

James Hamilton Lewis

(ca. 1863–1939)

James Hamilton Lewis served the state of Washington in the U.S. House of Representatives, and the state of Illinois in the U.S. Senate. Born in Danville, Virginia, Lewis spent most of his youth in Georgia. In 1885, however, he left the South and moved to Seattle, where he established a law practice and became active in territorial politics. After Washington's admission to the Union, Lewis was elected in 1896 to the U.S. House of Representatives. There he argued for recognition of Cuba's independence and for the establishment of the Mount Rainier area as a national park.

After losing both his congressional seat in 1898 and a subsequent bid for the U.S. Senate, Lewis moved to Chicago, where he once again became active in Democratic politics. In 1913 he was elected to the U.S. Senate from Illinois, the last senator chosen by that state legislature before the ratification of the 17th Amendment, which provided for the direct election of senators. Lewis became the first Democratic whip of the Senate. He was defeated at the end of his first term but won another term in 1930 and was reelected in 1936. Lewis resumed his role as party whip during his second and third terms. He was an authority on the U.S. Constitution and on foreign affairs, and a skillful legislative tactician. Lewis stood out among his contemporaries for his eloquent oratory and courtly manner. He died in office; his funeral service was held in the Senate Chamber.

Without ceremony, this oil likeness of J. Hamilton Lewis by Louis Betts was hung in the U.S. Capitol in November 1940. A formal unveiling was postponed until the Illinois delegation could be present following the fall congressional recess. The portrait was presented by the senator's widow to the Joint Committee on the Library shortly before it was exhibited in the Senate wing of the Capitol.

The precise date and circumstances of the picture's execution are not known. Betts was, however, a skilled copyist who spent a number of years studying and working in the mode of Europeans Frans Hals and Diego Velasquez. Betts may have copied a photograph of Lewis that was published in 1940, the year after his death, for the portrait closely resembles this image.

A successful portraitist, Betts grew up in Chicago and was especially identified with that city, though he achieved recognition in capitals both here and abroad. As a student, he trained under his father, Edwin D. Betts, and later with William Merritt Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. A 1923 art journal observed: “[Betts]

employs no accessories to heighten his effects. . . . He has only one aim . . . to set down on canvas for all time what manner of man or woman or child is before him as he or she is revealed to him by the spirit which gleams from the eyes.”¹

Betts maintained a studio in New York City. He was awarded a bronze medal at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 and numerous other prizes in succeeding years. The National Academy of Design presented him with a gold medal in 1931.



This photograph of Senator J. Hamilton Lewis may have been used for the Senate's portrait.

(Reprinted from *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. New York: James T. White & Company, 1940)

J. Hamilton Lewis

Louis Betts (1873-1961)

Oil on canvas, date unknown

39½ x 28¾ inches (100.3 x 73.3 cm)

Signed (upper left corner): Louis Betts

Gift of Rose Douglas Lewis (widow of J. Hamilton Lewis), 1940

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1940

Cat. no. 32.00015

