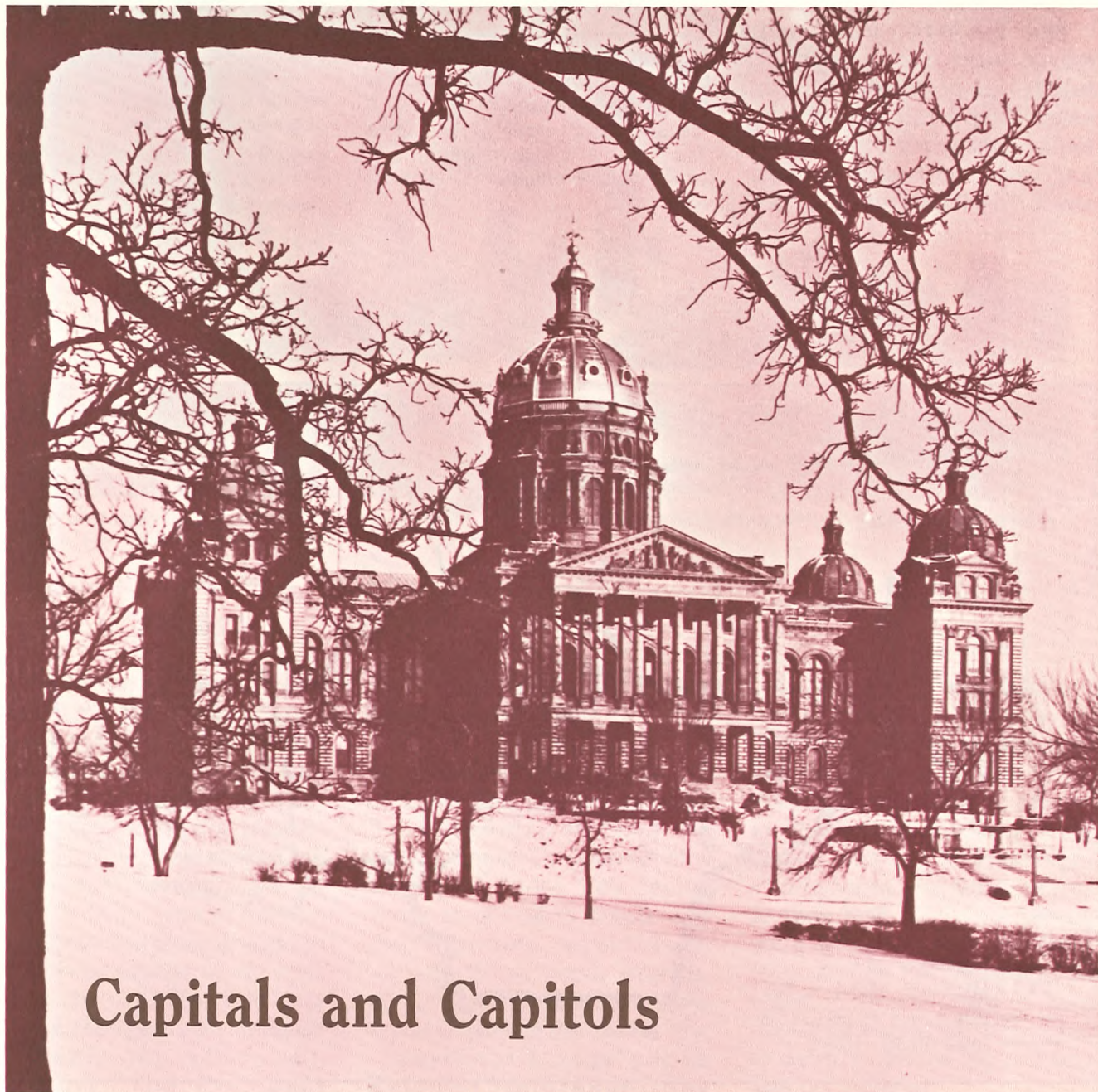


# THE GOLDFINCH

Vol. 5, No. 4

Margaret Atherton Bonney, Editor

April 1984



## Capitals and Capitols

The Iowa History Magazine for Young People



## A Place For Government

When the pioneers migrated westward across the Appalachian Mountains they brought their old customs, religions, and attitudes. They brought their government, too. Because the unsettled land was owned by the United States, it was governed by the laws of the United States.

