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Suspended above the vice president’s chair is a carved gilded eagle and shield, a symbol of the strength and unity of the young American republic. The piece was planned by Latrobe for the chamber. While the date of the actual installation is unknown, an 1829 guidebook describes the vice president’s chair as “canopied by crimson drapery, richly embossed and held by talons of an o’er hovering eagle.”

Below the eagle and the elaborate canopy is the desk of the Vice President of the United States. The Constitution provides that “The Vice-President of the United States shall be President of the Senate...” (Art. I, Sec. 3). This original desk, faced with a red “modesty” curtain, was used by every vice president from George Clinton to John Breckinridge.

Also original to the room is one of the two Senate bill hoppers on display. It is believed that the piece was used by the Senate during the early 19th century to store and track bills; as a bill advanced through the legislative process it moved up the shelves of the hopper. It is traditionally held that the upper shelves had less space between them because so few bills survived to become law. The original bill hopper is on loan from the Smithsonian Institution.

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The United States Supreme Court then occupied the room from 1860 to 1935. Modifications at that time included removing the circular balcony and vice president’s dais, and installing the Court’s bench and marble busts of the early chief justices. The room was later used for committee meetings and other Senate business. In 1976, under the direction of the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, the Old Senate Chamber was restored to its 1850s appearance. In recent years the Senate has used the chamber for occasional closed-door sessions dealing with highly classified issues of national security. In 1999 senators returned to the chamber for an extraordinary joint party conference to draft procedures for the impeachment trial of President William Jefferson Clinton.

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Working drawing for the Senate Chamber by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, October 20, 1809

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The Old Senate Chamber when used by the Supreme Court, ca. 1934

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Details from marble mantel, c. 1812

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The restored Old Senate Chamber

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Of the original furniture and decorations in the Old Chamber, several pieces are significant. Among the earliest objects installed in the chamber are two white statuary mantels located on the east wall. These classical mantels were ordered by Benjamin Henry Latrobe about 1812. Before they were shipped, however, the Capitol was destroyed in the fire of 1814. During the rebuilding project, Latrobe learned that the mantelpieces still existed and were available for use in the chamber.

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Webster Replying to Hayne courtesy Boston Art Commission

S. Pub. 109–9

The Old Senate Chamber 1810–1859

Details from marble mantel, c. 1812

S. Pub. 109–9

George Washington by Rembrandt Peale, 1823

Senate bill hopper, ca. 1817

Webster Replying to Hayne courtesy Boston Art Commission

Latrobe drawing courtesy Architect of the Capitol

Prepared under the direction of the U.S. Senate Commission on Art by the Office of Senate Curator
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