Iowa's Counties and Courthouses:
An Introduction

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The following article consists of excerpts from LeRoy Pratt's book, The Counties and Courthouses of Iowa (*published by Klipto Printing Company, Mason City, 1976).*

A GREATER APPRECIATION FOR THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF Iowa's county courthouses has developed in recent years. Most of the old structures were built by craftsmen who took great pride in their work. The more imposing courthouses gave their communities a sense of identity—an accomplishment that often distinguished one town from all others. The preservation of these historic buildings serves to enrich our heritage. They are an important part of Iowa's history. The National Register of Historic Places has been set up to identify such tangible reminders of the past and to provide added protection against the destruction of those properties worth saving. A number of Iowa's courthouses have been placed on this Register.

Over the years there have been numerous changes in Iowa's county courthouses. Many of them have been torn down and replaced with modern architecture. Some counties, however, realizing the value of their old courthouses, have preserved and restored them. These "recycled" courthouses, saved from the wrecking ball, continue to serve the present-day needs of their counties, and at the same time maintain a link with the past.

The construction of county courthouses usually followed the organization of the counties themselves. Under the laws of the Territory of Wisconsin, 1837, county government was placed with a board of three commissioners, having both ad-

ministrative and judicial powers. This was continued in the Territory of Iowa and afterwards in the State of Iowa. In 1851, the commissioner system was replaced by the county judge system. Ten years later, the administrative and judicial powers were separated, with a district court created for judicial authority and a board of supervisors for the administrative work of the county.

It was while Iowa was still a part of Michigan Territory (in 1834) that the two original counties were formed. In fact, this was the very first act of the Legislature of Michigan Territory relating to Iowa. These two counties—DuBuque and Demoine—then included all of Iowa and parts of surrounding states. During the next twenty-four years (1834-1857), new counties were established by legislative enactment as rapidly as the growth of population warranted it, and their creation marked the progress of settlement. While counties were usually laid out in advance of the arrival of settlers, sometimes the settlers arrived first.

In the settlement of the Territory of Iowa, the legislature first organized counties along the Mississippi River. These counties on Iowa's eastern border were originally given jurisdiction over the lands and settlements adjoining each on the west. When these different localities became sufficiently settled to support their own local government organization, and after the Indians sold their lands, additional counties were laid out and named. The movement to detach territory and form new counties usually originated with the settlers who lived in these sparsely settled areas.

The counties created during these early years were all very large, and were established primarily for maintaining law and order; their size and shape were not of primary importance, and boundaries were not intended to be permanent. However, in his first message to the Territorial Legislature, meeting on November 12, 1838 in Burlington, Territory of Iowa, Governor Robert Lucas stated

> When we take into consideration the local excitements that frequently arise in the neighborhoods, on the subject of division of counties, the alteration of county lines, and the location of

county seats, I am satisfied that much benefit would result to the community, were the whole of the surveyed part of the Territory layed out into counties of a uniform size, and so bounded as to preclude any subsequent sub-division, or alteration of the boundaries; and the seats of justice established in each (where such seats of justice have not already been established by law) by disinterested commissioners to be appointed for the purpose.

Up to the time Iowa became a state in 1846, a total of thirty-three counties had been formed by legislative enactment under territorial law. Between 1846 and 1851, when Indian rights were finally terminated, an additional sixteen counties were added in the eastern portion of the state. The remaining fifty counties were established on paper by the Third General Assembly on January 15, 1851, although there were variations in county names and boundaries after that date and, as late as 1860, there were only ninety-seven counties formally organized. It was not until after the Civil War (in 1871) that Osceola County was formally organized, although it was one of those established on January 15, 1851. Located on the northern boundary of the state, it thus became the ninety-ninth county in Iowa.

