

## The Early Federal Workforce

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George Washington knew the value of the federal workforce. He also knew that choosing people for that workforce was freighted with political and policymaking consequences. In one of the first letters he wrote after his inauguration in 1789, Washington ruminated that “I anticipate that one of the most difficult (&) delicate parts of the duty of my (office will be th)at which relates to nominations (for appointmen)ts.”

Washington’s comments may come as a surprise. After all, the Constitution focused principally on the powers of elected offices and said practically nothing about the appointed ranks of the federal bureaucracy. But no sooner did the federal government come into being than Americans scrambled to create a federal workforce that could secure the nation’s goals.

The necessity was clear. The United States faced challenges at home and abroad. With the nation’s finances in shambles, the federal government needed a treasury system that could raise revenue. The United States claimed millions of acres in the West, and the federal government was supposed to supervise that land until it could be organized as states. Federal officials faced fierce resistance from native peoples who defended their land, even as western settlers demanded that the federal government support their desire for land that belonged to Native Americans. Americans sought diplomatic and commercial relationships in foreign nations in an era when the French Revolution generated chaos in the Atlantic World. Americans worried that failure on any of these fronts could spell disaster for the young republic.

All of these challenges required policymaking strategies, but they also required federal personnel to bring those strategies into being. Throughout these decades, the United States built what they considered a robust federal workforce. The goals and priorities of that workforce would seem familiar today: promote peace and prosperity, serve the federal leadership, and defend the nation against its enemies. But other priorities are now completely alien. The federal government now has a direct impact on people’s lives. In the decades following ratification of the Constitution, citizens rarely observed federal activity directly. The federal government now has institutions whose task is to remove forms of inequality between citizens. At the moment of its founding, the federal workforce had a mandate to establish and support racial supremacy, whether that meant subordinating native Americans, helping to expand African-American enslavement into new territories in the Southwest, or establishing a federal judiciary that assumed the subordinate status of native Americans and African Americans (whether free or enslaved).

This government operated under a profoundly different set of organizational rules. Many of the bureaucratic principles that govern large organizations (including governments) came into being during the late-nineteenth century. The organizational challenges facing the federal government at the moment of its founding were familiar: selecting and promoting qualified

people, developing priorities, managing finances, etc. But the means that people used to achieve those ends were fundamentally different.

Some numbers tell the story of the early federal workforce as it came into being in a tumultuous era. In 1802, a little over a decade after its creation, the federal government employed 3,905 people. By 1826, that number had more than doubled to 10,415. These numbers do not include two groups for whom there is no reliable data: enlisted personnel in the United States military and officeholders in the numerous federal territories. The government underwent periodic moments of reduction and growth in intervening years, and it was not until the late 1810s that it stabilized. Determining exact numbers is a challenge, and telling in its own right. Federal leaders didn't think to keep records of their total number of employees. Congress only called for an accounting twice between 1789 and 1816, and only when Congress passed a continuing resolution in 1816 requiring a list of all federal employees and their pay did the leaders in the executive branch get serious about the seemingly obvious task of enumerating their employees.

Throughout these decades, most federal employees reported to five federal departments (State, Treasury, War, Navy, and the Post Office). But the lines of authority were hardly so clear as they are today. For example, there was an Attorney General but no Justice Department. U.S. attorneys were paid from a vaguely defined judicial budget that also paid the salaries of federal judges, and they found themselves receiving orders from the secretary of state, the secretary of the treasury, or the President himself; everyone except the attorney general. The State Department supervised foreign affairs, but also had a grab-bag of domestic responsibilities: the patent office, the census, and most demanding of all was the civil administration of federal territories. The Coast Guard reported to the Treasury Department, an arrangement explained by its official name: the Revenue Cutter Service. Created to intercept smugglers who sought to avoid the paying federal import duties, the Revenue Cutter Service was occasionally—and derisively—called Hamilton's Navy, a criticism of the first treasury secretary who many critics believed was intent on creating a massive fiefdom unto himself.

These departments reflected the organizational principles of the pre-modern world. They were geographically distributed but administratively decentralized. For example, as late as 1824 the State Department extended across the United States and around the world, but employed only thirteen men in its central office in Washington. The headquarters of the War and Navy Departments employed 32 and 21 people, respectively. The Treasury Department, which always employed the largest central office, had 152 personnel.

But who served in these offices? And what experiences did they encounter in federal careers? Almost all federal employees shared certain basic demographic similarities. Almost all of them were white, and almost all of them were men. A small number of free people of color or people of mixed Anglo American and Native American ancestry held low-level positions, most of them unpaid. A small number of women served principally as lighthouse supervisors. Most of these women were widows whose husbands died in the Revolution War, and the appointment constituted a form of compensation in an era before substantive pensions. The white men who constituted the official ranks of federal workforce came from all corners of American society and all directions of the compass. They were native born and foreign born. Not only did they work

in every state and territory, but they came from every state and territory. Indeed, distributing federal appointment by region was a sharp political issue which many saw akin to the apportionment in Congress. While officials from some states (Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts) were at different times overrepresented within the federal workforce, this state of affairs reflected not only regional preferences within the executive but also the large populations in those three states.

