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Senate Clerk's Desk

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From D.C. to Kentucky: The History of the United States Senate Clerk's Desk

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FROM D.C. TO KENTUCKY:
THE HISTORY OF THE U.S. SENATE CLERK'S DESK

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By
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April 2020

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ABSTRACT

This Mahurin Honors College Capstone Experience aims to highlight the importance of the historical object and accurately document the complete history of the former United States Senate Clerk's Desk, placed in the chamber in 1859 and removed in 1951. The desk's first and last occupants were Kentucky natives and civil servants, and its current resting place is in Western Kentucky University's Kentucky Museum. Through research that began in the nation's capital, and a journey to follow the desk's paper trail, the object's massive historical legacy and close ties to the state of Kentucky may live on. Along with a traditional research report of the desk, an online exhibit has been created in order to allow visitors of the Kentucky Museum to learn about the desk without viewing the object, considering the desk is not in a condition to be exhibited at the moment. By completing this project, historical gaps will be filled for future researchers and others interested in the architectural history of the Senate.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Kentucky Museum on Western Kentucky University's campus owns a desk that has played a vital and singular role in the history of the United States. Although the desk plays a key role in our nation's history, it lacks proper documentation and interpretation in order to exhibit it correctly. This paper is the first scholarly attempt to document and interpret this important piece of American material culture.

The history of the United States Senate clerk's desk, completed in 1859 in time for the United States Capitol Extension, creates a unique window into mid-nineteenth century creative practices as well as visual political culture. Upon finding out the desk is currently in storage at the Kentucky Museum on Western Kentucky University's campus, one may ask themselves how a desk that resided at the front of the United States Senate for almost one hundred years ended up there in the first place. Utilizing funds from a Faculty-Undergraduate Student Engagement Grant from WKU, as well as various documents, images, and transcripts covering the Capitol Extension of 1859, this essay aims to provide a clear and concise provenance of the desk and create a colorful illustration of the desk's character, hopefully opening the door for further research and proper care of the desk in the future.

Material culture documents history in ways that often texts cannot. Aesthetic choices often reveal intrinsic personal and political motivations and can play a key role in interpreting the past. With this theory in mind, I believe it is necessary to create a holistic document to narrate to story of the previous United States Senate clerk's desk so that others may discover the desk's unique character and visitors to the Kentucky Museum can learn of this state's connection to their nation's capital. My project documents the desk and its path to Bowling Green, Kentucky for future researchers and historians so that they may be able to better use the desk as a teaching

tool. The intention of this essay is to uncover truths through historical analysis and artistic investigation.

SECTION TWO: A CAPITOL-SIZED BRAWL

The U.S. Senate Clerk's desk's journey began on March 1, 1843 with Daniel D. Bernard of New York in the House of Representatives. It was on this day that the House adopted Bernard's motion to expand the original Capitol Building. Initially, the motion only mentioned extending the south end of the wing for the House.¹ The following report compiled by Colonel J. J. Abert, Corps of Topographical Engineers, completed in January 1844, stated that a similar extension should be considered as well for the Senate. The matter was then left for six years until, after multiple unapproved reports for the extension project, Jefferson Davis, then a member of the Senate Committee on Public Buildings, suggested an amendment to a civil and diplomatic appropriations bill for the extension that was adopted by the Senate and the House after a slight modification and price change. The bill was signed by President Millard Fillmore on September 30th, 1850 and the plan was in motion.²

Several days earlier, on September 26th, 1850, the Senate passed a resolution inviting architects to submit concepts for the project.³ Thomas Ustick Walter was one of the architects who responded to the invite. Walter was a native-born Philadelphian who became an architect through practical experience with his father, a master bricklayer. After years of back and forth between his formal schooling and practical experience in an architectural office as an architectural and mechanical draft student, Walter entered private practice in Philadelphia in 1830. During this time, he rose to fame, winning many design competitions across New England,

¹ Homer T. Rosenberger, "Thomas Ustick Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 50 (1948): 279, www.jstor.org/stable/40067332.

² *Ibid*, 281.

³ *Ibid*, 283.

including the Philadelphia County Prison and Girard College, a fine example of Greek Revival in the United States.⁴

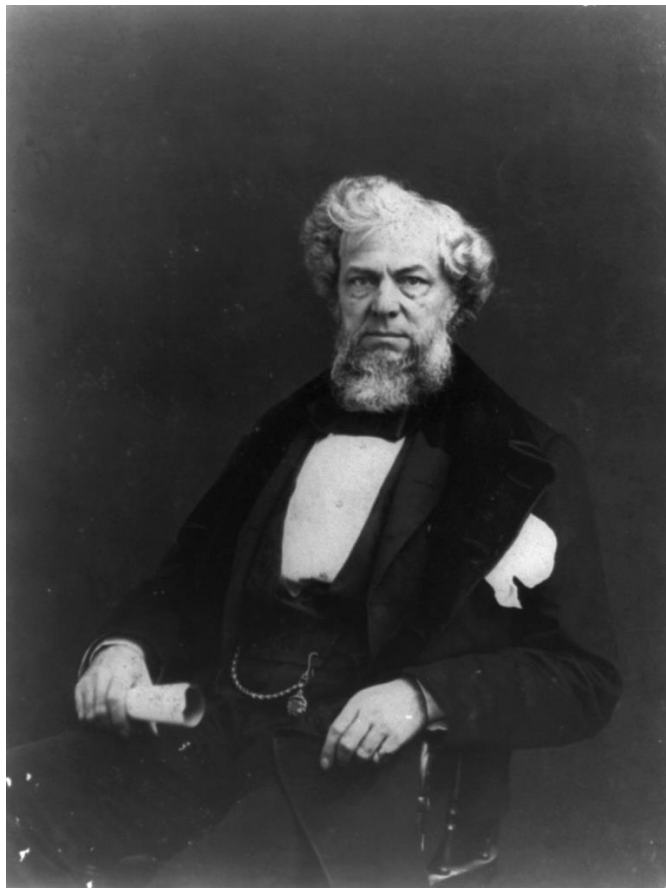


Figure 1. *Thomas Ustick Walter, Architect of the Capitol, 1851-1865*, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-86319.

