

10-22-2004

Why the Oval Office is Oval

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Recommended Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Why the Oval Office is Oval" (2004). *Ask Gleaves*. Paper 54.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/54

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Why the Oval Office is Oval

Why is the Oval Office oval?

The Oval Office is the primary working office of the president of the United States. It is located in the West Wing.

The West Wing *seems* as if it has been around forever, but it did not exist prior to the early 1900s. The West Wing was added to the Executive Mansion because Theodore Roosevelt had a large, young, rambunctious family that needed all the room possible in the main part of the house. So in 1902 Congress authorized office space to be added to the Executive Mansion. TR and the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White could not agree on a design, so the original West Wing was built as a temporary structure to house the executive offices. There was no Oval Office in this first West Wing.

The West Wing was expanded in 1909, while President William Taft was on vacation. That's when the Oval Office was created on the site where a tennis court once stood. Taft was the first president to work daily in the Oval Office.

The Oval Office was designed by an architect named Nathan Wyeth. The room's shape was inspired by two rooms in the adjoining White House: the Blue Room and the room directly above it, the Yellow Oval, both located in the middle of the south side of the old mansion.

The Blue Room has a history. It was inspired by George Washington. Washington did not live in the White House, but he was one of the jurors who approved the winning design. Washington had neoclassical tastes. He told the architect of the White House that he wanted a room that was neoclassical and suitable for greeting people in the proper manner. The first president basically didn't like to greet people in a line, shaking their hands. He preferred to host levees, in which guests would come into a room and arrange themselves in a loose circle or oval, allowing the president to stand in the middle of the room and bow to them. This gesture kept a formality, a distance, between the president and his guests. Washington thought it was an appropriate social greeting; it certainly dramatized the office of the presidency, and John Adams, who was thought to possess monarchical tendencies, maintained the practice. (Thomas Jefferson, by the way, ended the practice of holding levees; he was the first president to greet his constituents with a simple handshake. It was less monarchical, more republican.)

So the idea for the Oval Office goes back to the Blue Room, which was designed to conform to the way George Washington wanted the president to greet people.

(Question from WUOM listener [Ann Arbor, MI])

