

CUSTOMS TO BUILD NATIONAL HISTORICAL COLLECTION

Customs issues played a significant part in the development of the colonies and were a focal point of discussions that led to federation nearly 100 years ago. As part of its contribution to the celebration of the centenary of federation, the Australian Customs Service has decided to undertake a number of history projects.

One major project is the establishment of a national historical collection of Customs artefacts, documents and memorabilia.

The collection will be located in Canberra and kept under correct museum and archival storage conditions. It will include a number of items of historical interest currently held by Customs in various official collections in Canberra and other cities and towns where the organisation has offices.

These scattered collections currently include documents, photographs and seized goods such as smuggled objects, illicit stills, previously banned books and even contemporary items such as recently seized growth hormone vials.

The first customs activity in Australia was the collection of excise on spirits, wines and beer in 1799. The imposition of the excise was an effort by the colonial government to not only control the distribution of liquor, but also to raise funds. Early proceeds paid for the building of Sydney's first prison, hospital and a bridge over the Tank Stream.

By the 1890s, colonial customs departments were collecting 90 per cent of government revenue.

The federation of Australian states in 1901 saw Customs established as one of the first Commonwealth departments. Section 86 of the Australian Constitution empowered the Commonwealth government to collect and control customs duties and excise. At the time federation, at least along the colonial borders, was as much about the end of inter-colonial tariffs as it was the unification of the colonies.

In 1901-02, the first financial year after federation, customs and excise revenue totalled 8.9 million pounds or 77 per cent of total Commonwealth revenue. By 1903-04 this percentage had grown to 79 per cent. It reduced to 70 per cent in 1912-13 just before the introduction of income tax in 1915.

The first step towards establishing a Customs national historical collection will be to evaluate, catalogue and conserve the many items now held in Customs Houses around Australia.

Customs history officers have been appointed in every state and territory. Readers who have items they wish to donate to the collection, or who know of artefacts or photographs which may be available for loan or sale, are requested to contact the national history officer in Canberra or the nearest state or territory officer.

Names and contact telephone numbers are:

ACT, national history officer, Graeme Austin - (02) 6275 6298
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