

# A Tale of Two Customhouses

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One customhouse is in the largest city in the United States and the other is in one of the most remote and desolate areas of our nation. The former customhouses at New York City and Castolon, Texas stand as examples of the diverse environments where U.S. Customs officers performed their duties.

As our nation prospered, customhouses were built to reflect the growing power and wealth of our republic. Cities and states competed to have grand customhouses built in their towns. Some of the new structures were designed inhouse by the Supervising Architect of the Department of Treasury and others were designed by famous private architects who had won competitions for the job of designing these public buildings.

At smaller ports of entry, Collectors of Customs remotely supervised the customs staff who were often housed in leased private buildings. Even though these buildings were not built by the government as customhouses, they were identified as “customhouses” since that is where the business of U.S. Customs was done.

The diversity of U.S. Customs is apparent when you compare the location, volume of work and architecture of the former customhouses at New York and Castolon. The Alexander Hamilton Customhouse has always been one of the nation’s busiest. This building was designed by noted architect Cass Gilbert in the Beaux-Arts style and was completed in 1907. The exterior features sculptures by Daniel Chester French and remains one of New York’s most well-known landmarks.

Castolon, Texas is one of the humblest customhouses. The adobe building was originally built in the early 1920s by a private property owner as an office for the Texas Rangers and a U.S. Customhouse. It was located along the Rio Grande River in the Chihuahuan Desert in what is now Big Bend National Park. The port was never a significant source of revenue and the population of Castolon never exceeded a few hundred people.

Both customhouses were abandoned by the U.S. Customs Service but not the Federal government. The Alexander Hamilton Customhouse now houses the National Archives, the National Museum of the American Indian, and U.S. Bankruptcy Courts. The Castolon Customhouse now houses a National Park Service exhibit on the life and culture of the people who once resided there.

Enjoy the images of the former customhouses in New York and Castolon. Both helped to build our nation and protect our borders.

Let us not forget the men and women who carried out the mission of U.S. Customs in what were both in their own way challenging working environments.

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