

*A Brief History of  
House Rooms  
370, 371, and 372*



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Michigan's present Capitol, the state's third, opened on January 1, 1879, to great acclaim.

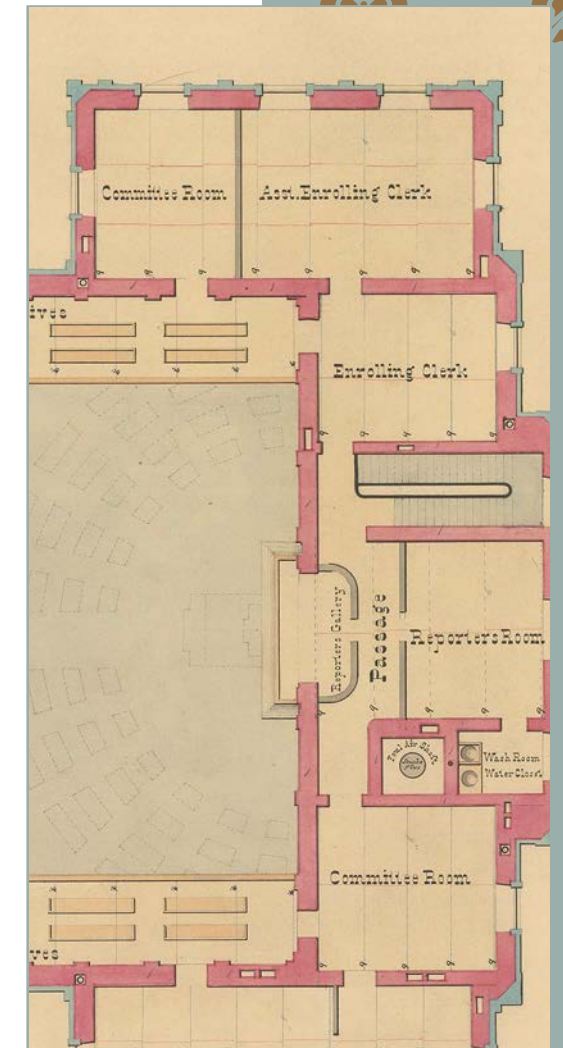
*Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan*

## House Committee Rooms and Offices

Architect Elijah E. Myers took great care to make sure that all of the House and Senate session staff would be accommodated with appropriate quarters. On his 1872 hand-inked floor plans, which still survive in the Archives of Michigan, Myers marked the rooms located northwest of the House Floor as committee rooms. The spaces directly north of the Floor were offices for the Speaker of the House and the House Clerk. The area to the immediate northwest of the Floor contained another committee room, and space for the Assistant Clerks and the Sergeants at Arms.

As might be expected, Myers continued this theme on the third floor. He tucked offices for the Enrolling Clerk, the Assistant Enrolling Clerk, and a committee room in the northwest corner of the wing (in the rooms now identified as H370, H371, and H372). Immediately behind the Reporters' Gallery (situated above the rostrum) was, appropriately, the Reporters' Room. And, in the north-eastern corner, three more committee rooms (today known as H373, H374, and H375) stood ready for legislative business.

