Virtual Snapshot Series

The General Assembly Chamber
The General Assembly

There are two houses in the New Jersey State Legislature, the Senate and the General Assembly. The General Assembly is the lower house. Assembly Members sponsor and vote on ideas for laws called bills. They also initiate all bills that devote sums of money to a specific need or purpose. The Assembly has 80 members. Two members are elected from each of New Jersey’s 40 legislative districts.

Assembly Members serve two-year terms. They must be at least 21 years of age, a United States citizen, a New Jersey resident for two years prior to an election, and a resident of their district for at least one year prior to an election.
The Speaker of the General Assembly

The rostrum, a two-tiered platform located at the front of the chamber floor, is where the Speaker of the Assembly and Assembly Clerk work.

The upper level of the platform is for the Speaker of the General Assembly. The Speaker is voted into position by the other members and is typically from the majority party. They choose what bills are introduced and voted on, and determine the rules for discussing a bill in the chamber. The Speaker is the third in line to become acting Governor if the Governor becomes incapacitated, leaves office, or travels out of New Jersey for an extended period of time.
The Clerk of the General Assembly

The lower level of the rostrum is for the Clerk of the General Assembly. The Clerk plays an administrative role and is responsible for taking attendance (referred to as a quorum call), announcing the bills, and reporting the vote totals made by the legislators. The Clerk is appointed by the Speaker and is not a legislator.
Voting in the Chamber

The General Assembly Members meet in a special room called a chamber. Each of the 80 Assembly Members have their own desks.

Voting for bills in the General Assembly is tracked on electronic boards at the front of the chamber. Members push buttons on their desks to cast their votes. Green buttons are marked with “yea” (yes) and red buttons are marked with “nay” (no). The yellow button is pressed to cast an abstention vote, which indicates that the member is declining to vote either for or against the bill. Members push the white button to ask for permission to speak.
During a legislative session, members of the public are invited to sit in the gallery -- a balcony that overlooks the chamber floor. Citizens in the public gallery are not allowed to speak during a session, but they can share their opinions about a bill earlier in the legislative process as legislators discuss bills in committee hearings. Members of the press, executive branch, and lobbyists (people whose business it is to try and influence public policy) may also sit in the public gallery. General Assembly proceedings are televised over cable networks and streamed online in real time on the New Jersey Legislature’s website.
History

The General Assembly is the larger of the two legislative chambers in the State House. Engineer and Assemblyman James Moylan, designed the State House General Assembly wing after the previous chamber became outdated. Construction began in 1891, took nine months to complete, and cost $232,000. The Legislature held its first session in this chamber on January 12, 1892.
Presidential Portraits

At the front of the chamber are portraits of two U.S. presidents, both with connections to Trenton.

To the left of the Speaker’s rostrum is a portrait of Abraham Lincoln who visited the State House in 1861 on his way to his inauguration in Washington D.C. He spoke to both houses of the Legislature during his visit.

To the right of the rostrum is a portrait of George Washington who during the American Revolution in 1776, crossed the Delaware River and fought the battle of Trenton.
The Details

The chamber includes many fine details including white Italian marble, carved oak woodwork, tiles, stained glass, plaster, gold leaf, and elegant lighting fixtures.

While many of the details in the chamber are original, one of the most eye-catching objects was integrated during a restoration of the room in the 1990s. Since the original carpeting could not be replicated, a new design was created featuring four New Jersey state symbols: the eastern goldfinch, violet, red oak, and honey bee.
The Chandelier

When the General Assembly chamber opened in 1891, it contained one of the most modern and novel inventions in New Jersey: an electric chandelier.

The Edison Electric Light Company installed the electric lighting system and fixtures. The lighting fixture contains 66 light bulbs, weighs approximately 1,240 pounds, and can be lowered to the ground for maintenance.

The masks surrounding the two thick bands on the chandelier are believed to represent Jupiter, Roman god of thunder, lightening and rain. Jupiter was also referred to as god of destiny, justice, virtue, and law.
The State Seal

High above the Speaker’s rostrum is a carved statue of the State seal. The seal was completed in 1777 by Pierre Eugene du Simitière after designs by Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence who also designed early versions of the American flag.

The New Jersey State seal includes two female figures: Liberty and Prosperity, the Roman Goddess of agriculture. The horse’s head represents strength and commerce; the helmet symbolizes independence; and the plows decorate a blue shield in honor of New Jersey’s agriculture history.