

NYT 5/12/74

A Historic Room, a Historic Proceeding

By LINDA CHARLTON
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 9— On the wall behind 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.

Mr. 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 Court named Halstad, I. Ritter, who was ultimately convicted and removed from office.

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

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.

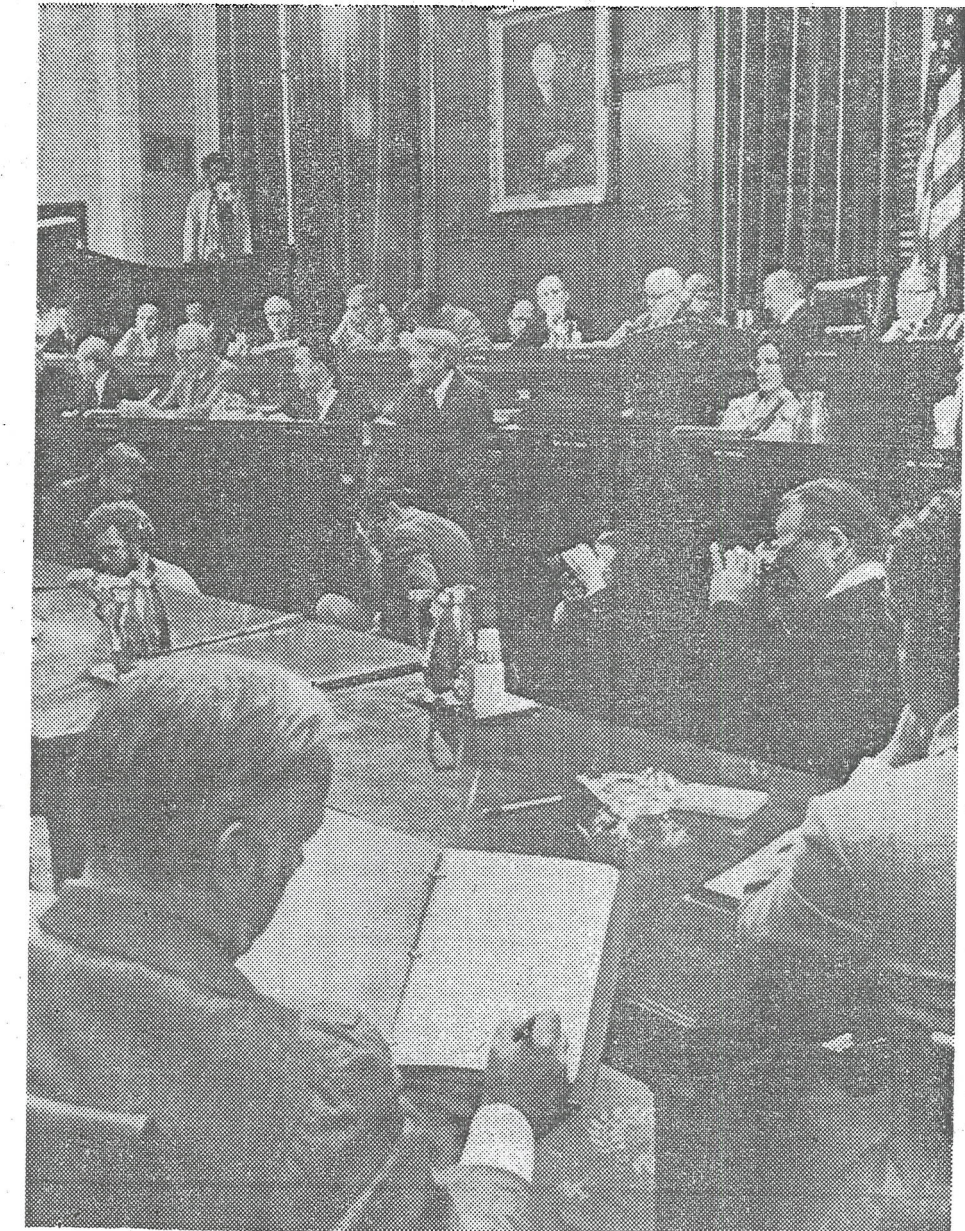
In the Spotlight

Dominating the room was a high platform of rough wood, skirted in black velvet, that supported a mammoth 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 of the 36 men and two women was provided with a note pad, three thin handbooks of rules of procedure and an ashtray. There were ashtrays for the spectators, too, set out under the chairs on the yellow-green rug with its stylized garlands and stars. The chairs, about 150, were labeled—90 for newsmen whereas about 300 had asked for admittance; one for a staff member or relative of each committee member, and others marked "reserved" for other members of Congress.

There were, in the end, just 11 seats left for the public. Maybe the word had spread because only about 35 persons waited in the corridor behind the yellow cords and brass stanchions for admittance. At their head was a



The New York Times/George Tames

James D. St. Clair, foreground, the President's chief lawyer, taking notes yesterday as Peter W. Rodino Jr., second from right in background, presided over the House Judiciary Committee's hearing. On the wall is a portrait of Hatton W. Sumners, a Democrat from Texas who was chairman of the committee in 1936 and presided over hearings that led to impeachment and conviction of a Federal judge, Halsted L. Ritter.

young woman who seemed to be wearing television makeup. Charleen Treffinger of Joppa, Ind., who reportedly missed only two days of last year's Senate Watergate hearings, was back. She had been in line since 9:30 A.M.

When the doors opened at 12:30, the technicians were still at work with their cables, wires and lights. The first principal to arrive, at 12:45, was James D. St. Clair, Mr. Nixon's lawyer, who told reporters outside the room that he believed "the President will not be impeached."

Just before he walked in, carrying a large black briefcase, someone had given a final polish to the small table where he and his two assistants, Malcolm Howard and John A. McCahill, were to sit. His arrival brought reporters clustering around him.

Albert E. Jenner Jr., the chief minority counsel, at-

tracted less attention. He and John M. Doar, the majority counsel, and their assistants, were seated at a long table to the left of Mr. St. Clair and his aides. To their left was the stenotypist, her machine on a small third table.

The committee members filtered in through the crowd. There were, it seemed, a high proportion of blue shirts, suitable for the bleaching lights of television.

It was not until 1:10 that Mr. Rodino used his gavel and there was silence in the high-ceilinged room with its pale green walls. Looking out toward the cameras and the huge American eagle on the opposite wall, Mr. Rodino spoke briefly about the matters that had brought everyone there.

They were there, he said, "to investigate fully and completely whether sufficient grounds exist for the House of Representatives to exer-

cise its constitutional power to impeach Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States of America."

There was a brief statement from Representative Edward Mutchinson of Michigan, the committee's ranking Republican, then a few words from Harold D. Donohue, a Massachusetts Democrat, 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, Democrat of Alabama, was absent because, his office said later, of a long sched-mony in his home district.

And at 1:27, Mr. 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.