

Church in the U.S. Capitol

Many people are surprised to learn that the United States Capitol regularly served as a church building; a practice that began even before Congress officially moved into the building and lasted until well after the Civil War. Below is a brief history of the Capitol's use as a church, and some of the prominent individuals who attended services there.

CAPITOL IN 1800

The cornerstone of the Capitol was laid by President George Washington in 1793., but it was not until the end of 1800 that Congress actually moved into the building. According to the congressional records for late November of 1800, Congress spent the first few weeks organizing the Capitol rooms, committees, locations, etc. Then, on December 4, 1800, Congress approved the use of the Capitol building as a church building. ¹

The approval of the Capitol for church was given by both the House and the Senate, with House approval being given by Speaker of the House, Theodore Sedgwick, and Senate approval being given by the President of the Senate, Thomas Jefferson. Interestingly, Jefferson's approval came while he was still officially the Vice-President but after he had just been elected President.

Significantly, the Capitol building had been used as a church even for years **before** it was occupied by Congress. The cornerstone for the Capitol had been laid on September 18, 1793; two years later while still under construction, the July 2, 1795, *Federal Orrery* newspaper of Boston reported:

City of Washington, June 19. It is with much pleasure that we discover the rising consequence of our infant city. Public worship is now regularly administered at the Capitol, every Sunday morning, at 11 o'clock by the Reverend Mr. Ralph. ²

The reason for the original use of the Capitol as a church might initially be explained by the fact that there were no churches in the city at that time. Even a decade later in 1803, U. S. Senator John Quincy Adams confirmed: "There is no church of any denomination in this city." ³ The absence of churches in Washington eventually changed, however. As one Washington citizen reported: "For several years after the seat of government was fixed at Washington, there were but two small [wooden] churches. . . . Now, in 1837 there are 22 churches of brick or stone." ⁴ Yet, even after churches began proliferating across the city, religious services still continued at the Capitol until well after the Civil War and Reconstruction.

MANASSEH
CUTLER

Jefferson attended church at the Capitol while he was Vice President ⁵ and also throughout his presidency. The first Capitol church service that Jefferson attended as President was a service preached by Jefferson's friend, the Rev. John Leland, on January 3, 1802. ⁶ Significantly, Jefferson attended that Capitol church service just two days after he penned his famous letter containing the "wall of separation between church and state" metaphor.

U. S. Rep. Manasseh Cutler, who also attended church at the Capitol, recorded in his own diary that "He [Jefferson] and his family have constantly attended public worship in the Hall." ⁷ Mary Bayard Smith, another attendee at the Capitol services, confirmed: "Mr. Jefferson, during his whole administration, was a most regular attendant." ⁸ She noted that Jefferson even had a designated seat at the Capitol church: "The seat he chose the first Sabbath, and the

adjoining one (which his private secretary occupied), were ever afterwards by the courtesy of the congregation, left for him and his secretary.”⁹ Jefferson was so committed to those services that he would not even allow inclement weather to dissuade him; as Rep. Cutler noted: “It was very rainy, but his [Jefferson’s] ardent zeal brought him through the rain and on horseback to the Hall.”¹⁰ Other diary entries confirm Jefferson’s attendance in spite of bad weather.¹¹

In addition to Mary Bayard Smith and Congressman Manasseh Cutler, others kept diaries of the weekly Capitol church services including Congressman Abijah Bigelow and statesman John Quincy Adams. (Adams served in Washington first as a Senator, then a President, and then as a Representative; and his extensive diaries describe the numerous church services he attended at the Capitol across a span of decades.) Typical of Adams’ diary entries while a U. S. Representative were these:
Attended public service at the Capitol where Mr. Rattoon, an Episcopalian Senator under President Jefferson were these:

clergyman from Baltimore, preached a sermon.¹²

[R]eligious service is usually performed on Sundays at the Treasury office and at the Capitol. I went both forenoon and afternoon to the Treasury.¹³

Jefferson was not the only President to attend church at the Capitol. His successor, James Madison, also attended church at the Capitol.¹⁴ However, there was a difference in the way the two arrived for services. Observers noted that Jefferson arrived at church on horseback¹⁵ (it was 1.6 miles from the White House to the Capitol). However, Madison arrived for church in a coach and four. In fact, British diplomat Augustus Foster, who attended services at the Capitol, gave an eloquent description of President Madison arriving at the Capitol for church in a carriage drawn by four white horses.

