

Some Women behind Our Money

From the first days of the Treasury Department, female employees and appointees have had a tremendous impact on numismatics.

by Walt Ostromecki LM1085423

WOMEN HAVE contributed much to numismatics in the United States, but their exploits have gone almost unrecognized and unnoticed within our hobby commu-

nity. Throughout American history, women of all ages, race and stature have made contributions to numismatics since the Department of the Treasury was established by Congress on September 2, 1789.

▲ In August 1945, Sigmund Solomon (left), superintendent of the U.S. Assay Office at New York, shows U.S. Mint Director Nellie Tayloe Ross one of the vaults in the new silver depository at West Point.

Waldrake and Summers were employed “as coin adjusters, at fifty cents a week . . . because a man would take no less than \$1.20 . . .”

Their story begins in 1795. Treasury Department archival records note that “two females [were] hired in early 1795 at the fledgling Philadelphia Mint.” Given the time period, you might guess their positions were housekeeper, cook or clerk, but you would be dead wrong!

The first two women hired at the Philadelphia Mint—Sarah Waldrake and Rachel Summers—were employed “as coin adjusters, at fifty cents a week . . . because a man would take no less than \$1.20 for the same job.” Mint Director David Rittenhouse had them assigned to adjust coin planchets to the proper weight by filing them. Philadelphia Mint records do not indicate the number of gold coins adjusted by these two women for any given week or month, but a total of 14,290 pieces were produced in 1795.



▲ Women work around a table in the Adjusting Department at the New Orleans Mint around 1897.

Treasury Department records mention that both Waldrake and Summers left the Philadelphia Mint employ in early 1801, but there is no indication as to why. The record does, however, state that they “were very efficient, trustworthy and better suited to use a small thumbnail file than men.” So, the next time you see or purchase a slabbed, certified U.S. gold coin issued prior to 1801 bearing adjustment marks on the rim, remember its pedigree has the grand numismatic dis-

inction of being attributed to one of these two pioneering Philadelphia Mint women.

Customs Service

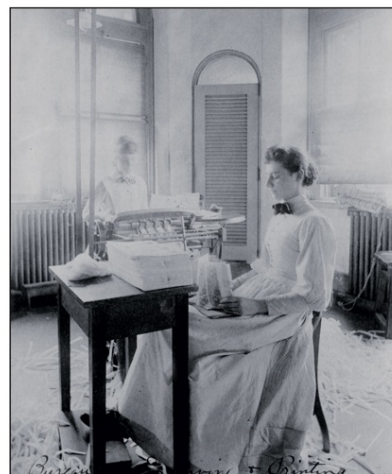
Between 1800 and 1859, women were hired by the Customs Service as nurses, surveyors and lighthouse keepers. Surveyors’ duties included taking charge of incoming vessels that were placed in quarantine; supervising the shipping of cargo, including U.S. Mint coinage; and examining baggage during a vessel’s stay in port. Women were given the dangerous assignment of handling vessels that were quarantined because of sickness.

The first woman employed by the Treasury as a customs surveyor was Augusta Owen in 1841. (At the time, surveyors managed the inspectional force at ports of entry.) Records do not list her assigned port of call, but in all probability it was Norfolk, Virginia. Miss Owen did an admirable job for over 10 years. Her numismatic connection is found in signed documents, such as U.S. customs inspection receipts; cargo bills of lading verifying shipment; and receipts of U.S. coinage and bullion that passed through Virginia.

Currency Cutters

The outbreak of the Civil War put great financial demands on the federal government and created job opportunities for females. Women—regiments of them beginning in late 1861—were an integral, day-to-day part of the U.S. Treasury Department. They filled an array of mostly low-paying, menial positions: janitors, charwomen, currency cutters and clerks.

As the war dragged on and men went off to battle, the Treasury Department experienced an acute personnel shortage. Workers at all levels were in short supply, especially in the areas responsible for trimming and processing notes.



▲ In the late 19th century, women trimmed and stacked sheets of currency at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington, D.C.

According to government records, U.S. Treasurer Francis Spinner demanded authority from Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase “to hire women to cut Treasury notes . . . [because] a woman can use scissors better than a man, and will do it faster and cheaper.” This would not be considered a very flattering job recommendation by today’s standards!

In April 1862, Miss Jeannie Douglas became the first woman hired to hand-cut and ready paper money for circulation. Under close scrutiny by Treasury officials, she performed her duties quickly and skillfully. Within a few, short months, she earned a reputation as the Bureau’s best and most proficient note-cutter, proving that women were well-suited for work previously done by men only.

