



## THE HOUSE CHAMBER

OFFICE OF THE CLERK, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



### A Message from the Speaker

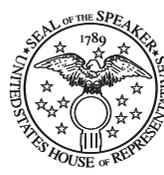


Since 1857, this hall has served as the Chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives. And as its presiding officer, I have the best view in the House. I stand at the speaker's rostrum, where I can see all 435 of the people's elected representatives.

Below is the hopper, where we submit legislation, and the well, where we debate the great questions facing our country. Engraved on the wall behind me is the nation's motto, "In God We Trust."

To my right is a portrait of George Washington, our first president.

Each year, one of his successors comes to this chamber to report to a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union. This is where we do the people's business. So we want to welcome you here, and, with this brochure, invite you to explore this special place we call the people's House.



Sincerely,

Paul D. Ryan  
Speaker of the House

## Welcome to the House Chamber

Vital democratic processes and a rich heritage resound in the House Chamber. Legislative activities in the U.S. House of Representatives begin and end in this room. Every bill is introduced here, and those reported out of Committee return to be debated and voted on. The House Chamber hosts the President’s annual State of the Union address, delivered to a Joint Session of Congress, as well as addresses by foreign dignitaries. It has also served as the scene of some of the most dramatic legislative events in American history—as Representatives craft laws and decide questions of war and peace.

The House met in this room for the first time on December 16, 1857. Formerly the House met in the Old House Chamber, now called National Statuary Hall. Seven Delegates and 234 Representatives (from 32 states

and seven territories) sat at individual desks. As membership increased, the Chamber was altered several times.

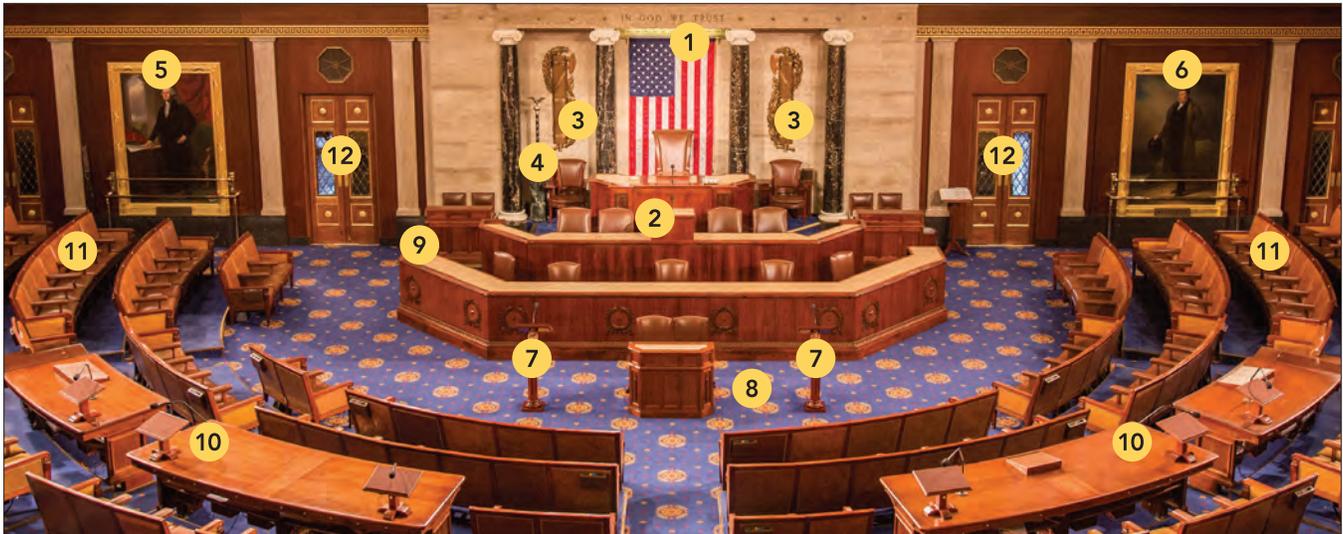
The present, theater-style seating was installed in 1913. Major renovations made from 1949 to 1951 included the removal of the original marble Speaker’s rostrum and the replacement of the stained-glass ceiling. The House Floor now accommodates 435 Representatives, five Delegates, and the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico.



**Voting Machine** Introduced in 1973, electronic voting is one in a long series of changes brought about by technological advances from the telegraph to the internet.



