

RG 9 Mayor (1797-present)

History

The municipal government established in 1796 was modeled after the federal constitution with a two-branch legislature (city council) and an independent executive (mayor). Reflecting a conservative philosophy, the charter restricted office holding and voting to men of means. The council's two branches provided both a voice to the general populace through a popularly elected lower chamber and a conservative influence through an upper chamber composed of the social and political elite. Members of the lower chamber, or first branch, of the council had to possess \$1,000 of assessed property and were popularly elected on an annual basis, two from each ward. Ballots were cast by voice vote by residents owning property worth at least thirty pounds currency. Every other year, voters selected one elector from each ward and the electors in turn chose the eight members of the upper chamber, or second branch, of the council. The electors also chose the mayor, who had to own \$2,000 worth of property. It was also necessary to own \$2,000 in property to serve in the second branch.

The 1796 charter granted the mayor and city council specific power to regulate markets, streets, lots, bridges, police, fire companies, sewers, public health, and waterways. The municipal government also levied taxes and enacted all laws necessary to govern the city within the authority conferred by the charter. While this system gave Baltimore more local authority than it had ever possessed, the state continued its traditional dominance in many areas; the state was, in fact, reluctant to part with its traditional power even into the twentieth century.

According to the charter, the mayor assumed the position of prime importance in the municipal government. Mayoral authority covered supervision of elections, enforcement of ordinances, and veto power. The mayor also appointed all city officers from a list supplied by the council; supervised the police force, harbor dredging, and street lighting; directed a variety of attempts to introduce fresh water into the city; and administered the municipal budget. Equipped with a broad range of responsibility and prerogative, the mayor's office was firmly established as the most significant element of Baltimore government by 1800.

Many aspects of the Baltimore executive changed during the antebellum period. The mayor for the first two decades under the 1796 charter selected one of two candidates named by the council for each official position. In 1817, the mayor gained authority to freely nominate any individual he wished with the advice and consent of the council. The most significant change occurred in 1833 when the state revised the city electoral system and provided for direct election of the mayor.