

# The U.S. Customs Guillotine

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In 1789 the First Congress of the United States established U.S. Customs and soon after, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton began creating operating procedures for the new agency. In that same year in France, Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin and Dr. Antoine Louis were working on a new machine that would decapitate criminals. As a result, they created the guillotine which was thought to be more efficient and more humane than other forms of capital punishment then in use. The guillotine became famous for its use during the French Revolution. The term and/or image of a guillotine has been often used as a hyperbolic metaphor for getting rid of someone.

In 1841 it was used in exactly this way to describe the turnover of U.S. Customs officers that occurred when President William Henry Harrison took office. You must remember that in the 1800s, U.S. Customs positions were awarded based on patronage. Each time a Presidential administration changed, positions at the customhouse were up for grabs. There were no civil service laws to protect employees and competence and tenure meant extraordinarily little.

The attached newspaper article from the May 3, 1841, edition of the *Boston Post* is headlined "The Guillotine in Motion". The writer describes the situation at the customhouses in Boston, Philadelphia and New York as officers were removed from the rolls to make way for new appointments.

Next time you check your bank account and see that Uncle Sam has deposited another pension check, remember to thank former Collector of Customs New York, Chester Arthur. As the President of the United States, he signed the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883 which paved the way for the stable civil service careers we enjoyed at the U.S. Customs Service. "Heads no longer roll" at the customhouse each time a new Presidential administration takes office. Thanks Chet.

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## Primary Sources

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