Upon Walter's arrival in Washington, at the age of forty-six, he was appointed as the lead architect on the extension project by then-President of the United States, Millard Fillmore. This was not the original plan from the Senate, which was actually to divide the reward money among the four best architects and allow Robert Mills, Architect of Public Buildings, to combine the best aspects of each design to form an ideal aggregate structure using the ideas of some of New England's best and brightest architects. Despite this plan, President Fillmore seemed to believe

⁴ Mario E. Campioli, "Thomas U. Walter, Edward Clark and the United States Capitol," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 23, no. 4 (1964): 211, doi:10.2307/988181.

that there was no need for a “middleman” of sorts, and approved Walter’s plans on his own on June 10th, 1851. The next day, Thomas Ustick Walter was sworn in as the Architect of the Capitol Extension.⁵

Walter’s grand plan for the extension focused on three major undertakings: the addition of a Senate Wing and a House Wing with connecting corridors, and a new larger, more grandiose dome.⁶ These plans were far more than just a display of the grandeur of the nation, they were also a practical display of a new nation’s success. The Capitol Extension project was started because the nation itself was expanding at a rapid rate, and as the United States gained more land, more senators and representatives began to appear in the nation’s capital. According to Secretary of State Daniel Webster, during his address at the cornerstone ceremony for the Capitol Extension on July 4th, 1851, the expansion of the nation’s size in that year compared to 1793, when construction on the original Capitol began, was unimaginable. There was an “increase in states from fifteen to thirty-one, an increase in number of Representatives and Senators in Congress from 135 to 295, a growth in population from 3,929,328 to 23,267,498, (...) and a growth in Washington from zero to 40,075.”⁷ There was simply no room left in the crowded, dimly lit halls and chambers of the original building, designed by Dr. William Thornton, Stephen Hallet, and famed architect Charles Bulfinch.⁸ Something had to be done, and Walter was the man for the job.

As stated earlier, construction began on the Capitol Extension projection July 4th, 1851 during the cornerstone ceremony. According to letter correspondences to President Fillmore from Walter, construction was moving swiftly, even though there had been several hiccups, such

⁵ Rosenberger, “Walter and the Completion of United States Capitol,” 283.

⁶ *Ibid*, 273.

⁷ Rosenberger, “Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol,” 279.

⁸ *Ibid*, 273.

as the sandy soil not providing a steady base for the foundations of the North Wing.⁹ Everything was running smoothly until a request for an additional one million dollars was brought up by Walter to Congress, in which the proposal was fiercely debated. On March 16th, 1852, after much discussion, the Committee on Public Buildings was ordered by the Senate to conduct a thorough investigation of Walter's work and progression of the approved plans for the Extension.¹⁰ Though they did not find Walter at fault for any wrongdoing, from this moment on he was kept under a close watch to ensure further spending was absolutely necessary. Supervision of the project was transferred from the Secretary of the Interior to the Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, and several days after the transition of power, Davis selected a Superintendent and Captain of Engineers on March 23rd, 1853.¹¹ At this point in time, another major figure in the desk's history entered the picture: Captain Montgomery Cunningham Meigs.

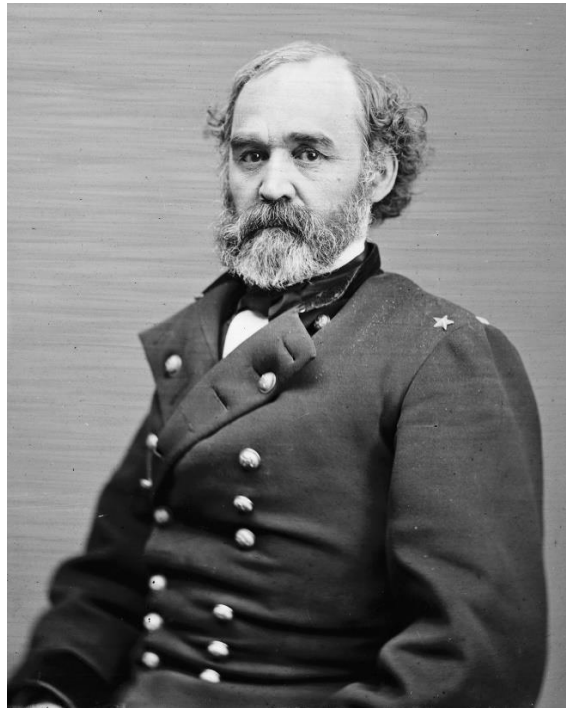


Figure 2. *Montgomery C. Meigs*, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-cwpb-07055.

⁹ *Ibid*, 291.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 296.

¹¹ Rosenberger, "Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol," 297.

Captain Meigs, born in Augusta, Georgia in 1816, spent his youth in Philadelphia. After graduating from the U.S. Military Academy, Meigs took on the role of army engineer.¹² After his time in the army, Meigs became a famed engineer in Washington, known for the Washington Aqueduct, a crucial part of early life in the nation's capital. He is also known for other stunning engineering marvels such as the Union Arch Bridge near Cabin John, Maryland, which was, for 50 years, the largest masonry arch in existence.¹³ Davis chose Meigs not only because of his experience in the field of engineering, but also because Meigs considered Davis a mentor and political asset. Meigs was often met with fierce objections concerning almost all aspects of the project, from the choice of contractors to the appointment of Meigs himself, given he was a military man supervising a civilian project, but Davis remained one of his staunch supporters in Congress.¹⁴ Meigs's role as Superintendent and Captain of Engineers for the Capitol Extension entailed many responsibilities besides maneuvering political roadblocks for the project, such as business management, contracts, heating, cooling, and acoustic engineering of the building additions, and management of funds. These responsibilities that Meigs assumed meant that, although Walter remained the highest paid individual on the project, he would become, in many ways, Meigs's subordinate, as well as many of the contractors, engineers, and builders that were hired for the project. As one can imagine, this new supervision did not go smoothly. Only briefly did Meigs and Walter get along and work together in a reasonable fashion.¹⁵ Soon, their partnership would become riddled with conflict about everything from the largest aspects of the

¹² Montgomery C. Meigs, *Capitol Builder: The Shorthand Journals of Montgomery C. Meigs, 1853-1859, 1861: A Project to Commemorate the United States Capitol Bicentennial, 1800-2000*, ed. Wendy Wolff (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), xxv.

¹³ Rosenberger, "Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol," 297.

¹⁴ Meigs, *Capitol Builder*, xxxiv.

¹⁵ Rosenberger, "Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol," 297.

project, like the construction of the new dome, to the smallest, such as the wood chosen for the new Senate desks. Walter, who believed himself to be securely in charge, watched his unilateral power over the project be taken away from him bit by bit, and began to feel bogged down by the presence of his own foreman of sorts. The progression of the project would only become more contentious as time went on. Disagreements between Meigs and Walter became almost unbearable for Walter, who often found himself crushed under Meigs's upper hand as supervisor. Meigs made the project a ceaseless stream of disagreement and road blocks for Walter, even claiming publicly at one point that the designs for the extension were mostly his and not Walter's,¹⁶ but the tide turned in 1857 when John B. Floyd took office as the Secretary of War under newly elected president James Buchanan. Floyd was loyal to Democratic party, and used the Capitol Extension as a way to use "patronage to reward cronies and political supporters"¹⁷. Meigs, a man hired for his integrity and honesty, was no longer in the favor of Davis and found many of his plans and courses of action halted by Floyd as power was handed back to Walter. With this new shift in power, the desk that now rests at the Kentucky Museum began to take shape in the mind of Thomas Walter, not as a stroke of genius, but as a form of revenge against Meigs' previous lack of consideration for Walter's participation in the project.