Meanwhile, some counties had been renamed and others were created only to be terminated. In all, 105 counties have been established in Iowa since 1834. During the existence of Iowa as a territory and state, fifteen counties have been created which do not now exist. Some of these "forgotten" counties were combined with other counties; some went out of existence as a result of legislative enactment, court decision, or popular will; and still others were renamed. The counties that have ceased to be are:

Bancroft (named in honor of historian George Bancroft, and at one time a part of or attached to Fayette, Boone, and Webster counties before it was merged with Kossuth).

Belknap (named for the U.S. Secretary of War, General Belknap, but the proposal to divide Pottawattamie County failed to get voter approval).

Buncombe (named after a county of the same name in North Carolina, and changed to Lyon on December 10, 1862).

Cook (created on paper from the original county of Demoine on December 7, 1836, and terminated by Acts of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature on December 21, 1837).

Crocker (established in 1870 where Bancroft had been, but the act was declared unconstitutional because the proposed county contained less than 432 square miles).

Fox (established in 1851, the name was changed to Calhoun on January 22, 1853).

Grimes (failed to get voter approval in 1876).

Humbolt (divided between Kossuth and Webster, but reestablished in 1857 as Humboldt).

Keokuk (the first Keokuk County, named after the Sac Indian Chief, was created on December 21, 1837 and terminated by Act of the Iowa Territorial Legislature on July 30, 1840).

Kishkekosh (named after the Fox Indian Chief, and changed to Monroe on August 1, 1846).

Madison (created February 15, 1844, but never organized, it included that part of Lee County known as the "Half-Breed Tract").

Risley (made part of Webster in 1852).

Slaughter (named for William B. Slaughter, Secretary of Wisconsin Territory, and renamed Washington in 1839).

Wahkaw (established in 1851 and renamed Woodbury in 1853).

Yell (named to honor Colonel Archibald Yell, killed in the Battle of Buena Vista in the Mexican War, it was combined with Risley County to form Webster County).

The nomenclature of counties, and of county seats, follows no fixed rule. Names sometimes resulted by accident, or at the caprice of an individual. Counties were named in honor of presidents, distinguished statesmen, Indian chieftains and Indian tribes,[1] and to commemorate important events. Occa-

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[1] The true meaning of any Indian name or phrase is always subject to question. Different authorities often have different interpretations of such words. Of course, the Indians who lived in what is now Iowa had no written language. Theirs was solely a spoken tongue. When Indian words were written down by white men, they were recorded phonetically. This caused many variations in spelling and meaning of words. In addition, languages other than English often complicated the picture. Many of the early explorers were French or Spanish, and Indian words were

sionally names were chosen only after mature deliberation and by general consent. County names thus are a kind of index to American history.

A majority of Iowa's ninety-nine counties have been named for people. Of these, eleven counties were named after presidents of the United States (the only other state having more counties named for presidents is Nebraska with twelve); eighteen counties honor governors; seventeen counties have names of Indian origin (including eight Indian tribes); three were named for Irish patriots, one was named for Hungarian patriot, Louis Kossuth; and three counties in Iowa were named for women (Bremer, Louisa, and Pocahontas). Two counties, Tama and Monona, are considered by some authorities to have been named after Indian women.

In this Bicentennial year, it is appropriate to recognize the fact that fifteen of Iowa's counties have been named for persons who participated in or were associated with the American Revolution.

Adams—named for John Adams (1735-1826), a delegate to the First and the Second Continental Congress, a member of the committee appointed by the Congress to draw up a Declaration of Independence, and the second president of the United States.

Carroll—named for Charles Carroll III (1737-1832), a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a delegate to the Continental Congress. Carroll risked his fortune and his life by joining the Revolutionaries. He was the only Roman Catholic and the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, dying at the age of ninety-five.

Fayette—named for the Marquis de LaFayette (1757-1834), French soldier, statesman and leader who offered his services to the American Revolutionary Army, and played an impor-

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sometimes recorded in these languages. In translation to English, still other spellings or meanings were introduced. In fact, it is difficult to say with complete certainty what many Indian words really meant to the Indian himself. Thus the word "Iowa," which is supposedly derived from an Indian word, has been variously interpreted to mean "Beautiful Land," "This is the Place," and "Dust in the Face." In tracing what is believed to be the original form of an Indian word to its supposed modern English equivalent, different translators arrive at different meanings.

tant part in our struggle for independence. His affection for the United States continued throughout his lifetime, and he was made an honorary citizen of this country.

