



Supreme Court Oaths Firsts and Other Trivia

INFORMATION SHEET

The first Justice to be fully vested as a member of the Supreme Court was James Wilson, who took his oaths on October 5, 1789.

The first recorded presence of a sitting President at an oath ceremony occurred on January 18, 1940, when Franklin D. Roosevelt invited Frank Murphy to take his Constitutional Oath at the White House. Justice Stanley F. Reed, another Roosevelt appointee, administered the oath in the Oval Office.

Harry S. Truman was the first sitting President to observe an oath ceremony at the Supreme Court when he witnessed Justice Harold H. Burton take the Judicial Oath in open Court on October 1, 1945.

The first African American person to take the oaths of office as a Supreme Court Justice was Thurgood Marshall. Senior Associate Justice Hugo L. Black administered the Constitutional Oath to Marshall on September 1, 1967. The Clerk of the Court administered the Judicial Oath to Marshall in the Courtroom on October 2, 1967.



President Roosevelt watches as Justice Reed administers the oath to Frank Murphy (center).



William H. Rehnquist (left) and Lewis F. Powell, Jr. before their investiture ceremony, 1972.

Photo by The Washington Post.

The first time an outgoing Chief Justice administered the oaths to an incoming Chief Justice was on June 23, 1969, when retiring Chief Justice Earl Warren administered a combined oath to Warren E. Burger. On that day, Richard M. Nixon became the first sitting President to participate in an oath ceremony when, acting as a member of the Supreme Court Bar, he read a tribute to Warren.

On the rare occurrence that two Justices join the Court on the same day, seniority is determined by age. This occurred on January 7, 1972, when Lewis F. Powell, Jr., and William H. Rehnquist were sworn-in during a special sitting of the Court. Although Rehnquist had taken his Constitutional Oath prior to Powell, Chief Justice Burger administered the Judicial Oath to Powell (age 64) before Rehnquist (age 47).

Powell was also the first appointee to sit in Chief Justice John Marshall's historic Bench chair in the Courtroom prior to taking the Judicial Oath on January 7, 1972. This tradition has been followed by all succeeding appointees.

The first woman to take the oaths was Sandra Day O'Connor on September 25, 1981. On this date, President Ronald Reagan, First Lady Nancy Reagan, Mr. John J. O'Connor (the new Justice's spouse), and Mrs. Vera Burger (the Chief Justice's spouse) were the first guests known to be present in the Justices' Conference Room during the private oath ceremony. This was also the first time this private ceremony is known to have been photographed.

The first Justice to take the two oaths from different Chief Justices was Antonin Scalia on September 26, 1986. At a White House ceremony, retiring Chief Justice Warren E. Burger administered the Constitutional Oath to Justice William H. Rehnquist, who had been appointed Chief Justice, and to Justice-designate Antonin Scalia. Later that day in a special sitting in the Courtroom, Chief Justice Burger administered the Judicial Oath to William H. Rehnquist. Chief Justice Rehnquist in turn administered the Judicial Oath to Antonin Scalia.

The first Hispanic person to take the oaths of office was Sonia Sotomayor on Saturday, August 8, 2009; this was also the first time that an oath-taking ceremony held at the Court was broadcast live on TV.

On Monday, April 10, 2017, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy administered the Judicial Oath to Justice-designate Neil M. Gorsuch in the White House Rose Garden (below). Having served as a law clerk for then-retired Justice Byron R. White and Justice Anthony M. Kennedy in 1993-94, Justice Gorsuch is the first Justice to serve as a member of the Supreme Court alongside a Justice for whom he clerked.