By the year 1858, the time had come to design the main furnishings for the new Senate chamber, and the conflict between Meigs and Walter reached a fever pitch. Countless disputes were taking place both inside and outside of the Capitol Building, and progress on the extension became bogged down by lack of communication between Meigs and Walter. John B. Floyd became the mediator in this figural war between the stubborn architect and the steadfast

¹⁶ William C. Allen, *History of the United States Capitol: A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics* (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 272-3.

¹⁷ Meigs, *Capitol Builder*, xxxiv.

supervisor who would refuse to communicate with each other directly. On one occasion, Meigs drew up plans for the arms of the benches in the Senate gallery and sent them to Floyd for approval without consulting Walter. Floyd, noticing that the designs did not correspond with the designs for the rest of the chamber, sent the drawings to Walter, who created his own drawings for the arms immediately and sent them over to Floyd's office, who approved them instead.¹⁸ On September 16th, 1858, just days before the quarrel over the desks in the Senate began, Meigs penned a letter to President Buchanan imploring him to have Walter removed from his position and relieved of all his duties, passing them on completely to Meigs.¹⁹ Although many of Meigs's complaints concerning Walter may have been valid, they were not taken seriously by Floyd, Walter, or Buchanan. Walter, a friend and political ally of Floyd, was not to be touched by Meigs, and Buchanan was no help in the matter. The Capitol Extension was the least of his worries with a civil war brewing deep in the heart of the nation. He only wished for the dispute to be settled swiftly so this matter could finally be laid to rest. With this type of stagnation in communication between architect and supervisor, it was inevitable that the main desks in the chamber would face the same sort of pointless bickering, with even more characters introduced as the Capitol-sized feud widened in scope.

¹⁸ Rosenberger, "Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol," 284.

¹⁹ Meigs, *Capitol Builder*, 654.

SECTION THREE: A STATELY DESK FOR THE SENATE

Pringle Slight was hired as the foreman of the carpenters for the Capitol Extension project by newly appointed Architect of the Capitol, Thomas U. Walter, in 1851.²⁰ Given that this position was such a massive undertaking, it was common sense to choose Slight for the job. In 1825, Slight was hired by the third Architect of the Capitol, Charles Bulfinch, to assist with the completion of the first Capitol dome. From that point on, Slight became a prominent figure in smaller Capitol Building projects as the Master Carpenter at the Capitol, often called in for minor jobs in all parts of the building.²¹

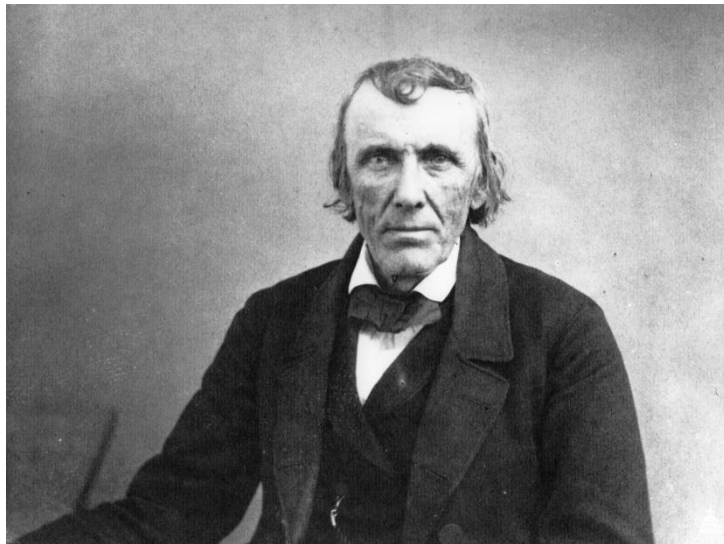


Figure 3. *Pringle Slight*, Architect of the Capitol.

When the time came to choose a person for the position of foreman of the carpenters, Slight's previous experience and familiarity with the building made him an instant forerunner. Slight's expertise was used mostly for the replacement of the first dome with a larger, more impressive structure. His assistance with building the first dome came in handy, as he was familiar with the

²⁰ Kristen Frederick, "A 'Slight' Capitol Contribution," Architect of the Capitol, last modified May 13, 2013, www.aoc.gov/blog/slight-capitol-contribution.

²¹ Ibid.

weak points and structural issues the dome had. He had also been the person who assumed the job of the first dome's upkeep since its completion and replaced its copper shell in 1834.²²

The earliest discussion of the desk's construction came in the form of a letter from Captain Meigs to Secretary Floyd in which the plans for his desks are included, as well as information concerning the materials needed and the ornamentation of the structures on September 22nd, 1858. Meigs mentions that it was crucial for him to finish the designs before he left for the quarries, and that he would like Floyd to examine the plans before they are fully carried out.²³ Pringle Slight was first introduced to the fiery dispute concerning the desks at this point, receiving the plans for the desks that same month. He sends a letter to Meigs during his work on the desks soon after. Slight states that a requisition has been made for materials being used for the desk, including a large amount of mahogany. This means that planning and construction for Meigs's desks had already begun when Walter began to interfere with Meigs's intentions in early October 1858. Slight, caught in the middle of the spat, only wanting to carry out his duties properly, had to put up with receiving letters from Meigs, Floyd, and Walter, all commanding him to do different things.

In late September 1858, Floyd instructed Meigs to search for potential sources of stone for the outer columns on the Capitol. While he was absent from Washington, Walter came across drawings for the central desks in the Senate chamber created by someone on the engineer's staff. Furious by this and disgusted by the quality of design, Walter went to Floyd to make his case against their fabrication. Floyd assented to Walter's request, and halted work on the desks soon

²² Ibid.

²³ Montgomery C. Meigs, *Montgomery C. Meigs to John B. Floyd, September 22, 1858*, letter, from Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk's Desk*.

after. Floyd sent Meigs his drawings back, along with Walter's new drawings with orders to start fabrication on them instead.²⁴

