Island was chosen in 1890 by the House Committee on Immigration as the site of the new Immigration Station for the Port of New York. Before the federal government stepped in and took over the immigration process on April 18, 1890, each state managed its own immigration records, with varying degrees of organization and diligence. The federal takeover made records much more centralized—and ultimately, easier for genealogists to search.

Congress appropriated \$75,000 to construct the first Ellis Island Inspection Station, which officially opened on January 1, 1892. The site quickly became what was likely America's busiest immigration station, processing more than 12 million immigrants by the time the station closed in 1954. In 1907 the station processed 1,004,756 immigrants; its busiest day was April 17, 1907, when 11,747 immigrants were processed. Today, 40 percent of Americans can trace their ancestry through Ellis Island.

For the vast majority of immigrants, Ellis Island truly was an “Island of Hope,” the first stop on their way to new opportunities and experiences in America. For the rest, it became the “Island of Tears,” a place where families were separated and individuals were denied entry.

DAR and other service organizations helped immigrants acclimate to their new home, generously donating money, time and expertise. From 1921 to 1954, the DAR distributed millions of copies of its *Manual for Citizenship*, in various languages, to immigrants at Ellis Island as they passed through the Railroad Room. Many immigrants used the *Manual* to learn English and to become familiar with the requirements for citizenship.

On average, the inspection process took approximately three to seven hours, but some families spent weeks or months at Ellis Island waiting for clearance to enter the country, often because they



**Left:** President General Ann Fleck, right, toured Ellis Island on February 17, 1988, during the restoration. **Above:** The Great Hall as it appeared during Mrs. Fleck's tour.



lacked proper documentation or because they were suffering from contagious diseases. DAR chapters from across the country regularly sent practical donations to aid in these families' comfort. At the Detention Building, DAR members passed out clothing, food, books, yarn, sewing materials and other items to detainees through a window that was later dubbed the “Window of Hope.” Immigrants were said to see a DAR member and call out, “Here comes the Revolutionary lady.”

## Honoring the Station

DAR members remain active in celebrating Ellis Island and all that it has meant to this nation of immigrants. Here are some ideas for ways to commemorate the 125th anniversary.

- Examine your chapter's history or minutes from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s to determine if your chapter sent volunteers to work with the detained immigrants, or sent contributions or supplies to be used at the site. Present those findings and any historical photos or documents at an upcoming meeting.
- Ask chapter members if they have ancestors who passed through Ellis Island, and invite them to speak about those ancestors' experiences.
- Start a program to assist immigrants with the naturalization process, whether with English as a Second Language classes or civics education courses.
- Watch newly digitized NSDAR Archives videos related to Ellis Island at [www.dar.org/ellislandvideos](http://www.dar.org/ellislandvideos).

DAR members also provided occupational therapy via hands-on lessons in needlecraft, sewing, crocheting and more, helping detainees pass the time as well as make necessary items for their families. During the war years, when immigration was halted, the DAR remained at Ellis Island to serve the returning wounded and disabled service-members temporarily stationed there.

In 1988 DAR established the Ellis Island Restoration Committee, the purpose of which was to raise donations for the restoration of Ellis Island and promote the project among DAR members and the public. The DAR encouraged members to place an ancestor's name on the American Immigrant Wall of Honor, and it also sponsored a room called the New Americans Gallery in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. The organization's efforts raised \$750,000 toward the restoration and refurbishment of the site.

—By Carol Felson, Commemorative Events Committee National Vice Chair, 125th Anniversary of Ellis Island