

The Gavel Comes Down

A Scene Fit for History

Washington

On the wall beyond the House Judiciary Committee's double bank of seats, between two ceiling-high windows and just to the left of the chairman's padded chair, there is a dimming portrait of Hatton W. Sumners.

Sumners was a Democrat from Texas who served 17 terms in the House, a man few would probably remember or care about except that he was chairman of this committee during the last proceedings that resulted in an impeachment, in 1936.

Impeached was a federal judge named Halsted L. Ritter, who was ultimately convicted and removed from office.

So Sumner's portrait had a certain historical interest in a room where everyone knew more history was being made yesterday.

The television cameras were there to capture some of the history on film — four crane-tall, glaring lights, two aimed at the committee and two at the rows of straight-backed chairs and the three wooden tables pushed together facing the committee where the lawyers were to sit.

Dominating the room was a high platform of rough wood, skirted in black velvet, that supported a camera directed squarely at Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr., the chairman of the committee, and his colleagues, at the black and white nameplates, the neatly stacked paper cups for the ice water in the carafes

placed at intervals along the ledges where the 38 committee members' microphones were mounted.

In front of each chair was a notice that the "Impeachment Inquiry Hearings" would begin today, at 1 p.m., in this room, 2141, of the white marble imperial mausoleum called the Rayburn House Office Building.

Each member was also provided with a notepad, three thin handbooks of rules of procedure and an ashtray. The approximately 150 chairs were labeled — about 90 for the news media representatives, one for a staff member or relative of each committee member, and the others marked "reserved" for other members of Congress.

There were, in the end, just 11 seats left over for the public. There were only about 35 persons confined behind the yellow cords and brass stanchions outside in the corridor.

The first principal figure to arrive, at 12:45, was James St. Clair, President Nixon's lawyer, who told reporters that he believed "the President will not be impeached."

St. Clair was carrying a large black briefcase, of the general dimensions of a salesman's sample case. His appearance attracted a cluster of reporters.

Albert E. Jenner Jr., the chief minority counsel, attracted less attention. He and John Doar, the majority counsel, and their assistants, were seated at a long table to the left of St. Clair and his two aides, Malcolm Howard and John A. McCall.

Meanwhile, the committee members filtered in through the crowd and took their seats.

At 1:10 p.m. Rodino used

his gavel and there was silence in the high-ceilinged room with pale green walls.

They were there, he said, "to investigate fully and completely whether sufficient grounds exist for the House of Representatives to exercise its constitutional power to impeach Richard M. Nixon, president of the United States of America."

There was a brief statement from Representative Edward Hutchinson of Michigan, the committee's ranking Republican, then a few words from Harold Donohue (Dem-Mass.) about the committee going into executive session, followed by a brief, formal hassle and a quick roll-call vote that disclosed that one member of the committee, Walter Flowers (Dem-Ala.) was absent because, his office said later, of a long-scheduled ground-

breaking ceremony in his home district.

And at 1:27, Rodino used his gavel again to recess the committee until the room could be emptied of all the people, the lights, the cameras, until the doors could be closed and the lawyers' briefcases opened.

New York Times — LINDA CHARLETON