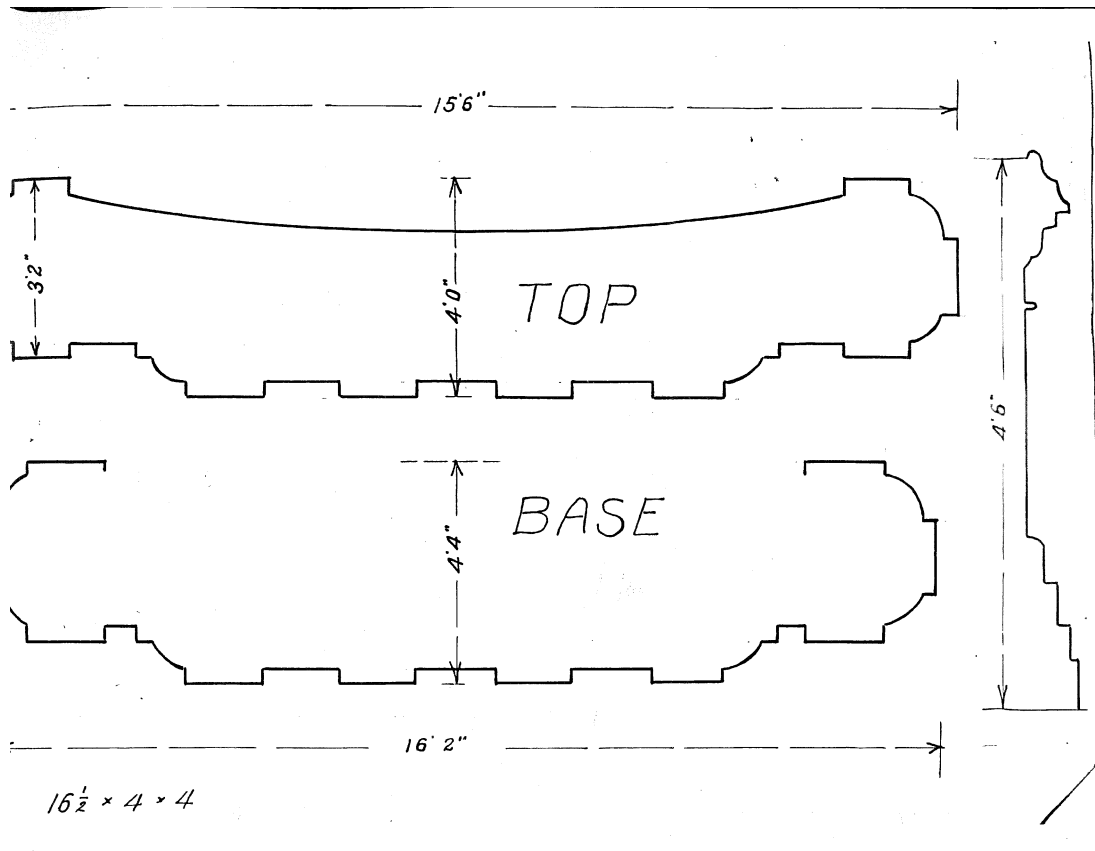


Figure 4. *Walter's Sketch for the U.S. Senate Clerk's Desk*, Letter from John B. Floyd to Montgomery C. Meigs, November 5, 1858.

Of course, this angered Meigs, who believed himself to be the superior man on this project. However, he did heed the orders, but not without making his resentment clear. Meigs penned a letter to Floyd on October 25th, 1858 concerning the dispute.

"Sir,

²⁴ Rosenberger, "Walter and the Completion of the United States Capitol," 284.

I have to acknowledge the receipt of the design for the Vice President's chair and desk, with desks of Secretary, clerks, and reporters of the Senate, submitted for your approval (...) rejected. Also of the design by Mr. Thomas U. Walter, adopted in its stead.

Regretting for many reasons, which I see it would be useless to detail here, this action of the Department, I have, in obedience to orders, commenced the construction of the work, and will endeavor, by beauty of material and workmanship, to make some amends for the poverty of the design.

I beg leave, most respectfully, to call attention to my letter of the 16th with which I respectfully appealed, through the War Department, to the President, to ask upon several agents made many months since, in regards to repeated irregularities of Mr. Walter, which, while not checked by the President, under if impossible for me to execute successfully the trust committed to me. Of the receipt of this letter I have as yet received no acknowledgement.

I have the honor to be,

Very respectfully,

Your obdt. servant,

M. C. Meigs

Capt. Of Engineers,

In charge of the Capitol Extension"²⁵

This letter correspondence makes it very clear that Meigs was quite bothered by the actions of Floyd and Walter, even going so far as to say that he will not accept responsibility for the desks because he believes the design to be so poor. He does, however, assert that he will try

²⁵ Montgomery C. Meigs, *Montgomery C Meigs to John B. Floyd, October 25, 1858*, letter, from Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk's Desk*.

to improve the quality of the design by ensuring the desks will be made with the best materials available in superior craftsmanship under his orders. These incidents become increasingly frequent, with Floyd always choosing Walter's side. Eventually, in October 1859, Meigs was removed from the Capitol and Post Office extension projects. He was to be reinstated in 1860 only for his focus to be drawn immediately to the threat of a civil war.²⁶

Walter's plans for the desks included three sketches: one desk for the vice president, another for the clerks, and a bannister-like one for the reporters, which was later scrapped on November 5th, 1858 by Floyd.²⁷ The clerks' desk is four feet and four inches wide at its widest point on the base, four feet and six inches tall, and sixteen feet and two inches long at the base.

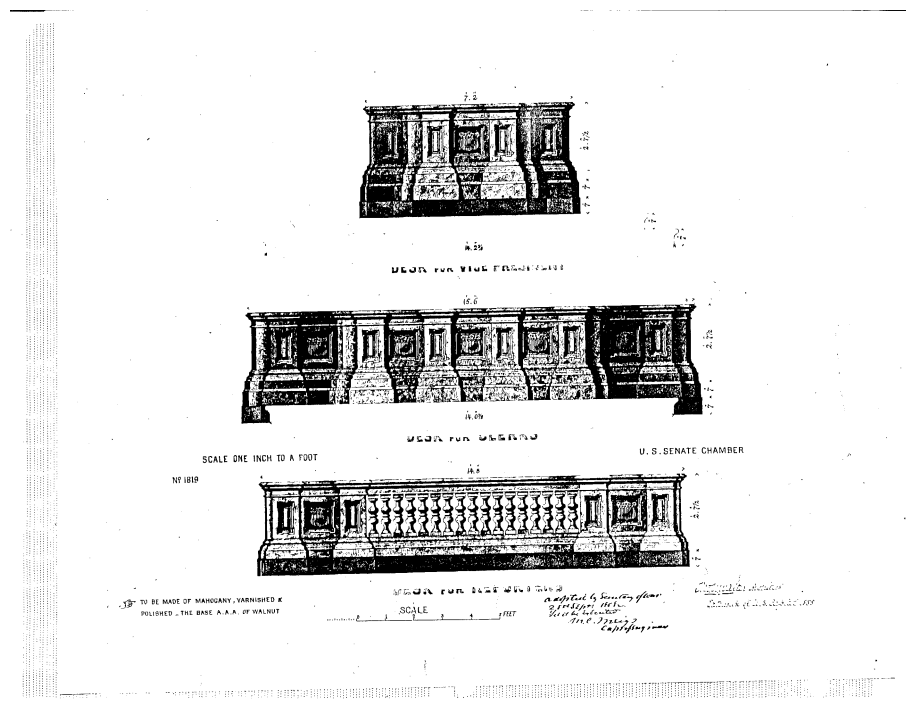


Figure 5. *Design of the Desk Fronts for the Vice President, Clerks, and Reporters*, Thomas U. Walter, 1858.

