

# Senate Statistics

## Sergeants at Arms

### James Mathers (1789-1811)

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A large funeral procession passed through the muddy streets of Washington on September 5, 1811. Following a Marine Corps honor guard, the mourners included heads of government agencies, aging Revolutionary War veterans, and many of the city's "most respectable citizens." Had Congress been in session, a large contingent of senators would almost certainly have joined this solemn gathering. All had assembled in tribute to the widely admired Sergeant at Arms of the United States Senate, the Honorable James Mathers. Several weeks earlier, Mathers had tripped and fallen down his cellar stairs, breaking an ankle. Complications from that accident proved fatal.

No one, including Mathers, knew exactly how old he was. He could only guess that he had been born about 67 years earlier. He knew for sure that he was born in Ireland, from which his family had migrated to New York City some years before the Revolutionary War. In that war's earliest days, Mathers joined the Continental army and served throughout the long conflict, suffering a major wound.

After the war, with a large family of his own to support, the wounded veteran found employment as a clerk with the Continental Congress. This one-chambered national legislature had moved in the 1780s from one major city to another, ending up in New York by 1785. It was in New York that the Continental Congress elevated Mathers to the post of principal Doorkeeper. He assumed those duties on May 15, 1788, just as the Congress was about to go out of existence. As a result of that body's weaknesses under the Articles of Confederation, delegates had met in Philadelphia during the previous spring and summer to create a new constitution. By June 1788, the necessary number of states had ratified the Constitution. From that time, Mathers and the handful of other congressional staff devoted their attention to helping with the transition into new quarters on lower Manhattan's Wall Street.

The Senate of the First Congress, meeting in the second-floor chamber of the newly refurbished and renamed Federal Hall, achieved a quorum for business on April 6, 1789. As one of their very first orders of business, members elected the former Continental

Congress Doorkeeper Mathers to be their doorkeeper. This was a particularly important post for a legislature that intended to conduct all its sessions in secret. This closed-door policy copied the practice of both the Continental Congress and the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Only the House of Representatives, meeting on the floor below—the "lower house"—welcomed visitors to its sessions.

On the Senate's second day in session, members elected as their secretary [Samuel Otis](#), an ally of Vice President [John Adams](#). Close in age, Mathers and Otis differed greatly in background and education. A first generation American, Mathers lacked Otis' educational opportunities and financial backing. Otis had earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Harvard College more than a quarter-century earlier. Prior to the Revolution, as Mathers was establishing himself in a new land, Otis flourished as a Boston merchant and state legislator.

As the Senate's principal officers, Mathers and Otis took on duties similar to those of the Continental Congress' doorkeeper and secretary. As Otis and his assistants were keeping the financial accounts and legislative records, Mathers and his one aide tended the chamber door, maintained the Senate's two horses, and purchased the firewood. While the Senate considered its secretary a year-round official, its doorkeeper performed most of his duties during the approximately six months each year that the Senate was in session. Consequently Otis received an annual salary of \$1,500, while Mathers received three dollars for each day on the job. (At that time, senators were also paid for each day of actual attendance--at a six-dollar rate.)

Within a year of the Senate's first session, Congress decided to establish a permanent capital city far to the south of New York, along the banks of the Potomac River. During the ten years they estimated it would take to construct the necessary public buildings, the national government would be headquartered in Philadelphia, where the House and Senate took up temporary quarters in the newly renamed Congress Hall.

Doorkeeper Mathers' security functions expanded significantly during the Senate's residence in Philadelphia. In 1794, after receiving much unwelcome criticism for its closed-session policy, the Senate decided to open its legislative proceedings as soon as a gallery could be constructed. When that gallery opened in December 1795, Mathers assumed a new responsibility— keeping order among the visitors.

Three years later, as the Senate planned its first impeachment trial, members realized that they needed to have an officer with the police powers necessary to arrest those who refused to appear before that proceeding. One of the uncooperative parties was the target of the proceeding--former Tennessee Senator [William Blount](#). From his home in Tennessee, Blount indicated he had no plans to attend his Senate trial. Wishing to return Blount by force, if necessary, the Senate, on February 5, 1798, created the office of sergeant at arms, modeled after a similar post in the House of Representatives and the British Parliament. The Senate added these new duties to those of Doorkeeper Mathers, expanding his title to "sergeant at arms and doorkeeper."

When Mathers failed in his efforts to return Blount to Philadelphia, the Senate proceeded without the former senator. At the trial, Mathers became the first Sergeant at Arms to issue the Senate's newly adopted proclamation: "All persons are commanded to keep silence while the Senate of the United States are receiving articles of impeachment against \_\_\_\_\_ on pain of imprisonment." In recognition of his added responsibilities, the Senate increased Mathers' pay to the equivalent of \$800 per year. (Not until 1873 did the Senate's two principal officers receive approximately equal compensation.)

When the Senate moved to Washington in 1800, Mathers assisted with the shipment of its furnishings and papers. He helped establish the new quarters in the Senate's Capitol wing and remained on the job—and in his employers' good graces—until his death in 1811. In addition to being the Senate's first Sergeant at Arms, this Irish immigrant of humble origins maintains the distinction of holding his post for more than twenty-two years. Although his immediate successor missed breaking that record by weeks, no Sergeant at Arms since the early nineteenth century has come close. As those at his funeral would surely have agreed, James Mathers deserves to be counted among the Senate's "founding fathers."