After the Indian tribes were moved away from a region, a territorial government was established. An area remained a territory while it was being settled and while the population was small. The President appointed

the territorial governor and the federal government paid the bills for the territorial government. The settlers elected representatives to make recommendations for laws, but the governor had the final word about the laws passed by the **legislators**. The representatives met together every year. The city

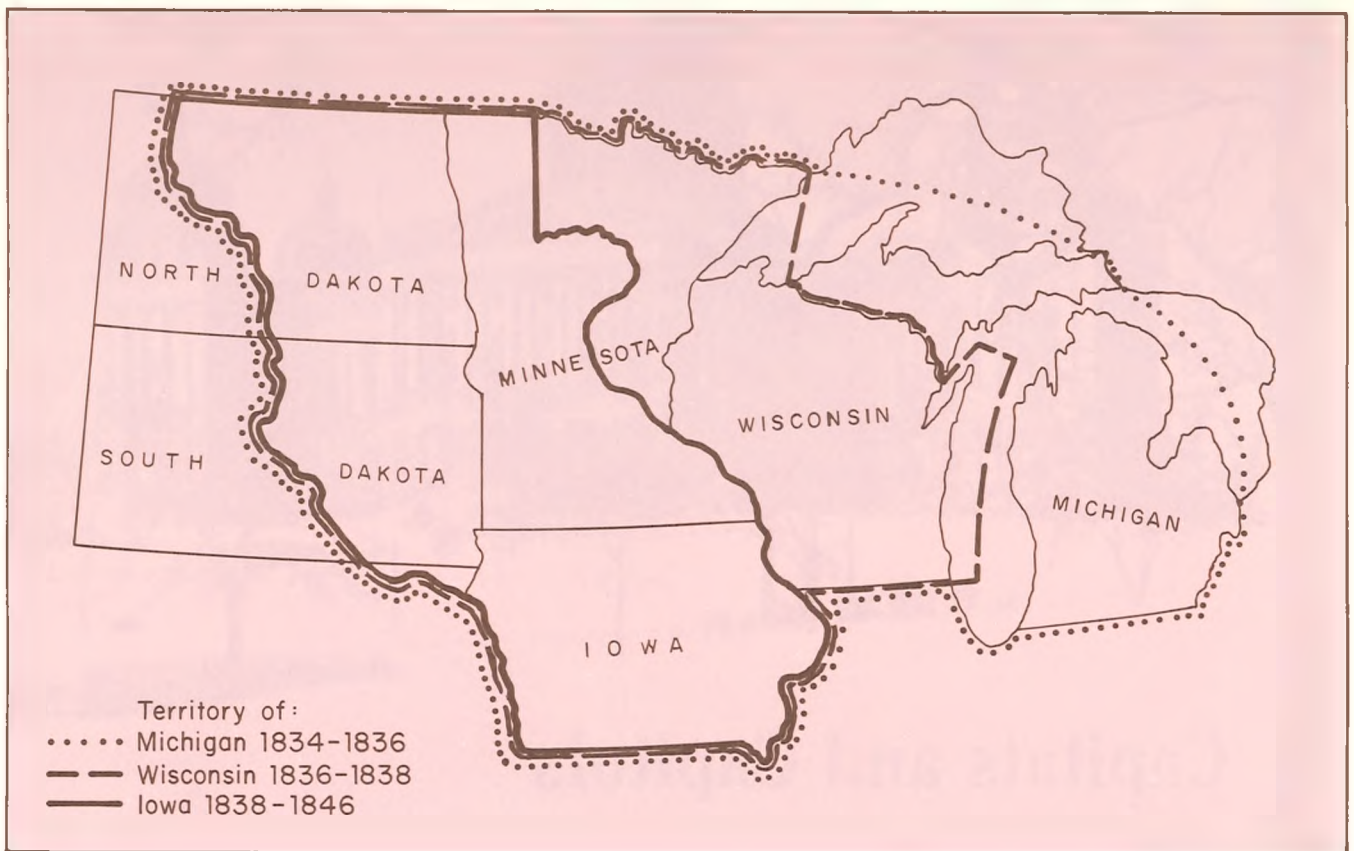
**legislators n.**—elected representatives and lawmakers; members of the Legislative Assembly which was the lawmaking body for the Iowa Territory. After Iowa became a state, the title changed to General Assembly.

in which they met was called the **capital** and the building, the **capitol**.

The first meeting places for government officials on the frontier were seldom impressive buildings. Usually, legislators met in plain wooden structures. The business of government could not wait for an imposing building to be built.

**capital n.**—the city which is the seat of government.

**capitol n.**—the building in which the State or Territorial legislature meets.



THE BOUNDARIES OF THE MICHIGAN, WISCONSIN, AND IOWA TERRITORIES. *Although the territorial boundaries included huge amounts of land, the first settlers made their homes and towns in only a small part of the territory.*



*This photograph of the territorial capitol at Belmont, Wisconsin was made many years after the legislators met there in 1836. The capitol at Belmont still stands and is a state park.*

When the settlers began crossing the Mississippi to live in the Iowa country, the federal government realized it was time to provide a territorial government for the Iowa region. In 1834 the area was attached to the Michigan Territory. This did not bring government representatives close enough to the pioneer settlers in the Iowa region, so in 1836 the area west of Lake Michigan was set apart to create the Wisconsin Territory. The President appointed Henry Dodge as territorial governor. He selected

the first meeting place for the Legislative Assembly.

There was often much competition amongst the people of towns and villages because the village that became the capital would be assured of a successful future. The capital would attract many people and these people would need transportation, food, clothes, and shelter. All sorts of business would prosper in the capital city.

