

THE U.S. SENATE  
DEMOCRATIC  
LEADER'S SUITE



# THE U.S. SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADER'S SUITE



---

The rooms that today comprise the Democratic leader's suite were a centerpiece of the 1859 Senate extension. This suite occupied a prominent location on the second, or "principal" floor, directly across the hall from the Senate Chamber. The Senate extension and its companion House extension, designed by Thomas U. Walter and built by Montgomery C. Meigs, were meant to inspire visitors to reflect upon the Capitol as a symbol of American democracy. To this end, the extensions contained the finest workmanship, the most exquisite building materials, and the latest technologies then available.



View of the principal corridor near the Senate Chamber looking towards room S-224, ca. 1900

## History

Unlike most spaces in the Senate wing of the Capitol, which have had many different tenants, records indicate that the rooms of the Democratic leader's suite have had only two occupants, the secretary of the Senate offices (secretary, chief clerk, executive clerk, and financial clerk), and the Democratic leader of the Senate.



*"Office of the Secretary of the Senate—Preparing the Summons for President Johnson to Appear before the Court of Impeachment" from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, March 28, 1868*

The Office of the Secretary of the Senate was the first occupant of rooms S-221 through S-224 when the new extension opened. The secretary plays an essential role in the functioning of the Senate, overseeing an array of legislative, administrative, and financial services neces-

sary for the daily operation of the Senate. The importance of the secretary's role was reflected in the assignment of desirable office space so close to the Senate Chamber.

An elected officer, the first secretary was chosen on April 8, 1789, just two days after the Senate achieved its first quorum for business. From the start, the secretary was responsible for keeping the minutes and records of the Senate, disbursing payrolls, receiving and transmitting official messages to and from the president and the House of Representatives, and purchasing supplies.



View of S-221, ca. 1860

The secretary's offices were fortunate enough to remain in their prime location for more than a century.

In 1987 Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd traded spaces with the secretary, thus moving the Democratic leader's office into the suite, where it remains to this day. Other Democratic leaders who have occupied the suite are George J. Mitchell, Thomas A. Daschle, and Harry Reid.

The positions of party floor leader are not included in the Constitution, as are the president of the Senate (the vice president of the United States) and the president pro tempore. Instead, the posts of majority and minority leader evolved out of necessity. During the 19th century, floor leadership was exercised by the chair of the party conference and the chairs of the most powerful standing committees. The first floor leaders were formally designated in the 1920s. Today, the Democratic and Republican leaders are elected

by the members of their party in the Senate at the beginning of each Congress. They serve as spokespersons for their parties' positions on issues and spend much of their time on or near the Senate floor—opening the day's proceedings, keeping legislation moving, and protecting the rights and interests of party members.

When the Senate wanted to honor Senator Byrd's "unequaled service" to the institution and years of leadership, they formalized his association with the suite of rooms. In 1989 a Senate resolution designated rooms S-221 through S-224 as the "Robert C. Byrd Rooms."

### **Decorative Highlights**

Throughout the 1859 extension, colorful and intricately patterned English floor tiles from Minton & Company enliven the spaces. Every office boasts groin-vaulted ceilings, monumental doors and windows set in ornate cast-iron frames, and carved marble fireplace mantels, in addition to unique decorative details.



This historic valance adorns one of the west facing windows

Touring the Democratic leader's suite, the gilded features—window valences, overmantel mirrors, and plasterwork—stand out with their gold leaf finishes. The valences include both historic pieces and replicas, and were

either produced by Capitol carpenters as early as 1856, or purchased for the building in the late 1880s. Similarly, the Rococo Revival mirrors were purchased for the Capitol beginning in the 1880s.

Equaling the sparkle of the gold leaf are the nickle-plated brass and crystal chandeliers and wall sconces that are seen throughout the suite. While not the original light fixtures, these crystal chandeliers are early 1900s copies of chandeliers from the White House. According to accounts, three White House chandeliers were installed in the Capitol and generated so much interest that replicas were produced for many offices. To this day, the crystal chandeliers are prized by those occupants who are lucky enough to have them.

While many rooms in the Capitol have spectacular views, the placement of the Democratic leader's suite in the southwest corner of the extension allows for views of the Mall as well as the



The jib door in S-221 leads to this balcony

Capitol dome. In S-221 the view can be enjoyed through what appear to be identical windows in the west wall, or from the portico balcony. The balcony is accessed through the north window—actually a jib or “window” door, and one of only eight in the extension. By lifting the bottom sash and opening a pair of small doors under the sill, the window functions as a door, providing access to the balcony while maintaining the appearance of a window to keep with the room and building’s symmetry.

Another unusual architectural element, only one of four in the extension, is found in room S-222. The stained glass window depicting a shield, an eagle, flags of the U.S., and the motto *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, one), grabs the attention of all visitors. The window provides light to the lower staircase on the other side of the wall, thus accounting for its seemingly unusual placement.

The senator’s private office, S-223, features a fireplace mantel that is unique in the Capitol in both the choice of marble type and heavy design. The



Stained glass window in S-222





Fireplace mantel and mirror in S-223

origins of the dark green marble is a mystery, and it is not used anywhere else in the Capitol. The design employs a simple composition, with two columns supporting a lintel decorated with a row of dentils.

Another highlight of the room that denotes its use by the senator is the ceiling decoration, which contains four medallions, one of which has the recent tradition of displaying the state seal of the room's occupant. The other medallions are filled with the Great Seal of the U.S., a freedom (or liberty) cap with laurel branches, and the Seal of the U.S. Senate.

Located to the east of the senator's office, S-224 also has a fireplace mantel with an interesting story. Different in its firebox design and decoration, this fireplace was moved to the room in 1935. Unlike other fireplaces in the extension that had shallow fireboxes to accommodate coal



either produced by Capitol carpenters as early as 1856, or purchased for the building in the late 1880s. Similarly, the Rococo Revival mirrors were purchased for the Capitol beginning in the 1880s.

Equaling the sparkle of the gold leaf are the nickle-plated brass and crystal chandeliers and wall sconces that are seen throughout the suite. While not the original light fixtures, these crystal chandeliers are early 1900s copies of chandeliers from the White House. According to accounts, three White House chandeliers were installed in the Capitol and generated so much interest that replicas were produced for many offices. To this day, the crystal chandeliers are prized by those occupants who are lucky enough to have them.

While many rooms in the Capitol have spectacular views, the placement of the Democratic leader's suite in the southwest corner of the extension allows for views of the Mall as well as the



The jib door in S-221 leads to this balcony

