

THE U.S. SENATE
DEMOCRATIC
LEADER'S SUITE



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Party Leaders

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 spokesperson 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.

History of the Suite

The rooms that today comprise the Democratic leader's suite, S-220 through S-224, were a centerpiece of the 1859 Senate extension—occupying a prominent location on the principal floor, directly across the hall from the Senate Chamber.



View of the principal corridor near the Senate Chamber from room S-224, ca. 1860

This desirable office space was first assigned to the Office of the Secretary of the Senate, whose responsibilities necessitate access to the Chamber floor. The secretary plays an essential role in the functioning of the Senate, overseeing an array of legislative, administrative, and financial services needed for the daily operation of the Senate.

Unlike most Senate spaces in the Capitol, which are frequently reassigned to different tenants, the rooms of the Democratic leader's suite have only been occupied by two offices. In 1987 then Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd traded spaces with the secretary, thus moving the Democratic leader's office into S-221 through S-224. As staff and work increased, room S-220 also was assigned to the Democratic leader office, reuniting the suite of rooms.

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."



View of S-221, ca. 1860

Decorative Highlights

The Senate and House extensions, 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 that end, the extensions contain the finest workmanship, the most exquisite building materials, and the latest technologies then available. Many of the offices in the new wing have groin-vaulted ceilings, monumental doors and windows set in ornate cast-iron frames, carved marble fireplace mantels, and colorful and intricately patterned English floor tiles from Minton & Company.



Restored ceiling in S-224

Aside from the standard decorative elements, the Democratic leader's suite includes a number of special details. The ceilings, featuring simple yet elegant designs that accent the vaults, were added as part of a major campaign to refurbish the Capitol around 1900. Restoration of the ceilings started in 2001 and now much of the original 1900 work is exposed. In S-200 and S-221 the ceilings had been painted out, so the original decorations were studied and replicated.

The suite is lighted throughout by nickel-plated brass and crystal chandeliers. While not the original light fixtures, these crystal chandeliers are 1910s copies of chandeliers from the White House. According to accounts, seven White House chandeliers were installed in the Capitol and generated so much interest that replicas were produced for many offices.



Fireplace mantel and mirror in S-223

Each fireplace mantel in the suite is adorned with an elaborate gilded Rococo Revival mirror. These mirrors were purchased for the Capitol beginning in the 1880s. The gilded window valences seen in S-221 through S-223 are from that same period and include both historic pieces and replicas.

While many rooms in the Capitol have spectacular views, the placement of the Democratic leader's suite allows for views of the Mall and the Capitol dome. From S-221 the view can be enjoyed on the portico balcony. The balcony is accessed through the north window—actually a jib or “window” door, and is one of only two still in use on the Senate side of the Capitol. 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.



The jib door in S-221 leads to this balcony



Stained glass window in S-222

Another uncommon architectural element is found in S-222, and is one of only four in the Capitol. The stained glass window depicting a shield, an eagle, flags of the U.S., and the motto *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, one), garners attention. 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 personal office, S-223, features a fireplace mantel that is unique in the Capitol in both the choice of marble type and unadorned design. The origin of the dark green marble is a mystery, and it is not used anywhere else in the Capitol. The design employs a classic composition, with two columns supporting a lintel decorated with a row of dentils.

A highlight of the room that denotes its use by the current leader 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 United States, a freedom (or liberty) cap with laurel branches, and the Seal of the U.S. Senate.

The highly ornamented Rococo table in S-223 was originally purchased for the Vice President's Room in 1860. The table remained in the room until 1898 and was used by ten vice presidents.

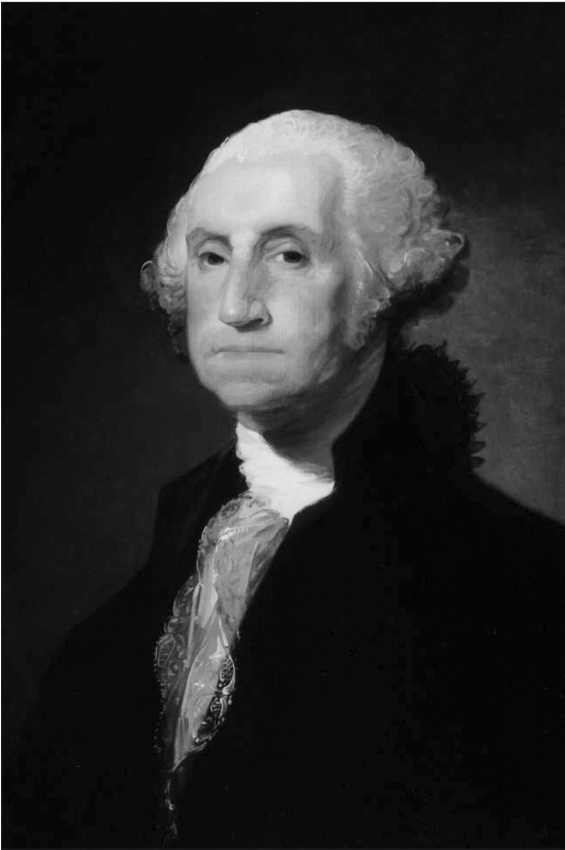


The Rococo table in S-223

Another historic furnishing in the suite is an unusual spool leg table. It is one of three identical tables used by the U.S. Supreme Court when they met in their second floor chamber in the Capitol.

Located to the east of the senator's office, S-224 also has a marble fireplace mantel with an interesting story. Different in its firebox opening and decoration, this fireplace was moved to the room in 1935. Unlike other mantels in the extension that had small openings to accommodate coal fires, this one contains a large opening designed for wood-burning fires. Likely made in Italy around 1818, the mantel has vase-shaped columns supporting a lintel decorated with palmetto leaves.

One of the main attractions of the Democratic leader's suite, and a significant piece in the



George Washington by Gilbert Stuart,
ca. 1796–1805

Senate's Fine Art Collection, is the revered painting of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. This painting is based on Stuart's famous Athenaeum portrait of Washington—best known as the image on the one dollar bill.

While office needs and decorative tastes have changed over the years, the Democratic leader's suite retains an historic appearance. The original architectural elements are complimented by the paint and fabrics and by many significant historic pieces that are displayed throughout the suite.