Franklin—named for Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), elder statesman of the American Revolution and the oldest signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Greene—named for the American Revolutionary General Nathanael Greene (1742-1786), who displayed skill and courage throughout his entire military career. He was in supreme command of the Continental Army during the temporary absence of George Washington in 1780 because of the Benedict Arnold conspiracy investigation.

Hancock—named for John Hancock (1737-1793) of Massachusetts, whose bold signature stands out as the first and largest on the Declaration of Independence.

Jasper—named for Revolutionary War hero, Sgt. William Jasper (1750-1779) of South Carolina, who was killed in battle on October 9, 1779. He refused a commission after displaying gallantry under heavy fire at Fort Moultrie in 1776 and continued to serve in the ranks until his death during the assault on Savannah.

Jefferson—named for the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), third president of the United States.

Marion—named for the American Revolutionary soldier General Francis Marion (1732-1795), known as the Swamp Fox. He organized a band of irregular cavalry—Marion's Brigade, based in the swamps and forests of South Carolina—to harass the British forces. When pursued, he and his troops disappeared into the swamps. After the Revolutionary War, Marion returned to his plantation, and served in the state senate and as a member of the South Carolina Constitutional Convention in 1790.

Marshall—named for John Marshall (1755-1835), who served with the Virginia militia (1775-1779) in the Revolutionary War. He believed in a strong central government, and was a champion of George Washington. From 1801 to 1835 he was

Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Montgomery—named for General Richard Montgomery (1738-1775), who was born in Ireland and served in the British Army before settling in New York in 1772. He served for only a few months in the Continental Army before he was killed during an assault on Quebec on December 31, 1775.

Shelby—named for the American soldier General Isaac Shelby (1750-1826), who served in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812. He was Kentucky's first governor (1792-1796) and later served another term (1812-1816).

Warren—named for the colonial patriot Joseph Warren (1741-1775). A successful physician, he drafted the famous "Suffolk Resolves" (1774), which called for the use of force, if necessary, in resisting the colonial policies of Great Britain. He participated in the Lexington-Concord Battle that opened the Revolutionary War, and was killed as a volunteer in the Battle of Bunker Hill (1775).

Washington—named for George Washington (1732-1799), the "Father of His Country" and first president of the United States (1789-1797).

Wayne—named for General Anthony ("Mad Anthony") Wayne (1745-1796), American soldier and colonial American revolutionist. During the Revolutionary War, he fought with Washington, LaFayette, and Nathanael Greene. He also served in Congress (1791-1792) and commanded a successful campaign against the Indians of the Northwest Territory, which ended with the Greenville Treaty of 1795.

The naming of Iowa counties and towns has resulted in some confusion. While many towns have the same name as the counties in which they are located, many like-named towns and counties do not match up. For example, Des Moines, the capital city, is not in Des Moines County, but in Polk County, as most people are aware. Likewise, Keokuk is not in Keokuk County, nor are Cedar Rapids or Cedar Falls in Cedar County. Monona and Monroe are located some distance from the counties of the same names. Osceola, the seat of Clarke County, is the state's breadth away from Osceola County.

Clarkesville is in Butler County, not Clarke. Kossuth is in Des Moines County, not Kossuth. Webster City is in Hamilton County, next door to Webster County, while Hamilton is in Marion County, Marion is in Linn County, and Linn Grove is in Buena Vista County. Jefferson is not in Jefferson County, but in Greene County; and Greene isn't in Greene County, but in Butler. Sioux City and Sioux Rapids are not in Sioux County, but Sioux Center is right where it should be, square in the center of Sioux County. Emmetsburg is in Palo Alto County, not Emmet; Benton is in Ringgold County, not Benton; and Dallas is not in Dallas County, but Dallas Center is. Franklin is way down in Lee County, far removed from Franklin County; and Fremont is in Mahaska County, some distance from Fremont County in southwestern Iowa. Mount Union is down in Henry County, half way across the state from Union County, while Union is in Hardin County. Plymouth is in Cerro Gordo County rather than Plymouth County; and North Washington is actually some 150 miles north of Washington County. Wapello is the county seat of Louisa County, and not Wapello County; and Webster is in Keokuk County, rather than Webster County.[2]

