

SPEAKERS OF THE HOUSE



Frederick A.C. Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania
First Speaker of the House, (1789–1791)
Collection of U.S. House of Representatives

“ . . . I venture to say that, taken as a whole, the House is sound at heart; nowhere else will you find such a ready appreciation of merit and character, in few gatherings of equal size is there so little jealousy and envy. . . The men who have led the House, whose names have become a splendid tradition to their successors, have gained prominence not through luck or by mere accident. They had ability, at least in some degree; but more than that they have had character.”

— Speaker Joseph G. Cannon
of Illinois, (1903–1911)

Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution states: *“The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker and other Officers.”* The Speaker acts as leader of the House and combines several roles: the institutional role of presiding officer and administrative head of the House, the partisan role of leader of the majority party in the House, and the representative role of an elected Member of the House. The Speaker of the House is second in line to succeed the President, after the Vice President.

FAST FACTS

- **First Speaker of the House**

Frederick A.C. Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania was elected presiding officer on April 1, 1789, the day the House organized itself during the First Federal Congress (1789–1791).

- **Longest-Serving Speaker of the House**
Samuel Rayburn of Texas served as Speaker for a total of 17 years, two months, and two days.
- **Shortest Term of Speaker**
Elected Speaker of the House as a sign of respect from his colleagues on March 3, 1869, Theodore M. Pomeroy of New York served for the closing day of the 40th Congress (1867–1869).
- **First Woman Speaker**
On January 4, 2007, Nancy Pelosi of California became the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House.
- **Longest Consecutive Service as Speaker**
Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill holds the distinction of the longest consecutive service as a Speaker (1977–1987) while J. Dennis Hastert has the longest consecutive service for a Republican Speaker (1999–2007).
- **State with the Most Speakers**
Eight Massachusetts Representatives have served as Speaker of the House.
- **First Speaker to serve as President**
James K. Polk of Tennessee was the first (and only) Speaker to serve as President.
- **Longest Election for Speaker**
After more than two months and 133 ballots, Nathaniel T. Banks of Massachusetts was elected Speaker on February 2, 1856.
- **Youngest Speaker Elected**
Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia was elected Speaker on December 16, 1839, at the age of 30.
- **Oldest Speaker Elected**
Henry T. Rainey of Illinois was elected Speaker on March 9, 1933, at the age of 72.
- **First Speaker to Make a Televised Address in the House Chamber**
On Opening Day of the 80th Congress (1947–1949), Speaker Joseph Martin of Massachusetts addressed the House during the first live television broadcast in the House Chamber.
- **First Speaker to Approve Regular TV Feeds from the House Chamber**
Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill of Massachusetts authorized a three-month closed-circuit testing period in 1977 which paved the way for regular televised proceedings in the House Chamber beginning in 1979.
- **Most Party Affiliations for a Speaker**
During his entire House career, Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts had four different party affiliations (Democrat, American Party, Republican, and Independent).

- **First Sitting Speaker to Lose Re-election to his House Seat**
William Pennington of New Jersey lost his bid for a seat in the 37th Congress (1861–1863).
- **Number of Speakers to Die in Office**
Five Speakers died in office: Michael C. Kerr of Indiana; Henry T. Rainey of Illinois; Joseph W. Byrns of Tennessee; William B. Bankhead of Alabama; and Samuel Rayburn of Texas.

TEACHING TIP

Ten Questions: Have students select a Weekly Historical Highlight date which focuses on a Speaker of the House. Compile 10 questions to ask the Speaker concerning his/her career in the House. In pairs, have one student play the part of the interviewer, while the other is the interviewee (the Speaker). Conduct research to devise answers that would likely be made by the Speaker being interviewed.