



THE ILLUSTRATED SENATE: 19TH-CENTURY ENGRAVINGS OF THE U.S. SENATE

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Visual sources have largely shaped the image that Americans have formed of the United States Senate. For over 200 years, paintings, engravings, photographs, and later television and film, have enabled those beyond Capitol Hill to draw judgments and opinions about this legislative body. The Senate has been depicted in many ways—it has been friend and foe, weak and strong, corrupt and incorruptible, moderate and extravagant. During the mid-19th century, the American public turned to illustrated newspapers for most of their visual information. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly* were just two of the popular illustrated weeklies that combined art, science, and literature with war and politics. These visual records of the United States Senate influenced people's perception of the government, and as such are important historical documents that tell us much about the dynamics of that era. In looking at these images today, we can step back in history and see the Senate as the country once did.

When the Senate held its first session in New York in 1789, little was known of the new government. Originally, the Senate met in closed session. Although it opened its doors to the public in 1795, its inner workings remained a mystery to the majority of Americans. Even though politics was the major subject in post-Revolutionary War newspapers, engravings of the government and its legislators were uncommon due to limitations in printing technology. The country was also predominantly rural, and with rudimentary transportation of the day, news from Washington, D.C., was infrequent and often several weeks (or even months) old when it finally arrived. With few illustrations of Congress available, and other types of prints expensive, most people



Early engravings of the U.S. Capitol depicted a grand building set on the brow of Jenkins Hill. (See p. 105)

simply did not have the opportunity to see pictures of the early Senate. For them, their view of the new government was formed through written or oral sources.

The first printed images of the Senate were simple portrait engravings of the members and views of the buildings that housed the institution: Federal Hall in New York, Congress Hall in Philadelphia, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Early engravings of the Capitol date from the 1830s and were printed in limited numbers. Some were by English

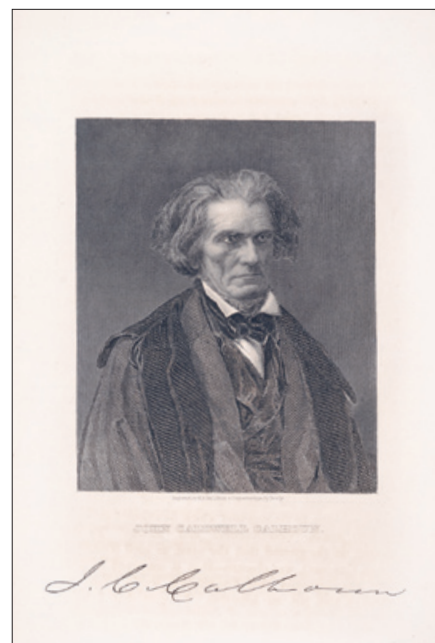
artist William Bartlett, who traveled the countryside creating detailed drawings that were later published in his illustrated travel guide, *American Scenery*. His Capitol views show an idyllic setting, far from the reality of the day. In contrast, during his 1842 visit, Charles Dickens referred to Washington, D.C., as the “City of Magnificent Intentions.” He found “spacious avenues, that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere, streets, mile-long, that only want houses, roads and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete; and ornaments of great thoroughfares, which only lack great thoroughfares to ornament. . . .”¹ Artistic license aside, these early engravings helped ensure feelings of confidence and hope in the new government—a majestic Capitol symbolized stability and permanency.

As America ceased feeling uncertain about its recent independence, it began to take pride in its national figures and institutions, and the country’s attention focused increasingly on the actions of Congress. The period from 1829 to 1833 has been called the “Coming of Age of the Senate.”² It was during these years that the United States Senate became the focal point of the nation. Spectators jammed the Senate galleries to hear the great Senate orators of the day—Henry Clay of Kentucky, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina—debate such monumental

issues as slavery and states' rights. Those unable to crowd into the Senate Chamber to hear these historic deliberations and see their favorite senators now eagerly awaited news from Washington, D.C. Most importantly, advances in technology—from the daguerreotype to new printing methods—helped feed this growing interest.

