

THE VICE PRESIDENT'S ROOM



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Historical Highlights

The United States Constitution designates the vice president of the United States to serve as president of the Senate and to cast the tie-breaking vote in the case of a deadlock. To carry out these duties, the vice president has long had an office in the Capitol Building, just outside the Senate chamber.



Earliest known photographic view of the room, c. 1870

Due to lack of space in the Capitol's old Senate wing, early vice presidents often shared their room with the president. Following the 1850s extension of the building, the Senate formally set aside a room for the vice president's exclusive use. John Breckinridge of Kentucky was the first to occupy the new Vice President's Room (S-214), after he gavelled the Senate into session in its new chamber in 1859.

Over the years, S-214 has provided a convenient place for the vice president to conduct business while at the Capitol. Until the Russell Senate Office Building opened in 1909, the room was the only space in the city assigned to the vice president, and it served as the sole working office for such men as Hannibal Hamlin, Chester Alan Arthur, and Theodore Roosevelt.



Death of Henry Wilson, 1875

Several notable and poignant events have occurred in the Vice President's Room over the years. In 1875 Henry Wilson, Ulysses S. Grant's vice president, died in the room after suffering a stroke. Six years later, following President James Garfield's assassination, Vice President Chester Arthur took the oath of office here as president.

Two former presidents, Ulysses S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes, stood among those attending the ceremony. In 1919 Vice President Thomas Marshall signed the constitutional amendment granting nationwide suffrage to women. On April 12, 1945, Vice President Harry S. Truman was on the House side of the Capitol when he received a telephone call informing him to come immediately to the White House. His biographer records that Truman “ran through the echoing old Crypt, past the Senate barber shop, then up a flight of stairs with brass banisters to his office—to get his hat.” This marked Truman’s last action as vice president. When he arrived at the White House he learned that Franklin Roosevelt had died.

The close proximity of the Vice President’s Room to the Senate chamber has allowed the vice president easy access to the members when the Senate is in session. For over 125 years, the room has provided an elegant and convenient setting for ceremonial functions, informal party caucuses, press briefings, and private meetings.



Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir visits with former Vice President Hubert Humphrey (third from right) and other members of Congress in the Vice President’s Room, 1974

Decorative Arts

The Vice President's Room was initially furnished in a modest style. Few of those original pieces exist today, but the marble mantel and colorful Minton floor tiles manufactured in England are both part of the room's first decoration. Many of the room's present furnishings, such as the ornate gilded mirror and the matching Victorian window cornices, date to the late 19th century.



View of the room, April 1868

Of all the 19th century vice

presidents who occupied this room, none affected its style and decoration as significantly as Garret Augustus Hobart, who won election with William McKinley in 1896. Senate vouchers detail his

purchases of imported silk mohair carpeting, Neapolitan silk curtains, numerous Persian throw rugs, and “a silk velour slumber robe” made to order to match the velour cushions on his office sofa.



Vice President Garret A. Hobart

The double-pedestal, mahogany desk is sometimes referred to as the “Wilson desk,” an erroneous association with Vice President Henry Wilson. Every vice president from Garret Augustus Hobart to Lyndon Johnson used the desk. In 1969 it was loaned to the White House and served as the Oval Office desk for Presidents Nixon and Ford. It was returned to the Senate in 1977.



Vice President Lyndon Johnson and Senate Sergeant at Arms Joseph Duke, 1963

The Senate purchased the floor clock in 1898 from Washington jeweler Harris and Schafer for \$600. Vice President John Nance Garner used the clock to time his entrance into the Senate chamber. As the chimes began to ring fifteen seconds before the clock struck twelve, Garner would stop whatever he was doing and walk to the chamber, reaching his seat precisely at noon.

The small gilded mirror has been displayed in the room since the completion of the Senate extension in 1859. It was most likely transferred from the old Senate wing. Although various legends attribute the mirror's original ownership to Dolley Madison or John Adams, no documentation exists, and the mirror's origin remains a mystery.



The ornately carved rosewood cabinet dates from the late 19th century. Some call it the “John Nance Garner Liquor Cabinet,” because of its association with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first vice president, who invited visitors to “strike a blow for liberty” with its contents. Among the objects currently displayed on its shelves is a sterling silver desk set that was presented by the Senate to Vice President Adlai Stevenson in 1897, and recently donated to the Senate by former Illinois Senator Adlai E. Stevenson III.



Fine Arts

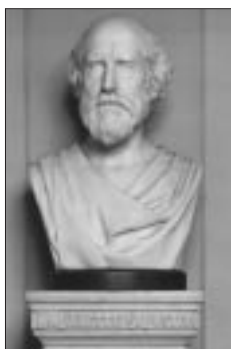
In 1885, the Senate voted to place a marble bust of Henry Wilson in the Vice President's Room, to honor one of the Senate's most popular presiding officers. Before being elected vice president, Wilson had served as a senator from Massachusetts from 1855 to 1873. He played an important role during the Civil War, as chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, and throughout his career championed legislation to aid the working class.



Henry Wilson by Daniel Chester French, 1885

The Wilson bust served as the genesis for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection, displayed in the Senate chamber gallery and on the second floor of the Capitol's Senate wing.

A native of Connecticut, Lafayette Foster was elected as one of the first Republican senators in 1854. Reelected in 1860, he became president pro tempore five years later. With the death of Abraham Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson succeeded to the presidency, and Foster became acting president of the Senate and keeper of the keys to the Vice President's Room.



Lafayette Foster by Charles Calverley, 1878

On the cover: The Vice President's Room around 1900 by noted Washington photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston

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