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The History of the U.S. Senate Clerk's Desk

Spring 3-3-2020

Cast of Characters

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THOMAS U. WALTER, 1804-1887

Thomas Ustick Walter, designer of the U.S. Senate Clerk's Desk, was appointed Architect of the Capitol from 1851-1865 after winning a design competition for the Capitol Extension Project. Although his ambitious designs won him this prestigious position, his excessive spending did not go unnoticed. In 1853, Captain Montgomery C. Meigs began his role as the checks and balances for Walter, and their working relationship almost immediately soured. Walter, growing tired of answering to Meigs, designed the Senate Clerk's Desk, not out of inspiration, but instead out of frustration and revenge.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERY C. MEIGS, 1816-1892

Montgomery Cunningham Meigs became a major part of the desk's story when he was appointed Superintendent and Captain of Engineers of the Capitol Extension on March 23rd, 1853. He and Walter developed a contentious relationship over the course of the project, often butting heads over design matters. The clerk's desk in particular became a major point of contention for the two, bringing their feud to a fever pitch.

JOHN B. FLOYD, 1806-1863

John Buchanan Floyd was appointed Secretary of War in 1857 after Jefferson Davis, in the midst of the Capitol Extension Project and the great feud between Meigs and Walter. Floyd's loyalty to the Democratic Party won Walter great favor in his position, as opposed to Meigs's previous partnership with Davis. Floyd constantly allowed Walter to make all the executive decisions without considering Meigs's objections, including the desk's designs. Meigs's designs for the desk had been submitted, and construction had already begun when Walter submitted his own designs and suggested Walter's be thrown out, all while Meigs was out of town on business. Floyd agreed with Walter, upsetting Meigs greatly.

PRINGLE SLIGHT, 1790-1860

Pringle Slight was appointed Foreman of the Carpenters for the Capitol Extension Project by Walter in 1851. He seemed to be the obvious choice for the position, given his extensive history working in the Capitol on odd jobs since 1825, when he was hired to work on the first Capitol dome. His craftsmanship was used to finish the Senate Clerk's Desk. The dispute over the appropriate designs for the desk caused Slight to cease production on Meigs's designs and start on Walter's, prolonging the amount of time it took to construct the desk properly.