# The Old Senate Chamber 1810–1859

UNITED STATES SENATE

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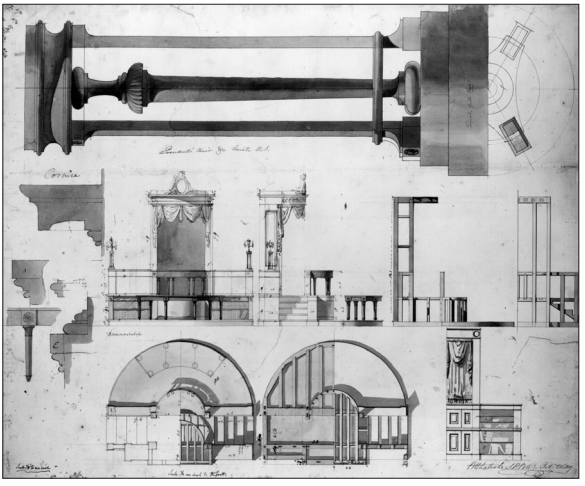
## Historical Highlights

When Congress moved to the new capital city of Washington in November of 1800, only the north wing of the Capitol Building had been completed. Here the Senate met in a two-story room on the ground floor, now the site of the Old Supreme Court Chamber. Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe later redesigned and rebuilt the space and created a new Senate chamber on the second floor, modeled after the amphitheaters of antiquity. The Senate moved into this chamber in Feb-



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

ruary of 1810, but the setting was short-lived. On August 24, 1814, the British marched on Washington and set fire to the Capitol, leaving the exterior scarred and blackened, the interior gutted, and the Senate chamber destroyed.

Congress met in temporary quarters across the street as work proceeded in rebuilding the Capitol. Latrobe enlarged his original design for the Senate chamber and, following his resignation, architect Charles Bulfinch completed the work by December of 1819.

During its residence in this chamber from 1810 to 1859, the Senate grew from a small advisory council to the primary forum for the great national debates of the mid-19th century—an era known as the Senate's "Golden Age." Here the "Great Triumvirate" of Senators Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, Henry Clay of Kentucky, and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina fiercely debated the issues of slavery, territorial expansion, and economic policy affecting the new nation. The Senate became the sounding board for the nation, and its galleries were packed with visitors hoping to witness these memorable proceedings. In this chamber senators forged a series of compromises that held the Union together in the four decades prior to the Civil War.

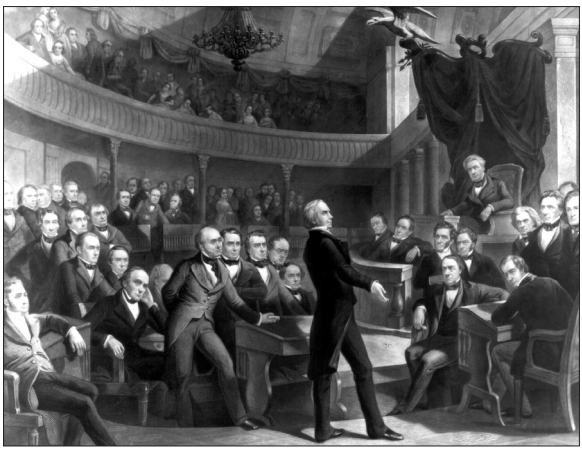
The first of these compromises concerned Missouri's petition to enter the Union as a slave state in 1819. The slavery controversy focused national attention on the Senate, where free and slave states were equally represented, requiring a compromise to resolve the issue. In forging the Missouri Compromise, Congress agreed to admit Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state and to bar slavery from all of the remaining Louisiana Purchase lands north of the 36° 30' north latitude, thus preserving the balance of political power between the two factions.

*Webster Replying to Hayne,* by G.P.A. Healy, 1851

A decade later, Senators Robert Hayne of South Carolina and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts met in dramatic confrontation over the issue of "Nullification." Vice President John C. Calhoun presided over the debates during which Hayne maintained the rights of the states to nullify federal laws, viewing the Union as a compact of sovereign states. In ringing oratory, Webster proclaimed the nationalistic intentions of the founding fathers and the Constitution. Warning of the possibility of civil war, he denounced as foolish the notion of "liberty first and Union afterwards," instead declaring "Liberty *and* Union, now and forever, one and inseparable."

