

Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

Emery L. Frazier (1966)



When Joe Dougherty reported for work in 1968 as the Senate's first Curator, Chief Clerk Darrell St. Claire assigned him a cramped one-room office adjacent to the Senate Library's fourth-floor stacks. Intimately familiar with the Capitol's byways as a consequence of his long service in the Library of Congress' Capitol Station, Dougherty had no trouble finding Room S-411. When he arrived, he discovered the room stocked with a rich trove of books, files, and historical memorabilia. He also found an occupant -- the owner of these materials -- who neither knew of his coming nor had any immediate plans to vacate the premises.

Where would the Curator sit? As illness soon forced Dougherty's retirement, this question remained unanswered. The room's occupant continued undisturbed for several more weeks until an acting Curator -- a novice to the Senate and its ways -- retraced Dougherty's footsteps into S-411.

As acting Curator, on loan from the Library of Congress, [now Senate Historian] Richard Baker thus encountered the Honorable Emery L. Frazier. The twentieth person to serve as Senate Secretary, Frazier had retired to this space several years earlier to work on various writing projects. The former Secretary looked older than his seventy-four years. His tired face, solemn manner, and deeply resonant Kentucky dialect, gave the immediate impression of a person who had been there and had seen it all. And he had. In the months ahead, as the two shared the office -- Baker used Frazier's desk when he was absent and his side chair when he was not -- Frazier proved to be a world-class tutor on the Senate's history, traditions, and mythology.

Emery Frazier was born at Railey Station, Kentucky, on January 24, 1896. He interrupted his University of Kentucky studies in 1917 to enlist in the army during World War I. After the war, he returned to the university and graduated in 1920. Admitted to the state bar a year later, Frazier practiced law and won election in 1922 to a term in the Kentucky house of representatives. He later served as that body's reading clerk and as mayor of Whitesburg, Kentucky.

Emery Frazier entered the national political arena as assistant reading clerk for the 1932 Democratic National Convention, at which his fellow Kentuckian and long-time friend, Senator [Alben Barkley](#), delivered the keynote address. As the 1932 elections returned the Democrats to power in the Senate by a large margin and raised Barkley's stock among his party colleagues, he arranged for Frazier's appointment as Senate Legislative Clerk. "I thought I'd go up for a little while," Frazier observed years later. In fact, he remained as legislative clerk for the next sixteen years, even after the Republicans took control in 1947. Much of his Senate career paralleled that of Senator Barkley, who served as Democratic leader from 1937 until his election as Vice President in 1948. When asked to cite the most dramatic event of his entire Senate career, Frazier unhesitatingly cited Barkley's 1944 floor speech attacking President Franklin Roosevelt after the chief executive ignored the Democratic Leader's recommendation and vetoed a wartime tax bill. Barkley then resigned as leader only to be immediately reelected by his Democratic colleagues.

In 1948, as Barkley prepared for his transition from the floor leader's desk to that of the Senate's presiding officer, Frazier graduated to the post of Chief Clerk. He held that position, through changes in party control, for the next seventeen years until his election as Secretary. From 1936 through 1964, Frazier also served as the Democratic National Convention's chief reading clerk. His rich baritone voice became instantly familiar to millions of radio listeners and, from 1952, television viewers.

As Chief Clerk, Frazier spent much of his off-the-floor time researching the Senate's history. He wrote to relatives of former Secretaries seeking photographs and biographical information. He took a particular interest in the Senate chamber desks and promised to prepare a detailed historical account of their construction and use. In January 1955, he organized a unique Senate chamber tribute to seven Senate employees, each with more than fifty years of service. A decade later, he conceived the Senate Service Awards program that continues to acknowledge the "loyal service" of employees who have served at least twelve years.

In the summer of 1965, Senate Secretary Felton Johnston announced he would retire at year's end. Several senior senators immediately suggested Frazier as his successor. Senate Majority Leader [Mike Mansfield](#) admired Frazier, but wanted Democratic Party Secretary Frank Valeo for the job. In a 1985 oral history interview, Valeo described Frazier as a "very pleasant person [who] had a great love for the Senate [and] was liked by just about everybody in the Senate. . . . He was what you might call a traditional figure of the Senate staff structure." Valeo continued, "He was the one that did most of the hiring of people for the Secretary. He had a good eye for the needs of the Senate in the context of that period, particularly for what was needed on the floor, so he chose people with that very much in mind."

To forestall a contest, Mansfield astutely devised a plan, which the Senate readily adopted. It provided that Frazier would serve as Secretary for nine months, until his seventieth birthday, at which time Valeo would assume the post. When Frazier became

Secretary on January 1, 1966, he appointed Darrell St. Claire to succeed him as Chief Clerk.

From his days in the Kentucky legislature through his tenure as Chief Clerk, Frazier loved nothing better than calling the roll. As Secretary, he was reluctant to give up this function, particularly since his successor, St. Claire, had little interest in performing it. Within five years, the title of Chief Clerk was changed to Assistant Secretary, reflecting St. Claire's broader administrative focus.

Frazier's nine-month term as Secretary passed quickly — perhaps too quickly, for he seemed to regret having to step down on September 30, 1966. But that regret quickly faded as Darrell St. Claire installed him in S-411 to work on his long-deferred Senate history-related writing projects.

Richard Baker's tutorials with Emery Frazier lasted into 1970, when declining health ended the latter's regular trips to S-411 and Baker took another job. Frazier moved back to Kentucky, without completing his history of Senate desks, and died there on April 24, 1973.