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House Sergeant at Arms: A Primer

The Sergeant at Arms is an elected officer of the House of Representatives and is the chamber’s primary law enforcement official and protocol officer, responsible for maintaining security on the House floor and the House side of the U.S. Capitol complex. Initially established during the First Congress, when the House elected Joseph Wheaton of Rhode Island on May 12, 1789, the Sergeant at Arms performs duties according to law, House rules, and custom.

“The House, according to the order of the day, proceeded by ballot to the appointment of a Sergeant-at-Arms; and upon examining the ballots, a majority of the votes of the whole House was found in favor of Joseph Wheaton.”

Annals of Congress, May 12, 1789, p. 330

Selection Process

The House of Representatives, on the first day of a new Congress, typically elects the House Sergeant at Arms. Generally, the election occurs with the adoption of a House Resolution (H.Res.). After the resolution’s introduction, the minority party typically offers an amendment to nominate its own candidate for office. Once the House disposes of the minority-party amendment, the House votes to agree to the resolution and elect the Sergeant at Arms. Two recent Sergeants at Arms—Wilson “Bill” Livingood and Paul Irving—served through changes in the majority party, being elected by both Republican and Democratic majorities. The current Sergeant at Arms, William Walker, was elected on April 21, 2021, and sworn in on April 26.

Acting Appointment by Speaker

In several instances, the incumbent Sergeant at Arms did not complete his term. Should an incumbent Sergeant at Arms not complete a term, the Speaker of the House, pursuant to 2 U.S.C. § 5501, has the power to appoint an acting Sergeant at Arms. Alternatively, the House could consider a resolution to elect a new Sergeant at Arms.

Since the Speaker was given this appointment authority in 1953, it has been used on multiple occasions in previous Congresses: in 1954 with the resignation of Lyle Snader and the appointment of William Bonsell; in 1980 with the resignation of Kenneth Harding and the appointment of Benjamin Guthrie; in 1992 with the resignation of Jack Russ and the appointment of Werner Brandt; and in 2021 with the resignation of Paul Irving and the appointment of acting Sergeant at Arms Timothy Blodgett. In two of these cases—Guthrie and Brandt—the acting Sergeant at Arms was subsequently elected by the House.

In at least one instance, following the retirement of Wilson “Bill” Livingood on January 17, 2012, the House considered a resolution (H.Res. 511, 112th Congress) to elect Paul Irving as Sergeant at Arms the same day.

117th Congress

On January 3, 2021, the House reelected Paul Irving as Sergeant at Arms for a sixth Congress. On January 7, 2021, he resigned as Sergeant at Arms following the events of January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol during the joint session of Congress to certify and count the 2020 presidential election electoral votes. On January 11, 2021, the Speaker, pursuant to her authority under 2 U.S.C. § 5501, appointed Timothy Blodgett as acting Sergeant at Arms. On April 21, 2021, the House elected William Walker as Sergeant at Arms (H.Res. 339), effective April 26, 2021.

Immediate Past Sergeant at Arms

Since 1980, seven individuals have served as House Sergeant at Arms or acting Sergeant at Arms. **Table 1** lists the Sergeants at Arms since 1980, and when they first took office.

Table 1. Sergeants at Arms of the House, 1980-2021

Congresses	Sergeant at Arms	First Took Office
96 th (1979-80) to 97 th (1981-82)	Benjamin Guthrie	March 1, 1980
98 th (1983-84) to 102 nd (1991-92)	Jack Russ	January 3, 1983
102 nd (1991-92) to 103 rd (1993-94)	Werner Brandt	March 12, 1992
104 th (1995-96) to 112 th (2011-12)	Wilson “Bill” Livingood	January 4, 1995
112 th (2011-12) to 117 th (2021-22)	Paul Irving ^a	January 17, 2012
117 th (2021-22)	Timothy Blodgett ^b	January 11, 2021
117 th (2021-22)	William Walker	April 26, 2021 ^c

Source: U.S. Congress, Office of the Historian, “Sergeants at Arms,” at <https://history.house.gov/People/Office/Sergeants-at-Arms>.

Notes:

- Paul Irving announced his resignation on January 7, 2021.
- Timothy Blodgett was appointed as Acting Sergeant at Arms on January 11, 2021.
- William Walker was elected by the House on April 21, 2021.

