



Very sincerely yours,
John H. Kasper

From a portrait in oil by Robert Hinckley in the gallery of the State Historical Department,
Des Moines, Iowa. The State Capitol in the background.

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KASSON'S LONG FIGHT FOR THE NEW CAPITOL.

BY JOHNSON BRIGHAM, STATE LIBRARIAN.

And here 'twixt suns that rise and set,
'Twixt river and river, and sea and sea,
Will we build thee a shrine, he said, where yet
Our children's children shall worship thee
As their fathers have, O Liberty!

Arthur Sherburne Hardy's Ode on the Laying of the Cornerstone of Iowa's New Capitol. (Read by J. B. Grinnell.)

The location of the Capitol in Des Moines was at most a temporary settlement of the Capitol location question. The building, erected in fulfillment of the citizens' pledge, was at best a temporary affair, small, ill-arranged, and unsafe. Even before the occupancy of the building, it was evident that the State would soon be compelled to do for itself what it should have done at first—build a State House adequate for the needs of the future.

The legislative contest for a new Capitol building was deferred for ten years, and was not settled until 1872,—fourteen years after the first General Assembly convened in Des Moines.

Several names stand out prominently in the history of the long struggle beginning in 1868, among them Jonathan Cattell, B. F. Allen, George W. Jones, and J. H. Hatch, respectively, representatives of Polk county; but the one man to whom the palm of leadership was cheerfully conceded by his compeers—whether they were for or against the measure—is the late John A. Kasson. In fact, Mr. Kasson was chosen, and twice re-chosen, a representative from Polk county that the movement for a new Capitol might have in him a leader of legislative experience, tact in handling men and persuasive eloquence. "At the time of the fall election, in 1867," he says, "I was far away seeking rest and recreation after several years of hard public labors, when notice came to me

that I had been elected to the House of the Twelfth General Assembly, with J. H. Hatch for my colleague. On my return they told me of the special object of Polk county sending me to that legislature.”

Jonathan Cattell, of Polk, was serving the second half of his senatorial term. With three strong men, and one of them a giant in the arena of debate and a diplomat by nature and education, Polk county was “all fit for the fight.” Arrayed against the proposed new Capitol were various interests which together proved formidable. The representatives of State institutions at other points were easily lined up against the measure as one involving an outlay which might jeopardize their own anticipated appropriations. Representatives of districts dependent on other trunk lines than the Rock Island were rounded up by appeals to local interests. Disappointed representatives of other localities that had failed to secure the location of the Capitol, were eager to reopen the question of location. Conservatives in the matter of expenditure were of the opinion that the time had come for a halt in the expenditure of public money. With not a few of this class, the inadequacy of the old Capitol was regarded as a pretext, the danger a mere scare, and the measure a selfish scheme of the Polk county trio to strengthen themselves with their constituents at the expense of the State.

On the other side, were the citizens of Des Moines and Polk county who best knew the inadequacy of the old structure, and were continually haunted by the ever-present possibility of a re-opening of the whole question and the ultimate loss of that which had cost them so much. Behind these locally interested parties was a considerable number of legislators who approached the question on its merits.

This, in general, was the complicated situation which confronted the young statesman from Polk in 1868 as he entered upon his arduous task.

The initial move was a resolution proposing a joint committee to examine the Capitol building and report on its sufficiency for the forthcoming inauguration. The committee reported the building safe for all who could be accommodated within its limited area.

The next was the creation of a strong House committee on public buildings of which Polk county's representative, Mr. Hatch, was chairman. February 1, the committee reported a bill providing for a state house at a cost not to exceed \$1,500,000. The bill was taken up March 3, and was confronted with a substitute, which was promptly voted down, by an amendment limiting the cost to \$1,000,000; and the next day by an amendment reducing the cost to \$600,000. Later, a million-dollar amendment was temporarily agreed upon. The war of diplomacy continued until the 7th of March, when the bill, as amended, passed the House by a vote of 55 to 36.