In a matter of weeks, Douglas’ workload was lightened when 70 more women were hired as currency cutters. They worked a 10- to 12-hour day and were paid about \$600 a year, about one-third the wages earned by men doing the same job. ©

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Mrs. Leonard saved “the government millions of dollars by having the special gift to spot even the best bogus currency.”



▲ This early 20th-century photograph shows women inspecting currency at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Droves of widows or mothers of men wounded and killed in the Civil War were employed at the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C., as cutters of currency, stamps, documents, banking materials, etc. Many secured their jobs in a most unusual way—by personal appeal to President Abraham Lincoln. It is said the kind-hearted man never refused such a request; he simply tore a strip from a piece of paper and penned: “Give this lady employment. Abraham Lincoln.”

The next time you see a U.S. greenback of the period that is perfectly centered, with evenly cut margins all around, remember that this superior piece probably was the handiwork of a female Treasury Department cutter. Perhaps it was trimmed by Jeannie Douglas herself.

Charwomen

In November 1862, the color barrier was broken at the Treasury Department when Sophia Holmes was hired to work in the Division of Issue as a charwoman at \$15 dollars a month. Holmes was a free, African-American

native of Washington, D.C. According to Treasury records, she saved the division an estimated \$200,000 in newly printed currency that had been (mistakenly?) tossed in the trash. Upon finding the discarded notes, she resolved to keep the discovery a secret until she could talk to U.S. Treasurer Francis Spinner when he made his customary rounds that evening.

During the war, Spinner was accustomed to sleeping inside the Treasury building to assure himself that the nation’s money was safely secured. At about 2 a.m., Spinner started his customary walk through the dimly lit corridors and offices, when Holmes called out. He cautiously approached.

Holmes pointed to the trash box, carefully removed the top layer of wastepaper and nodded toward a stack of greenbacks underneath. She then told him of her discovery.

Astonished, Spinner called the guards and ordered her held until he could verify her story. The officers quickly determined the bills were new

and ready for circulation. They had no idea how they got there, and no explanation ever was made public.

Holmes was exonerated, and, a few days later, Spinner rewarded her honesty with an official appointment to the position of janitress (chiefly running errands) at an annual salary of \$660. Holmes thus became the first African-American woman officially appointed to government service. “Aunt Sophie,” as she came to be known, worked at the Treasury for another 38 years.

Counterfeit Detectors

In 1864 Willard A. Leonard was hired by Treasurer Spinner as the chief counterfeit detector. She quickly gained a reputation “as the most remarkable woman in government employ.” During Leonard’s 41 years of distinguished service, “she was credited with saving the government millions of dollars by having the special gift to spot even the best bogus currency . . . and NEVER made a mistake.”

The press often referred to Leonard as “the Treasury Department’s Female Sherlock Holmes.” Perhaps a more fitting honor and tribute to her impeccable skill would have been to change the motto “In God We Trust” to “In God and Mrs. Leonard We Trust.” Currency collectors have her to thank for all their guaranteed-genuine, pre-1904 specimens.

Mutilated Currency

If your collection contains a piece of charred paper money or other financial document attributed to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, you have a connection to six women in the Treasurer’s Office. They painstakingly salvaged, pieced together and identified the charred remains of more than 100 cases of burned currency, securities, bonds and postage stamps.



▲ In 1913 a woman identified as Mrs. Brown examined damaged bills for redemption at the Treasury Department.

PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Starting in 1934, Ross was forced to gear up coinage production at all three U.S. Mints to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



▲ A late-19th-century photograph depicts women operating machinery at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington, D.C.

More Opportunities

With the dawn of the 20th century, women—especially those within the Treasury Department—began filling jobs and managerial positions previously held by men. Unfortunately, their pay still was below that for male workers, but the gap was narrowing.

The opening of the U.S. Mint in Denver, Colorado, in 1906 brought more opportunities. Records note that “several women work at the Mint as coin press operators, a position that had been previously reserved for men only.” For the first time, women had a hand in manufacturing the nation’s coinage. Perhaps they even had a hand in the striking of such classic rarities as the 1914-D Lincoln cent, 1912-D Liberty Head nickel, 1916-D Mercury dime, 1932-D Washington quarter, 1921-D Liberty Walking Liberty half dollar, 1911-D Indian Head quarter eagle (gold \$2½) and 1906-D double eagle (gold \$20).