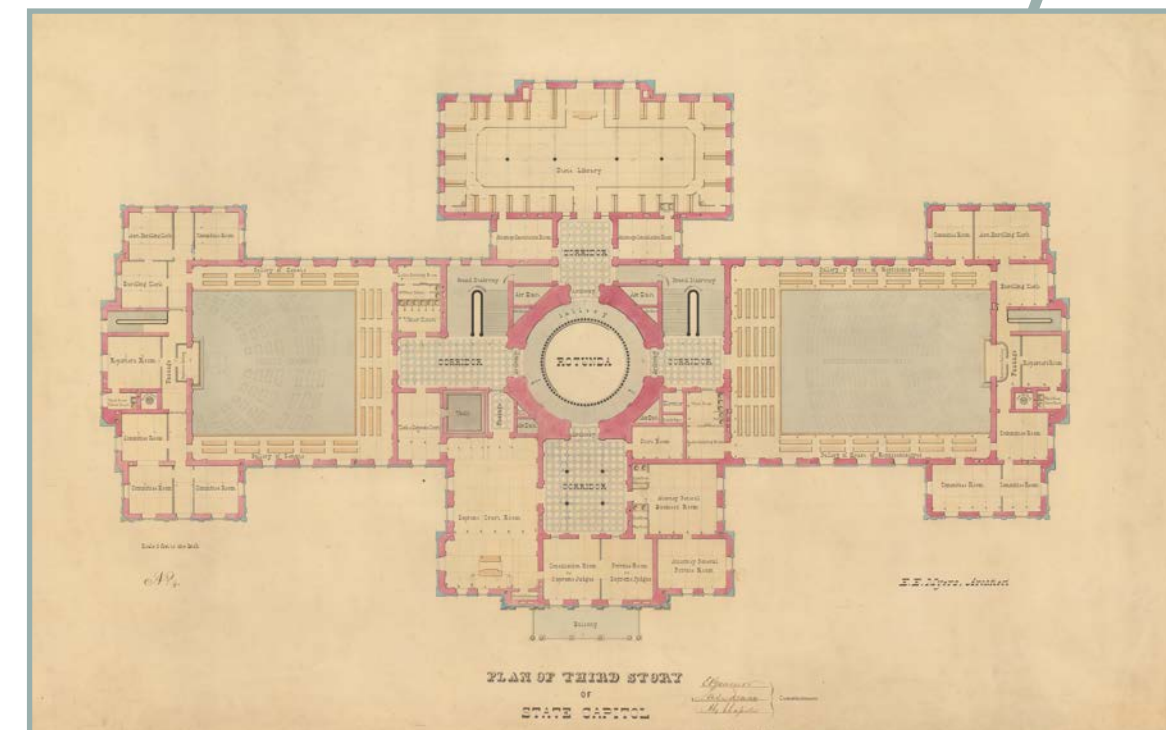
Like the rest of the Capitol, these rooms were designed to be both functional and beautiful, as befitted a growing and prosperous state. "The offices throughout are elegantly fitted up," a reporter wrote following his visit on January 1, 1879, for the Capitol's official dedication. "All of the doors are massive in finish, and fitted with locks specially made to order and being on bronze hinges, and bearing the arms of the state."<sup>1</sup> Passing through the doorways, visitors stepped onto colorful Brussels wool wall-to-wall carpets, laid in strips and carefully sewn together by hand. Sturdy and tasteful polished walnut desks, chairs, tables, and bookcases stood at attention, ready for use. Tall windows, framed by crisp wooden pocket shutters, ushered in natural light, while elegant new gas chandeliers, purchased from the Mitchell Vance Company in New York, gleamed overhead.



## The Golden Age of Capitol Construction

The Michigan State Capitol was built during the golden age of Capitol construction in the years following the American Civil War. From its inception, the building was designed to serve several functions and roles for the state. First, and most importantly, it is the official seat of government for the State of Michigan. It is a public forum where people can express their opinions, and a symbol of governmental traditions and the state itself. Yet the Capitol is also, at its very essence, an office building, where the day-to-day functions of government have played out for well over a century.

When the Capitol first opened in 1879, it was state government's only active office building, where all three branches of government were housed. The executive branch, including the Governor, State Treasurer, Secretary of State, State Librarian, Auditor General, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Adjutant General, claimed most of the offices within it. The judicial branch was represented by the Supreme Court, which occupied offices and an elegant chamber in the east wing of the third floor. The legislative branch used the House and Senate Chambers, the largest and most impressive rooms in the Capitol, as well as offices for the Secretary of the Senate, the Clerk of the House, and a few committee rooms. There were no offices for individual legislators, who, when in Lansing for brief part-time legislative sessions, worked from their desks on the chamber floors.



The Capitol's original hand inked floorplans still survive in the Archives of Michigan. The third floor plan included the Legislative Chambers and the adjoining offices and committee rooms.

*Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan*

## The First Clerks

The *1879 Michigan Manual* tells us the names of the men who had the pleasure of working in the rooms behind the Chamber when the Capitol first opened. The Clerk of the House, who occupied an office directly behind the Chamber on the second floor, was Daniel L. Crossman, of Williamston. His staff consisted of a Journal Clerk (Lewis M. Miller of Mt. Clemens), a Corresponding Clerk (John T. Page of Lansing), an Engrossing and Enrolling Clerk (V.W. Bruce of Howard City), an Assistant Engrossing and Enrolling Clerk (W.S. Plumb of Mattawan), and Clerks for the Judiciary, Ways and Means, Municipal Corporations, Taxations, and State Affairs Committees.<sup>2</sup>

A quick survey of the *Manual* relates two basic facts about the legislature in the late nineteenth century. First, the legislature was part time, meaning that they only met in Lansing three to five months in odd numbered years. While special sessions could be called by the Governor, they were the exception and not the rule. As a result, these spaces would have been incredibly busy during session, but very quiet once the House had recessed.

Secondly, the men using these spaces were not professional civil servants, and generally did not live in Lansing. The *Manuals* tell us each clerk's home post office and county, his birthplace (all of the aforementioned clerks were born in Michigan, New York, or Ohio), his profession (among the clerks there were journalists, farmers, lawyers, one clerk, and one druggist), and the boarding house or hotel where he stayed during session.



J.H. Scotford of Lansing photographed grand spaces like the rotunda, the House Chamber (seen here), and the Governor's Office around the time the Capitol opened. Smaller, less impressive rooms, did not garner the same attention.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection

## Early Changes

As might be expected, changes to these rooms, and the rest of the Capitol, were constant. Two major improvement projects were launched in the 1880s, only a few years after the building opened. First, starting in 1885, electricians began wiring the Capitol for a new technology – electric lights. Prior to this, the Capitol was lighted entirely by gas fixtures. That same year, painters began to decorate the Capitol's plain white plaster walls with an array of rich colors and ornate designs. Slowly, every room was transformed by artists who stenciled, grained, marbled, and striped beautiful motifs on the walls and ceilings.

In 1892, the Board of State Auditors directed the Superintendent of the Capitol to survey the building and its contents. He recorded his findings in their annual bound report, which survives to this day. Its contents reveal not only the type of items in the Capitol, but also just how lavishly each space was furnished. Unlike the large first floor departmental suites, the rooms behind the House Chamber contained a modest number of very functional pieces of furniture. Room I (now H370) housed one bureau and writing table, one lounge, eight chairs, one table, and two cuspidors (or spittoons). In comparison, Room J (now H371) contained one book case, a revolving book stand, two tables, one lounge, thirteen chairs, and two cuspidors, whereas Room K (now H372) boasted two tables, ten arm chairs, one paper rack, and, of course, two cuspidors.<sup>3</sup>

## Committee Rooms

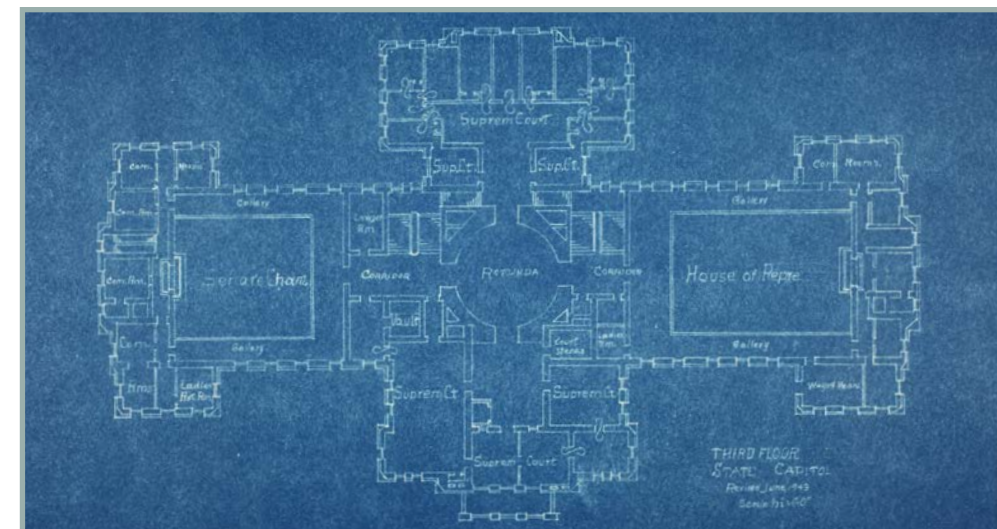
Information regarding the actual use of the rooms now known as H370, H371, and H372 can be found in the small, pocket-sized Legislative Handbooks that have long been a quick and easy reference guide for people working in and around state government. Beginning in the early twentieth century, each notes the location of every single House and Senate committee room, as well as the respective committees and clerks who worked in them.

