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Statehouse Chambers Returning to Original Splendor

Ever since the spring legislative session ended, workers have been toiling in the House and Senate chambers, ripping up flooring, clearing away asbestos, and upgrading heating, air conditioning, and electrical systems. When they're finished, the chambers will look more like they did around the late 1800s, yet they'll have modern amenities that blend in with their new, historic look.

We talked to representatives from the House and Senate about the \$16 million renovations, which are overseen by the Office of the Architect of the Capitol and the Capital Development Board, with assistance from the Senate and House leadership. Steve Brown was the spokesman for House Speaker Michael Madigan and Cindy Davidsmeyer was the spokeswoman for Senate President Emil Jones.

Why are the House and Senate chambers being renovated?

Brown: Chiefly because the last time any major work was done was in the 1970s and systems in public buildings or private homes tend to wear out. That's the case with the heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system in the entire Statehouse, and some of the electrical systems in the House and Senate chambers. About five years ago the plan was put in place to do the renovation.

The plan was deferred at that point because of the state's budget problems, but now, as the fiscal condition improves somewhat, it's felt that it's time to move ahead. Part of the reason is that the heating and air conditioning system is about 12 years past its recommended useful life. (He adds that the HVAC renovation in the chambers is the first part of a 4-year project to upgrade those systems throughout the Statehouse.) So, while (the HVAC and electrical systems) work is being done in the House and Sen-

ate, which includes an extensive asbestos removal, we're going to redo the chambers.

Davidsmeyer:

The HVAC and asbestos removal project now underway requires work to be done under the House and Senate floors, among other areas. This made it the right time to consider completion of the 2000-2001 chamber renovation project (which was halted for a number of reasons).

Necessary restoration work was completed on the ceilings in the Senate and the House chambers, and Rooms 400 and 212, to prevent further deterioration of those structures, but other chamber work was put on hold. Carpeting and chairs were already purchased for the chambers (the carpeting replicates that used at the turn of the century) and has been in storage. Work has continued since that time on the third and fourth floor rotunda areas, restoring historic colors, woodwork, and glass.



The Illinois House of Representatives staff have been using old photos of the Chambers, like this one from 1893, to help them return the Chambers to their original appearance. The photos provide information about details like carpeting, decorations, lighting, and the like. This photo came from a book called "Souvenir of the Illinois Legislature of 1893."

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Statehouse Chambers...

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What do the renovations entail?

Daidsmeyer: Extensive research was conducted to find historic photographs of the Senate floor in its early history; these were used to design a historically correct structure, floor coverings, and furnishings from the early years of the Capitol. The latest technology is being employed in sound, computer, and voting systems that are both state-of-the-art and aesthetically discreet.

Brown: All renovations include stripping the interior of the chamber down to sub-flooring, which was necessary because there was asbestos underneath the floor, along with in the attic area, and above the ceiling. After that, workers began to make replacements and do some upgrading. We've also changed some of the layout in a small way that wouldn't be noticeable to the average person, but it helps with accessibility issues and provides some different kinds of spaces for different activities, including where we store all the hardware to run the computer systems and things like that.

Talk about your efforts to make the renovations historically accurate.

Brown: We're trying to get back to what the building looked like when it was first constructed, as closely as possible. That was the theme used when the House ceiling renovation went on, as well as the renovations on the committee rooms, some Senate committee rooms, and the Senate chambers. For too many years, for budget reasons or expediency, a lot of significant and pretty complex artwork was painted over, and as people went back in to do some repainting, for example, they discovered there was some intricate work that had been covered. So the intention for probably the last ten years has been that if we're going to do renovations in the Capitol building, since it's an historic landmark, let's try to get back to, as near as one can determine, the original colors and scenes and details.

The desks on the House floor had a variety of appearances over the years. At one point they were individual, small, roll top desks that could be moved

around. I've seen photos of the House chambers sometime in the 1800s where desks were moved aside and then large tables brought in and set up for committee meetings... The desks will not be roll tops, they've looked at different things. The desks will be fixed in place, too.

Daidsmeyer: We are striving to restore (the Senate chambers) to a period -- the late 1800s to early 1900s, rather than a particulate date. For example, several versions of desks were shown in early Senate photos. We elected to use the roll top desks which allow the storage of laptop computers, voting equipment, and members' work documents. Restoration of the Senate's original skylight was not feasible at this time, due to structures in the attic over the Senate chamber ceiling.

New information has been discovered during the project and appropriate adjustments have been made to accommodate them. For example, original stenciling was discovered during the demolition on the walls behind the Senate Press Box. Original plans to install acoustic fabric in that location were replaced with a replication of those stencils on canvas. It has been difficult to balance the desire for absolute historical accuracy with accessibility, as well as technological and fiscal considerations. We believe we reached an appropriate balance.

What is the most challenging aspect of the renovations?

Daidsmeyer: The many, many hours of meetings and decisions.

Brown: To attempt to bring back the attention to detail from the historic past. If you just wanted to use new materials and weren't concerned, and just put in desks and chairs so the House and Senate could function, you could probably do that much more quickly and I would guess, maybe less expensively, but I'm not sure. But, if you take a step back, and understand that we work in an historic landmark, that we have some obligation to preserve that, that becomes a challenge, because then you're trying to make modern day technology and modern day work happen in a building that was designed in the 1800s.



Capitol Matters: The Statehouse's Challenging Construction

Illinois' beautiful Statehouse had a rough start. Just after the Civil War, officials realized the existing Capitol (now the Old State Capitol on Springfield's downtown square) was too small for the burgeoning state. They needed a new building with a lot more room, according to articles by Mark W. Sorensen and Wayne C. Temple in the Capitol Centennial Papers, printed in 1988 by the Illinois State Archives for the 100th anniversary of the Statehouse's completion.