The bill had comparatively smooth sailing until it reached the Senate. There it was confronted by anti-capitol memorials, notably from Webster and Buchanan counties. It went to a committee favorable to the project, and was reported out on the 14th and was made a special order for the 19th of March.

The bill, once fairly before the Senate, was confronted with a substitute which was promptly voted down. A motion was made to table it, but that also failed—by a vote of 25 to 20. A move to indefinitely postpone was defeated by a vote of 23 to 22. The bill then ran the gauntlet of unfriendly amendments. One of these amendments prevailed, eliminating the building committees of the two houses from the board of commissioners. Another volley of amendments followed. Some of these carried, thereby seriously endangering the fate of the measure. Senator Cattell and the friends of the bill fought bravely; but, it became apparent that theirs was a losing fight. With the discretion of a wise general, Cattell summoned all his strength for a retreat, securing postponement until the 25th,—the bill as amended to be printed meantime.

The prospect on the 25th was far from hopeful. On the 26th, an amendment in the nature of a substitute, authorizing an advertisement for plans for a new state house, and providing for the repair of the old, was adopted by a vote of 27 to 20. All seemed lost; but a friendly senator moved a reconsideration, which motion carried. The bill, with its load of amendments, was referred back to the committee, March 30.

The committee reported a substitute calling for plans for a new capitol building, and appropriation money for repairs on the old. This was so amended as to call for plans for a two-million dollar building. On the third day of April, the substitute was adopted, by a vote of 39 to 7. The House promptly ratified the Senate's action. The substitute was adopted by the House by a vote of 59 to 6.

The net results of the session were:

1. A commitment of the State to the consideration of the question of a two million dollar capitol building.
2. A popular awakening to the desirability, if not necessity, of a new building.

The Thirteenth General Assembly found Mr. Kasson in his seat and ready for the fray. His colleague in the House this session was George W. Jones. In the Senate the seat vacated by Jonathan Cattell was now occupied by B. F. Allen, one of the best known of the pioneer bankers and business men in Iowa, not gifted in debate but strong in the committee-room and in the lobby, a "good mixer" and a resourceful manager of men and measures.

The opposition in the House, formerly led by the trio, Traer of Benton, Dudley of Wapello and Brown of Van Buren, was now measurably strengthened by Cutts of Mahaska, a vigorous organizer and forceful debater. Mr. Kasson in after years especially mentioned the redoubtable John P. Irish, of Johnson, and the witty Pat Gibbons, of Keokuk, as among his most serviceable allies.

The tactics of two years before were reversed. The bill, this time, first saw the light in the Senate. The building committee, of which Griffith of Warren was chairman, reported it out on the 28th of January, 1870, and it was made a special order for February 4. There seemed to be an understanding that the fight this time would be in the House. In due time it was reached in the Senate. It was slightly amended and engrossed, and, on the following day, was read a third time and passed—by a vote of 27 to 18. Then began the fight for its life.

The bill came over from the Senate February 7, and on the usual motion to refer, Traer was opposed to any reference. Cutts urged indefinite postponement. Dudley urged immediate action. Kasson's motion to refer to the building committee finally carried by a vote of 53 to 39,—a vote which could not be taken as a measure of the strength of the bill.

When the day set for the presentation of the committee's report arrived, a postponement of the special order until the 8th of March was asked and granted, though Cutts and Dudley vigorously opposed the motion.

The 8th of March arrived. After a preliminary skirmish, the real battle of words began. Traer moved an indefinite postponement, urging the bad condition of the State's finances and the paramount needs of the several state institutions. Gibbons, of Lee, made a good-humored, generous plea for the new building. Ball, of Jefferson, declared himself unalterably opposed to the bill. Irish rose to the occasion, drawing from Ball an admission that if he felt free to vote he would vote aye. Then followed Cutts, "the Ajax of the opposition." Mr. Kasson long afterward said: "It would be difficult indeed to surpass that speech in artful adaption to intimidate fearful members and to prejudice the doubtful against the entire proposition." It was a compound of humor, satire, argument and appeal. It is difficult to read with seriousness Mr. Cutts' picture of Iowa's poverty,—"little children running round with their little knees protruding through their pants, their coats all ragged and tattered and torn, their little caps with their fore-pieces off and all torn, their father gone to the county seat to pay out the last half-dime which is to go into that magnificent state house"!