However, many towns are located in counties of the same name: Audubon in Audubon County, Boone in Boone County, Carroll in Carroll County, Cherokee in Cherokee County, Clinton in Clinton County, Dubuque in Dubuque County, Fayette in Fayette County, Floyd in Floyd County, Grundy Center in Grundy County, Guthrie Center in Guthrie County, Ida Grove in Ida County, Lucas in Lucas County, Marshalltown in Marshall County, Muscatine in Muscatine County, Pocahontas in Pocahontas County, Polk City in Polk County,

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[2]While on the subject of names, it·is also interesting to note that, without leaving the state, you can visit such "faraway" places: as Akron, Arlington, Battle Creek, Birmingham, Brazil, Brooklyn, Buffalo, California, Cambridge, Charleston, Cincinnati, Dallas, Dayton, Delhi, Denmark, Denver, Dorchester, Durango, Geneva, Genoa, Hamburg, Harpers Ferry, Holland, Jamaica, Knoxville, Lansing, Lincoln, Luxemburg, Luzerne, Macedonia, Madrid, Manchester, Manilla, Melbourne, Montgomery, Montpelier, Mount Vernon, Nevada, Norway, Oakland, Oxford, Panama, Persia, Peru, Plymouth, Portland, Salem, Rochester, Saint Paul, Salem, Toledo, Toronto, Trenton, Tripoli, Troy, Vail, Vincennes, Wales, Wallingford, Washington, West Point, and Wyoming. They are all Iowa communities.

Sac City in Sac County, Shelby in Shelby County, Story City in Story County, Tama in Tama County, and Washington in Washington County.

With few exceptions, the counties of Iowa run in very regular tiers from east to west, but boundaries are less regular from north to south. In total area Iowa's counties range from Osceola, the smallest, with 398 square miles, to Kossuth, the largest, with 979 square miles. The county boundaries were laid out with a very practical reason in mind. It was considered wise to have this distance from the county seat to the farthest corners of the county no more than one day's driving distance by horse and buggy. Thus, Iowa has only fifteen counties larger than 700 square miles in total area (Benton, Clayton, Clinton, Crawford, Fayette, Jasper, Kossuth, Linn, Monona, Plymouth, Pottawattamie, Sioux, Tama, Webster, and Woodbury) and only two of these exceed 900 square miles (Kossuth and Pottawattamie).

The counties of Iowa are, for the most part, fairly regular in shape. Seventy-six are bounded entirely by straight lines; of these, thirty-nine are square. Correction lines in the United States land survey cause jogs in some county boundaries. Rivers and streams serve as partial boundary lines for other counties. Lee County is more nearly surrounded by water than any other county in Iowa, with the Mississippi, Des Moines, and Skunk Rivers forming a water boundary on three sides. Of the ninety-nine counties, thirty-six are on the borders of Iowa and sixty-three are in the interior.

The formation of Iowa counties followed closely after the various cessions of lands from the Indians to the United States government. When new counties were created they often contained too few settlers to establish a county seat, erect a courthouse, and elect county officers. During this early period, these "paper" counties were usually attached to some nearby county that was already organized. When the new county's population had increased sufficiently to justify it, the formal organization then took place and courthouses were built.

