

Isaac Bassett

(1819-1895)

Isaac Bassett began his Senate career in December 1831, at the age of 12, when he was appointed by Daniel Webster to serve as the institution's second page. Bassett's father, Simeon Bassett, was a Senate messenger at the time, and young Isaac frequently accompanied him to the U.S. Capitol. Isaac Bassett later recalled, "on one of these visits . . . Daniel Webster called me to him and took me up in his lap and . . . said to me: 'My little man, would you like to be made a page?'"

Promoted to messenger in 1838 and to assistant doorkeeper in 1861, Bassett worked in the Senate Chamber, attending nearly every legislative session until his death in 1895. He was deeply esteemed by senators and fellow employees alike for his discreet, faithful, and dedicated service. "I have tried to do my duties and act honestly," he wrote, and for this the Senate honored him with gifts and testimonials on several occasions. By the 1880s the elderly Bassett, with his long gray beard and dignified bearing, had become an icon of the gentlemanly, statesmanlike qualities that represented the Senate at its best. He was a willing subject for newspaper reporters, cartoonists, and photographers, always ready to regale anyone who would listen with stories of the Senate in "olden times" and of the great men who had served then.

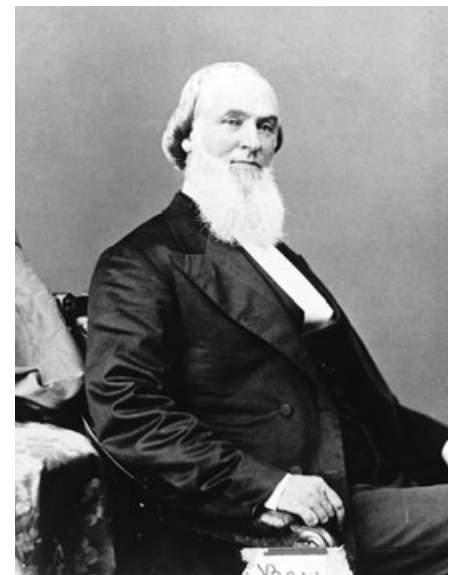
Bassett's most abiding legacy to the Senate is the manuscript he left behind at his death, which provides an unparalleled view into the institution during the 19th century. Hoping to have a memoir of his Senate experiences published posthumously "to give the public the benefit of these years of observation among public men," he made copious notes and compiled a rich array of newspaper clippings describing the Senate's people, traditions, and procedures. The book was never published. However, the manuscript survived, faithfully preserved by Bassett's descendants and eventually donated to the U.S. Senate.

In 1876 members of the Senate commissioned artist Freeman Thorp to paint a portrait of Isaac Bassett as a "testimonial of their personal regard and of their high appreciation of the intelligence, the promptness, the accuracy, and the conscientious fidelity" that had exemplified Bassett's 45 years of service up to that point. In his memoirs Bassett himself describes the simple, touching presentation ceremony:

Soon after the adjournment of the Senate on the 3rd day of August 1876, Mr. Ferry, the President of the Senate, came up to me and said, "Captain, I want to see you for a few minutes in the Marble Room." I, in my usual way, said, "Certainly, sir," and made a polite bow. He then put his arm in mine and led me to the Marble Room, and to my surprise, I saw quite a crowd. He turned my attention to a portrait that had been covered over and made this remark, "Look at that picture and see if you can recognize it." I must confess that I never was so embarrassed in my life before. . . . I knew not what to say, for I was taken by surprise, not knowing that any such thing was in contemplation; it was kept a perfect secret from me. . . . How can I express my kindness to all of the senators? Words cannot do it; my heart overflows with gratitude to them all.

Exactly how Thorp completed the painting without arousing Bassett's suspicions is unknown. Perhaps the artist worked from a photograph, because there is an existing image of Bassett that resembles the painting. In 1991 Elizabeth Rummel Crosby, Isaac Bassett's great-granddaughter, donated the painting of Bassett to the U.S. Senate.

Thorp was born in Ohio and worked extensively in photography before turning to oil painting. Over the years he executed a number of portraits of prominent individuals, including the Senate's painting of Abraham Lincoln (p. 262). Seven of Thorp's works are also located in the House wing of the Capitol.



Isaac Bassett was photographed at Mathew Brady's Pennsylvania Avenue studio, date unknown.

(U.S. Senate Collection, Gift of Ms. Anjanette Vail Van Horn)

Isaac Bassett

Freeman Thorp (1844-1922)

Oil on canvas, 1876

29 ½ x 24 ½ inches (74.9 x 62.2 cm)

Signed and dated (lower right): Thorp / 1876

Gift of Elizabeth Rummel Crosby (great-granddaughter of Isaac Bassett), 1991

Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 1991

Cat. no. 31.00017