In 1867 the legislature passed a law requiring Sangamon County and Springfield to buy the Old State Capitol and give the state nine acres of land for the new Statehouse. A national contest was held to choose the best design for the new Capitol and architect John Crombie Cochrane, from Chicago, won the \$3,000 prize.

To prepare for construction, the railroad was extended to Monroe Street and around the building site, so materials could be brought directly to it. Construction began March 11, 1868.

Concerns about costs, materials, methods, and political intrigue led to investigations and changes a year later. "The use of iron, wood, and plain stone was substituted for marble on the interior; all limestone for the outer walls was to be cut and prepared by convicts in Joliet; and, most importantly, the new state constitution of 1870 put a \$3.5 million limit on costs," Sorensen writes. "Any amount above this would require approval by a majority of voters in a direct election."



This April 14, 1871 photo shows the foundation of the Statehouse under construction. Photo courtesy of ilstatehouse.com

Cochrane's partner, Alfred H. Piquenard, was the real force behind the project. He supervised the construction in Springfield and made substantial changes to the Capitol's design. But the Civil War veteran was battling debilitating health problems and was involved with many other projects, including the Iowa Statehouse construction. Cochrane used the same plans for their capitol. (Ironically, this was the second time Iowa got Illinois' plans for a Statehouse; John Rague, the architect of our Old State Capitol, sold Iowa those plans for their first Capitol, too.) Piquenard also battled workmen who stole materials

from the current Statehouse's construction site.

Even though the Capitol wasn't finished, the legislature held session there during the winter of 1877. But money had run out and construction stopped. Illinois citizens refused to approve the necessary money to finish the Statehouse until 1884. Unfortunately, Piquenard, the architect who directed the project for so long, didn't live to see it completed. He had died in 1876.

The public celebrated the new Illinois State Capitol, laid out in the shape of a Greek cross and topped with a dome taller than the U.S. Capitol's, in a grand opening on January 1, 1887. It had cost \$4.5 million. After all the bills were paid in July, 1888, "the state house commissioners returned the remaining balance of \$6.35 to the state treasurer," Sorensen writes.



House Paintings: History and Mystery

The House of Representatives Chambers are adorned with historic paintings of two famous Illinoisans -- one of Abraham Lincoln and another of his rival in politics and romance, Stephen Douglas, who also courted Mary Todd. As part of the Chambers'

renovations, the paintings got a check-up, according to Brad Bolin, Assistant Clerk of the House.

A conservator checked on the paintings' condition, which was deemed good, and then the paintings got a "light cleaning," Bolin says. Bolin and Steve Dyer, with the Office of the Secretary of the Senate, did some research into the paintings' history, which dates back to 1867. The following information comes from a paper Bolin wrote about the art works.

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House Paintings: History and Mystery

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In 1867 the State of Illinois contracted with artist Aaron Darling, a well-known portrait artist who had moved to Springfield from Chicago. His job was to create full length paintings of Lincoln and Douglas for display in the Statehouse at a cost "not exceeding one thousand dollars each." This was just two years after Lincoln's death and six years after Douglas's, so many in the Statehouse knew the men personally, which led to mixed feelings about the portraits. One representative voted against the measure to procure the paintings. The mixed feelings didn't stop there, but more on that in a minute.

Darling and his wife, also a painter, set up a temporary studio in the Statehouse (now the Old State Capitol) in Springfield while he was working on the Lincoln and Douglas portraits. A February 13, 1870 Chicago Tribune article written by a visitor to the Capitol, described the artists' studio and the paintings.

"Darling paints and receives visitors at the same time, profiting much by the criticisms of friends of the distinguished dead. He has certainly done justice to both men. Mr. Lincoln is almost life-like. Artists have frequently painted him who endeavored to soften the angularity of his features, and give grace to his form; they fail by destroying his strong individuality. He is represented here, just as he looked. The subject is the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation..."

The paintings were on display in the (Old State) Capitol in January, 1870 for the State Constitutional Convention. The delegates, in a vote closer than you'd expect, approved a resolution highly complimenting Darling, Lincoln, Douglas, the portraits, and even the Springfield man who made the portraits' frames. The resolution said the paintings would "not only tastefully decorate the hall of legislation, but enkindle in the minds of future statesmen, the love of country which distinguished the patriots..." The vote on the resolution was 36 to 22. Why did a good number oppose it?

The only hint is in the convention transcripts. A "Mr. Tincher" said, "It may be possible that there are honorable gentlemen on both sides of the house who think that there is more said in the resolutions in respect to the subjects of these portraits, than they deserve. But I think they express no more than the people of the State of Illinois feel and endorse. Both of the persons represented have been distinguished in life, and I think that the artist has well portrayed their features upon the canvas. I hope that we will not enter into any discussion upon the question, but pass the resolution at once."

While living in Springfield, Darling also painted several portraits for area residents. He died in 1882, at the age of 67, while living at an asylum in Jacksonville.



Transitions

Former State Senator Jack Knuepfer, a Republican from Elmhurst, died mid-September. Before serving eight years in the Senate, he served two years in the House. Knuepfer was 85.

Tim Anderson, the former Special Assistant to Senate President Emil Jones, became the Executive Director of the Illinois Commerce Commission on July 31. His predecessor, Scott Wiseman, became the Midwest Regional Vice President of the Center for Energy and Economic Development last year.

