

# A Tale of Two Customhouses

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By Steven W. Hooper

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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## Primary Sources

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# A Tale of Two Customhouses - Images

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*Figure 1:* The seven-story Alexander Hamilton Customhouse in New York City was designed by noted American architect Cass Gilbert and built from 1900 -1907. U.S. Customs vacated the building in 1973. The statues of the four continents in front of the building were designed by Daniel Chester French who also designed the Lincoln Monument in Washington D.C. and the Minute Man statue in Concord, New Hampshire.

Source: U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) website <https://www.gsa.gov/historic-buildings/alexander-hamilton-us-custom-house-new-york-ny>.



*Figure 2:* A closeup of the “America” statue by Daniel Chester French that stands in front of the Alexander Hamilton Customhouse. The statue features the goddess “America” seated on a throne surrounded by symbolism highlighting both North and South America.

Source: New York architecture website <https://nyc-architecture.com/LM/LM012-ALEXANDERHAMILTONCUSTOMHOUSE.htm>.



*Figure 3:* Central rotunda of the Alexander Hamilton Customhouse in New York City. The rotunda rises to the third story of the building and the ceiling is self-supporting and contains no supporting metal structure. The rotunda was designed by Spanish architect Rafael Guastavino. The panels contain murals depicting shipping activities in the Ports of New York and New Jersey by artist Reginald Marsh.

Source: U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) Services website  
<https://www.gsa.gov/historic-buildings/alexander-hamilton-us-custom-house-new-york-ny#photogallery>.



*Figure 4:* The former customhouse at Castolon, Texas was built in the early 1920s to serve as a Texas Ranger station and U.S. Customhouse. The building was later used as the residence of Magdalena Silvas who worked as a cook while raising five children in the home. The only sculptures in front of this customhouse are a goat and some chickens.

Source: National Park Service (NPS) website <https://www.nps.gov/places/magdalena-house.htm>.



*Figure 5:* Metal signpost indicating directions to the U.S. Customhouse at Castolon, Texas. The building in the background is the Alvino House which is the oldest known adobe structure in Big Bend National Park. The gap in the mountains is Santa Elena Canyon which was cut by the Rio Grande River and is one of the most scenic areas of the park.

Source: Author's photograph.