It remained for Mr. Kasson to reply to "the Ajax of the House." As in mythology, Agamemnon awarded to Odysseus, over Ajax, the coveted arms of Achilles, so the verdict of most listeners to this notable debate was that the Polk county statesman fairly won first honors in the contest for supremacy. Mr. Kasson maintained that the reputation of his State was depreciated by the mean and narrow housing of its legislature

and its executive officers. Dealing with plain, practical men, he did not rely on mere sentiment. He maintained that (1) the state house then occupied was at best only temporary and wholly inadequate, and was unsafe as against fire or storm. It had no committee rooms; its walls were defective and had been pronounced unsafe; the opposition had shamefully discredited the financial condition of the State, the appropriation asked could easily be paid out of existing resources without increasing taxation or robbing other state institutions; (2) that the old state house would be untenable before the possible completion of the new; (3) and that the implied obligation of the State to build a new capitol in consideration of the valuable grants of land and pecuniary sacrifices made by the people of Polk county should be fulfilled.

Mr. Kasson was frequently interrupted by questions and comments, but he deftly parried every thrust and cleverly answered every question.

The debate was continued on into the next forenoon, with Cutts, Irish and Ball frequently on the floor.

Once the former member from Jefferson turned the laugh on the cleverer member from Polk. In the audience that packed the old capitol during the debate were many public-spirited women of Des Moines. Professing to regard the presence of the Des Moines ladies as an attempt to influence votes for the bill in which they were interested, Mr. Ball ironically remarked:

“Don’t you see, they have sent all these ladies and gentlemen to prove that there is danger here! They sit here, I have no doubt, in danger and fear! . . . I am pretty nearly—not quite, though— . . . satisfied to vote for the bill!”

Everybody laughed.

Mr. Kasson good-humoredly retorted that his old friend’s modesty prevented him from seeing that the ladies of Des Moines were not there to show their courage, but were drawn thither by “the attractions of the gentleman from Jefferson.”

Ball came back with the remark that he had always had an excellent opinion of himself, and it was now demonstrated to his entire satisfaction.

Kasson's friends laughed last, for with nimble wit came the quick retort:

"I take back what I said about the gentleman's modesty."

But the tension was not long relieved. Intimations of attempted bribery were made and were met by ridicule, denunciation and challenge for proof. Petitions were met by remonstrances, and feeling ran high.

Then came the calm following the storm. The period of compromise was reached. Mr. Kasson and his friends were driven to admit two riders on the third reading, their poverty of votes and not their will consenting.

On the morning of April 8, four weeks after its engrossment, the bill was called up for a third reading. The strained condition of the House is well illustrated by an incident related by Mr. Kasson.¹ He says:

"As I left my house on the morning of that day for the capitol, I stopped at the hotel to see that no dilatory friend of the bill should be lingering there. At that moment a citizen hastened to tell me that —, of — county, whose vote we counted on, had just been seen going into a drinking saloon near by. I sent him to look for this member, and received the report that he had slipped out the back door. . . . I learned that he had been beset by some anti-capitol members the night before who had drugged him with whisky, put him in his room and locked his door, thinking he would not awake in time for the vote. I dispatched a wagon instantly for my good friend, Father Brazil, whose influence over this member I knew, with an urgent request to follow him and bring him to the state house as soon as possible. I then proceeded to the state house with increased anxiety, not knowing whether that one absent vote might not defeat our bill at the very crisis of its fate. A short time before the voting began, however, I discovered the absentee entering the house, followed closely to his seat by the good priest who took post behind his chair, and did not let him out of his sight until the voting was over. He found the absent member on the lonely bank of 'Coon river, sitting solitary on a log, like a man either in manly shame of

¹Fifth Reunion of Pioneer Lawmakers' Association, p. 27.

himself or having a racking over-night headache. But when Father Brazil said, 'Come with me,' he went."

