

RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
FURNITURE



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Designed in the Beaux Arts style by the prominent New York City architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings, the Russell Senate Office Building was commissioned (along with its House counterpart, the Cannon Office Building), to relieve overcrowding in the United States Capitol. When first occupied in 1909, only three sides of the planned four-sided Senate structure were completed. Four three-room suites, 94 two-room suites, 10 single rooms, and 8 committee rooms provided much-needed office and meeting space.

To furnish the building, Carrère & Hastings chose to oversee the design and construction of custom-made pieces and hired New York cabinet-maker Thomas D. Wadelton to manufacture



Flat Top Desk



The Russell Senate Office Building, ca. 1920s.

full-scale models under their direction. Hastings wished the pieces to be “very American” and sought inspiration from “old books of the furniture of our forefathers.” Elliott Woods, the superintendent of the Capitol who administered the project, stressed the need to make the offices distinguished. After inspecting the models in Tuckahoe, New York, Hastings reported: “So far as I am capable of judging, I think it is going to be the swellest set of furniture of the time that I have ever seen. It is the real thing, and has all the character and dignity which it seems to me furniture for the United States senators should have.” Woods was “immensely impressed” and “quite enthusiastic” about the furniture, remarking on its “rich brown color” and



Round Arm Swivel Chair



Round Arm Chair

the “effects obtained by matching the veneers.” The models were placed on exhibition in the new House Office Building for contractors to review.

Following an in-depth review process, George W. Cobb, Jr., of New York was awarded the furniture contract on August 6, 1908. Cobb, who had submitted the lowest bid at \$61,715.70, a significant discount from the proposals of his 20 competitors, subcontracted the manufacturing work to S. Karpen & Bros. of Chicago and the Standard Furniture Company of Herkimer, New York.



At the beginning of the 20th century, S. Karpen & Bros. was one of the country’s leading makers of upholstered furniture. *(Michigan City Public Library)*



Table



Solomon Karpén, the eldest of nine brothers, founded S. Karpén & Bros. in 1880. The firm worked with T.D. Waderton and Carrère & Hastings to furnish both the Russell Building and the New York Public Library. (*Library of Congress*)

Cabinet and upholstery inspectors were dispatched by Superintendent Woods to examine the work in progress, and letters arrived almost daily providing him with reports on the carving, shaping, and gluing of the cabinetwork.

In December 1908 the superintendent and the Building Commission decided to finish the building floor by floor, instead of wing by wing, requiring 40



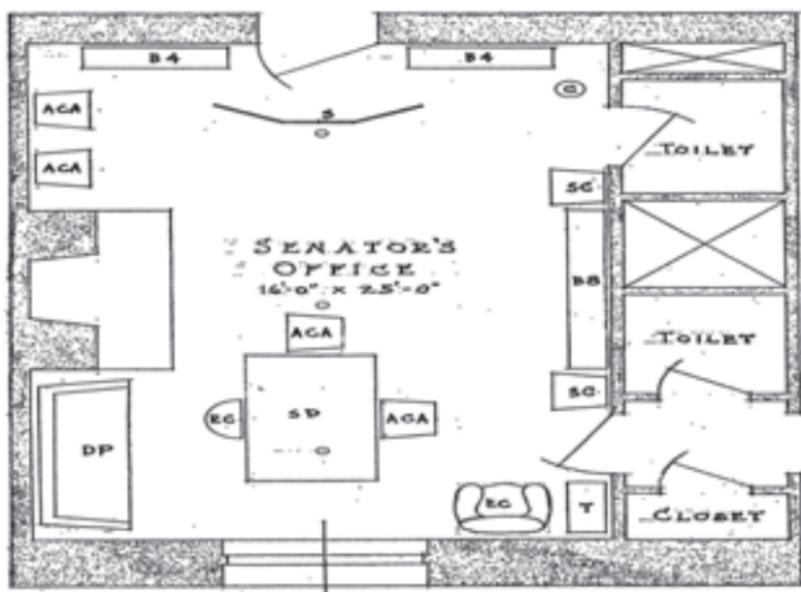
Square Arm Chair



Swivel Chair

sets of furniture be shipped by Christmas. As many as 15 cabinetmakers labored “day and night, 7 days a week” to meet the revised timetable. When the building officially opened on Friday, March 5, 1909, 92 sets of furniture had been delivered for each of the senators from the nation’s 46 states.

Initially, a senator’s suite consisted of two rooms. The larger suite served as the senator’s private office and connected to a slightly smaller



A desk, davenport, table, several chairs, and bookcases are shown in this 1933 furnishings plan for a senator’s office. (*Architect of the Capitol*)



Davenport



The Russell office suite occupied by Senator Guy Goff (R-WV), ca. 1925-1931. (*Library of Congress*)

room for the secretary. A standard set of mahogany office furniture was made for each suite. The senator's set consisted of a flat-top desk, a swivel desk chair, two arm chairs, one small chair, an easy chair, a davenport, and bookcases (ordered at the senator's discretion after the building was occupied). The secretary's set included a rolltop desk and swivel chair, a rolltop typewriter desk and chair, a table, two armchairs, three side chairs, and a bookcase.



Small Side Chair

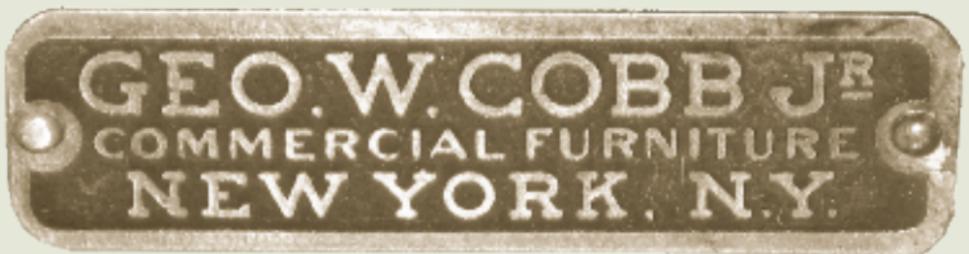


Easy Chair

A senator's furniture cost \$314.95, while that for the secretary's office cost \$271.58. After the building opened, the superintendent of the Capitol ordered additional furniture at prices set in the 1908 contract.

The original contract did not prohibit the manufacturers from duplicating the Senate furniture and selling it to the public. "Furniture specified for the U.S. Government" was advertised in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, and S. Karpen & Bros. catalogues.

In 1933 the Senate office building was enlarged with a fourth wing along First Street. More than a thousand pieces of furniture, identical in style but made of walnut, not mahogany, were commissioned from three New York firms: W.H. Gunlocke Chair Co., the Company of Master Craftsmen, Inc., and the Sikes-Cutler Desk Corporation. Owing to the larger three-room suites in the new wing, 26 senators chose to move and brought their mahogany furniture with them. As a result, the walnut pieces were delivered to newly vacated offices in the older section of the building.



George W. Cobb's label is still found on several 1909 Senate desks and tables.

The Russell furnishings were the largest single furniture contract issued by the Senate, numbering thousands of pieces, each one carefully designed and custom built from the finest materials. The furniture continues to be used daily and is prized by senators and staff. Its beauty and quality complement the rich Beaux Arts grandeur of the Senate's first office building.



Charles Curtis (and his secretarial staff shown above) continued to use a Russell suite after the senator became vice president, 1929. *(Library of Congress)*

Cover photo: Senator's suite, 1909. *(Architect of the Capitol)*



Side Chair



Arm Chair



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