²⁶ Meigs, *Capitol Builder*, xxxv.

²⁷ John B. Floyd, *John B. Floyd to Montgomery C. Meigs, November 5, 1858*, letter, from Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk's Desk.

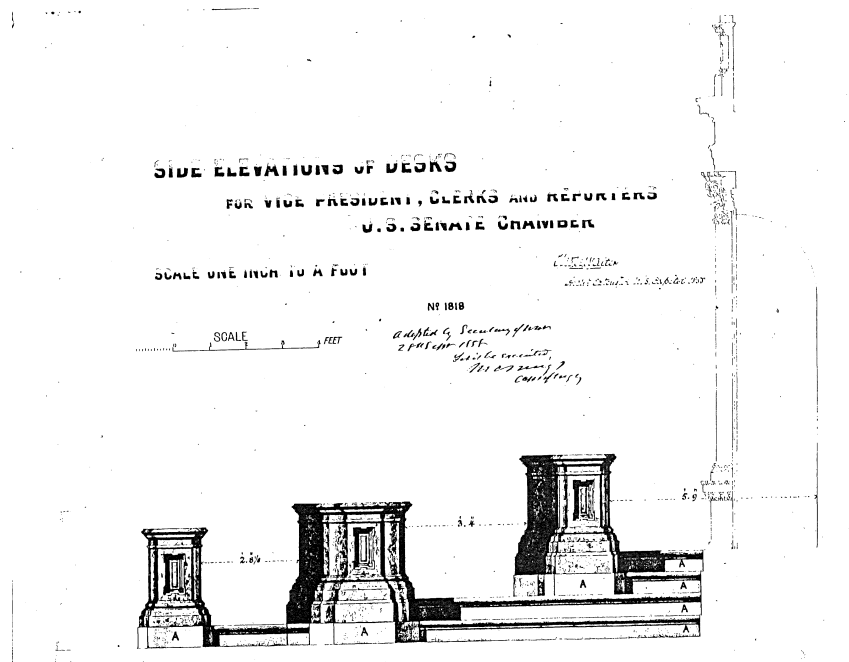


Figure 6. *Side Elevations of Desks for the Vice President, Clerks, and Reporters*, Thomas U. Walter, 1858.

According to letters sent on October 11th²⁸ and 12th²⁹, 1858 from Slight to Zephaniah W. Denham, Meigs’s chief clerk for the Capitol Extension, and Meigs himself, the desks are comprised of mahogany and walnut, ordered from Edwin Bender & Company located on the southeast corner of 8th St. and Girard Ave. in Philadelphia, PA. Receipts and letters show that Pringle’s son, Robert, made the journey to procure the materials needed for the desks. Progress on the desk was not hasty. In fact, Slight remarked to Meigs on December 10th³⁰ and 23rd³¹, 1858 that he was taking his time on the desks because it would be a shame to see them finished in a “slovenly manner” just so that they will be done in time for the original deadline. Calls were

²⁸ Pringle Slight, *Pringle Slight to Zephaniah W. Denham, October 11th, 1858*, letter and requisition for materials, from Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

²⁹ Pringle Slight, *Pringle Slight to Montgomery C. Meigs, October 12, 1858*, letter and official receipt, from Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

³⁰ Pringle Slight, *Pringle Slight to Montgomery C. Meigs, December 10, 1858*, letter, from the Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

³¹ Pringle Slight, *Pringle Slight to Montgomery C. Meigs, December 23, 1858*, letter, from the Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

made in the Senate as early as December 16th to be allowed into the new Senate Chamber, and by December 22nd, 1858, it had been decided by the Committee on Public Buildings that the new Senate Chamber would be occupied by January 4th of the coming year.³² Slight remarked to Meigs that, as of December 10th, it would “not be safe” to expect the desks, as well as the rest of the chamber, finished before 5 weeks from then.³³ Nevertheless, by December 23rd, 1858, Slight wrote to Meigs about lining the desks with cloth because “the tops are nearly ready”.³⁴

The desks were indeed in use during the Senate’s first meeting in the new chamber on January 4th, 1859, although several parts of them were completed in a temporary manner in order that they be used at the correct time.³⁵ It was not until April that the desks were attended to once more to complete them fully. On April 14th, 1859, Slight penned a letter to Meigs informing him that he and his workers were in the process of “making a more substantial job of them.”³⁶ This letter also mentions several other components of the desk that were yet to be finished. Slight notes that Mr. Ashbury Dickins, North Carolina Democrat and Secretary of the Senate, and Major William Hickey, Chief Clerk of the Senate, requested better locks on the drawers of the desk, to which Slight suggests that the locks should be made to order to meet professional standards, instead of being handmade.³⁷ He also remarks that Dickins wishes for the desk to be covered with “dark blue cloth”, which does not fall under Slight’s jurisdiction. This is the last correspondence about the desks between Slight and Meigs. It can be assumed that, given that the desks were so near being finished, and that Meigs had much more troubling matters to deal with

³² Meigs, *Capitol Builder*, 684-85.

³³ Slight, *Slight to Meigs, December 10, 1858*, letter.

³⁴ Slight, *Slight to Meigs, December 23, 1858*, letter.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Pringle Slight, *Pringle Slight to Montgomery C. Meigs, April 14, 1859*, letter, from the Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

on the horizon concerning his position on the Capitol Extension project, the completion of the desks was the least of his worries at the time, and he entrusted Slight to finish the job responsibly and swiftly, like many of his other projects at the Capitol. The desk was finished later in 1859, although there is no specific date that is fully reliable.

The desk's appearance is quite pertinent to the object's story. Upon first glance, one may note on its massive size, yet may not find anything remarkable to say about it otherwise. This is most certainly the intent of Walter's designs, which may also be a reason why the designs were chosen for the desks by Floyd. During the mid-nineteenth century in America furniture-making exploded due to the Industrial Revolution's mechanization of previously tedious workmanship. Because machines were able to build desks, tables, and chairs at rapid speeds, average Americans could own fine furniture that used to only exist in the homes of the wealthy.³⁸ Revival styles of all kinds swept across the nation, such as the Egyptian Revival with its Nile-inspired motifs, or the Rococo Revival, which brought the furniture of Versailles into the homes of everyday Americans. Furniture made in these styles were heavily painted, gilded, and decorated with elaborate detailing that was unheard of before the advent of machines.

The desk completed by Slight in 1859 resembles none of these elegant, decorative styles. Instead, it can be described as solid, colossal, and sobered. Walter's designs for the Senate desks were most likely created in this fashion to reinforce the ideals of the Senate, a branch of the government characterized by its elevated composure. It is often viewed as the more judicious branch of Congress, and the desk's subdued nature reflects the body of government within which it resides. Its size may also reference the weight of the decisions that the Senate takes part in. Considering it is at the literal front and center of the Senate, it only makes sense for it to

³⁸ Amelia Peck, "American Revival Styles, 1840-76," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/revi/hd_revi.htm.

accentuate the defining characteristics of the Senate: tempered, diligent, and paramount to the U.S. Government. His subdued designs were another point of contention for Meigs, who preferred more decorative styles of art and architecture. He even called them pieces of “pulpit furniture” upon seeing the designs.³⁹

The desk that currently resides at the Kentucky Museum is covered in cloth, although the color is not dark blue and instead appears green.