Duties of the Sergeant at Arms

As the chief law enforcement officer of the House, the Sergeant at Arms is responsible for security in the House

wing of the Capitol, in the House office buildings, and on adjacent grounds. Under the direction of the Speaker of the House or other presiding officer, the Sergeant at Arms plays an integral role in maintaining order and decorum in the House chamber.

Protection and Security

The Sergeant at Arms is responsible for ensuring the safety and security of Members of the House; congressional staff; official visitors to the House, including visiting national and foreign dignitaries; and tourists. Toward this mission, the Sergeant at Arms sometimes works in concert with the Senate Sergeant at Arms and the Architect of the Capitol. These three officials comprise the Capitol Police Board, with the U.S. Capitol Police Chief serving as an ex-officio member (2 U.S.C. §1901 note). The House Sergeant at Arms also serves with the Clerk of the House, the Senate Sergeant at Arms, the Secretary of the Senate, and the Architect of the Capitol on the Congressional Accessibility Services Board (2 U.S.C. §2172). This board oversees the Office of Congressional Accessibility Services, which provides and coordinates accessibility services for individuals with disabilities in the U.S. Capitol complex.

To carry out its protection and security function, the House Sergeant at Arms derives its law enforcement authorities from laws that date to 1867 (15 Stat. 12). The Sergeant at Arms is also “authorized to make such regulations as they may deem necessary for preserving the peace and securing the Capitol from defacement, and for the protection of the public property therein, and they shall have power to arrest and detain any person violating such regulations, until such person can be brought before the proper authorities for trial” (2 U.S.C. §2183).

The Sergeant at Arms also processes security clearances for House employees through the Office of House Security (OHS). The OHS also provides briefings and assistance for Members and staff regarding foreign travel and protecting personally identifiable information (PII). In addition, OHS acts as a repository for classified documents and provides a secure location for the review of those documents.

Order and Decorum

The Sergeant at Arms (or a designated SAA assistant) attends all floor sessions and is tasked with maintaining order under the direction of the Speaker or other presiding officer (Rule II, clause 3). Additionally, House rules designate the mace as the symbol of the Office of the Sergeant at Arms and provide that the mace “shall be borne by the Sergeant-at-Arms while enforcing order on the floor” (Rule II, clause 3(b)). Further, the Sergeant at Arms may be directed to compel absent Members to attend House sessions in order to achieve the necessary quorum by escorting them to the chamber (Rule XX). Both practices have been rare, particularly in recent years. The Sergeant at Arms also enforces the rules relating to the privileges of the Hall of the House (House Rule II, clause 3(c)).

Protocol

The Sergeant at Arms performs a number of protocol and ceremonial duties. Among these duties are to lead formal

processions of House Members at ceremonial events (e.g., presidential inaugurations, joint sessions and meetings of Congress, and other formal addresses to Congress); to greet and escort visiting foreign dignitaries; and to organize and coordinate arrangements for travel for Members of Congress to congressional funerals.

Additionally, the Sergeant at Arms carries the mace into the House chamber each day the House is in session. According to the Office of the House Historian, the Sergeant at Arms places the mace atop a pedestal on the Rostrum, to the right of the Speaker. This symbolizes that the House is in session and the mace remains in place while the House is in session. **Figure 1** shows the House mace.

Figure 1. Mace of the U.S. House of Representatives



Source: U.S. Congress, Office of the House Historian, “Mace of the U.S. House of Representatives,” at <https://history.house.gov/Blog/2017/December/12-4-mace/>.

Administrative

The Sergeant at Arms performs administrative services in support of Members, staff, and visitors. Many of these functions are associated with House security and operations. These include the operation of the House appointment desk and the House parking garages and lots.

House rules require the Sergeant at Arms to report semiannually to the Committee on House Administration the financial and operational status of each function under Sergeant at Arms jurisdiction (Rule II, clause 3(e)). The reports generally provide financial information, describe current operations, and present new and future plans.

The House Sergeant at Arms is divided into eight divisions to support the office’s protection and security, decorum, protocol, and administrative functions. They are Immediate Office/Member Support; Protocol and Chamber Operations; House Garages & Parking Security; Information Services; Identification Services; Police Services/Law Enforcement; House Security; and Emergency Management.

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