

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to walk through the busy corridors of the United States Capitol without hearing stories. The building's marble and sandstone halls echo with loud stories, whispered stories, stories told in English and in a multitude of other languages. Members of Congress tell stories to colleagues and constituents. Red-jacketed Capitol tour guides spend long days as professional storytellers, and serve as models for the many congressional staff, seasonal interns, and even legislative pages called on to help introduce the Capitol and Congress to the millions who flock annually to Washington, D. C. Knowing that individual visitors may come to Capitol Hill only once in a lifetime, these hosts rely on historical vignettes to enliven the experience. Years later, many of those visitors will recount to family and friends, in letter-perfect detail, the stories they heard on their first visit to the United States Capitol.

Over the past 30 years as Senate Historian, I have prepared countless historical narratives to inform senators, staff, constituents, and others who are curious about the traditions, personalities, and legislative landmarks of the “World’s Greatest Deliberative Body.” More recently, I have reshaped many of these stories into brief sketches for those who have a strong interest in the subject but lack the time to explore extended historical essays. From hundreds of Senate anecdotes, I have selected the 200 that appear in this volume. Each includes references for further reading.

There are stories reflecting all areas of Senate activity, from its important constitutional prerogatives—such as confirmation of presidential nominations—to historical milestones of decidedly less importance. An example of the latter occurred in 1930 as senators confronted the choice of continuing with traditional operator-assisted telephones or accepting a daunting new product of communications technology—the dial phone.

From the well-known and notorious, to the unusual and even whimsical, these stories are presented to enlighten, inspire, amuse, and inform. Each story amplifies the narratives that precede and follow it. Read collectively, they provide clear impressions about the forces, events, and personalities that have shaped the Senate of the 21st century.

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