

Mark Twain Debuted Iconic Style at Copyright Hearing

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Mark Twain impersonators routinely don a white suit to evoke the persona of the famous author. But Twain himself did not make a habit of wearing white until very late in his life. He unveiled his signature style on December 7, 1906, at age 71, when he testified about a copyright reform bill before the Congressional Joint Committee on Patents. The hearing took place in the Congressional Reading Room of the Library of Congress.

Twain posed in white for New York photographer A. F. Bradley in 1907.



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“In spite of the keen December wind blowing outside, he burst into view, garbed in a cream-colored suit of light summer flannel,” wrote the *Washington Post* in “Twain’s Fancy Suit” on December 8, 1906. “The effect was decidedly startling; it fairly made one shiver to look at him.”

Author William Dean Howells, Twain’s close friend, wrote in *My Mark Twain*, “Nothing could have been more dramatic than the gesture with which he flung off his long loose overcoat, and stood forth in white from his feet to the crown of his silvery head. It was a magnificent coup, and he dearly loved a coup.”

“I have reached the age where dark clothes have a depressing effect on me,” the *Post* quotes Twain as explaining.

“I prefer light clothing, colors, like those worn by the ladies at the opera.”

Whatever his reason for wearing white, it helped to call attention to his testimony. Twain was a strong promoter of copyright reform, both domestic and international. He had lost substantial income in past decades from overseas piracy of his work, especially in Canada and Britain. In the 1870s, he started traveling to Canada upon publishing a new work to apply for a Canadian copyright, which protected his works throughout the British Empire. He enthusiastically welcomed passage in 1891 of the Chace Act, which extended copyright protection to certain works of foreign authors whose nations protected works of U.S. authors.

Twain, who was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, wanted copyright protection to last in perpetuity. But he testified in 1906 in favor of the bill then before Congress extending protection to the life of an author plus 50 years. At the time, the term was 28 years with the privilege of renewal for another 14 years.

Twain expressed his view with characteristic wit: “I like that extension from the present limit of copyright life of 42 years to the author’s life and 50 years after,” he testified. “I think that will satisfy any reasonable author, because it will take care of his children. Let the grandchildren take care of themselves.”

The 1906 bill did not pass, and the term Twain argued for didn’t become law until

1978, when the 1976 Copyright Act was implemented. Today, the term for most works is the life of the author plus 70 years.

While in Washington in 1906, Twain visited the studio of photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston on 1332 V Street, NW. The first official White House photographer, she had taken pictures of many famous people, including Theodore Roosevelt, Susan B. Anthony, and John Philip Sousa. On December 11, 1906, Twain sat for Johnston in his white suit. Later, he posed for many more white-suited photos, including the one included with this column. ©



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At the 2012 National Book Festival, copyright information specialist **JOHN SAINT AMOUR** dressed in white to impersonate Mark Twain for a presentation about copyright. At right is **SYREETA SWANN** of the Register’s Office as the Statue of Liberty.