



Supreme Court Oath 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 time a Supreme Court appointee is known to have taken an oath at the White House was when Franklin D. Roosevelt invited Frank Murphy to take his Constitutional Oath there on January 18, 1940.
- The first Justice to have the President who appointed him attend his investiture ceremony at the Supreme Court was Harold H. Burton. President Harry S Truman attended his ceremony on October 1, 1945.
- The first African American to take the oaths of office as a Supreme Court Justice was Thurgood Marshall. Justice Hugo L. Black administered the Constitutional Oath to Marshall on September 1, 1967. A month later, on October 2, 1967, the Clerk of the Court administered the Judicial Oath to Marshall in the Courtroom.
- 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, President 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 before Powell, Chief Justice Burger administered the Judicial Oath to Powell (age 64) before Rehnquist (age 47).
- The first appointee to sit in the historic Bench chair used by Chief Justice John Marshall prior to taking the Judicial Oath was Lewis F. Powell, Jr., who did so 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, Mrs. Nancy Reagan, Mr. John J. O'Connor, and Mrs. Vera Burger 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 both oaths from different Chief Justices was Antonin Scalia on September 26, 1986. At a White House ceremony, retiring Chief Justice Burger administered the Constitutional Oath to Associate Justice William H. Rehnquist, who had been appointed Chief Justice. Next, he administered the oath to Scalia. Later that day, Chief Justice Burger administered the Judicial Oath to Rehnquist during a special sitting of the Court, and in turn, Chief Justice Rehnquist administered the Judicial Oath to Scalia.
- The first Hispanic 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 at the Court was open to broadcast coverage. Previously, oath-taking ceremonies held at the Court, other than formal investiture ceremonies, were private events and not open to the media.