

HOUSE ROSTRUM



The rostrum and well of the House Chamber
Image courtesy of the Office of the Clerk,
U.S. House of Representatives

“I should like to see this gray painted out and put back to gold, that was around here for so many years and that was so beautiful and so attractive to the eye. I do not like coldness when I can have warmth.”

— Speaker of the House
Sam Rayburn of Texas

The rostrum, a place for public speaking, is the location from which the Speaker of the House presides. It has many symbols that are important to American government.

FAST FACTS

- **House Rostrum**
The rostrum is made of wood panels decorated with relief carvings of laurel branches, which symbolize victory and accomplishment. The current wood rostrum replaced the old marble version in the mid-20th century.
- **Hopper**
Representatives introduce bills by placing them in the bill hopper attached to the side of the clerk’s desk. The term derives from a funnel-shaped storage bin filled from the top and emptied from the bottom, which is often used to house grain or coal. Bills are retrieved from the hopper and referred to committees with the appropriate jurisdiction.
- **Fasces**
The bronze fasces, representing a classical Roman symbol of civic authority, are located on both sides of the U.S. flag. The original Roman fasces consisted of an axe within a bundle of rods, bound together by a red strap. Over time, the fasces came to represent the ideal of American democracy: like the thin rods bound together, the small individual state achieve their strength and stability through their union under the federal government.

- **Mace**

Crafted by New York silversmith William Adams, the current mace has been in use since 1841 when Representatives met in the old House Chamber (now Statuary Hall). The original House mace was destroyed when the British burned the Capitol in 1814—during the intervening years, a wooden mace was used. Made of 13 thin ebony rods representing the original states, an eagle astride a silver globe sits atop of the mace. Each time the House convenes, the Sergeant at Arms places the mace on a pedestal at the Speaker’s right. To restore order in the chamber the Speaker may direct the Sergeant at Arms to take the mace from its pedestal and present it before an unruly Member.

- **Inkstand**

Before the Speaker calls the House to order, the coin silver inkstand is placed on the Speaker’s lectern. Considered the oldest surviving relic of the House, the inkstand dates from between 1810 and 1820. Although its origins are unknown, it most likely came to the House around 1819, when the old Chamber was first in use. The tray contains three crystal inkwells and is adorned on both sides by swags and medallions with eagles. The feet of the tray take the form of fasces with snakes winding around them, a classical symbol of wisdom supporting authority and the strength of unity.

TEACHING TIP

Ask students to make a list of common symbols in American culture. Lead a discussion on the various uses and importance of symbols. Then ask students to discuss the symbols on the rostrum. If they were going to add symbols that represent the nation today, what might they be? Have students design a new rostrum and a newly-renovated House Chamber.