From Jefferson through Abraham Lincoln, many presidents attended church at the Capitol; and it was common practice for Members of Congress to attend those services. For example, in his diary entry of January 9, 1803, Congressman Cutler noted: “Attended in the morning at the Capitol. . . . Very full assembly. Many of the Members present.”¹⁶ The church was often full “so crowded, in fact, one attendee reported that since “the floor of the House offered insufficient space, the platform behind the Speaker’s chair, and every spot where a chair could be wedged in” was filled.¹⁷ U. S. Representative John Quincy Adams (although noting that occasionally the “House was full, but not crowded”¹⁸) also commented numerous times on the overly-crowded conditions at the Capitol church. In his diary entry for February 28, 1841, he noted: “I rode with my wife, Elizabeth C. Adams, and Mary, to the Capitol, where the Hall of the House of Representatives was so excessively crowded that it was with extreme difficulty that we were enabled to obtain seats.”¹⁹ Why did so many Members attend Divine service in the Hall of the House? Adams explained why he attended: “I consider it as one of my public duties- as a representative of the people- to give my attendance every Sunday morning when Divine service is performed in the Hall.”²⁰

Interestingly, the Marine Band participated in the early Capitol church services. According to Margaret Bayard Smith, who regularly attended services at the Capitol, the band, clad in their scarlet uniforms, made a “dazzling appearance” as they played from the gallery, providing instrumental accompaniment for the singing.²¹ The band, however, seemed too ostentatious for the services and “the attendance of the marine-band was soon discontinued.”²²

From 1800 to 1801, the services were held in the north wing; from 1801 to 1804, they were held in the “oven” in the south wing, and then from 1804 to 1807, they were again held in the north wing. From 1807 to 1857, services were held in what is now Statuary Hall. By 1857 when the House moved into its new home in the extension, some 2,000 persons a week were attending services in the Hall of the House.²³ Significantly, even though the U. S. Congress

began meeting in the extension on Wednesday, December 16, 1857, the first official use of the House Chamber had occurred three days earlier, when “on December 13, 1857, the Rev. Dr. George Cummins preached before a crowd of 2,000 worshipers in the first public use of the chamber. Soon thereafter, the committee recommended that the House convene in the new Hall on Wednesday, December 16, 1857.”²⁴ However, regardless of the part of the building in which the church met, the rostrum of the Speaker of the House was used as the preacher’s pulpit; and Congress purchased the hymnals used in the service.

The church services in the Hall of the House were interdenominational, overseen by the chaplains appointed by the House and Senate; sermons were preached by the chaplains on a rotating basis, or by visiting ministers approved by the Speaker of the House. As Margaret Bayard Smith, confirmed: “Not only the chaplains, but the most distinguished clergymen who visited the city, preached in the Capitol”²⁵ and “clergymen, who during the session of Congress visited the city, were invited by the chaplains to preach.”²⁶

In addition to the non-denominational service held in the Hall of the House, several individual churches (such as Capitol Hill Presbyterian, the Unitarian Church of Washington, First Congregational Church, First Presbyterian Church, etc.) met in the Capitol each week for their own services; there could be up to four different church services at the Capitol each Sunday.

IN 1867, OVER 2,000 PER WEEK ATTENDED
CHURCH SERVICES AT THE CAPITOL

The Library of Congress provides an account of one of those churches that met weekly at the Capitol: “Charles Boynton (1806-1883) was in 1867 Chaplain of the House of Representatives and organizing pastor of the First Congregational Church in Washington, which was trying at that time to build its own sanctuary. In the meantime, the church, as Boynton informed potential donors, was holding services- ‘at the Hall of Representatives’ where- ‘the audience is the largest in town. . . . nearly 2000 assembled every Sabbath’ for services, making the congregation in the House the ‘largest Protestant Sabbath audience then in the United States.’ The First Congregational Church met in the House from 1865 to 1868.”²⁷

With so many services occurring, the Hall of the House was not the only location in the Capitol where church services were conducted. John Quincy Adams, in his February 2, 1806, diary entry, describes an overflow service held in the Supreme Court Chamber,²⁸ and Congressman Manasseh Cutler describes a similar service in 1804.²⁹ (At that time, the Supreme Court Chamber was located on the first floor of the Capitol.) Services were also held in the Senate Chamber as well as on the first floor of the south wing.

OLD SUPREME
COURT CHAMBER

Church In The Capitol Milestones

* 1806. On January 12, 1806, Dorothy Ripley (1767-1832) became the first woman to preach before the House. One female attendee had noted: “Preachers of every sect and denomination of Christians were there admitted- Catholics, Unitarians, Quakers, with every intervening diversity of sect.

Even women were allowed to display their pulpit eloquence in this national Hall.”³⁰ In attendance at that service were President Thomas Jefferson and Vice President Aaron Burr. Ripley conducted the lengthy service in a fervent, evangelical, camp-meeting style.