Governor Dodge chose Belmont (in present-day Wisconsin) as the first meeting place of the Territorial

Legislative Assembly. Belmont was a frontier town located in the lead mining region on the road that ran between Mineral Point, Wisconsin and Galena, Illinois. Lumber for the two-story frame capitol was cut at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The structure was partially built before the pieces were shipped down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi to Galena. From there it was hauled by wagon the thirty miles to Belmont where the building was put together.

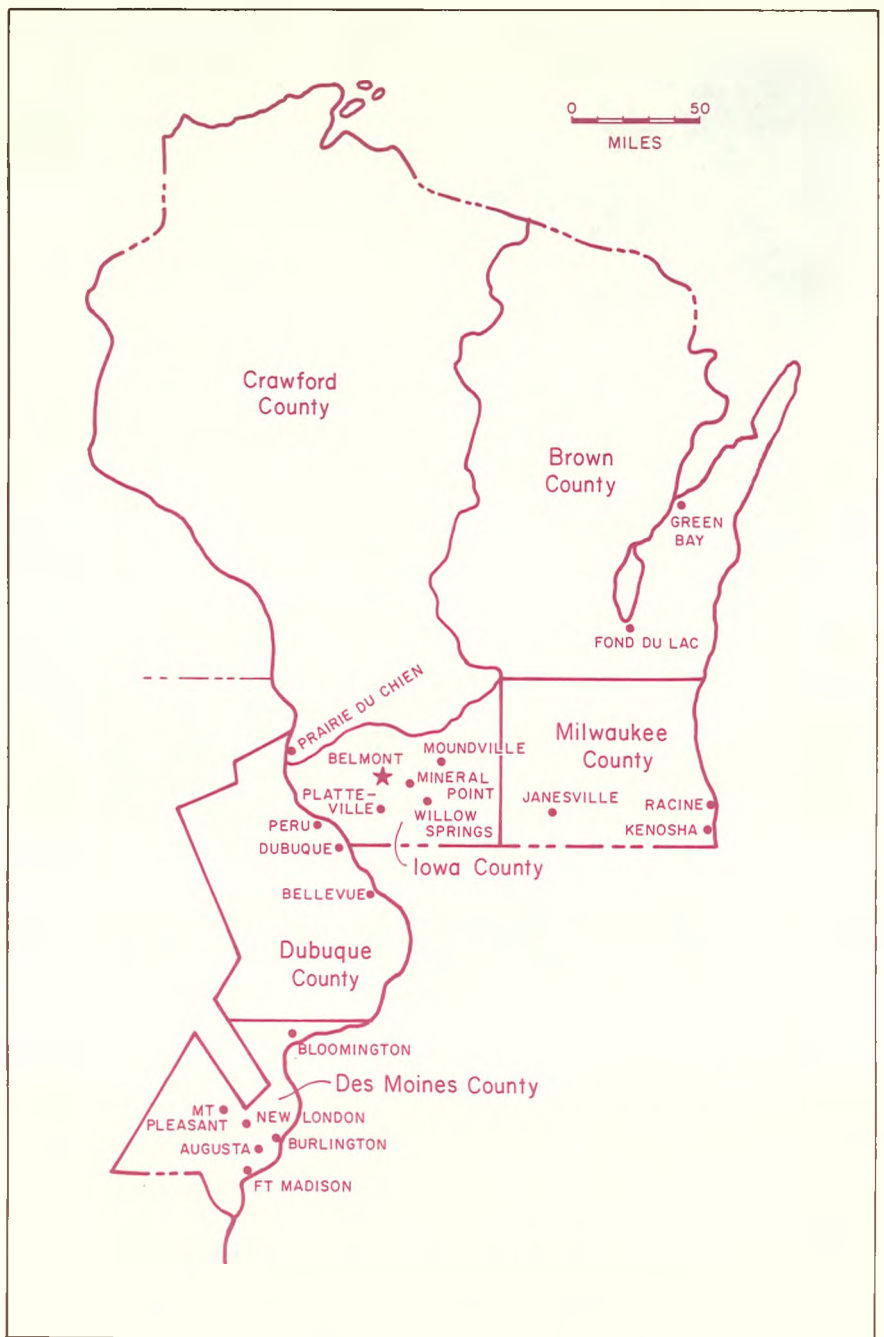
When the newly elected legislators arrived at Belmont



they found one tavern, three lodging houses, two **grogshops**, a newspaper printing office and an unfinished stable. Housing for the lawmakers was crowded in the little village. Several legislators squeezed into a single room, some sleeping on the floor. Lack of comfort did not keep them from conducting their official business. One of the most important decisions made during this session was about a future capital location. The site of Madison (Wisconsin), was finally chosen. Because there were not yet any buildings at Madison, it was decided to hold the next session at Burlington, in the Iowa country.

Because the legislators met during the winter, travel to Burlington was by land rather than by water. Many legislators took the route on the west side of the Mississippi River. It was a cold and uncomfortable journey. There were not many settlers' houses at which to stop between Dubuque and Burlington. The traveling legislators camped out on the prairie, beside the trail.