Denver wasn’t the only facility to

employ women as press operators. In 1909 the San Francisco Mint followed that precedent when it “magnanimously hired additional press operators (some women) to assist in the striking of the new Lincoln cent.” Collectors should be aware that women likely played a role in the striking of the highly sought-after 1909-S VDB Lincoln cent.

Mint Directors

In 1910 Margaret V. Kelly paved the way for the first woman to be appointed Director of the Mint. Secretary of the Treasury Franklin McVeagh designated Kelly as Acting Director of the Mint in the absence of the Bureau’s two top (male) officials. She reportedly drew one of the largest salaries paid to women in government service at the time. She proved, once and for all, that women were capable professionals in high, appointed positions.

The first woman Mint Director was

Nellie Tayloe Ross, who was tapped for the position by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. Ross held the post the longest—20 years.

Ross’ tenure was marked by many firsts. When she took the job, Mint production was at an all-time low. However, with new and far-reaching monetary laws restricting private gold ownership and the minting of gold coins—and with help from an upbeat and growing national economy—demand for silver coinage was about to increase at an unprecedented rate.

Total coinage production in 1933 consisted of just cents, half dollars, and gold \$10 and \$20 coins, with nearly all the total mintage of the latter two remelted at the Mint. Starting in 1934, Ross was forced to gear up production at all three U.S. Mint facilities to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to meet the demand for coins in all denominations, cent through silver dollar. Coinage production soared to a high of 358 million ©



▲ In April 1938, Mint Director Nellie Tayloe Ross and Edward Bruce, chief of the Treasury Department Procurement Division, inspected designs submitted for the new Jefferson nickel.

“I also supervised the highest total of gold bullion ever amassed at Fort Knox, and the highest total of silver stored at West Point.”

pieces, including three commemorative half dollars. Gold coinage was not struck again until 1986.

In order to meet the increased production needs, Ross sharply expanded each minting facility's manpower, machinery, vault space and storage capacity. She also spearheaded and oversaw construction of a new San Francisco Mint; the doubling in size of the Denver facility; and the building of new depositories for gold at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and for silver at West Point, New York.

It was during Ross' term that another innovation was tried, the striking of two coins simultaneously. This new process was developed by San Francisco Mint technicians and accounted for greatly increased production of 1-, 5- and 10-cent coins.

At a gala party celebrating Ross' 100th birthday on November 27, 1976, she reflected on her years as Mint Director:

In the early years of my service, we had only a depression to worry about, but in the 40's with ersatz nickels and cents, the prospect of new denominations, shortages of metal and reduced operating costs, were more than enough worry for one small woman. I guess one of the reasons for small coin shortages was the established habit of school children and others hoarding them for war bonds and other purchases. This custom had to be reversed and we at the mint undertook a massive campaign to reeducate the public. It was a long uphill battle, but we finally succeeded.

Few individuals realized the tremendous responsibilities that rested on my shoulders. It seemed to most all I had to do was direct the operations of the three mints . . . , which in itself was a job for any man or woman. But, that was just the tip of the iceberg. I also supervised the highest total of gold

bullion ever amassed at Fort Knox, and the highest total of silver stored at West Point; [and] the opening of the pyx at the annual Assay Commission meeting in Philadelphia Mint.

Eva Adams was appointed the 27th Director of the Mint by President John F. Kennedy. Her tenure (October 1961 to August 1969) covered one of the most volatile periods in Mint history, when silver was removed from our circulating coinage. This was followed by another hobby first: no mintmarks were used on circulating coinage from 1965 through 1968, because coin collectors were blamed for the continuing nationwide coin shortage. No proof sets were minted during that period either; instead, “special mint sets” were produced. Adams gave the numismatic community the silver Kennedy half dollar of 1964 and the 40-percent silver half dollar of 1965-70.

Adams' finest hour came in late 1964, after President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation providing for the first striking of silver dollar coins for circulation since 1935—the 1964 Peace dollars. Her press release read “45 million new Peace design cartwheels dated 1964 will be struck at the Denver Mint with distribution being made from commercial banks only.” Numismatists



▲ Mint Director Eva Adams ordered the melting of the silver 1964 Peace dollars struck at the Denver Mint.



▲ Georgia Neese Clark was the first woman to serve as Treasurer of the United States.

and the public were in seventh heaven over the announcement. But, their joy was short-lived.