The 1907-1908 handbook reveals the following assignments:

*Room I – Committees on State Affairs, Insurance, Fish and Fisheries, and the State Library – clerked by Miss. Gilbert*

*Room J – Committees on Judiciary, Elections, and Revision of the Constitution – clerked by Mr. Miller and Mrs. Kelley*

*Room K – Committees on General Taxation, Federal Relations, Lumber and Salt, Religious and Benevolent Societies, Game Laws, and the Geological Survey – clerked by Miss. Berglund<sup>4</sup>*



This 1943 floorplan reveals little about the rooms behind the House Chamber, where dozens of committees worked across the decades.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

While the number and function of House Committees continued to change over the years, a few remained constant. Among these was the Judiciary committee, which, according to the Legislative Handbooks, continued to meet in room J through the 1969/1970 session.

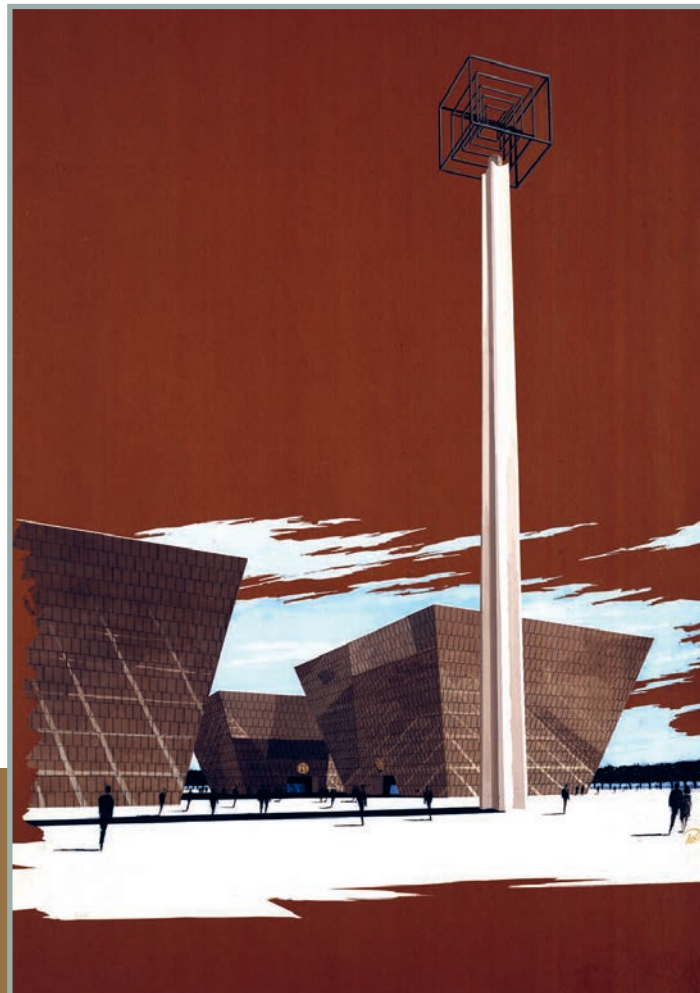
At some point during this period (probably in the 1920s or 1930s) a tasteful judicial cartouche was introduced to the west wall of Room J. The origin of the piece, including the identity of the person who commissioned it, the identity of the plasterer/artist who executed the work, and the exact year in which it was created, remains a mystery.