The story of the courthouses of Iowa is the story of the state

and its people. County seats and courthouses were of vital interest to all pioneer settlers. In many counties, the courthouse was the first and sometimes the only public building in the county. These memorable early-day courthouses were adapted to many uses, day and night. The courthouse doors always "swung on easy hinges." Various communities in the county usually tried to acquire the seat of county government by fair means or foul—by physical force, legislative enactment, judicial decree, or by vote of the people. Few public issues have equalled in strenuousness and real excitement these county seat contests. Of course, each person involved was loyal to his or her home town, but this offered no logical or systematic reason to locate a county seat at one place or another. Ideally, the selection process should involve the entire county. In actuality, special interests often attempted to sway the county seat elections. Civic patriotism, hope for commercial success and prosperity, the desire to become a social center for the surrounding area, and residency of the county officers frequently entered into the contests.

The building of a substantial courthouse usually marked the end of the struggle and the establishment of a new city to which railroads, highways, factories, jobbing centers, and resultant prosperity might come as the years passed. However, in the 1880s, one unidentified writer for Union Historical Company, Des Moines, considered the county seat contests as the "most bitter and unfortunate controversies which ever occur."

> They engender animosities which are transmitted from father to son, and the strife in which people thereby become embroiled lasts from generation to generation. By reason of the ill-feeling this engendered, the material progress of a community is retarded, and the evil effects produced on the manners and morals of a people are truly deplorable.

About two-thirds of the county seats in Iowa's ninety-nine counties were designated by authorities only after long and bitter contests. Obviously, there are many advantages to be gained by a town becoming the county seat—the prestige

attached to the seat of justice, and the gravitation of population, business, and social activities to the chief point of political interest in the county. Indeed, the prize was usually considered worth what it cost in effort, money, and political intrigue, for defeat in a county seat contest often led to decline and the eventual abandonment of the town. Of course, many of the factors considered in the early days in locating the county seat are not so important today. But for the most part, the people of each county worked out their own destiny after the excitement died down.

Important factors in determining location of the county seats were: a central location in the county, preferably near or on a railroad; local interest; donation of land or buildings; financial donations; and the size and relative importance of the contesting towns.

The method of locating and relocating the county seats has varied through the years. Chapter 353 of the *Code of Iowa* sets forth the legal procedure for relocation of county seats in the state. Laws organizing Iowa's first counties made no provision for county seats; however, a place for holding court was designated. Eventually the legislature appointed three commissioners to locate a county seat at the time the organizing act was passed for the county. A general law to provide for the organization of counties was passed in 1847, but the method of selecting the county seat was not specified. A second general law, passed on January 22, 1853, provided that a majority of the voters of any county could petition the district judge during the vacation of the general assembly to appoint commissioners to locate the county seat. In 1855 a new law provided for the relocation of the county seat when citizens of the county presented to the county judge a petition signed by at least half of the voters. It then became the duty of the judge to submit the question to a popular vote at the next April election. This was amended in 1862 to transfer the duty of calling the election to the board of supervisors and provide that a vote for removal of the county seat should not occur more often than once in three years. Another amendment in 1894 pro-

vided that a petition for removal might be presented to the board of supervisors at the regular June session in any even numbered year, thus limiting removal action to once in two years. This was again changed in 1897 to read "at the regular June session, but not oftener than once in five years." A further stipulation was added in 1911 that if a county seat has been located continuously at the same place for a period of forty years or more, it may not be removed except by a two-thirds vote in favor of the proposed removal. A special provision added in 1923 stated that in case $100,000 is donated to a county for building a courthouse, the board of supervisors may appropriate from the general fund of the county a sum equal to one-half of the donation to complete the work.

To the disinterested person, the county courthouse may be "just another building," but anyone who gives the matter a little thought will realize that the courthouses of Iowa reflect important aspects of the story of its people and its culture.

It has been the custom in our country to provide a building in each county for the holding of court sessions and to house the various county officials. At first these public buildings were very primitive—usually a log house sufficed. Sometimes a schoolhouse, church, or even the home of a pioneer was used to hold court. In time, however, a definite form of architecture developed along the Atlantic seaboard, resulting in the "Old Colonial" courthouse. There was a quiet dignity in these buildings, well suited to that day.