Denver Mint Superintendent Fern Miller oversaw the first trial minting of the silver dollar coins in early 1965, “some 316,076 sparkling beauties.” However, a short time after the trial striking, the government reversed its decision to issue silver dollars, and future production was canceled. Adams ordered all 316,076 trial specimens to be melted, with the silver to be made into coinage bars.

Her order was implemented, but rumors spread that Superintendent Miller had permitted Mint employees to acquire examples at face value, and, despite her request and guarantee that all be returned, not all were. Adams was called before a government committee

to testify on the matter. Under oath, Adams insisted that “all produced coins were accounted for and melted . . . none was preserved!” Whether any 1964 Peace dollars escaped the melting pot remains a matter of conjecture.

U.S. Treasurer

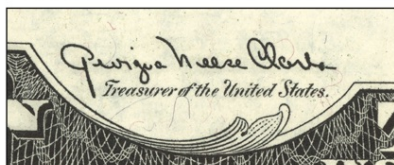
In 1949 President Harry Truman gave the nation's purse strings to a woman with his appointment of Georgia Neese Clark to the post of

PHOTO: ANA ARCHIVES

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“While some thought me a novelty, the President had deep faith in my abilities and duties, which included being a government spokesman.”

PHOTOS: ANA MUSEUM



▲ Georgia Neese Clark said her fondest memory was the first time she saw her facsimile signature on U.S. currency. Collectors can find it on the Series 1934D \$10 Silver Certificate.

U.S. Treasurer, a precedent that has been followed by every President to date. Clark (who later became Mrs. Gray) served until January 1953. She gave the numismatic community a new collectible: her engraved facsimile signature on U.S. “Red Seal” issues, Silver Certificates and Federal Reserve notes.

I had the opportunity to meet and interview former U.S. Treasurer Clark at her Topeka, Kansas, home on January 11, 1990. During that interview, she recalled:

My fondest memory was seeing my facsimile signature imprinted on U.S. currency for the first time. It seems so long ago that I served the Truman Administration as the first woman U.S. Treasurer. While some thought me a novelty, the President had deep faith in my abilities and duties, which included being a government spokesman for the Treasury Department. Mr. Truman bore the brunt of . . . journalists’ jokes about a woman handling the nation’s purse strings by retorting, “The nation’s money supply is in good hands with a woman!”

PHOTO: ANA ARCHIVES

PHOTOS: ANA MUSEUM

Mint Superintendents

In 1953 President Dwight D. Eisenhower set a new precedent by appointing Rae Biester as Superintendent of the U.S. Mint at Philadelphia. For the first time, “The Mother Mint” had a mother at the production helm, who began to look at money as an art form. She became a numismatic connoisseur with a hands-on approach to management. One of her first acts was to remove the word “Superintendent” from her door, thus initiating a true open-door policy with employees, a rapport that has not been equaled, save possibly by Betty Higby during her tenure as Denver Mint superintendent in 1969-78.

Mint employees responded to Biester in kind by teaching her about all the facets that go into the production of each and every coin—namely talent, skill, labor and love! She passed along her newfound appreciation for the coinage struck at the Philadelphia Mint by including a card with a personal note with each set of



◀ Rae V. Biester was made an honorary ANA member at the Association’s 1957 convention in Philadelphia.



▲ The 1957 proof set included a note from Philadelphia Mint Superintendent Rae V. Biester that explained perceived scratches might actually be creases in the cellophane wrapper.

proof coins. The green card in the 1957 proof set read,

YOUR U. S. PROOF COINS

have been carefully inspected before release!

If there should appear—what may seem to you—a defect or a scratch on a coin—it is no doubt a crease in the polyethylene-coated cellophane in which they are encased.

We tell you this to save us both unnecessary correspondence. THANK YOU!

Rae V. Biester
Superintendent.

Biester’s tenure at the Philadelphia Mint (1953-61) provided the collecting community with a number of firsts. They include the 1955 doubled-die Lincoln cent, the 1960 Small-Date and Large-Date Lincoln cents, the 1955 D/S Jefferson nickel, the 1955 “Bugs Bunny” Franklin half dollar, the 1954 Carver/Washington half dollar, the box and flat-pack 1955 proof sets, and the last P-D-S Mint sets (1955).

Many women have had an impact on our money and our hobby—too numerous to be listed here. I hope this brief introduction inspires you to take time to learn more about them and their contributions to the collectable items we cherish today. ©

