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Spring 3-3-2020

## A Desk's Tale

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### Recommended Citation

Bowers, Olivia, "A Desk's Tale" (2020). *Documents*. Paper 6.  
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## A DESK'S TALE

The United States Senate Clerk's Desk was born from the mind of one of America's great architects, Thomas U. Walter, in 1858, but its journey truly begins back in 1843, when plans were approved for a Capitol Extension. In 1851, Thomas Ustick Walter was appointed Architect of the Capitol for the Capitol Extension Project after winning a design competition and construction began that same year. Walter's grand plans were very expensive, so in 1853, Captain Montgomery Cunningham Meigs was appointed Superintendent and Captain of Engineers for the project in order to keep Walter's spending in check. From the start, their relationship was strained as Walter struggled to work under Meigs's close watch. Meigs enjoyed the comfort of War Secretary Jefferson Davis's favor until 1857, when the situation reversed as John B. Floyd replaced Davis. Floyd favored Walter and his ideas, often approving them without Meigs's input.

In 1858, the time came for the Senate Clerks and Presiding Officer's desks to be made. Meigs had designs for the desks approved and submitted to the Foreman of the Carpenters, Pringle Slight, for fabrication by late 1858, and construction had started when Walter began to interfere. While Meigs was out of town on business, Walter found the designs for the desks and was upset by them. He then submitted his own designs in an attempt to convince Floyd to discard Meigs's plans. Floyd agreed, and construction began based on Walter's designs instead, infuriating Meigs, who had already called for Walter's resignation. These designs became the desks that sat in the Senate for nearly a century and eventually found their way to the state of Kentucky.

Over the course of its time in the Senate Chamber, the desk saw the Civil war, as well as both World Wars, pass through the legislative branch of the U.S. Government. It also saw the first African American U.S. Senator take his predecessor Jefferson Davis's spot in 1870, just nine years after he left to become President of the Confederacy. The desk also became the stage for Andrew Jackson's impeachment trial in 1868 and a monumental speech by Winston Churchill just nineteen days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The desk left the Capitol Building in 1951 and became a part of the Kentucky Museum's collections in 1979.