

1909 Copyright Law Revision Enacted in Haste — 97 Years Ago

Snow started falling the night before and, by the morning of March 4, 1909, it blanketed Inauguration Day with several inches. The papers said the largest crowd in 20 years was in Washington, and the White House was filled with well wishers of President-elect Taft. Outgoing President Teddy Roosevelt finally broke up the party at 10:00 a.m. to make his way up Capitol Hill. His group drove to the Capitol and arrived about 10:40 a.m. Drawing up to the east front of the building, they saw that Capitol Plaza was covered with snow, and the inaugural stand was useless.

New Hampshire representative Frank Currier introduced H.R. 28192 on the floor of the House on February 17, 1909. On March 3, the copyright revision bill appeared on the calendar as one of the first orders of business. The *Evening Star* of March 3 reported that “the bill is designed to prevent use of musical compositions in instruments without consent of their authors. ... Mr. Currier declared that a monopoly would not be created by the bill, because anyone could reproduce music without authority upon payment of 2¢ for each phonographic disc.” The bill passed unanimously under a suspension of the rules. Word went to the Senate.

Senator Reed Smoot moved that S. 9440 be considered. Later in the day after hearing that the House bill had been signed, he asked for a suspension of the rules and for H.R. 28192 to be substituted for S. 9440. Debate followed. That afternoon, a resolution was passed to have 1,500 copies of the bill printed. At 6:30 p.m., the Senate still had not come to a conclusion, and a dinner recess was called. At 8:30 p.m., Vice President Charles Fairbanks asked one senator who had objected to the rush of the bill if he had any further objection. The senator said no. The bill was then read three times, and there were no objections. The bill passed unanimously and was signed by Fairbanks.

As President Roosevelt entered the Capitol on March 4, the Vice President rushed to him with a fistful of bills that had been passed the night before and that needed his immediate signature. In the great rotunda, Roosevelt called his Cabinet together for a final time, distributed the bills, and asked the Cabinet members to review them for his signature. Among the bills was the copyright law. It was signed, and the party went to the Senate Chamber for the Inauguration as it was felt that the weather was too cold out front for the old Supreme Court Justices. Thus was William Howard Taft inaugurated and the 1909 copyright revision bill enacted. ©



*Taft and Roosevelt driving to the Capitol,
March 4, 1909* COURTESY PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIV.

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