Figure 7. Top view of U.S. Senate Clerk's Desk.

It can be assumed that the cloth has been replaced several times during its nearly one hundred-year tenure on the Senate floor. The locks seem to be made to order, identical in appearance, most likely not original to the desk itself. They feature an inscription stating that their patent is dated January 27, 1865 and April 2, 1878, several years after the desk was originally placed in the Senate chamber.

³⁹ Allen, *History of the United States Capitol*, 283.



Figure 8. *Lock featured on U.S. Senate Clerk's Desk.*

The drawers of the desk are lined with pine and appear to be original to the desk, lacking any modern improvements, such as drawer slides. Small wooden handles appear to be depictions of pairs of either European or Concorde pears with leaves that do not match the fruit tree. These are most likely original.



Figure 9. *Pear-shaped handles on drawers.*

The farthest drawer on the left features a pencil inscription on the underside of the drawer that spells “John J. King”, a man that has yet to be identified. The inside of the desk is lined with walnut paneling that may have been replaced if the need arose. The panels currently on the desk have undergone substantial wear due to shoes and chairs constantly hitting the desk. The inside of the desk has been retrofitted to hold wires for communication devices, most recently, a telephone. The wires remain from this, hanging out of the left side inner lining of the desk. It appears one of the center drawers has also been retrofitted to accept wires, as a hole has been cut into the bottom of it right next to the lock, which it is missing. The exterior of the desk is mahogany, curved at points to allow for the curvature of the overall structure. The front exterior of the desk is composed of three parts. Two ends curve around 180 degrees to create a small cavernous space on the backside, broken up by an ornamental panel with relief molding and frontal panels featuring the traditional patriotic shield with thirteen stars and thirteen stripes. The frontal panel is set forward from the end pieces, with two curved ends meeting the ends of the desk. It is composed of four ornamental panels with the same relief molding as the ends, and three deeper relief panels featuring the same shield.

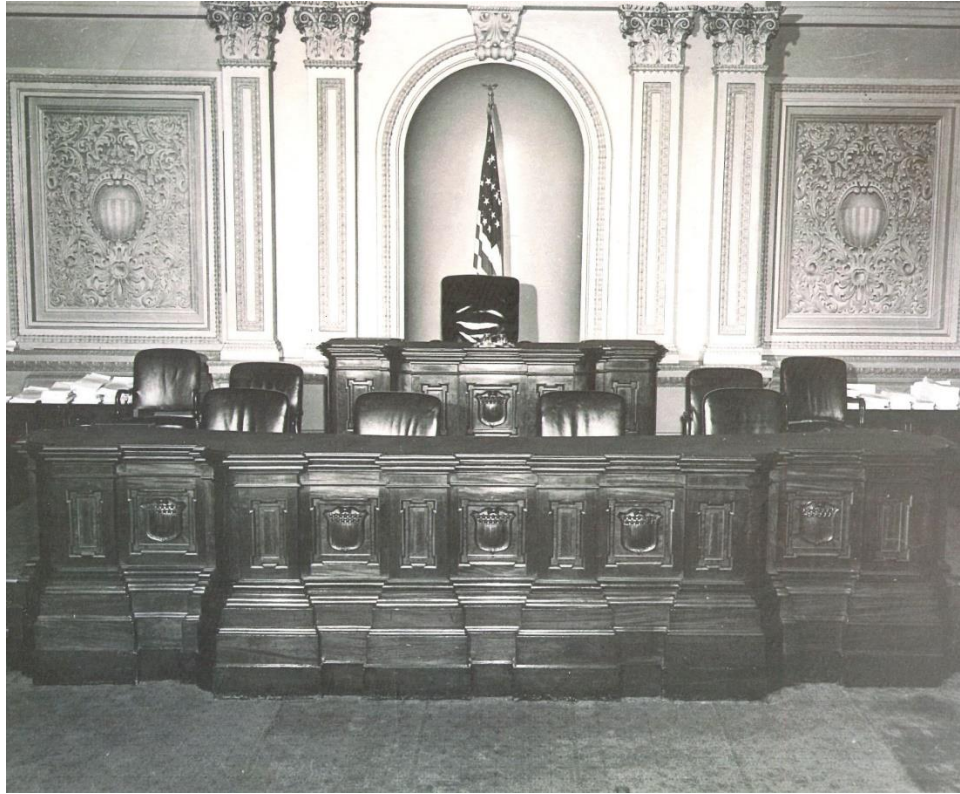


Figure 7. *Senate Clerk's and Presiding Officer's Desks in situ*, Kentucky Museum.

This design matches the much smaller Vice President's dais, which features two ends of the same design, and one small frontal piece with two ornamental molding panels and one shield panel. Though the desk appears to be in good shape from the mahogany exterior, the top, drawers, and interior desperately need attention, which is difficult to come by in its current location. In order to understand why the desk exists in its current condition and current location, we need to start from the moment it became active on the Senate floor.

SECTION FOUR: THE DESK IN SITU

Once the desk was placed in the Senate chamber in 1859, it became home to four Senate staff members for the next 100 years. The desk staff are as follows, starting from left to right seating positions at the desk:

- The Journal Clerk, who records the daily minutes and keeps a record of bills and resolutions.
- The Parliamentarian, who “provides advice on the precedents and practices of the Senate for the presiding officer and other Senators and assists in the referral of bills to Senate committees,” as well as keeping time in the Senate.
- The Legislative Clerk, who “reads” for the Senate, handling all the verbal duties on the Senate floor.
- The Assistant Secretary, previously known as the “chief” or “principal” clerk, who manages the Secretary’s smaller matters.
- OR the Assistant Legislative Clerk, who manages the Legislative Clerk’s smaller matters.

The fourth chair is usually filled by the Assistant Legislative Clerk.⁴⁰

Though these four places were typically filled by their respective officers, many noteworthy political figures and heads of state took their place behind the desk to address the Senate as well.

The desk also saw several of the most tumultuous decades of world politics.

⁴⁰ Congressional Research Service, *Guide to Individuals Seated on the Senate Dais*, by Valerie Heitshusen & Mildred Amer, 98-397 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2018), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/98-397.pdf>, 1-2.