Although only four years old, Burlington was already a market center. Jeremiah Smith, a Burlington merchant and farmer, constructed and paid for the building in which the legislature would meet. It was a two-story frame building, with fireplaces and stoves to provide warmth. A desk was furnished for each



PART OF WISCONSIN TERRITORY, 1836. Although settlers did not live in every part of the Wisconsin Territory, the distances between villages were long. This map shows the towns in which the Territorial Assembly representatives lived in 1836. You can see what a long distance they traveled to reach the capitol at Belmont.

**grogshop n.**—a place where alcoholic liquor mixed with water is served.

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legislator. The Legislative Assembly began meeting at "Smith's Capitol" on November 6, 1837. Many agreed that the building was much superior to the meeting place the year before, at Belmont. The legislators did not enjoy this new and more comfortable place for long. On the night of December 12, the people of the village awoke to the alarm given by a steamboat engineer who had spotted flames in the building. There was no fire department, and the people of Burlington watched helplessly as the whole block of seven buildings went up in flames. All they could do was try to save the contents of the adjoining building. Jeremiah Smith's store was destroyed along with the capitol. The legislators finished the session, meeting in smaller buildings in the town.

The next year, in 1838, another territorial boundary change took place. The Iowa Territory was created from the larger Territory of Wisconsin. Newly appointed Governor Robert Lucas chose Burlington for the next meeting of the Legislative Assembly. Because there was no capitol, arrangements were made to hold meetings in a newly constructed church building.

Desks were built for the officers and members of the Legislative Assembly, and a carpet was placed on the floor. The legislature met in the rented church building each year from 1838 to 1841. The building also served as a meeting place for the Supreme Court, as well as the District Court. Representatives of the Sauk and Mesquakie (Fox) tribes met there with Governor Robert Lucas to discuss their

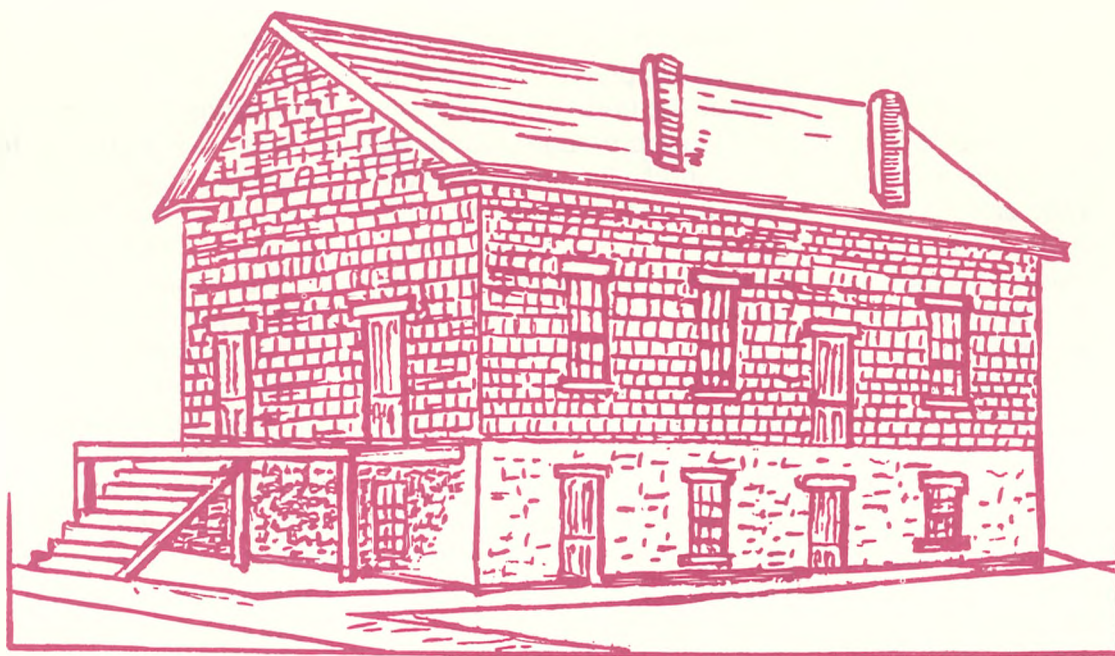
**annuity** payments in 1840.

In the meantime, the search for a new capital location began. Many towns wanted to become the capital. The legislators could not agree on where it should be. It was finally decided to build a new capital city which was to be called Iowa City. Three commissioners were appointed to select a site in Johnson County. These men were to meet at the town of Napoleon "on the first day of May, in the year eighteen hundred and thirty-nine" and locate the best site within the boundaries of Johnson County.

When the first day of May arrived, Chauncy Swan was the only commissioner to appear at Gilbert's trading post in Napoleon. Swan believed that at

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**annuity**. *n.*—money paid by the federal government to Indian tribes.