Next came the elaborate edifices with immense rotundas, winding and much ornamented stairs, wide corridors, high towers, and a lack of usable, well-lighted and well-ventilated office space. The exterior appearance predetermined the arrangement of the interior. The pretentious facades were meant to make the citizens "look up to" the law. In more recent years, consideration has been given to the needs of the county in planning a courthouse. The exterior appearance is an outgrowth of the functional plan, and there is more workable space within the building.

Architecturally, Iowa courthouses are a hodge-podge,

combining the good and bad features of various styles of architecture—some are of simple Greek design, others of more elaborate Roman style, or Gothic, Renaissance, Victorian, or "modern." Many of the early buildings borrowed heavily from the classical past. The current trend is toward the box-type office building, designed for efficiency. But, regardless of the style of architecture, the courthouse represents the county, the counties make up the state, and the states form the nation.

The individual histories of the older courthouses vary, but each one symbolizes the fierce local pride of Iowa's pioneer settlers. As expected, there was rivalry between neighboring communities seeking power and prestige.

Most of the early Iowa courthouses have disappeared—victims of time, fire, the elements, and man himself. These original "Temples of Justice" have been replaced, one by one, with newer, larger, and perhaps more permanent buildings. The older courthouses may be considered ugly, bizarre structures, but most of them are impressive in appearance. Frequently, the county courthouse is the focal point of the town: its cupolas, towers, and/or domes visible for miles around.

The following is one of the ninety-nine sketches included in Mr. Pratt's book, The Counties and Courthouses of Iowa. *The Van Buren County Courthouse is Iowa's oldest courthouse in continuous use.*

VAN BUREN COUNTY

Established: December 7, 1836   Organized: 1837

County Seat: Keosauqua

Van Buren County (490 square miles) was named for Martin Van Buren (1782-1862), then vice president and later the eighth president of the United States (1837-1841). The first court and the first meeting of the county commissioners were held at Farmington in the spring of 1837. On December 16, 1837, the legislature of Wisconsin Territory (which included Iowa) passed an act removing the county seat from Farmington to Rochester. This was vetoed by the territorial

governor and failed to become a law. Provision was then made
for an election to locate the county seat. The election was held
in 1838, with Keosauqua and Bentonsport as the contenders.
Keosauqua received a majority of the votes cast and became
the county seat.

Keosauqua was originally platted as two small settlements
—Des Moines and Van Buren, and both towns had hopes of
becoming the county seat. The settlers finally got together on a
Sunday evening to discuss plans to combine the two villages
and the decision was made to unite. The name, Port Oro, was
rejected as too "high-sounding" and the old Indian name,
Keosauqua (meaning "Great Bend"), was accepted as the
name of the settlement.

Another legislative act approved on January 25, 1839 pro-
vided that Keosauqua should remain the seat of justice, pro-
vided the town would contribute $5,000 in lots or materials for
the construction of county buildings. This was done and, on
April 20, 1840, the board of commissioners of Van Buren
County adopted a plan for the courthouse and appointed
Sewall Kenny and Henry King as building agents. On May 30,
1840, board members, consisting of John Whitaker, James
McCrary, and Josiah Mills, ordered that "the proposal for
building the courthouse presented by John Fairman and
James Hall be accepted for building said house in Keosauqua
for six thousand five hundred dollars, said house to be com-
pleted in two years from the first day of June next." On July 8,
1840, it was ordered by the board "that the courthouse be
located on the public square on the northwest side of the
public square twenty feet from the northwest line of the public
square at equal distance from each corner of said square, and
the end of said house to be placed fronting the Des Moines
River."

On January 7, 1841, the county commissioners ordered
that "the appointment of Sewall Kenny and Henry King as
building agents be rescinded." The contract was transferred
to Edwin Manning, the final building agent, who accepted the
note of the county commissioners for $1,712 at 15 percent

interest and $5,000 in "bonds and mortgages" which he and other local citizens had put up to retain the county seat at Keosauqua. The construction work dragged on and the finishing was done by several different persons. The courthouse was at last completed in September 1843 at a cost of $6,712.