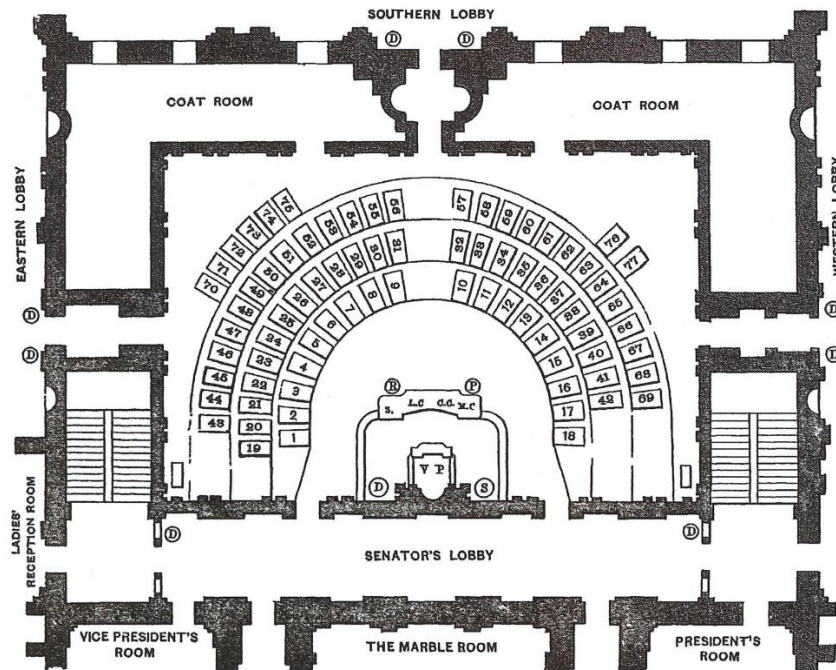


Figure 11. *Diagram of the Senate Floor*, Congressional Directory of the U.S. Congress, 49th Congress, 2nd Session, 1887.

Finished in 1859, the desk was present in the Senate Chamber for the duration of the Civil War. Kentucky’s own John C. Breckinridge, who was Vice President in 1861, presided over the clerk’s desk as Jefferson Davis rose to bid the Senate farewell to become the President of the Confederacy on January 21st.⁴¹ By April 16th of that same year, the Senate Chamber began to fill with Union soldiers as the Capitol took on the role of barracks.⁴² Many key moments in wartime legislation occurred in the Senate Chamber during the Civil War, but two of the most historic moments the desk witnessed was after the war ended, when the nation’s first

⁴¹ Jefferson F. Davis, *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 36th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington: U.S. Government Publishing Office), from Library of Congress, *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875*, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=055/llcg055.db&recNum=488>, 487.

⁴² “Soldiers Occupy the Senate Chamber,” *United States Senate* (Washington: Secretary of the Senate), accessed October 29, 2019, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Soldiers_Occupy_the_Senate_Chamber.htm.

impeachment trial took place in 1868 concerning President Andrew Johnson,⁴³ and when first African American senator, Hiram Revels, was elected in Mississippi in 1870. He took the same seat that Jefferson Davis left just nine years earlier.⁴⁴

Senate motions concerning the first “global” war, World War I were passed in the presence of the desk, and World War II was not far behind. It is commonly known that the bombing of Pearl Harbor pulled the United States into the ever-increasing scope of the global conflict, and soon, Churchill himself was in the nation’s capital and its Capitol, more specifically, to encourage Congress to fight with all the spirit they could muster. On December 26th, 1941, Churchill stood behind the clerk’s desk with a mess of microphones in front of him and stage lights glaring down as he offered his words of support to his allies.⁴⁵



Figure 9. *Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain, addresses a joint session of Congress in the Senate Chamber on December 26, 1941*, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-05359.

⁴³ “The Old Senate Rostrum: Extension of Remarks of Hon. Earle C. Clements of Kentucky in the Senate of the United States,” *Congressional Record – Appendix Vol. 98, pt. 10*, Senate, 82nd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington: U.S. Government Publishing Office), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-CRECB-1952-pt10/>, A3174.

⁴⁴ “First African-American Senator,” *United States Senate* (Washington: Secretary of the Senate), https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/First_African_American_Senator.htm.

⁴⁵ Andrew Glass, “Winston Churchill Addresses Congress, Dec. 26, 1941,” *Politico* online, December 25, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/winston-churchill-addresses-congress-dec-26-1941-232903>.

The Senate's ninety-six seats were all filled⁴⁶ as Churchill expressed his words of inspiration to the people of the United States, words that were so very needed for a country that had only recently delved into worldwide conflict. Many other influential political figures also addressed the Senate from behind the clerk's desk, such as the Rt. Hon. Arthur J. Balfour in 1917, then British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs⁴⁷, and King David Kalakaua of the Hawaiian Islands in 1874.⁴⁸ Thirty-one in-chamber funerals were held in the Senate as well, with the clerk's desk often serving as a backdrop for the coffin. Some notable funerals involving the desk include James B. Beck, a Senator from Kentucky from 1877 to 1890, and James S. Sherman, who died while serving as Vice President in 1912.⁴⁹



Figure 13. *Body of late Secretary of Navy lies in state in Senate Chamber. Washington, D.C., July 10. Funeral services attended by President Roosevelt and other government heads, were held in the Senate Chamber today for the late Secretary of the Navy Claude A. Swanson. The flag-draped casket is shown guarded by a sailor and a marine, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-hec-26959.*

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Charles Ripley Damon, comp., *The American Dictionary of Dates*, vol. 2 (Boston: Gorham Press), 1921, 119.

⁴⁸ Ed Edstrom, "U.S. Senate Clerk's Desk is Presented to Kentucky," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), August 2, 1951.

⁴⁹ "Funeral and Memorial Services in the Senate Chamber," *United States Senate* (Washington: Secretary of the Senate), https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/art/five_column/Funeral.htm.

In 1938, a structural engineer discovered that the Senate Chamber's ceiling was in desperate need of repair, as it posed a danger to the people below. Although action needed to be taken to make the chamber a safer place to conduct government business, the Second World War was on the horizon, and any changes had to wait while Congress focused solely on the threat of war. Once the war came to an end, the time had come to renovate the chamber completely, and on July 1st, 1949, the Senate moved into its previous quarters in the Old Senate Chamber to the right of the rotunda on the second floor.⁵⁰ The newly renovated Senate Chamber had no need for the old, wooden Senate desks, and soon, they were moved out of the chamber for the last time.

⁵⁰ "Senate Donates Historic Desk," *United States Senate* (Washington: Secretary of the Senate), https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Senate_Donates_Historic_Desk.htm.