## House Member Offices

The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of great change in the Capitol building. After ninety years of shuffling, squeezing, and relocating, the decision was made to dramatically remodel many of the offices in the Capitol. The action was motivated by a number of factors, including the state's move to a full-time legislature. This had dramatic repercussions for the Capitol building, where the pace of business in both House and Senate spaces increased significantly. As the number of legislators spending every week in Lansing rose, the call for additional office space reached a fever pitch. In order to accommodate all the members, space had to be found—preferably in the Capitol. Governor Romney's preferred solution called for the construction of a new Capitol. While significant steps were taken towards this ambitious goal, ultimately the project was tabled over cost and aesthetic concerns.

When it became clear that a new Capitol was not to be, a new solution was proposed. Why not dramatically reconfigure the Capitol's offices and committee rooms? The timing seemed ideal, as several of the building's longtime departmental occupants were moving out of the Capitol and into other buildings in downtown Lansing.

A scheme was developed to capture new space in the old building by subdividing the rooms in half to create two ten-foot tall offices, one above the other. From 1969 to 1972, almost every office on the Capitol's first, second, and third floors received an overfloor (sometimes called half floors or mezzanines). At the same time, offices were modernized by adding drop ceilings, fluorescent lighting, and institutional carpeting and furnishings. Original decorative paint had already been covered by layers of overpaint, paneling, and wallpaper. Almost every vestige of the Capitol's original elegance and character had disappeared.



Several of the plans considered for the new Capitol in the 1960s contained three buildings—designed to house and symbolize the three branches of government—and a central pylon.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*

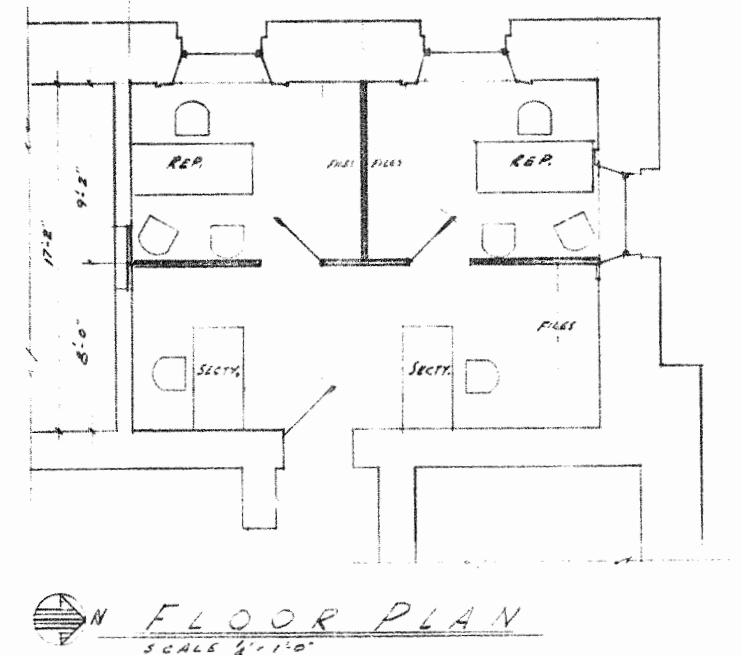


Happily, perhaps due to its proximity to the House Chamber, the areas behind the House were not overfloored. This space was, however, modernized, receiving a suspended ceiling that was installed to hide duct work and sprinkler piping. Unfortunately, it also concealed the elaborate plaster cornice.

Offices, corridors, and even the lobby into the House Chamber, seen here, were sliced in half horizontally to create additional office space in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*

*... due to its proximity to the House Chamber, the areas behind the House were not overfloored.*



A floorplan from 1970 showing accommodations for two Representatives and their secretaries in Room J.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*

About this time, the function of these spaces also changed. By the publication of the *1971-1972 Legislative Handbook*, these rooms were being used as office spaces for House members. A survey of the handbooks indicates that the following members worked in this area over the years.