Van Buren County's first and only courthouse stands in the center of a group of three county buildings. At the time, Van Buren County had the largest population of any county in Iowa Territory and the courthouse was one of the larger structures west of the Mississippi River. Built on a hill overlooking the town and the Des Moines River, it was the pride of the early settlers.

The original county office building, located just south of the courthouse, was built in 1855, while the county jail was erected in 1856, north of the courthouse. The one-story county office building was destroyed by fire on Sunday, January 12, 1896. The blaze was discovered about 2:00 a.m. by R. H. Starr and Mr. and Mrs. R. B. Snyder. The fire alarm aroused local citizens from their slumbers and many were soon at the scene. The fire was believed to have originated where the flue passed up through the treasurer's and sheriff's offices. Reportedly, this flue "was in bad condition" and high winds during the night were thought to have spread falling sparks from where the stovepipes entered the chimney or where it passed through the roof. The blaze spread rapidly and nothing could be done to save the contents of the building as the entire interior was in flames. The upper portion of the building fell, but the brick walls remained standing.

Located in the building were the offices of the county treasurer, clerk of the court, sheriff, and county superintendent of schools. All of the old tax books and papers in the treasurer's office were burned, but the tax books and receipts for the current year had been placed in the safe the night before. While the contents of the safe were badly damaged by the intense heat, they were useable, and all of the money was saved. Furniture and a number of blanks in the clerk's office were burned, but all books and valuable papers were in the vault and were undamaged except for smoke. Everything in the

sheriff's and the superintendent's offices was destroyed by the fire. Superintendent Goss lost his personal typewriter and a library worth $300 to $400. The building was insured for $300.

After the 1896 fire, county offices were moved into temporary quarters. The board of supervisors authorized the construction of a new brick office building, located on the same site, and not to cost more than an estimated $3,000. This building has been maintained and repaired through the years, and continues in use.

The Van Buren County Courthouse has solid brick walls twenty-two inches thick at the first story level, and eighteen inches thick at the second floor. Heavy oak timbers, more than a foot square, support the floors. The interior is finished in walnut taken from trees hewn near the courthouse site. The courtroom on the second floor was for many years the largest auditorium in Iowa unbroken by columns or pillars. A ten-foot-square tower, now gone, originally rose sixteen feet above the comb of the building. The framework of this old tower is still standing, up to the roof. Other outstanding architectural features are the simple, well-spaced windows, which were originally shuttered, and the dignified cornice and pediment gables. The Greek Revival style of architecture used at Keosauqua was to become very popular for courthouses.

Framed pictures—dating back over the years—of judges who have served the court, old maps, and other mementos adorn the interior. In the attic are the old gallows. On April 4, 1846 the only person to be legally executed in Van Buren County, William McCauley, was hanged on those gallows. He had been found guilty of murdering Don Ferdinand Coffman in Washington County. A change of venue placed the case on the Van Buren County docket. On the courthouse grounds is an old Civil War cannon, placed there as a memorial to the veterans of 1861-1865.

This is the oldest courthouse in continuous use in Iowa and the second oldest to be completed in the state. Although work was started on the Van Buren County Courthouse before the Lee County Courthouse at Fort Madison, court was held at

Fort Madison's new building in April 1843, while Van Buren County's court was not held until August of the same year. In 1917, there was a movement to consolidate Jefferson and Van Buren Counties. The new county was to have been called Van Buren, with the county seat at Fairfield, but no change was made.

The Van Buren County Courthouse has recently been strengthened by installing long truss rods through the building. Old mortar has been replaced and waterproofing applied to the brick surface. The stoves used to heat the building for 102 years were replaced by more modern heating equipment, and storm windows were installed.

Although many of Iowa's courthouses have been destroyed by fire or torn down when new ones have been erected, this sturdy old building and cherished landmark will still be standing when other monuments to Iowa's past have disappeared, if local historians have their way.

Photograph by LeRoy Pratt