OLD ZION, BURLINGTON. *Because this capitol was really a Methodist Church, it became known as "Old Zion."*





BUTLER'S CAPITOL, IOWA CITY. *This photograph was made many years after the building served as the temporary territorial capitol. By the time this picture was taken, changes had been made on the ground floor, and the building had been moved to another location.*

least two of the three commissioners must meet together on that day for their decision to be legal. When half the day had passed and no other commissioners had arrived, he called for a volunteer to make the trip on horse-back to commissioner John Ronalds' home downriver about thirty-five miles. The other commissioner, Robert Ralston, lived too far away to be reached in time. Philip Clark, a settler living in the area, offered to go. A little crowd of people remained at Napoleon and waited. Would Philip Clark find John Ronalds at home? If the commissioners did not meet, would the legislature have to start all over and make a new decision?

As the sun disappeared below the horizon, a small group of people waited for Clark's return. They waited on into the night. Just before midnight the sound of clattering hoofs could be heard. Into the little settlement of

Napoleon rode Philip Clark. John Ronalds was with him.

The next day Chauncey Swan and John Ronalds traveled together along the river, looking for a good location. Only two miles north of Napoleon they discovered a hill from which they could view the beautiful river, the surrounding prairie, and trees. It seemed the perfect place. Swan and Ronalds prepared to make their report. Although Ralston never arrived, he later met with the other two commissioners. Their selection was presented to the legislature which approved their recommendation.

By the end of July, the town was already laid out and a map had been drawn. People began to buy lots at Iowa City in August. Log cabins and frame houses seemed to spring up overnight. Plans for the capitol moved ahead rapidly.

The architect for the capitol at Iowa City was John Francis Rague. He had only recently

completed the plans for the Illinois capitol at Springfield. Work on the stone building began in 1840. Although the capitol was still under construction, the 1841 session of the legislature was scheduled to meet in Iowa City. To be sure the legislature would meet in Iowa City and not some other town, the citizens promised to provide a rent-free building for the legislature. In fact, Walter Butler, a citizen of the frontier capital, built the two-story frame building for the Legislative Assembly. Once again, a citizen had paid for the costs of a capitol.

The following year, the work on the new capitol was completed enough for the legislators to meet there. Sleighs and stages filled with people arrived in the bustling capital city. New hotels awaited those arriving to take care of the government's business. But changes were in store for the new stone capitol.





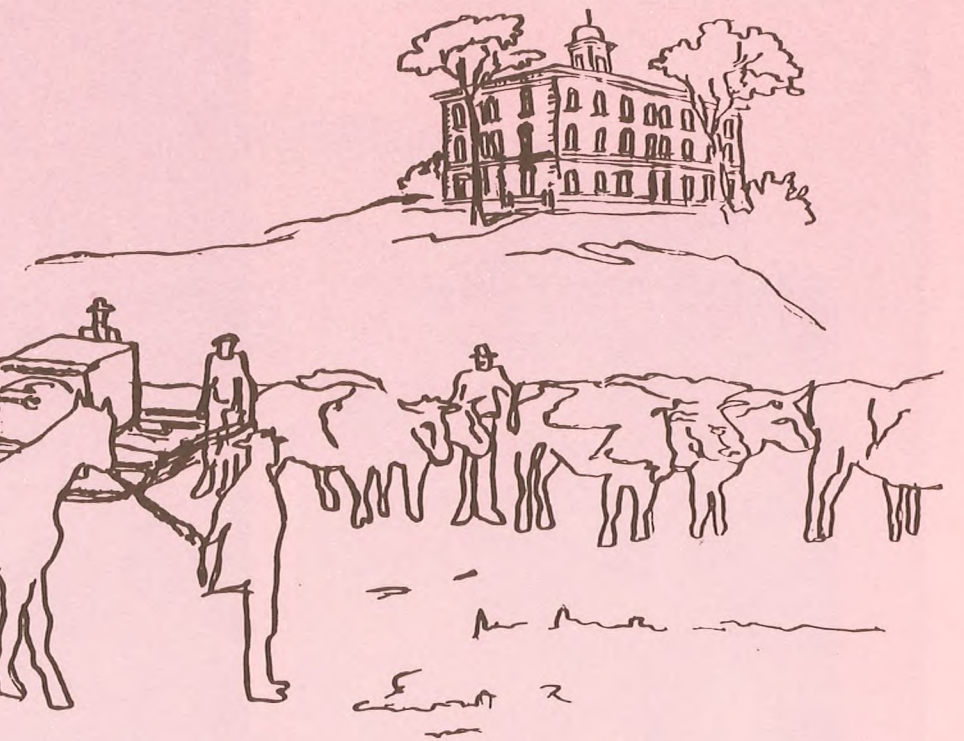
## Old Capitol, Iowa City

*Stone for the Old Capitol was cut at a quarry and floated down the Iowa River on rafts. The dome was originally covered with copper. The building was finished enough for the Legislative Assembly to meet there in 1842. Iowa became a state in 1846 and Governor Ansel Briggs took the oath of office in the Old Capitol. When Iowa moved its seat of government to Des Moines in 1857, Old Capitol was given to the University of Iowa. The building was used for classrooms and offices and soon became a symbol for the University. In 1970 the University stopped using the Old Capitol so that it could be restored. Six years later it was reopened so that people could visit the building that had become a symbol of both Iowa government and public higher education.*





