

This Day in History... January 6, 1882

Birth of Sam Rayburn

Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn was born on January 6, 1882, in Kingston, Tennessee. Famous for his integrity, Rayburn served as speaker of the House of Representatives longer than anyone else and spent 49 consecutive years in Congress.

Rayburn's family moved to Windom, Texas, in 1887. His family lived in poverty, as he and his nine siblings helped his parents work their farm. These experiences made Rayburn determined to receive a good education and help the poor. He went on to attend East Texas Normal College (known today as Texas A&M University – Commerce). He rang the school bell and swept the floors to earn money for his expenses. He graduated in 1903 and taught school for two years.



It was Rayburn's dream to make paved roads available to all Americans.

Rayburn entered politics in 1906, narrowly winning a seat in the Texas House of Representatives. During his time in office, he attended University of Texas Law School and was admitted to the bar in 1908. Among his accomplishments in the legislature, Rayburn helped establish the State Board of Health and Department of Agriculture and pushed for laws that made textbooks more accessible to schoolchildren.

In 1911, Rayburn became the youngest speaker of the Texas House of Representatives at age 29. The position was largely ceremonial up until this time. But Rayburn appointed a committee to establish the rights and duties of the speaker. In this role he passed significant legislation reducing working hours for women, child labor laws, a Confederate widows' home, and a tuberculosis treatment center. Years later, Rayburn recalled that this was the most enjoyable period of his career.

Rayburn was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1912. He would remain there for 49 years, serving more than 24 terms. Early on he joined the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. Rayburn introduced and helped pass several notable bills in his early years, including the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914, and the Esch-Cummins Transportation Act. In 1926, he helped create the US Highway System, an important moment in his dream of making paved roads available to everyone.

Rayburn served as Chairman of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee from 1931 to 1937. During that time, he helped pass several New Deal bills including the Truth in Securities Act, the Public Utilities Holding Company Act, the Emergency Railroad Transportation Act, and the Rural Electrification Act. He also helped pass the Flood Control Act of 1936 and helped establish the Soil Conservation Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps.



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In 1940, Rayburn was serving as House majority leader when the speaker of the House died, and he was called on to replace him. World War II had already broken out in other parts of the world, while the US remained neutral. Rayburn helped pass the Lend-Lease Act and the Service Extension Act of 1941. In 1942, the Roosevelt administration asked Rayburn to find funding for an atomic bomb, as part of the Manhattan Project. It was a top-secret project – only Rayburn, the Senate majority leader and five other congressmen knew about it.



Rayburn helped pass the Lend-Lease Act which provided food, oil and supplies to the UK, China, and the Soviet Union.



This stamp was issued less than a year after Rayburn's death.



The Rural Electrification Administration brought electricity to 90% of rural Americans by 1959.



The Soil Conservation Service dealt with water and soil erosion control caused by the negative effects of farming.

Rayburn was famous for his integrity, and insisted on paying his expenses with his own money. He also refused gifts – he wouldn't accept money from anyone and wouldn't let lobbyists buy him a meal – he insisted he wasn't for sale. During his career, Rayburn was well-known for his informal meetings held after business hours in the Capitol. Called the "Board of Education," the meetings were by personal invitation only, and members would play poker while discussing politics. Rayburn was commonly called, "Mr. Sam," or "Mr. Democrat."

Rayburn died from pancreatic cancer on November 16, 1961. He was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and is the namesake for several schools, roads, a submarine, and a room at the US Capitol.

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