



U.S. Office of Surface Mining

News Release



For immediate release
May 26, 2004

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OSM Office was World War II nerve center

(Washington, DC) -- Before there was a Pentagon, American military leaders and their British counterparts planned the defeat of Nazi Germany from an Octagon — the Octagon Office in what is now the South Interior Building at 1951 Constitution Ave, NW in Washington.

The distinctive room is now the office of Jeff Jarrett, director of the Office of Surface Mining, but when the building was constructed in 1932 it housed the Public Health Service. Architect J.H. deSibour, designed the three-story "E"-shaped marble building, including a very handsome private office for the Surgeon General himself.

The room, an octagon shape placed where the west leg of the "E" joins the front wing, is embellished with pecan paneling, ornamental carving, a molded plaster ceiling, parquet floor, marble fireplace, and crystal chandeliers.

The room is reputed to be the largest government office in Washington, even larger than the Oval Office in the White House.

In December, 1941, America entered the Second World War and a meeting known as the "Arcadia Conference" was held next door in the Federal Reserve Building. There President Franklin Roosevelt and Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill united the leadership of their armed forces under a Combined Chiefs of Staff who were to be the supreme military body for strategic direction of the Anglo-American war effort.

To insure the closest possible communications between London and Washington, it was decided that representatives of the British Chiefs should remain in Washington and confer daily with their American allies.

On January 30, President Roosevelt announced that the Public Health Service Building was to be renamed the Combined Chiefs of Staff Building. The American half of the CCS, which later became the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, held its first meeting on February 9, 1942, in this room.

The Octagon Room became the room where the Combined Chiefs of the two allied nations met to make decisions affecting the lives of millions of people during World War II. The auditorium on the building's first floor became a map room. During the war, the doors of the map room were closed and sealed, and an opening was cut in the floor to allow a sliding carriage to raise maps from the basement-level boiler pit.

By the close of the war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had held 201 meetings, most of which took place in the Combined Chiefs of Staff Building. Many critical decisions on Allied war strategy and battle plans were decided by senior military officials at this location.

While Allied Generals planned strategy in the Octagon Room, history was also being made in a secret structure on the roof.

There a temporary wooden structure atop the center wing of the building was the site of planning for the Manhattan Project, the super-secret effort that developed the atomic bomb.

The Manhattan Project was deemed so important to the war effort that the building was sealed, and sharpshooters maintained a round-the-clock vigil to guard it.

After the war, the building was occupied by the Atomic Energy Commission, then the National Science Foundation. In 1965, the Department of the Interior took over the building and it housed the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1972 it was the scene of a dramatic seven-day takeover by American Indian activists attempting to make their concerns known to the government and public.

In 1977 the building gained its current tenant, the newly formed Office of Surface Mining. As a major renovation of the building was going on the new OSM staff was writing the regulations needed for implementation of the Surface Mining Law. While the renovation was being done OSM employees moved from one section of the building to another until January 1981, when work was completed.

Shortly after OSM moved into the building, the temporary Manhattan Project structure on the roof was demolished. Preservationists attempted to stop the demolition; but, were unsuccessful. Each day as the wrecking ball finished its work preservationists would salvage pieces of the wooden walls that Manhattan Project scientists had used to scribble notes on.

Today, the Octagon Office, the former WWII nerve center, has been restored to its condition during that era. The room suite is detailed with filigree paneling, chandeliers, and a plaque designating the room as an important historic military location.