Moving the contents of the Old Capitol was a big task. There were no railroads in the state. Roads were only dirt ruts across the prairie. Bridges across streams and rivers had not yet been built. Along with the state papers, furniture, and books, four large safes had to be hauled to Des Moines. When the teamsters ran into a blizzard they had to leave the treasurer's safe on the prairie for several days until the storm passed. Then the safe was hauled on a bob-sled over the frozen ground to Des Moines.



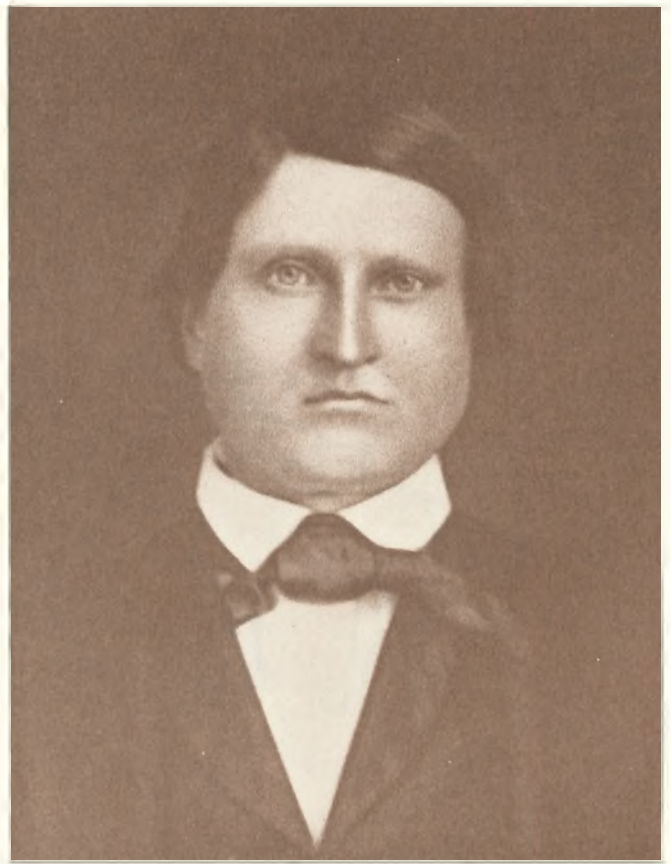
Only four years after legislators moved into the capitol at Iowa City, Iowa became a state. When the state boundaries were decided, talk began about a more central location for the capital. Once more, the cities and towns of Iowa competed to be the chosen place and, once again, three commissioners went in search of a location. They were told to choose a site "as near the geographical center" of the state as could be found. The commissioners journeyed up the Des Moines River valley, but found nothing there. They finally agreed on a beautiful prairie area between the Des Moines and Skunk Rivers, in Jasper County.

They named the site Monroe City. Two of the commissioners immediately bought lots in Monroe City, hoping to make a good profit when the capital moved there. Other people purchased land there too, thinking it would be a good investment. But this time the legislature did not accept the commissioners' recommendation. Instead, they considered other locations including Oskaloosa, Pella, and Fort Des Moines. Finally, in 1855, the decision was made to locate the capital within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers in Polk County.





*“It was a beautiful spot. The land rose above the river to provide a grand view of the Des Moines River valley.”*



WILLSON ALEXANDER SCOTT

The controversy over the exact location was not over yet. Even though the place had been narrowed down to the fork in the river, the question of which side of the river remained. The value of land would surely go up once the capitol location was decided. Offers of free land came from both sides of the river. In the end, ten east-side acres donated by Willson Alexander Scott and Harrison Logan were selected. It was a beautiful spot. The land rose above the river to provide a grand view of the Des Moines River valley.

The east-side developers were ready to do even more to

assure the transfer of the government to their location. When the time came to move the papers, books, and other government materials from Iowa City to Des Moines, Willson Alexander Scott offered to help pay for the moving costs. He also paid most of the costs for the three-story brick building which served as the capitol. It then was **leased** to the state for one dollar a year. Mr. Scott borrowed money to pay for some of the services he donated. He planned to earn the money back by

