

Iowa People and Events . . .

New Basement for Old Capitol

Confusion has existed in the minds of many persons resulting from viewing photographs of the old brick capitol building in Des Moines, once located where the soldier's and sailors' monument now stands across Walnut street south of the present capitol. Some of the photos show that it was a three-story building and some four — but unmistakably the same building. Now, how come? What could be the story back of the three-story photos, for even the one of the blackened ruins after the final fire, shows walls and spires of four stories. It has been puzzling, and the history books are not too revealing as to the enigma.

But all perplexity was removed when the fact was published that a full basement and a new roof were constructed subsequent to the erection of the building. Also, when Walnut street later was lowered, the embankment around the old capitol was partially taken away, and then it appeared to be the first story of a four-story structure, as shown in some of the photos.

William H. Fleming, in his "Autobiography of a Private Secretary," *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Vol. XV, p. 12, briefly refers to this, and how the old structure was "made more secure by the insertion under it a brick basement." Secretary Fleming served under seven governors, and came to be the best posted man in official circles upon state affairs, having personally been active in several capacities during a long official service.

With respect the remodeling of the old capitol, according to Fleming "the former foundation was of stone gotten from points down the Des Moines river. When an attempt was made to put a furnace in the original basement then under the building, the stone was found to be unsound; so, putting in a furnace was found to be something of an uncertain undertaking,

and only enough of the former foundation was removed to admit of a furnace, and that would heat only a part of the edifice."

Regarding the new basement constructed, Fleming continues: "The Twelfth General Assembly appropriated a sum sufficient to put a brick foundation under the building, which was a delicate undertaking. Could the statehouse office force remain in the edifice while it was being undermined? If not, could men be found to do that undermining if those, whose business would require them to remain therein, deemed the house would be unsafe for them to stay in it? The statehouse force remained there, while the walls were supported by block and wedge, until the new basement was fully built in. There were some alarms when the wedges were being knocked out, letting the walls drop a slight space to their proper place. And the work was all accomplished without accident of any kind some time before the Thirteenth General Assembly convened (in 1870)."

Sought Senators for Chicago

The passing of Prof. Charles E. Merriam, former political science teacher many years at Chicago university, at a hospital in Rockville, Maryland, after a ten-months illness, marked the close of a colorful life. Iowa-born and reared, he secured an education and became active in Chicago and Illinois politics, combining the practical with the theoretical, although never too practical in his theories. His interesting biography appears in this issue in the department of Iowa's Notable Dead.

Merriam loved Chicago, which he called "the capital of the middle empire." He served on numerous governmental agencies and advisory boards, and advocated many liberal policies. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Robert LaFollette, Sr., and when a candidate for mayor of Chicago, his campaign was managed by Harold Ickes.

One of Merriam's proposals when he was serving as alderman upon the city council of Chicago, was to create a forty-ninth state comprising the area of that city, thereby securing two United States senators and a quota of congressmen for the Windy City. The proposal stirred wide comment in the thirties, and was one of the few movements in the history of the nation to increase the number of United States senators. One other was to divide Florida into two states; another to cut off the southern points of both Illinois and Indiana and the state thus formed be named Jackson, for the population embraced would be mostly southern; and another to divide Texas into several separate commonwealths. All of these suggestions, with the exception of Merriam's, were made by pro-slavery people, who desired to enlarge their power in the U.S. senate.

Another phase of the subject of fixing the size of the U.S. senate had developed when the nation was founded, the large colonies being greatly feared by the smaller. The whole subject of legislative representation was fought over long and stubbornly by delegates from the several colonies in the drafting of the constitution of the United States. Feeling was intense. Several of the smaller colonies flatly refused to become members of the union proposed if it was to be controlled by the more populous states. At no time could agreement be reached that United States senators be apportioned upon the uncertain basis of population. Finally, area representation was achieved, two senators being accorded each state regardless of population, establishing forever small-state advantage, which to a degree is reflected in national political conventions and the electoral college.

No effort ever has been made to overturn the small-state leverage in senate representation upon the area basis. On the contrary, the suggestions that were advanced would have resulted in the creation of more small states.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.