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 has 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 permanent 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. Many of these pioneering women who worked on the census in these early years also broke through in other fields, such as law, medicine, education, activism, journalism, and the arts.

Mary Jane Van Holland, usually known as Jennie, was born on May 25, 1852, in Brooklyn, New York. Jennie’s father James, a bookbinder, passed away when she was a young child, and her mother, Eliza Harned, worked as a dressmaker to support Jennie and her brothers. Jennie attended Brooklyn Public School No. 19, and in 1877, she married Mills P. Baker. Unfortunately, both her husband and their only child, daughter Ella, passed away in 1879, and she decided to devote herself to the study and practice of medicine. In addition to the early deaths of her father, two brothers, husband, and child, Jennie was also influenced to enter medicine by her aunt, Dr. Clemence Harned Lozier. Dr. Lozier was a trailblazing physician and political activist who, in 1863, had established the New York Medical College and Hospital for Women, one of the first teaching hospitals for women. In all, Dr. Lozier inspired nine of her direct female relatives to join her profession. Jennie entered her aunt’s college in 1879, and earned her medical degree on March 28, 1882.

While attending medical school, Jennie trained to work with all members of the population and she later joked that she would send men to the male doctors if they agreed to send all of the women and children to her, a prospect that the male physicians realized would significantly reduce their business. During this crucial stage of Jennie’s education, she also served as a census enumerator in 1880. Similar to physicians, the job required knowledge of the local community, as well as the ability to gain the trust of the female housewives who most often answered the enumerator’s questions.
Starting on June 2, the day after Census Day, and ending on June 16, Jennie counted 2,244 people in her enumeration district in Brooklyn. The 1880 Census marked an impressive expansion over previous censuses and the results, encompassing demographic, social, and economic statistics, as well as special reports on Alaska and American Indians, filled 22 volumes.

Following her census work, and after receiving her medical degree, Jennie established an impeccable reputation as a doctor. By 1889, she was the chief of staff of the Brooklyn Memorial Hospital for Women and Children, in addition to serving in the dispensary and on the board of managers. Jennie stayed at Memorial Hospital, surviving a fire and reconstruction, as well as constant funding battles, until the hospital was finally absorbed into a larger institution in the early 20th century. Known for her work with women and children, Jennie also possessed a reputation as an efficient and quick surgeon—important skills during a time when unreliable and developing methods of patient sedation meant that time constraints greatly impacted surgical outcomes. Throughout her life, Jennie remained active in several medical societies and clubs, including the King County Homeopathic Medical Society, the New York State Homeopathic Society, and the American Institute of Homeopathy.

While developing her medical skills, Jennie simultaneously fought for the equal rights of women. From the time she entered medical college until the passage of the 19th Amendment, Jennie spoke, traveled and advocated for women’s suffrage and their inclusion in civic life. She helped found the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Political Equality League and the National Woman’s Party. She served on the local, state, and national suffrage societies as well as the Brooklyn Women’s Club. Jennie’s medical background overlapped with her political activities as she taught women basic anatomy and hygiene techniques, and advocated for affordable healthcare for women and children in working families.

In addition to her activism, Jennie continued working as a doctor almost her entire life. She also enjoyed traveling extensively and visited Europe several times, as well as Canada, Mexico, and the western United States. Jennie was active in the Universalist Church, was a charter member of the Chiropean Club, a Brooklyn women’s club focused on health issues, and enjoyed singing. She passed away on January 15, 1931, in her lifelong home in Brooklyn, NY. The Census Bureau is proud of Jennie’s pioneering medical work, civic service, and her contributions to her community and country.