That Father Brazil, of grateful memory, saved the day for Mr. Kasson, and for Des Moines and Polk county, is evident from the spirited report which follows:

"The two rider amendments were adopted without a division, and the roll call began. Every member was present except three. Hall and galleries were crowded to overflowing, as they had been throughout the debate. Many members had roll calls in their hand keeping count as the call proceeded, myself among them. The silence was intense—not a sound was heard save the clerk's monotonous call of names and the answer aye or no. The phonographic report of that session prints the figures '20' after my name on the roll call. This will remind some of you of a laughable incident that occurred at the time. If we had fifty-one ayes (no matter about the nays) the bill became a law, and I was therefore only counting the ayes. At the moment the clerk called my name I was writing the number of nays, [ayes] and inadvertently answered the call by shouting 'twenty,' at the top of my voice. It broke the silent tension of feeling, and for nearly two minutes the roll call ceased, while the whole house and audience were convulsed with laughter. I do not know that the mistake made any votes for us, but it certainly put our opponents into a more amiable humor. The official count gave us one solitary vote to spare, 52 to 46, with only two absentees. The immense audience shook the frail walls of the old building with their applause. There was the usual motion to reconsider and to lay that on the table, upon which 66 members voted with our friends, and only 31 voted against them. Two-thirds of the house indirectly befriended the measure. This vote probably represented the real judgment of the house, certainly much more than the vote on its passage.

"The Senate promptly concurred in the amendments, and the new capitol was finally authorized by law. Of course there was joy in the capital city of Des Moines. The people of Polk county expressed their satisfaction by a procession headed by music and bearing to my door a gold-headed cane, which I have handed over to Mr. Aldrich as a souvenir of

the event, to be deposited in that capitol museum which does so much honor to its founder and to the state."*

But Polk county had further use for Mr. Kasson. Two capitol commissioners, selected at large had been forced into the bill, and six others were to be nominated by congressional districts and elected in joint legislative convention. This procedure gave the State a partisan commission and, withal, too many in numbers. As was to be expected, the foundation work done was so defective as to give rise to a demand for a new start, with the probable reopening of the question of location. The appropriation which went with the bill was for a single term only. An annual appropriation and a working commission was the dual need which compelled the leader from Polk to accept a third term at the hands of his friends and neighbors. Mr. Kasson's colleague in the House this time was General Tuttle. Mr. Allen was a Senate hold-over.

Investigation was the first step taken. The investigating committee reported condemning the stone and the foundation. The House committee on public buildings reported an amendatory act February 27, 1872; but its consideration was postponed until April 2. Mr. Kasson moved that Maturin L. Fisher, of Clayton, Robert S. Finkbine, of Polk, and Peter A. Dey, of Johnson, two Republicans and two Democrats, be named as Capitol Commissioners. The Governor was made *ex officio* chairman of the commission. The old board was abolished. An annual appropriation of \$125,000 was secured. After much debate and many votes, it was finally voted that the commission should keep in view a cost of \$1,500,000. An amendment giving preference to all other appropriations over that for the capitol was forced through, (only to be voted down in the Senate) and the bill passed by a vote of 63 to 24. The bill met with no mishap in the Senate, carrying that body by a vote of 34 to 9.

After a scurrying for votes to enable the Senate amendments to pass the House, the bill as amended passed that body, a second time—and the long fight for the new capitol ended with a signal victory in which every one apparently rejoiced.

*This token is on display in the museum case in the State Historical Department, with similar mementoes of famous men and events of Iowa.

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