Women in the GPO Workforce

as seen in the GPO Photograph Collection

GPO History Talk
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Women in the GPO Workforce

When we recently posted a photo of the bindery in about 1930, a viewer wrote, “Interesting that there are no women in this photo; secretaries only at the time I would guess.” A wrong guess, in fact.
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There were probably relatively few female secretaries and clerks at that time, but many women at GPO. But let’s back up . . .
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Among the 350 employees who came from the Cornelius Wendell shop to become GPO, half were women.

Most were probably in the bindery, but . . .
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... not all.

Women were employed as press feeders. Look closely at the engraving. This would have been considered a step below pressmen and compositors, but was nevertheless a job that required skill. Unfortunately it paid less.
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This early photograph (probably around 1900) shows women in the job section as press feeders.
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And well into the 20th century (at GPO’s branch at the Library of Congress)
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The bindery also remained a significant employer of women.
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And it was in the bindery that the landmark 1973 class action case originated, in which Dorothy Thompson and over 300 other women bindery workers argued that they were systematically paid less for doing equivalent work to men. It was the largest gender bias settlement to that time, and it opened the door to equality of pay at GPO and elsewhere.
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Dorothy Thompson said:

“For years they told me the big industrial sewing machines I operate were woman’s work. But I knew all along I was doing the same work as men, and not getting paid the same.”
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There were other pioneers.

In 1895 the first Superintendent of Documents, Francis Asbury Crandall, hired a young librarian from Los Angeles to be the first librarian in the newly created Public Documents Division.
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Adelaide Hasse was the living definition of the turn of the century “new woman” — educated, ambitious, and passionate about her career in a growing new profession. Her time at GPO was brief, but she was the vanguard of a host of female professionals in non-printing occupations, and librarians specifically, of which there have been hundreds.
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Her particular legacy includes the magnificent Public Documents Library, which until it was disbanded in the 1970s, held nearly 2 million documents. She also created the basis of the Superintendent of Documents classification, which remains in wide use today.
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Meanwhile women’s inroads elsewhere were more sporadic.

Apprenticeship was expanded in the 1920s and 30s under Public Printers George Carter and Augustus Giegengack. Women weren’t specifically excluded, but it wasn’t until 1931 that two began the program, Blanche Boisvert and Beulah Fairell.
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Four women entered in the class of 1940, including Mary King and Elinore Nugent.
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World War II suspended apprentice training, and when it began again women were not recruited until 1970.
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Women made other forays into formerly all-male areas in the 1970s & 80s:

Carpenter Shop
Police
Messengers
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The first female top-level manager was Lois Schutte who became Director of Personnel in the 1980s.

The first female Superintendent of Documents was Judy Russell in 2001.

The first female Acting Public Printer is Davita Vance Cooks.