The introduction of the daguerreotype in 1839 allowed the faces of Clay, Webster, Calhoun, and other notable senators to become familiar throughout the country. Daguerreotypists pursued statesmen in the belief that American ideals could be symbolized in photographic images of the eminent men of the time. In a nation that idealized the democratic process, it was natural that governmental officials should exemplify the successful operation of the country. Where earlier engravings of the Capitol symbolized strength and permanency, now the daguerreotype captured images of greatness and “godlikeness” in the senators. Daguerreotypes, and engravings based on daguerreotypes, were popular because of association with the photographic process, and thus guaranteed accuracy.

Along with these early views of the Capitol and its legislators were limited-edition prints of the Senate Chamber made as symbolic commemorations of great senators and the momentous events in which they participated. The making of these images was directly related to a general drive for symbolic nationalism during this period. One of the earliest of these prints was the 1846 mezzotint, *United States Senate Chamber*, by



Engravings based on daguerreotypes were popular by the 1850s. (See p. 182)



Thomas Doney's 1846 mezzotint of the Senate Chamber accurately depicts the faces of the nation's leaders and Washington's social elite. (See p. 15)



This engraving highlights the dramatic debates of 1850, with Daniel Webster shown delivering his famous “Seventh of March” speech. (See p. 21)



Here Henry Clay presents his series of resolutions as he attempts to save the nation from the disaster of disunion. (See p. 19)

Thomas Doney (38.00027.001, p. 15). The scene, which depicts Henry Clay’s farewell address to the Senate in 1842, is based on over one hundred daguerreotypes taken from life by the studio of Edward Anthony. The print was enthusiastically recommended, and the plate was retouched for a second printing in 1847. Other commemorative prints of the period include *Union* by Henry S. Sadd after Tompkins H. Matteson (38.00019.001, p. 247) and *Daniel Webster Addressing the United States Senate* by James M. Edney (38.00016.002, p. 21), which pay homage to the efforts of these statesmen and others to stave off secession and civil war. *The U.S. Senate, A.D. 1850* by Robert Whitechurch after Peter F. Rothermel (38.00029.001, p. 19), perhaps the most dramatic of these prints, commemorates the moment that Clay rose in the Senate to introduce the series of resolutions that would later become known as the Compromise of 1850. These engravings of historic events in the Senate Chamber were hung on parlor walls and pictures of the more prominent senators were bought and displayed. Those who would never have the opportunity to see these men

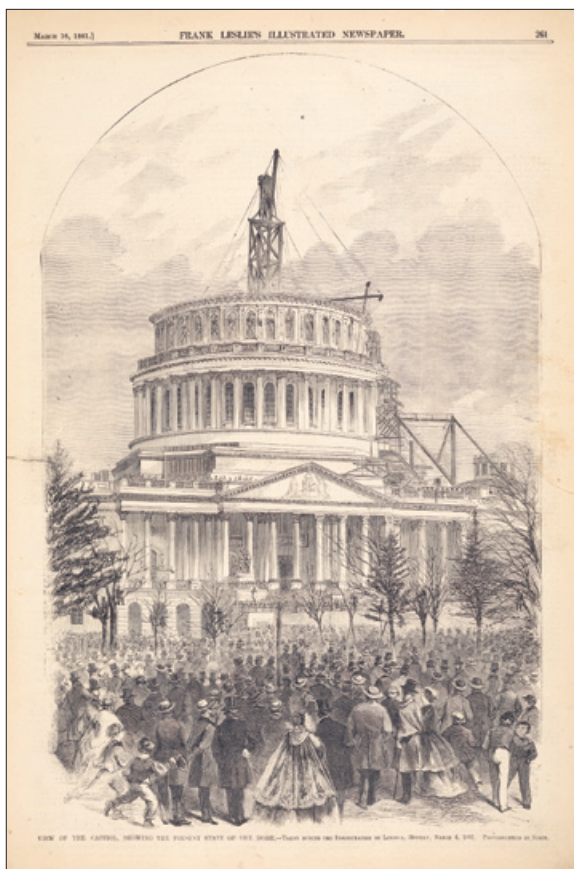
in person, or occasionally appreciate an oil or marble portrait in a private home or public hall, could now have their own images of them.