*Please note that the district numbers in the table reflect those in use at the time each respective handbook was printed.*<sup>5</sup>

|                  |                              |                |              |       |
|------------------|------------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------|
| <b>1971-1972</b> | Rep. Leonard S. Walton       | 18th District  | Detroit      | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Peter Kok               | 93rd District  | Grand Rapids | Rm. J |
|                  | Rep. George A. Prescott      | 102nd District | Tawas City   | Rm. J |
|                  | Rep. William B. Fitzgerald   | 4th District   | Detroit      | Rm. K |
| <b>1973-1974</b> | Rep. John A. Welborn         | 47th District  | Kalamazoo    | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Peter Kok               | 91st District  | Grand Rapids | Rm. J |
|                  | Rep. George A. Prescott      | 105th District | Tawas City   | Rm. J |
| <b>1975-1976</b> | Rep. Colleen House Engler    | 101st District | Bay City     | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Wilbur V. Brotherton    | 64th District  | Farmington   | Rm. J |
|                  | Rep. Peter Kok               | 91st District  | Grand Rapids | Rm. J |
| <b>1977-1978</b> | Rep. Donald H. Gilmer        | 55th District  | Augusta      | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. David L. Campbell       | 68th District  | Clawson      | Rm. J |
|                  | Rep. Jack E. Kirksey         | 35th District  | Livonia      | Rm. J |
| <b>1979-1980</b> | Rep. Kenneth J. DeBeaussaert | 26th District  | Washington   | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Debbie Stabenow         | 58th District  | Lansing      | Rm. J |
| <b>1981-1982</b> | Rep. Edgar W. Giese          | 98th District  | Reed City    | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Debbie Stabenow         | 58th District  | Lansing      | Rm. J |
| <b>1983-1984</b> | Rep. Rudy J. Nichols         | 20th District  | Waterford    | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Curtis Hertel           | 12th District  | Detroit      | Rm. J |
| <b>1985-1986</b> | Rep. Claude A. Trim          | 20th District  | Waterford    | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Curtis Hertel           | 12th District  | Detroit      | Rm. J |
| <b>1987-1988</b> | Rep. Agnes M. Dobronski      | 31st District  | Dearborn     | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Curtis Hertel           | 12th District  | Detroit      | Rm. J |
| <b>1989-1990</b> | Rep. Nancy Crandall          | 97th District  | Muskegon     | Rm. I |
|                  | Rep. Curtis Hertel           | 12th District  | Detroit      | Rm. J |

## The Capitol's Restoration

In 1987, the Michigan Senate and the House of Representatives began the process of restoring Michigan's Capitol. Chief among their goals was to return the building to its original Victorian grandeur while modernizing the many outdated systems within it. They sought to make the Capitol a living, working museum, where the functions of government would continue to play out in a beautiful and inspiring historic setting. In order to carry out this mission, the restoration team, made up of supportive elected officials, architects, craftspeople, and artists, would need to touch every single space in the Capitol, including these three rooms.

Changes came swiftly. The suspended ceilings were removed, returning the height of the rooms to their full twenty-two feet. Tradespeople rerouted and disguised ductwork, wiring, and sprinkler heads. Appropriate carpeting, designed using colors and patterns from the Victorian era, and period inspired furnishings, were crafted and installed. Skilled designers and craftspeople used photographs to recreate original gas lighting fixtures removed in the early twentieth century. New windows, neatly trimmed with appropriate wood shutters and draperies, replaced old.

Of particular importance to the restoration was the recreation of the Capitol's historic decorative artwork. Michigan's Capitol contains approximately nine acres of hand painted art. A variety of techniques were used in the building when it was decorated in the 1880s, including stenciling, striping, marbling, and gilding. Over the years, the artwork was painted over many times as styles changed.

For the first time, careful research was undertaken to determine the original colors and decorative paint motifs found in these rooms. These colors and motifs were then replicated by talented decorative artists who used traditional techniques to return the room to its proper late nineteenth century appearance.



