

James Burrill (Jr.)

(25 Apr 1772 – 25 Dec 1820)

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774-1989

A Senator from Rhode Island; born in Providence, Rhode Island April 25, 1772; was graduated from Brown University at Providence in 1788; studied law, was admitted to the bar in 1791, and commenced practice in Providence, Attorney General of Rhode Island 1797-1814; member of the State house of representatives 1813-1816 and served as speaker 1814-16; chief justice to the State supreme court in 1816; elected to the U.S. Senate and served from March 4, 1817 until his death in Washington D.C., December 25, 1820. Interment in the Congressional Cemetery.



The National Intelligencer, Tuesday, December 27, 1820

It is with deep regret that we have to announce the death of another Member of the National Legislature. The Honorable James Burrill, Junior, a Senator from the State of Rhode Island, departed this life on Monday night, aged 49, of a pulmonary complaint, which afflicted him, with more or less severity, for many years -- though the fatal attack which put a period to his useful and honorable career was of short duration. The death of this gentleman must be a great loss to the State which he has so faithfully represented. The shock which it inflicts on the high body of which he was a distinguished member, is strongly marked by the unaffected sorrow that pervades the Senate. The character of the deceased requires no eulogy from our lips, but justice demands of us to say of him, that few men, within our knowledge, have discharged the Legislative functions with more credit or usefulness than himself.

To a strong mind and much practical information, he added an assiduity and attention to his duties, which were constantly felt in the deliberations of the Senate; and to these qualities were joined a benevolence of disposition and a candor and liberality of sentiment, which acquired for him an esteem that gave full weight and value to his talents and industry.

The remains of Mr. Burrill will be conveyed to the Senate Chamber, this morning, at half past 10 o'clock, where Divine Service will be performed. They will from thence be carried to the burying ground. The following gentlemen of the Senate will act as

Pall Bearers:

Mr. Mills,	Mr. Lanman
Mr. Pleasants	Mr. Roberts
Mr. Williams, of T.	Mr. Thomas

The National Intelligencer, Thursday, December 28, 1820

The Funeral of the late Mr. Burrill, of Rhode Island, took place yesterday. The Ceremonies attending it were more impressive than usual, owing to the corpse being brought into the body of the Senate Chamber, and there rested. The President of the Senate was in the chair, by his side the Speaker of the House; the Officers both Houses in attendance, and the committee of Arrangements, the chaplains of Congress and the physicians, as well as the officers of both Houses, clad with the externals of that grief, which appeared to be felt internally by all persons present, and particularly by the Members of the

Senate. An eloquent and appropriate exhortation was given on the occasion by the Rev. Mr. Ryland, concluded with prayer.

Of Mr. Burrill, it may be said, that his death is equally lamented by those who agreed with and those who differed from him in political opinion. He was a man without guile, whose amiable qualities disarmed animosity where his political course might otherwise have excited it.

It was impossible to witness the ceremonies of yesterday in the Senate Hall, without recalling the incident which took place this day three weeks, to which the subsequent death of Mr. B. has given a particular interest. We have no believe, certainly, in omens, and now allude to that incident only as having been nearly the last act of Mr. Burrill's public life, and as having been the occasion of his expressing a sentiment which is worthy of being recorded, even on his tomb.

Dictionary of American Biography

Burrill, James (Apr. 25, 1772-Dec. 25, 1820)

Lawyer, Rhode Island politician, and senator, was born in Providence, the son of James and Elizabeth (Rawson) Burrill. He prepared for college in the school of William Wilkinson, at that time a celebrated classical and mathematical teacher in Providence. After graduating from Rhode Island College (now Brown University) in 1788, he began the study of law in the office of Theodore Foster, a Providence lawyer of extensive practice. When Foster, elected to the Senate in May 1790, relinquished his law practice, Burrill went into the office of David Howell, a prominent Rhode Island politician, where he remained until he was admitted to the bar in September 1791. He then began the practice of law in Providence. In the summer of 1795 he served as secretary of protest against a new apportionment of state taxes that he had been ordered by the General Assembly, and in August 1797 served on the committee of three that welcomed President John Adams to the town of Providence. In the following month (Oct. 8, 1797) he married Sally Arnold. Although little more than a youth, Burrill now became attorney-general of Rhode Island, which post he held from October 1797 to May 1813. During the next seven years he served as trustee of Brown University. In politics he was a Federalist. On June 7, 1813, he was elected to the General Assembly, and in May 1814, was chosen speaker of the House, which office he held until he resigned from the House in October 1816. At the May session of the latter year he was elected chief justice of the supreme judicial court of Rhode Island. A contemporary, writing in after years, speaks of Burrill at this time as the acknowledged head of the Rhode Island bar (Henry L. Bowen, *Memoir of Tristram Burgess*, 1835, p. 38). On June 21, 1816, the General Assembly, in grand committee, unanimously elected Burrill to the Senate. He declined to serve, on the ground that there was some doubt as to the constitutionality of his election (*Rhode Island Acts and Resolves*, Feb. Sess., 1817, p. 5). The General Assembly, however, unanimously confirmed his election Feb. 19, 1817, and Burrill represented his state in the Senate from December 1817 until his death, during which time he came to be recognized as one of the leading orators in that body. The *Annals of Congress* and the *Senate Journal* testify to his activity. He served on the committees on commerce and manufactures and on the judiciary. His first important effort was on Nov. 26, 1818, when he unsuccessfully attempted to obtain an increase in the salaries of the chief justice and the associate justices of the Supreme Court of the United States (*Annals of Congress*, 15 Cong., 2 Sess., col. 27). The most important questions before the Senate were those of the admission of Maine and Missouri to the Union. Although a member of the committee that reported the resolution, Burrill vigorously opposed the bill in two important speeches. In the first, Jan. 13, 1820, he opposed binding the two questions together and urged that each be considered separately on its merits (*Ibid.*, 16 Cong., 1 Sess, col. 94-97). The second speech, delivered Dec. 7, 1820, was an attempt to prevent the passage of the resolution. He urged that Section 26, Article 3, of the Missouri constitution, which made it the duty of the Missouri legislature to prevent free negroes and mulattoes from settling in Missouri, was "... entirely repugnant to the Constitution of the

United States ..." on the ground that it distinguished between classes of citizens (Ibid., 16 Cong., 2 Sess., col. 45-50). The resolution passed the Senate Dec. 12, 1820. Burrill died in Washington and was given a memorable funeral in the Senate chamber (Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, D.C., Dec. 27, 1820).

[Wm. R. Staples, Annals of the Town of Providence from its First Settlement, to the Organization of the City Govt., in June 1832 (1843); Wm. G. Goddard, "Biog. Notices of Early Grads at Brown Univ.," Am Quart. Reg., May 1839, p. 360; Bio. Cong. Dir. (1928); R.I. Am. and General Advertiser, Jan. 2, 5, 9, 1821].", " 29", " 31-32"