After the mid-1850s, the publication of illustrated journals further met the country’s demand for picture news of the events and people in Washington, D.C. While limited-edition prints were popular, it was the news magazines, such as *Frank Leslie’s*

Illustrated Newspaper and *Harper's Weekly*, that provided the general public with a timely glimpse of the events and people on Capitol Hill. Quick, accurate, and detailed drawings now accompanied stories. The magazines commissioned “special artists” to illustrate the debates in the Senate as they were taking place and to record the major activities of the members. New developments in the early 1850s reduced the time needed to make wood engravings, so pictures appeared within a week of an event, and later within days—a speed never before achieved. Previously, an artist traced an illustration onto a wooden block, but once completed only one engraver could work on it at a time. In the new process, the block was cut into sections so several engravers could work simultaneously, after which the sections were bolted together to form a finished plate. This process enabled publishers to produce engravings in hours rather



This 1853 engraving is one of the earliest views of the Senate and House Chambers to appear in an illustrated weekly. (See p. 17)



The construction of the new Capitol dome was pictured for all to see in an 1861 issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. (See p. 122)

than in days or weeks. These “assembly line” wood engravings lacked the detail and subtlety of metal engravings, but ensured that prints could appear soon after an event—and at a nominal cost. The growth of railroads and improvements in roads provided for rapid dissemination of the images. Where once pictures of the Senate Chamber were limited, and only images of certain members popularized, now the “Illustrated Senate” became accessible to the entire county. Picture journals, such as *Harper's Weekly*, *The Graphic*, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, sold for 10 cents a copy and quickly reached circulations of over 100,000, climbing to 300,000 at times during the Civil War.

Some of these early images showed the Capitol exterior under construction: the new Senate and House

wings and the monumental cast-iron dome that were added in the 1850s and 1860s. Architectural images aside, the majority of the engravings depicted the political and ceremonial events at the Capitol, the members of Congress, and tourists, lobbyists, and reporters.

Many of the prints in the Senate collection highlight the political events of the day. The wood engraving titled *The Assault in the U.S. Senate Chamber on Senator Sumner* (38.00292.003, p. 17), which appeared on the cover of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on June 7, 1856, presents an important moment in history. The events leading to the infamous “caning” began on May 19, 1856. On that day, in his “Crime Against Kansas” oration condemning the spread of slavery into Kansas, abolitionist

Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts delivered a vicious verbal attack on Senators Stephen Douglas, James Mason, and Andrew Butler. Taking offense at Sumner's words, Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina, a kinsman of Senator Butler's, brutally attacked Sumner with his cane as the Massachusetts senator sat at his desk in the Senate Chamber attending to correspondence. "Bleeding Kansas" and "Bleeding Sumner" soon became rallying cries for the North. Within days prints appeared both to promote and intensify antislavery sentiment. Most of these re-creations cannot be considered objective, although the engraving in *Frank Leslie's* presents one of the more accurate depictions of the event. The publication had already gained a solid reputation for rapid pictorial reporting, and the image appeared one week and one day after the event. In this engraving, the figures are relegated to the lower left of the print, with the Senate Chamber prominent in the picture. This may have been because the artist had stock images of the Chamber and was not present at the actual caning. But it also may have been a conscious decision, where the noble and grand setting of the Senate Chamber stands as a symbol of the institution; it will endure, despite the controversies of the day.³

While one print can often tell a larger story, numerous prints of the same event also convey important information. The Senate's print collection contains more than 40 engravings depicting the 1868 impeachment of President Andrew Johnson. Throughout the trial, the weeklies illustrated the historic event as it unfolded—from the proceedings in the Senate Chamber to events outside the room. The trial mesmerized the nation for over two months.



Important and dramatic political events, such as the caning of Senator Sumner, were pictured in the illustrated weeklies. (See p. 17)



The rush to get news to the public is evident in this 1868 print from the Andrew Johnson impeachment trial. (See p. 62)

The extreme interest in the proceedings is highlighted in the print, *A Race for the Wires—Energy of the Reporters* (38.00446.001, p. 62) by Theodore R. Davis, which shows the news reporters rushing to relay the event to their readers.