**Voting Boards** Votes are registered on the panels above the House Chamber’s Press Gallery. When Members are not voting, the panels are disguised as brocade fabric.



**1 U.S. Flag** By tradition, the U.S. flag hangs behind the Speaker's chair on the rostrum.

**2 Speaker's Rostrum** This three-tiered structure dominates the Chamber. The Speaker presides, with the assistance of the Parliamentarian, from atop the rostrum; staff who assist with Floor operations occupy the lower tiers of the rostrum. Relief carvings of laurel wreaths and the words *Union, Justice, Tolerance, Liberty, and Peace* adorn the front.

**3 Bronze Fasces** Two bronze fasces—symbols of civic authority since Roman times—are mounted on the wall behind the rostrum. Laurel branches, representing victory, twine around them.

**4 Mace** The House Sergeant at Arms uses the mace—a symbolic weapon which, like the fasces, represents authority—to bring the Chamber to order and to end altercations. The mace currently in use, with its silver American bald eagle and shaft of bound ebony rods, dates to 1841. The original House mace was destroyed when the British burned the Capitol in 1814.

**5 Portrait of George Washington** In 1834 the House commissioned John Vanderlyn to paint George Washington's likeness for display in the Chamber on the opposite side of the rostrum from his comrade-in-arms, the Marquis de Lafayette. The portrait depicts Washington in his role as statesman, with his sword concealed and hand resting on books and documents.

**6 Portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette** Artist Ary Scheffer gave his portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette to the House in honor of the Marquis' 1824 visit to the United States. A hero of the American Revolution, Lafayette delivered the first address to Congress by a foreign dignitary.

**7 Lecterns** Members address the House from a pair of lecterns. Traditionally Democrats speak from the lectern on the left; Republicans from the lectern on the right.

**8 The Well** The area directly in front of the rostrum is called the well of the House. Members speak from the lecterns. Seated in the center, Official Reporters transcribe House proceedings.

**9 Bill Hopper** Representatives introduce bills by placing them in the bill hopper attached to the side of the rostrum. The term derives from an agricultural storage bin used to house grain. Bills are retrieved from the hopper and referred to Committees with the appropriate jurisdiction.

**10 Leadership Tables** From these tables, Representatives from each party, called floor managers, control the flow of debate on bills before the House.

**11 Members' Seats** Members are free to choose any seat in the Chamber. By tradition, Republicans generally sit on one side of the aisle and Democrats on the other. From the perspective of this photograph, Republicans are on the right and Democrats on the left.

**12 Speaker's Lobby** The doors facing the Members' seats lead to the Speaker's Lobby, where Members can congregate privately while Congress is in session.

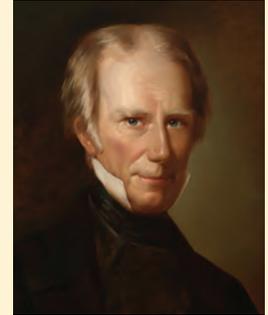
## Corridors and Speaker’s Lobby

Completed in 1857, the Capitol extension—with its marble floors, bronze staircases, and frescoed ceilings—added to the stately atmosphere of the House. The ornate Speaker’s Lobby, behind the doors flanking the Speaker’s rostrum, has huge windows that face south and open onto a balcony. The lobby, where Representatives gather to discuss issues and current events, was originally divided into offices and a hallway. In the 1870s, the House knocked out walls to improve ventilation, creating one grand, airy space. In the nineteenth century, citizens would meet their Representatives near the Speaker’s Lobby to advocate for a cause or bill. This practice is now called *lobbying*.



## Speakers’ Portraits

The service of former Speakers of the House is commemorated with portraits displayed in the Speaker’s Lobby and adjoining Members’ staircases. This tradition began in 1852, when artist Giuseppe Fagnani donated his portrait of Henry Clay in remembrance of the former Speaker’s death.



In 1891, supporters of legendary Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed commissioned a portrait by John Singer Sargent, the most prominent American portraitist of his day. The contrast of Reed’s renowned wit and his “impassive and inward turned eye,” as Sargent described it, made this work a particular challenge.



## Bronze Stair Railing

The Members’ staircase, built in 1857, provides a speedy route from the Speaker’s Lobby to committee rooms on the first floor of the Capitol. Sculptor Edmond Baudin took great pains with the figures in the bronze railings; a deer he used as a model lived in his studio for three weeks.