In the 1840s problems of territorial expansion and the slavery question again embroiled the Senate after the country acquired new western lands from the Mexican War. In one last effort to halt sectional disintegration and preserve the Union from civil war, Henry Clay emerged from retirement and returned to the Senate. Although in his 73rd year, Clay was strong and vigorous, known for his magnetic and fiery manner. On January 29, 1850 Clay took the floor of the Senate chamber to present his program of compromise intended to reconcile the major issues dividing North and South. He proposed an omnibus bill admitting California as a free state, letting the people of New Mexico decide the slavery issue there, fixing the Texas boundary, prohibiting the slave trade in the District of Colum-

bia, and toughening federal fugitive slave laws. The ensuing debates produced dramatic speeches by the three mighty legislators of the era: Clay, Webster, and the dying Calhoun. After months of bitter struggle, Clay's proposals became law.



*The United States Senate, A.D. 1850* engraved by Robert Whitechurch, 1855, depicts Clay presenting his compromise proposals

Any hope for peace was shattered four years later when Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which voided the Missouri Compromise and left the question of slavery in Kansas to those settled there. Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a strong antislavery supporter, attacked the bill and personally criticized Douglas, James Mason of Virginia, and Andrew Butler of South Carolina in his famous five-hour speech, "The Crime Against Kansas." Butler's nephew, Congressman Preston Brooks, took offense and came to the chamber, where he denounced Sumner and began repeatedly striking him with a cane. Due to the injuries, Sumner returned only intermittently to the chamber over the next three years. "Bleeding Kansas," as it came to be known, signaled the end of an era of compromise and sectional accommodation in the Senate. In this atmosphere of tension, the Senate moved into its new chamber in 1859 and on to the trials of the Civil War.


Lithograph of caning of Senator Charles Sumner, May 22, 1856

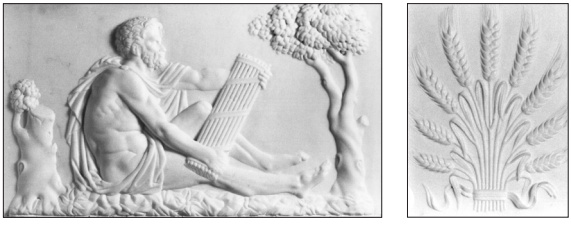
The United States Supreme Court then occupied the room from 1860 to 1935. Modifications at that time included removing the circular balcony and vice president's dais, and installing the Court's bench and marble busts of the early chief justices. The room was later used for committee meetings and other 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.

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

## Art Highlights

The restored Old Senate Chamber

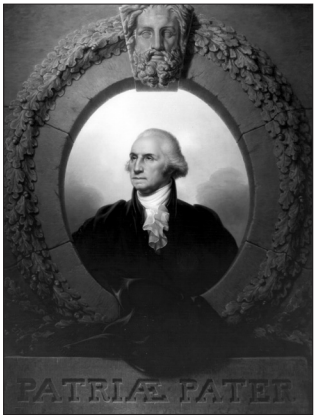
Today's visitors to the Old Senate Chamber will find reproductions of senator's desks arranged in four semi-circular rows. The original mahogany desks are now located in the present Senate chamber and were made by New York cabinetmaker Thomas Constantine, who in 1819 supplied "48 desks for Members, each $34." Constantine also provided 48 matching chairs; this design is still used today for chairs made for the present Senate chamber.



Details from marble mantel, c. 1812

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.




*George Washington* by Rembrandt Peale, 1823

On the east wall hanging high above the vice president's dais is a portrait of George Washington, which is among the Senate's earliest and most significant fine arts acquisitions. American artist Rembrandt Peale created the work in 1823, basing it on his earlier life studies of the former president. The artist hoped it would become the "standard likeness" of the first president, and he framed Washington with a painted stone porthole surrounded by an oak wreath and topped by a keystone bearing the head of Jupiter.

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-Presi-

dent 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.

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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