JOHN ENGLAND * 1826. On January 8, 1826, Bishop John England (1786-1842) of Charleston, South Carolina (Bishop over North and South Carolina and Georgia) became the first Catholic to preach in the House of Representatives. Of that service, President John Quincy Adams (a regular attendee of church services in the Capitol) noted: Walked to the Capitol and heard the Bishop of Charleston, [John] England - " an Irishman. He read a few prayers and then delivered an extemporaneous discourse of nearly two hours' duration. . . . He closed by reading an admirable prayer. He came and spoke to me after the service and said he would call and take leave of me tomorrow. The house was overflowing, and it was with great difficulty that I obtained a seat.³¹

* 1827. In January 1827, Harriet Livermore (1788-1868) became the second woman to preach in the House of Representatives. (Three of her immediate family members: " her father, grandfather, and uncle" had been Members of Congress. Her grandfather, Samuel Livermore, was a Member of the first federal Congress and a framer of the Bill of Rights; her uncle was a Member under Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison; her father was a Member under President James Monroe.) The service in which she preached was not only attended by President John Quincy Adams but was also filled with Members of Congress as well as the inquisitive from the city. As Margaret Bayard Smith noted, "curiosity rather than piety attracted throngs on such occasions."³² Livermore spoke for an hour and a half, resulting in mixed reactions; some praised her and were even moved to tears by her preaching, some dismissed her. Harriet Livermore preached in the Capitol on four different occasions, each attended by a different President.

HENRY H. GARNET AND HIS DISCOURSE * 1865. On February 12, 1865, Henry Highland Garnet (1815- 1882) became the first African American to speak in Congress. Two weeks earlier, on January 31, 1865, Congress had passed the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, and Garnet was invited to preach a sermon in Congress to commemorate that event. In his sermon, Garnet described his beginnings: 'I was born among the cherished institutions of slavery. My earliest recollections of parents, friends, and the home of my childhood are clouded with its wrongs. The first sight that met my eyes was my Christian mother enslaved."³³ His family escaped to the North; he became a minister, abolitionist, temperance leader, and political activist. He recruited black regiments during the Civil War and served as chaplain to the black troops of New York. In 1864, he became the pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D. C. (where he served at the time of this sermon). He later became president of Avery College and was made Minister to Liberia by President Ulysses S. Grant.

(For more information on this topic please see "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic: [Religion and the Federal Government \(Part 2\)](#)" on the Library of Congress website.)

NOTES

- [1] *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1853), p. 797, Sixth Congress, December 4, 1800.
- [2] *Federal Orrery*, Boston, July 2, 1795, p. 2.
- [3] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1874), Vol. I, p. 268, October 30, 1803.
- [4] Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith (Margaret Bayard), *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, Galliard Hunt, editor (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 16.
- [5] Bishop Claggett's (Episcopal Bishop of Maryland) letter of February 18, 1801, reveals that, as vice- President, Jefferson went to church services in the House. Available in the Maryland Diocesan Archives.
- [6] William Parker Cutler and Julia Perkins Cutler, *Life, Journal, and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler* (Cincinnati: Colin Robert Clarke & Co., 1888), Vol. II, p. 66, letter to Joseph Torrey, January 4, 1802. Cutler meant that Jefferson attended church on January 3, 1802, for the first time as President. Bishop Claggett's letter of February 18, 1801, already revealed that as Vice-President, Jefferson went to church services in the House.
- [7] Cutler and Cutler, *Life, Journal, and Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 119, in a letter to Dr. Joseph Torrey on January 3, 1803; see also his entry of December 12, 1802 (Vol. II, p. 113).
- [8] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 13.
- [9] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 13.
- [10] Cutler and Cutler, *Life, Journal, and Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 119, in a letter to Dr. Joseph Torrey on January 3, 1803; see also his entry of December 26, 1802 (Vol. II, p. 114).
- [11] Cutler and Cutler, *Life, Journal, and Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 114, December 26, 1802.
- [12] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, p. 268, October 30, 1803.
- [13] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, p. 265, October 23, 1803.
- [14] Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigleow, December 28, 1812. "Letters of Abijah Bigleow, Member of Congress, to his Wife," *Proceedings*, 1810-1815, American Antiquarian Society (1930), p. 168.
- [15] See, for example, Cutler and Cutler, *Life, Journal, and Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 119, from a letter to Dr. Joseph Torrey on January 3, 1803.
- [16] Cutler and Cutler, *Life, Journal, and Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 116, January 9, 1803.
- [17] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 14.
- [18] See, for example, John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, Vol. VII, pp. 437-438, February 17, 1828; Vol. XI, pp. 160-161, May 22, 1842; and others.
- [19] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, Vol. X, p. 434, February 28, 1841.
- [20] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, Vol. XI, p. 169, June 5, 1842.
- [21] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 14.

[22] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 16.

[23] James Hutson (Chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress), *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1998), p. 91.

[24] William C. Allen (Architectural Historian of the Capitol), *A History of the United States Capitol, A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 271.

[25] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 14.

[26] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 15.

[27] Fundraising brochure, Charles B. Boynton. Washington, D.C.: November 1, 1867, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress; available at Library of Congress at <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel06-2.html>.

[28] Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, p. 90.

[29] From the Library of Congress, at <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel06-2.html>.

[30] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 15.

[31] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, Vol. VII, p. 102, January 8, 1826.

[32] Smith, *The First Forty Years*, p. 15.

[33] Henry Highland Garnet, *Memorial Discourse* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1865), p. 73

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