The federal workforce included members of elite families and men struggling for an economic foothold. But this was certainly no meritocracy. Most high-level and prestigious jobs—members of the cabinet, federal judges, foreign ministers (the office now called ambassador)—were usually reserved for men of elite background, while most clerical or low-level offices usually went to men of middling status and modest means.

Perhaps the most important feature of federal employment compared to the current structure was the relatively limited range of opportunities. It was not simply that there were few offices in a small number of agencies, but the hierarchy itself was relatively flat, with few opportunities for lateral movement or upward mobility. This was particularly true in the civil branches of government, but also applied to the military. Promotions were few and far between. Consider the federal job with the largest single number of officeholders: postmaster. A post office in the early republic was a small affair, usually run by one postmaster who often doubled as a shopkeeper or merchant. These men almost never transitioned to other federal jobs. The same applied to the hundreds of revenue officials located in the nation's ports. These men collected the import duties that constituted the vast majority of federal revenue. Some might advance from inspector (the man who physically examined the goods aboard an incoming ship) to collector (the man who supervised the entire revenue operation), but many remained in a single office for years. That was certainly the case for Thomas Melvill, the grandfather of novelist Herman Melville. In 1789, George Washington appointed him to a revenue office in Boston. He was still in the job at age seventy-eight when Andrew Jackson removed him in 1829.

There were, of course, exceptions to these rules. The first member of the federal workforce to run a cabinet agency was Oliver Wolcott, Jr. Unlike most other agency heads, who held elected political careers before joining the cabinet, Wolcott served as comptroller of Connecticut before entering the federal workforce as auditor of the U.S. Treasury in 1790. Alexander Hamilton found Wolcott a superb financial official, advancing him comptroller in 1791, and when Hamilton resigned as secretary of the treasury in 1795, he supported Wolcott's selection as his successor.

The two men who held the largest number of Senate-confirmed appointments eventually translated appointed office into the highest elected office in the land.

John Quincy Adams held eight different diplomatic posts ranging from minister to the Netherlands in 1793 to secretary of state in 1817. William Henry Harrison is now the subject of trivia games (it not jokes) for serving the shortest tenure as President before dying of pneumonia in 1841 barely a month after his presidential inauguration, but long before then he was one of the most important figures in the western United States. From 1791 to 1814 the Senate confirmed his name seven times, beginning when he received a commission as second lieutenant in the

United States Army. In 1801, the twenty-eight year-old Harrison became governor of the Indiana Territory, an office he held until 1812, when he resigned to accept a commission as major general in the United States Army during the War of 1812.

A very different story emerges from Samuel Abbott, who held fourteen appointments in the Michigan Territory between 1805 and 1827, ranging from militia officer to tax collector to auctioneer to county judge. Abbott remained a jack-of-all-trades, the sort of person who was essential in a structure where the federal government only surrendered its administrative responsibilities when a territory transitioned to statehood.

Most of these men worked alone. Military officers, of course, supervised more men as they rose in the ranks. Customs houses included a growing number of clerks depending on the size of the port or the growth in trade. But men like Samuel Abbott or Thomas Melvill had decades-long terms of service without ever having much in the way of supervisory responsibility.

How to manage this complex set of offices with its diverse set of officeholders consumed the energies of senior leaders in the nation's capital. And all of them had clear visions for how best to create an effective federal workforce. The large central office staff in the Treasury Department reflected Alexander Hamilton's desire for power, but it was also a product of his realization that effective governance required centralized coordination. Thomas Jefferson came into office as President in 1801 vowing to reduce the number of federal employees, believing that government worked best when it governed least. He did indeed eliminate a number of offices, but he soon concluded that the nation needed a more robust workforce to meet new challenges, and immediately set about hiring additional men. Along the way, Jefferson also created the first institution founded for the technical training of federal employees: a military academy at West Point, New York. John C. Calhoun, best known now as the passionate defender of slavery and state's rights during the antebellum era, was a nationalist secretary of war during the administration of James Monroe eager to restructure the United States Army. His ally in reform was none other than Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. The two men later battled over the nation's future from the 1820s through Adams' death in 1846, but in the 1810s and 1820s they both imagined a future where a properly managed federal workforce would sustain the union and advance its goals.

As Presidents and members of the cabinet, Hamilton, Jefferson, Calhoun, and Adams all struggled to make federal governance work in an era of limited administrative systems and slow communications. The union that emerged was the product of both the Constitution and the federal officials created by that document: the President, members of Congress, and justices of the Supreme Court. But it was also the product of thousands of appointed officials populating the federal workforce, officials who found themselves in equally challenging circumstances as they sought to transform the broad framework established by the Constitution into a working government and who translated the broad outlines of policy into daily practices of governance.