SECTION FIVE: THE DESK'S OLD KENTUCKY HOME

The desks' journey to Kentucky began with the Presiding Officer's desk, which was presented to Alben W. Barkley, the last vice president to preside over the Senate from that desk, by the Architect of the Capitol, David Lynn. This was put into action by the Special Committee on Reconstruction of the Senate Roof and Skylights and Remodeling of the Senate Chamber on September 22nd, 1950 through Senate Resolution 357 of the 81st Congress, 2nd Session. This action was meant to honor not only Vice President Barkley, but also the first vice president to sit at the desk, John C. Breckinridge, and the entire state of Kentucky. After Barkley passed away, the desk was meant to be given to the State of Kentucky.⁵¹ Though the Presiding Officer's desk was given to Barkley, the clerk's desk still resided in the Capitol, cast to the side wall of the rotunda for a year before it left for Kentucky as well. Often, Emery L. Frazier, a Whitesburg, Kentucky native and the last chief clerk to sit at the clerk's desk, would pass by the desk and wish for it to be preserved in history properly. Therefore, Frazier, a member of the Kentucky Historical Society, soon contacted Bayless E. Hardin, the secretary-treasurer of the Kentucky Historical Society at the time, to see what could be done for the desk's future.⁵² On July 18th, 1951, Frazier had sent a copy of his proposed resolution to dispose of the desk by gifting it to the Kentucky Historical Society, and stated that he had experienced nothing but support for the resolution from the committee and the Vice President. He also states that his hope is that when the clerk's desk is in possession of the KHS, Barkley will be inspired to give the Presiding Officer's desk as well so that the rostrum may be reconstructed in Kentucky's Old Senate

⁵¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Donating to Vice President Barkley and the State of Kentucky the Desk Occupied by Vice Presidents in the Present Senate Chamber*, S Res. 357, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in Senate September 22, 1950.

⁵² Edstrom, "Clerk's Desk Presented to Kentucky," 1951.

Chamber for proper display.⁵³ This resolution was Senate Resolution 185 of the 82nd Congress, 2nd Session, passed on August 1st, 1951, which states through “Public Law 731, Eighty-first Congress, where materials of historical interest are removed and not reused, to authorize the disposal of same in such manner as it may direct,”⁵⁴ the clerk’s desk was to be given to the KHS in hopes that it would soon be reunited with its matching Presiding Officer’s desk.

On August 3rd, 1951, Frazier wrote to Hardin informing him that the resolution had passed and that he was awaiting the return of Senator Earle C. Clements in order to discuss proper removal.⁵⁵ At this time Hardin was indisposed in a Louisville hospital,⁵⁶ but plans continued on without him. By August 22nd, Clements sent a letter to the Office of the Governor of Kentucky informing him that the desk was ready to be transported, and that a state-funded highway truck would be a viable option, including a sketch of the proper measurements for reference.⁵⁷ From this letter, it is assumed that this course of action was taken, and the desk arrived at the Kentucky Historical Society on September 14th, 1951.⁵⁸

The clerk’s desk resided in the Old Senate Chamber in Kentucky’s Old Capitol Building for twenty-five years, but the ultimate goal of a reunited U.S. Senate rostrum never came to fruition. After Vice President Barkley passed away in 1956, the Presiding Officer’s desk was

⁵³ Emery L. Frazier, *Chief Clerk Emery L. Frazier to Secretary Bayless E Hardin, July 18, 1951*, Letter, from Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

⁵⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Conveying to the Commonwealth of Kentucky the Clerk’s Desk Formerly in Use in the Senate Chamber*, S Res. 185, 82nd Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate August 1, 1951.

⁵⁵ Emery L. Frazier, *Chief Clerk Emery L. Frazier to Secretary Bayless E. Hardin, August 3rd, 1951*, Letter, from the Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

⁵⁶ G. Glenn Clift, *G. Glenn Clift to Chief Clerk Emery L. Frazier, August 7th, 1951*, Letter, from Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

⁵⁷ Earle C. Clements, *Earle C. Clements to Edward A. Farris, August 22nd, 1951*, Letter, from Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

⁵⁸ Charles C. Pittenger, Jr., *Charles C. Pittenger, Jr. to Patricia MacLeish, November 1st, 1979*, Letter, from Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk’s Desk*.

given to the University of Kentucky, where it still resides in the Special Collections Research Center at the Margaret I. King Library.⁵⁹



Figure 14. *Senate Presiding Officer's Desk*, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky.

In 1976, the Old Capitol Building in Frankfort was to be renovated to restore it to its original appearance, and so the clerk's desk had lost its place in the building. Wanting to find a safe, long-term home for the object, the Kentucky Historical Society reached out to several potential new homes for the desk, including the Division of Political History at the Smithsonian in order to return the desk to its home city of Washington, D.C.⁶⁰ When the transfer back to Washington never came to fruition, the Kentucky Historical Society and the Kentucky Museum made a deal in which the desk would be given, on a permanent loan, to Kentucky Museum.⁶¹ When the time came to move the desk into the newly renovated Kentucky Building at the Kentucky Museum in

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ William Barrow Floyd, *William Barrow Floyd to Herbert Collins, June 21, 1974*, Letter, from the Office of the Curator of the Kentucky Museum, 1979.20: *Accession File for the United States Senate Clerk's Desk*.

⁶¹ Patricia MacLeish, *Patricia MacLeish to Charles C. Pittenger, Jr., October 17th, 1979*, Letter, from Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk's Desk*.

1979, it became apparent to the Museum Registrar Patricia MacLeish that the desk was indeed a permanent loan, and not a gift, which went against museum policy. She contacted Charles Pittenger, Jr., the Kentucky Historical Society's registrar at the time, requesting that the desk become an outright gift to the Kentucky Museum.⁶² Pittenger wholeheartedly agreed that the perils of a permanent loan were not worth the trouble, and a gift agreement was signed on October 25th, 1979.⁶³

The desk remains in the Kentucky Museum's collection to this day, where it was featured in several exhibits before it was put away for the foreseeable future. Since the desk left the Capitol in 1951, it had undergone considerable wear and tear, due to frequent relocation, exhibiting, and travel. The bottom edges of the desk have been scuffed, varnish is completely worn off in some spots, the inner planks of pine have been considerably damaged due to frequent abuse by the shoes of the sitters, and many parts may have already been removed or replaced. It has been noted previously that the desk is quite large and awkward to maneuver, especially considering that the sheer weight of the desk itself is enough to deter anyone from relocating it. After the desk's final exhibition at the Kentucky Museum, it was decided by the staff that the desk was to be put away in storage until it was properly cared for by a restoration expert. Because of its size, it proved to be impossible to move without substantial assistance, and even then, it would simply be unsafe for both the movers and the desk itself to move it anywhere besides the floor that it already rested on. Therefore, the next course action was to build a temporary wall around it to keep it safe from wandering visitors. Over time, the temporary room

⁶² MacLeish, *MacLeish to Pittenger, Jr., October 17th, 1979, 1951.35.*

⁶³ Gift Agreement from the Kentucky Historical Society to the Kentucky Museum, signed by Charles C. Pittenger, Jr. and W. R. Buster, Director of the KHS, October 25th, 1979, from Kentucky Historical Society, 1951.35: *Deaccession File for the United States Senate Clerk's Desk.*

became much more permanent as other items were stored with the historic desk, sometimes with the desk acting as the storage unit itself as display items were sat on top of it.

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