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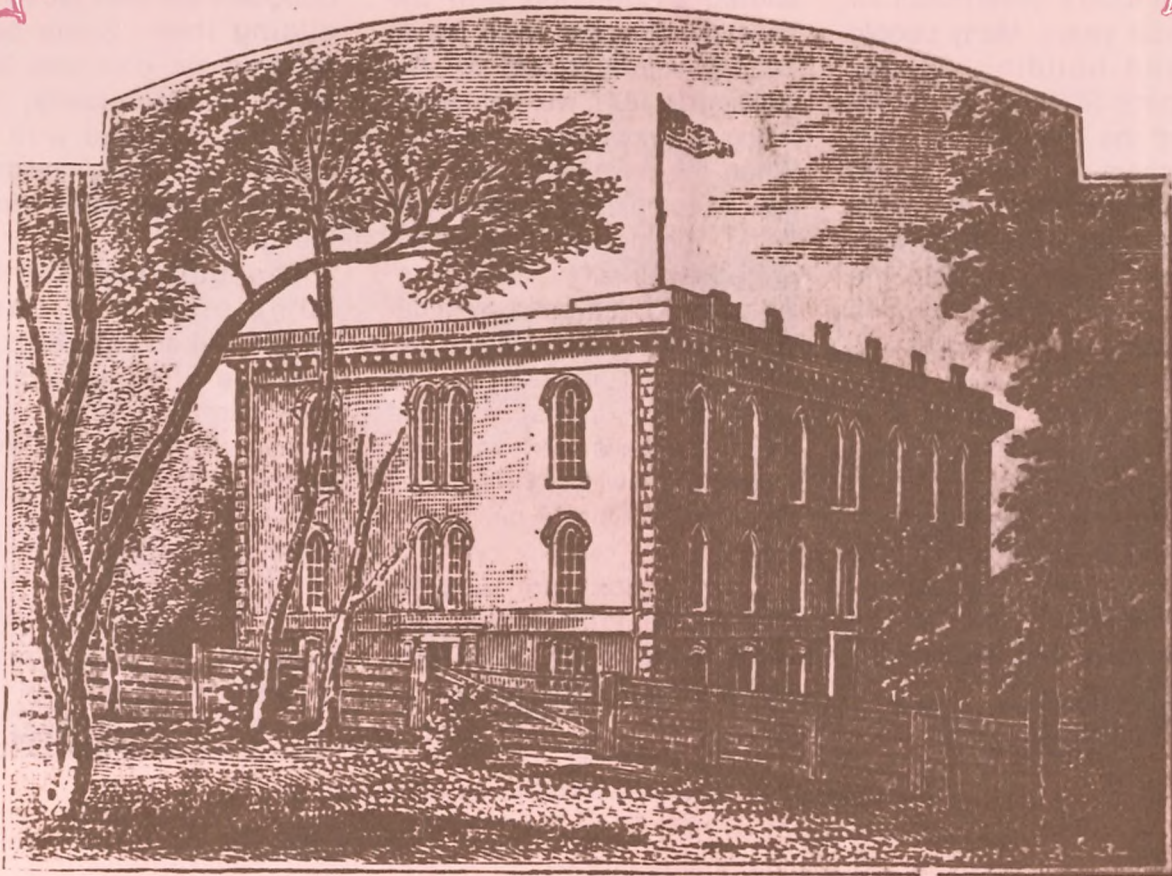
**leased v.**—to rent a building for a set period of time.

selling some of the land he owned around the capitol site. Unfortunately, a period of **depression** arrived about the time the capital was moved and Scott's business did not do well for a time. In order to pay back the money he owed, he decided to open a saw-mill in the gold country at Pikes Peak. Unfortunately, he never reached Colorado. He died of cholera near Fort Kearney, Nebraska. Scott was buried in Iowa on Capitol Hill, and in 1923 a marker was placed at his gravesite.

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**depression n.**—a period of time marked by decreased trade, employment, and production.





## Old Brick Capitol, Des Moines

*The brick capitol at Des Moines was surrounded by woods on Capitol Hill. Many successful Iowa politicians served the state within its walls. After the new capitol was completed, the brick building remained unused and fell into disrepair. The building burned in 1892. The Civil War Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument stands on the site today.*





Although the brick capitol had been intended as a temporary meeting place, it remained the home of Iowa's government for twenty-six years. Many people opposed building a new, permanent Statehouse. Some believed the cost was too high while others wanted the capital moved to their part of the state. Railroad companies, other than the Rock Island, wanted the capital city on their line. But John A. Kasson, a political leader who favored a new building spoke about state pride.

A state, like an individual, should present a decent exterior to the world—a grand building with noble lines and elegant architecture would be an inspiration and a stabilizing influence.

The Iowa General Assembly finally agreed to provide funds for a new capitol. The legislature allotted \$1,500,000 with the understanding that taxes would not be raised to pay for the building. In 1871, workers began laying the concrete foundation. When the basement walls had neared completion a defect was found. The stone chosen for the project was full of moisture. When the cold freezing weather arrived, many stones cracked. Although it added to the construction costs, the first basement walls were removed and replaced with stone from the Old Capitol Quarry near Iowa City.

Construction continued for many years. From time to time suggestions to cut costs were made. Ideas to omit the domes

and replace marble columns with iron were considered. When the domes were kept in the plan, a disagreement then arose about **gilding** them. Some people believed the gold was in bad taste, but eventually, those wanting the gold won. The central dome was gilded and the smaller domes were trimmed with gold.

