

Emily I. Farnum

Progressive Woman in the Federal City

The U.S. Census Bureau has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to employing women. Ever since 1880, when it started using professional enumerators rather than U.S. marshals, the Census Office had employed women in that role. With the advent of the Hollerith tabulating machine in 1890, women moved into the role of keypunchers. By 1909, 10 years before the 19th Amendment granted national women's suffrage, over 50 percent of the Census Bureau's 624 employees were women. As women proved themselves as capable as the men, and with the increasing number of women in the workforce, it became harder for the Census Bureau to justify assigning all supervisory positions to men. By 1920, the Census Bureau would once again push forward appointing the first five female supervisors, as well as the first three female expert chiefs of divisions.

Farnum Family 1880 Census

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The first female chief of division was Emily Ida Farnum. She was born in December 1875, to Laura and Walter Hamilton Farnum in Castile, New York. Raised in her grandfather's hotel until his death in 1882, Emily had access to the first library in Castile. After her grandfather's death, the family, which by now included two sisters, Jessica and Agnes, and a brother, Hamilton, sold their New York property and moved to Washington, DC.

Although the Farnum's exact arrival date in Washington, DC. is unknown, Emily's mother bought property in the city as early as 1895. Around 1900 Emily began her career with the Census Bureau as a clerk, while also studying literature at George

Washington University and sending stories to the Washington Post on the side. By 1908, she received a promotion to stenographer. She worked mainly in the Appointments Division, and during the intercensal period, handled most of the work by herself. After 20 years and two censuses, Census Bureau leadership recognized Emily's skills and promoted her as the first expert chief of a division in July 1919. As chief of the Appointments Division, she was responsible for the hiring, correspondence, and working life of 1,000 local employees and over 70,000 field workers of the 1920 Census (what would now be the Personnel Office).



Press and Sun Bulletin (Binghamton, NY); 2 Aug 1919



The Green Book Magazine; December 1919



AFTER PASSING several preliminary hurdles, Mrs. Fenlon was sent to talk with Miss Emily Farnum, who is chief of the appointment division of the Census Bureau, and who seems to have been impressed favorably by Mrs. Fenlon's record.

The Washington Post (Washington, DC.); 12 May 1940

Emily was not only a tireless Census Bureau employee, but she was also a passionate suffragist. As early as 1914, she wrote letters to the *Washington Times* as a proponent of a woman's right to vote and participated in marches. In 1916, the Stanton Suffragette Club, an auxiliary of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, elected Emily as an executive member. She was also an active member of the American Statistical Association.

Emily continued to work at the Census Bureau as the Chief of the Appointments Division through the 1940 Census. Her example, hard work, and earnest advice through five censuses has not just benefited the women of the Census Bureau, but has influenced the U.S. Commerce Department as a whole. She died on June 13, 1942, at the age of 66 in her adopted hometown of Washington, DC.



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Jessica Farnum with Library of Congress Staff, 1914



The Washington Post (Washington, DC.); 8 Jul 1906.

The same influence that attracted Emily to federal service had also affected her sister, Jessica. Jessica worked for the Library of Congress from 1902–1937, rising to the position of secretary in 1909. For many years, she was the only woman on the staff.

Emily and Jessica Farnum were not the only members of the Farnum family who lived progressive lives. Brother Hamilton worked briefly as a Congressional page before joining the Gray Line Tour Company and rising to manager. In 1921, he became the president of the Sightseeing Bus Lecturers and Standsmen Union and led pickets and strikes for unionization. Of the third sister, Agnes, less is known,

however she did push the bounds of what was socially acceptable for women by working as an actress in the first decade of the century. None of the siblings ever married and they lived together for their entire lives. Emily and Jessica's contributions both in their federal jobs and in their personal lives have enriched and affected those who followed.

Washington, D.C.		FIFTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1930		POPULATION SCHEDULE	
NAME	RELATION	SEX	AGE	RACE	EDUCATION
Emily Farnum	Secretary	Female	56	White	High School
Jessica Farnum	Secretary	Female	52	White	High School
Hamilton Farnum	Manager	Male	45	White	High School
Agnes Farnum	Actress	Female	40	White	High School

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Farnum Family 1930 Census