A decorative artist uses a straightedge to guide his paintbrush.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*



The Capitol's traditional woodgraining recipe calls for oil paints, umber pigment, and stale beer, which serves as the binder.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*

One of the techniques used in this space was that of woodgraining. The original Capitol building commissioners made the decision to use white pine as the dominant wood throughout the building. White pine was relatively inexpensive and available in abundance in this period. They did not intend, however, for people to recognize the wood as pine. Once the pine was installed, it was woodgrained—that is, painted carefully to mimic a more expensive wood—by talented artists. In the Capitol, painters transformed yards of humble pine by painting it with the grain of walnut, the most fashionable (and therefore rather expensive) choice of the 1870s. The technique that they used was replicated by modern decorative painters during the restoration. They labored many hours to apply the necessary seven layers of paint needed to mimic late nineteenth century process.

In Room J, special care was given to the decorative judicial cartouche. A section of the plaster around it was wisely preserved and protected while the rest of the room was being restored. Plasterers worked carefully to blend the new plaster with the old in this area, thereby creating the illusion that the entire plaster wall is original. Today it is impossible to tell where the old materials end and the new begin.



The restoration of the Capitol was completed in the fall of 1992. Rededication ceremonies held on November 19 and 20 of that year celebrated the success of the project, which won many significant state and national preservation awards. That same fall, the building was officially designated a National Historic Landmark, the highest honor accorded historic structures in America.

*The restoration of the Capitol was completed in the fall of 1992.*

Workers made sure that the plaster judicial cartouche was preserved intact.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*

*That same fall, the building was officially designated a National Historic Landmark . . .*



Cartouche after preservation.

*Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection*

## Post Restoration Use

The completion of the Capitol's restoration brought with it the need to resolve matters concerning the identification and future use of the Capitol's rooms. These three rooms, now renumbered H370, H371, and H372 under the new system devised by Capitol Preservation Architect Richard C. Frank, became, once again, a topic for discussion. House leaders initially returned the spaces to the Clerk's staff, who worked in the area until 1997, when the rooms were reconfigured into two legislative offices. At the end of the 1999-2000 session this scheme was abandoned, and the rooms designated for the use of session staff. Legislative members moved back into the H371/H372 suite in early 2017.<sup>6</sup>

|           |                       |                |             |      |
|-----------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------|------|
| 1991-1992 | Bill Clerks           |                |             | H371 |
|           | Journal Clerks        |                |             | H372 |
| 1993-1994 | Bill Clerks           |                |             | H371 |
|           | Journal Clerks        |                |             | H372 |
| 1995-1996 | Bill Clerks           |                |             | H371 |
|           | Journal Clerks        |                |             | H372 |
| 1997-1998 | Rep. Tom Alley        | 103rd District | West Branch | H372 |
| 1999-2000 | Rep. Hubert Price Jr. | 43rd District  | Pontiac     | H372 |
| 2001-2002 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2003-2004 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2005-2006 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2007-2008 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2009-2010 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2011-2012 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2013-2014 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2015-2016 | Session Support Staff |                |             |      |
| 2017-2018 | Rep. Gary Glenn       | 98th District  | Midland     | H372 |
| 2019-2020 | Rep. Brandt Iden      | 61st District  | Kalamazoo   | H372 |
| 2021-2022 | Rep. Mary Whiteford   | 80th District  |             | H372 |



## End Notes

- 1 *The Evening News*, January 2, 1879.
- 2 *The Red Book for the Thirtieth Legislature of the State of Michigan*. W.S. George & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1879, p. 98-99.
- 3 *Annual Report of the Board of State Auditors for the State of Michigan for the Year 1892*. Robert Smith & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1892, p. 519.
- 4 *Michigan Legislative Handbook*, 1907-1908, p. 76.
- 5 *Michigan Legislative Handbooks*, 1971-1990.
- 6 *Michigan Legislative Handbooks*, 1991-2022.
- 7 Information per discussions with Mr. Gary Randall, Clerk of the House, and Mr. Tim Bowlin, former House Business Manager.





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