The building had been completed at a cost of \$2,873,294 and was paid for by the time of completion. The legislature had found the extra money without raising taxes or borrowing.

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**gilding n.**—a thin layer of gold used to cover something.



Workers pose for a picture in front of the partially completed capitol.

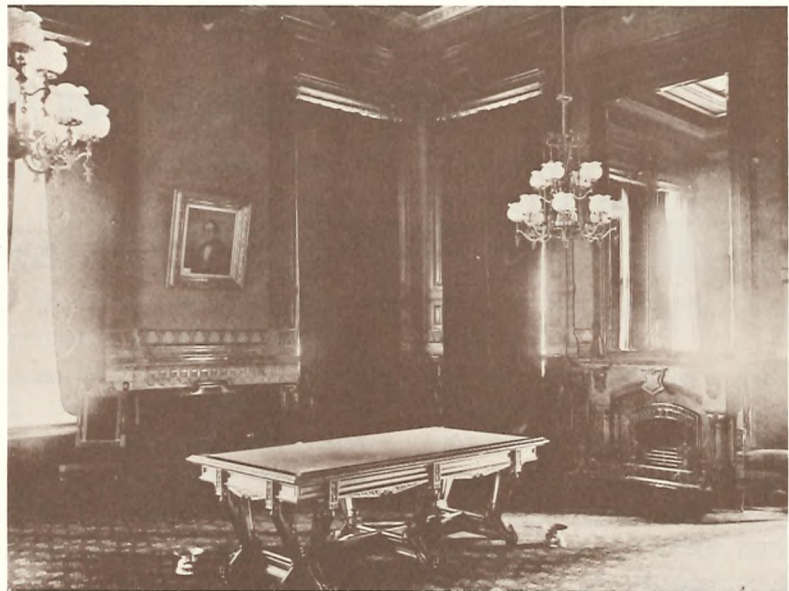
*“Construction continued for many years. . . . suggestions to cut costs were made.”*





*The dome begins to rise during the construction of the capitol, 1880.*

The legislators moved into the capitol in January 1884. A reception and open house highlighted the day and evening. The people of Iowa were invited to visit their capitol, walk through its rooms, and meet their Governor. Over 30,000 Iowans accepted the invitation, many traveling by train to see the new building. It was an impressive sight; the gilded dome shone by day in the sun, the lights blazed at the top of Capitol Hill, by night.



*The governor's reception room where Governor Buren R. Sherman met Iowans when they toured the new capitol.*





## State Capitol, Des Moines

*Neighborhood houses and barns surround the stately new capitol atop Capitol Hill. To the right stands the Old Brick Capitol which burned eight years after the new Statehouse was completed.*





*Smoke billows from the House Chamber during the fire in 1904.*

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Work on the capitol's interior decoration continued through the years and had just been completed when fire broke out in the House of Representatives wing. Both the governor and legislators helped fight the blaze. The legislative session was scheduled to begin one week later, and despite the damage, the legislators met on time. They simply moved their meeting place to an undamaged part of the building while debris from the House chamber was removed. The charred walls and ceiling

were covered with white canvas. Blue bunting hung in graceful festoons for a touch of color in the otherwise "white chamber." The chamber was completely redecorated after the legislators returned home.

As the years passed the number of people needed to take care of government business increased, and the departments outgrew their space in the capitol. New government buildings arose on the hill overlooking the Des Moines River valley. The original ten

acres grew to 165. The additional land provided space for attractive grounds around the capitol as well as for office buildings for the different departments of state government.

The gold-domed building continues to serve as the seat of Iowa's government. The General Assembly meets there every year, and many state officials, including the Governor and the Justices of the Supreme Court work in the building.



## One Step Further . . .

### FIELD TRIPS —

Old Capitol, Iowa City. contact: Office of Public Information  
5 Old Capitol  
Iowa City, Iowa 52242  
Phone: (319) 353-5691

State Capitol, Des Moines. contact: Tours and Information  
State Capitol  
Des Moines, Iowa 50319  
Phone: (515) 281-5591

### FILMS —

*Old Capitol: Restoration of a Landmark.*  
available from: Media Services  
C4 Seashore Hall  
University of Iowa Audiovisual Center  
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

### *Exploration to Statehood.*

Produced by the Iowa Public Broadcasting Network. Consult your Area Education Agency or local school district media center.

### READING —

"The Capitol at Burlington" by Marie Haefner in the *Palimpsest*, March 1937.  
"Old Zion Church" by Jacob A. Swisher in the *Palimpsest*, July 1932.  
"Butler's Capitol" by William J. Peterson in the *Palimpsest*, December 1955.  
"Iowa's Old Capitol" by Margaret N. Keyes and Robert K. Bower in the *Palimpsest*, July/August 1976.  
"Willson Alexander Scott" by Jacob A. Swisher in the *Palimpsest*, August 1947.  
*Under the Golden Dome: the Story of Iowa's State Capitol and What Goes on Inside.*



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