The weeklies also depicted ceremonial and commemorative events that highlighted the strong nationalist feeling of the country at the time. Take, for instance, *Interior of the Rotunda—Procession to the Portico* (38.00062.001, p. 54). This print portrays a decidedly minor event during the March 4, 1853, inauguration of Franklin Pierce. A crowd of dignitaries makes its way through the Capitol Rotunda to the East Front for the inaugural ceremony.

This image is carefully composed to convey a theme greater than a simple procession. The figures recede almost to insignificance

against the majestic backdrop of the soaring Rotunda. In fact, the visual theme of the print is not the assemblage of luminaries or the stately procession itself, but the grandeur and permanence of the magnificent stone edifice and the rich national history recorded in the monumental paintings lining its walls. This print boldly declares the importance and permanence of the event for which these dignitaries have gathered, the supreme pageant of American democracy—the peaceful transfer of power from one head of state to another, as dictated by the will of the people. When seen in the light of events that were then shaking the nation, the artist’s intent becomes all the more poignant. The last and best agreement to stave off secession and civil war had been forged three years before in the Senate Chamber, only steps away from the scene of this print. Although the Compromise of 1850 would survive barely a decade, its ultimate failure could not have been known on that March day in 1853. It must have seemed then that nothing could threaten the repetition of the



Franklin Pierce's inauguration was one of the first inaugurations to be depicted in the weekly news publications. (See p. 54)



Along with illustrating dramatic political events, the weeklies also highlighted daily activities around the Capitol. (See p. 89)



Many 19th-century engravings were extremely accurate in their architectural and furnishing details, such as this 1888 image of the Capitol's Supreme Court Chamber. (See p. 89)

solemn tableau depicted here. It must have seemed that the government would stand as permanently, as firmly, and as grandly as the Capitol Rotunda itself, whatever passing dangers might be posed.

Along with such grand ceremonial events as inaugurations, views of everyday life in the building also were popular. Magazine illustrators were often drawn to the busy and varied nature of the legislative branch, as the Capitol corridors, crowded with senators and spectators, offered a glimpse into the Senate's 19th-century operations. Illustrations showed Senate pages delivering documents; messengers arriving from the House; senators taking lunch in the dining rooms; tourists gazing in awe at the Rotunda; scholars pondering volumes in the Congressional Library; and even an elderly doorkeeper using a broom handle to turn back the hands of the clock to give the legislators a few more minutes to conclude their business at the end of a session. Before, only the "greatest" statesmen and most historic moments in the Chamber were depicted, but now the everyday Senate was revealed. For those Americans who could not attend state ceremonies or wander through the Capitol corridors, these engravings offered vicarious experiences through the illustrators' eyes.

While the illustrated journals captured events as they unfolded in the Rotunda, Senate Chamber, and in the corridors of the Capitol, they also provided an important

pictorial account. These renderings tell us much about the decor of the Vice President's Room, the Senate Reception Room, the Refectory, the Supreme Court Chamber, and other spaces in the Capitol that have gradually changed over time. Despite lacking the detail of photographs, these prints yield important information today to aid the historian, curator, and preservationist.

As the 20th century approached, dramatic changes took place that would ultimately signal the demise of the illustrated weeklies. Hand-engraved woodblocks and steel engravings were now replaced by the photographic linecut. While photography had existed earlier, it was not until later in the 19th century that printing technology was able to reproduce such images. This marked the end of the illustrated artist and eventually the illustrated papers. Outmoded by cheaper and faster technology and more accurate images, the last issue of *Franks Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* appeared in 1902, while *Harper's Weekly* finally closed its doors in 1916. In their heyday these magazines, and other illustrated papers, offered unique experiences for the average American—they provided the most realistic depiction of the events and people of the day. ❧



Photography replaced hand-drawn illustrations in the weekly magazines. (See p. 148)

¹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), 282.

² Robert C. Byrd, *The Senate, 1789–1989*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1988), 105.

³ David Tatham, "Pictorial Responses to the Caning of Senator Sumner," in *American Printmaking before 1876: Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 14.