

The Octagon Office

RADM Jerrold M. Michael, USPHS (Retired)

On February 21, 2013, under the direction of their chief professional officer RADM Sven Rodenbeck, the PHS engineers met as a group in Washington, DC and among other things celebrated the 100th anniversary of the establishment of their profession as a recognized category within the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

It was a singular event underscored by the historic building in which the meeting took place, namely the South Interior Building on Constitution Avenue in Washington, DC. That building near the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument is now part of the Department of Interior Headquarters complex. The still remaining engraved Anchor and Caduceus symbol of the Public Health Service above the main entrance doors to the building, however, is a constant reminder that the 1932 era facility was originally named The United States Public Health Service Building.



The PHS Building when construction was completed in 1932

(Photograph from Federal Archives)

The Service occupied that building from 1933 to 1942 and might have for some considerable period of time but World War II shaped a different future for the distinctive three story "E-shaped" marble building designed by architect J.H. deSibour.

Within the building was a distinctive room designed to serve as the personal office of the Surgeon General. The office was an octagon shape facility located where the west leg of the "E" joins the first wing. It was embellished with pecan wood paneling, a built in bookcase, ornamental carving, a molded plaster ceiling, parquet floor, marble fireplace, and crystal

chandeliers. The room, always known as “The Octagon Office,” was reputed to be one of the largest government offices in Washington, DC.



The Octagon Office as originally constructed

(Photograph from Federal Archives)



Surgeon General Hugh Cumming in the Octagon Office in 1935

(Photograph from “A profile of the United States Public Health Service 1798-1948”)

In December 1941, the United States entered the Second World War and a meeting known as the "Arcadia Conference" was held next door to the PHS building in the equally attractive, Federal Reserve Building. There President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill united the leadership of their armed forces under a Combined Chiefs of Staff who were to be the supreme military body for strategic direction of the Anglo-American war effort. To insure the closest possible communications between London and Washington, it was decided that representatives of the British Chiefs should remain in Washington and confer daily with their American allies.

On January 30, President Roosevelt announced that the **U. S. Public Health Service Building** was to be renamed **The Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) Building** and to be used by them. The American half of the CCS, which later became the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, held its first meeting on February 9, 1942, in the Octagon Office. The Room became the place where the Combined Chiefs of the two allied nations met to make decisions affecting the lives of millions of people during World War II.

The auditorium on the building's first floor where the PHS engineers meeting took place became a map room. During this period, the doors of the map room were closed and a guarded entrance constructed. An opening was cut in the floor to allow a sliding carriage to raise maps from the basement-level "boiler pit."

By the close of the war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had held 201 meetings in total, most of which took place in the Combined Chiefs of Staff Building. Many critical decisions on Allied war strategy and battle plans were decided by senior military officials at this location.

While Allied Generals planned strategy in the Octagon Room, history was also being made in a secret structure on the roof. The temporary wooden structure atop the center wing of the building was the site of planning for the Manhattan Project, the super- secret effort that developed the atomic bomb. The Manhattan Project was deemed so important to the war effort that the building was sealed, and sharpshooters maintained a round-the-clock vigil to guard it.

After the war, the building was re occupied for about one year by the Public Health Service and then by the Atomic Energy Commission and the National Science Foundation. In 1965 the Department of the Interior took over the building and it housed the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1972 it was the scene of a dramatic seven-day takeover by American Indian activists attempting to make their concerns known to the government and the public.

In 1977 the building gained its current tenant, the newly formed Office of Surface Mining (OSM). Shortly after OSM moved into the building, the temporary Manhattan Project structure on the roof was demolished. Preservationists attempted to stop the demolition; but, were unsuccessful. Each day as the wrecking ball finished its work preservationists would salvage pieces of the wooden walls that Manhattan Project scientists had used to scribble notes on.

Today, the Octagon Office, the former Office of Surgeon General Cumming and the WW II nerve center, is now room 234, the office of the Director for the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement. This second floor corner office has been restored to its condition during that original era and is still detailed with filigree paneling, chandeliers, and a plaque designating the room as an important historic location.

References:

- 1) Department of Interior. "History of the Headquarters South Interior Building," 2008
- 2) Furman, Bess. *A Profile of the United States Public Health Service, 1798 – 1948*, National Library of Medicine, Washington, DC, 1973

