

Who was the First Female Collector of Customs?

By Steven W. Hooper

Who was the first female U.S. Collector of Customs? Go ahead, use your computer to check the internet. Was it Mrs. A.J. Harris of Fairport, Ohio in 1901? Or was it Ms. Estelle V. Collier of Salt Lake City in 1920 or maybe Jeanette Hyde of Honolulu in 1925 or even Mrs. Bernice M. Pyke of Cleveland in 1934?

My internet search turned up these four women identified as the “first woman” U.S. Collector of Customs. Only one is truly the “first” woman collector. Here are some details on the candidates for the title:

Mrs. Victoria B. Harris (Mrs. A.J. Harris) of Fairport, Ohio who in 1901 was reported by newspapers as “believed to be the first woman collector of customs.” My research found that Harris who served at the Port of Fairport, Ohio succeeded her husband upon his death. Her husband was a Deputy Collector of Customs under the collector located in nearby Cleveland, Ohio. In addition to her duties at U.S. Customs, Harris was the manager of the Postal Telegraph Company, manager of the telephone exchange, a freight agent, and a writer.

Ms. Estelle V. Collier of Salt Lake City, Utah is identified in newspapers in 1920 as the “first woman collector of customs.” My research found that Collier was appointed to the position of Collector of Customs for Utah and Nevada by President Woodrow Wilson on February 28, 1920 and was confirmed by the Senate. Collier had been the chair of the Women’s Democratic Committee where she worked for women’s suffrage. She was the Chair of the Women in Industry during WWI and worked for the Red Cross while she raised four children.

Ms. Jeanette Hyde of Honolulu, Hawaii is identified in a U.S. Customs publication from the Pacific Region in 1989 as the “first woman to ever be appointed a collector of customs.” My research revealed that Hyde was appointed to the position of collector on March 13, 1925, by President Calvin Coolidge and confirmed by the Senate. Prior to her appointment, she served as a member of the Republican National Committee. She graduated from the University of Utah in 1883.

Mrs. Bernice M. Pyke of Cleveland, Ohio was reported as “said to be the first woman appointed a collector of customs in the United States.” My research revealed that Pyke was appointed to the position of Collector of Customs by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in March of 1934. Prior to service with U.S. Customs, she taught mathematics in Illinois schools and was active in the suffrage movement and the Democratic party. She attended Ohio Wesleyan University and graduated with an A.B. degree from Smith College in 1902.

It appears that in the days of expensive long-distance calling and long before the invention of the Internet, newspaper reporters were not able to verify the information in their articles when it involved “nationwide firsts”. Those days are behind us now and a few strokes on the keyboard can identify the women who blazed the path for others to follow.

I propose that before next year’s Women’s History month, we eliminate the confusion and ask the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) historian to declare the official “First woman Collector of U.S. Customs”. All these women are certainly worthy of our admiration and their communities are justifiably proud of them; but only one of them can truly hold this title.

Let the research begin!

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