

# THE PRESIDENT'S ROOM



## Historical Highlights

In 1789 President George Washington wrote to the United States Senate recommending a chamber “for the joint business of the President and the Senate.” Although the Capitol’s early architects planned for such a room, it was not until extensions were added to the building in the 1850s that one was finally built.



“President’s Room, N. Wing U.S. Capitol” by Casimir Bohn, 1865

The provisions of the Constitution made the President’s Room an important necessity. As originally written, the Constitution scheduled the terms of office for the president and the Congress

to begin at the same time—noon, March 4. For this reason, outgoing presidents often had to visit the Capitol during the final hours of March 3 to sign last minute legislation that had been hurriedly passed by outgoing congresses. These visits frequently lasted through the night, with the president remaining at the Capitol the entire time.

Bill signing was not the only presidential activity during these late night visits. On March 3, 1865, while President Abraham Lincoln was working in the President’s Room, General Ulysses S. Grant received a message from General Robert E. Lee proposing a peace conference. Grant at once telegraphed Washington, D.C. for instructions. His message eventually reached Lincoln at the Capitol, where the president drafted an immediate reply, ordering Grant not to confer with Lee unless it was to consider terms of surrender. The following morning, Lincoln was in the room again, finishing business before proceeding to the inaugural platform on the Capitol’s East Front to renew his oath of office.

As president himself, Grant spent the final hours of the 44th Congress (March 3, 1877) in his room in the Capitol, working to sign his own accumulation of last-minute bills.



“President Grant and His Cabinet at the Capitol, Midnight, March 3” from Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, March 24, 1877

In 1885 President Chester Arthur, visiting the room to sign last-minute legislation, brought financial relief to the dying, poverty-stricken ex-President Grant by placing him on the army retired list as a lieutenant general. Similarly, just as his term in office expired, Benjamin Harrison signed a controversial bill in the room for the financial relief of Jefferson Davis’ widow.

In the early 20th century, President Woodrow Wilson attempted to revive George Washington’s practice of conferring in person with the Senate. To this end, Wilson used the President’s Room as often as three times a week for legislative meetings. In 1917 the *Baltimore Sun* noted that frequently during such sessions “the door to his office was left open, and visitors were treated to the unusual spectacle of a President actively at work in public.” When Inauguration Day fell on a Sunday in 1917, Wilson took the oath of office privately in the room. His public oath followed on the Capitol’s East Front the next day.



Calvin Coolidge in the President’s Room, June 7, 1924

The President’s Room was rarely used by presidents after 1921. The 20th Amendment, ratified in 1933, further eliminated the need for the room by unlinking the end of congressional and presidential terms, thus eliminating the troublesome crush



President Lyndon B. Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the President’s Room after the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

of last-minute legislation on March 3. History was made once again in the room in 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson chose it as the site for his signing of the historic Voting Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination at the polls.

On January 20, 1981, President Ronald Reagan established the tradition of an inaugural day visit to the President’s Room. Succeeding presidents have followed Reagan’s example, visiting the room immediately after the inaugural ceremony to sign documents and pose for photographers.

Except for these infrequent presidential visits, the room is used today primarily by senators for private meetings, interviews, and impromptu caucuses.

## Art Highlights

Early guidebooks referred to the President’s Room as “one of the gems of the Capitol.” Diarist Mary Clemmer Ames described it in glowing terms in the 1870s:



Executive Authority by Constantino Brumidi, 1859

aspects of the development of the nation, decorate the corners of the ceiling—Christopher Columbus, discovery; Amerigo Vespucci, exploration; Pilgrim leader William Brewster, religion; and Benjamin Franklin, history.

The frescoes, darkened with long neglect and periodic overpainting, were professionally restored in 1994–1995, uncovering their original vibrant colors and revealing Brumidi’s fine technique.

Most of the furnishings in the room have long been associated with this historic chamber. The two Turkish sofas and five large armchairs were acquired in 1875, and have been restored to their original appearance.



Chandelier, ca. 1896, following conversion for electricity

The chandelier is richly decorated with historical and allegorical figures.

The elaborate floor tiles were made by Minton, Hollins and Company of Stoke-Upon-Trent, England. Their excellent condition after nearly 150 years is a result of a unique “encaustic” tile-

“Gilding, frescoes, arabesques, glitter and glow above and around. There is not one quiet hue on which the tired sight may rest. Gazing, I feel an indescribable desire to pluck a few of Signor Brumidi’s red legged babies and pug-nosed cupids from their precarious perches on the lofty ceilings, to commit them to nurses or to anybody who will smooth out their rumpled little legs and make them look comfortable.”

The rich frescoes gracing the walls and ceiling were completed during 1859–1860 by Italian artist Constantino Brumidi. Brumidi, who emigrated to the United States in 1852, spent the last third of his life decorating the interior of the Capitol Building. He based his design for the President’s Room on Raphael’s ceiling of the *Stanza della Segnatura* in the Vatican Palace.

Adorning the walls, elegantly framed with floral motifs, are portraits of George Washington and the members of his first cabinet. On the ceiling are four allegorical figures personifying the foundations of government—Religion, Legislation, Liberty, and Executive Authority. Four historical portraits, each representative of fundamental

The President’s Room chandelier is the only one specifically made for the Capitol extensions that still remains in place. Originally gas-burning, it was later converted to electricity. Subsequent modifications added 33 electric lights and 6 additional arms.

making process. Encaustic tiles were made using layers of colored clay imbedded in a neutral clay base to create vibrant, durable colors. Ordinary tiles are merely painted with colored glazes, which wear away much more quickly.



Harris & Shaefer floor clock, 1887

Photographs of the room from the late 1890s show the floor clock in the same location where it stands today. It was acquired for \$250 in 1887 from Washington jewelers Harris & Shaefer. The mahogany table, often erroneously associated with President Lincoln, also dates from the late 19th century.

Today, the President’s Room is considered one of the showpieces of the Capitol’s Senate wing. It continues to be used for important national and ceremonial events, and serves as a constant reminder of the close relationship between the executive and legislative branches of our government.

On the cover: The President’s Room, ca. 1890, by Washington photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston

Johnson photograph courtesy Smithsonian Institution

Executive Authority and chandelier image courtesy Architect of the Capitol

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