

# The Petersen/Harlan Award

EVERY YEAR, the State Historical Society of Iowa presents the Petersen/Harlan Award to recognize an individual, group, or organization that has made significant long-term or continuing contributions to Iowa history. The award is named in honor of William J. Petersen, long-time director of the State Historical Society in Iowa City, and Edgar Ruby Harlan, the second director and curator of the Historical Department of Iowa in Des Moines.

On May 21, 2007, the State Historical Society of Iowa presented this award to Richard H. Thomas of Mount Vernon, Iowa. For the past 40 years, Thomas has been an outstanding advocate for the study, appreciation, and accessibility of Iowa history. In 1974 he became the first chair of the Iowa

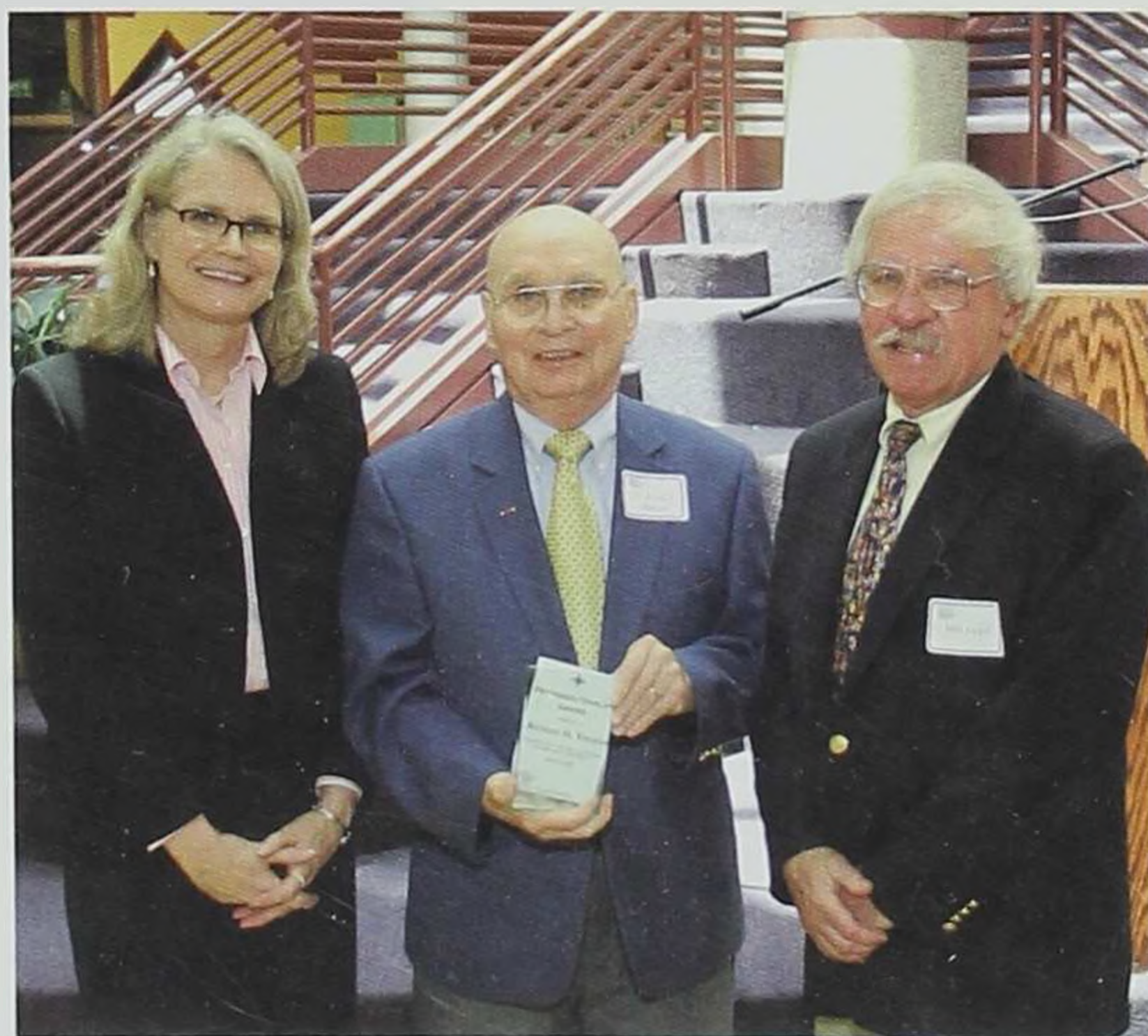
State Historical Board, playing a major role in directing the consolidation and operation of the three state agencies related to Iowa history. Three years later Governor Robert Ray appointed him as the first chair of the Terrace Hill Authority, which transformed Terrace Hill into one of the nation's best examples of adaptive reuse of a historic building. From 1974 to 1988 he performed yeoman service on the State National Register Nomination Review Committee.

As a history professor at Cornell College in Mount Vernon from 1967 until 1996, Thomas taught courses on architectural history. Some of his students have gone on to careers in history and historic preservation, while others have certainly taken a greater

appreciation for history and architecture into their daily lives. A champion of local historic preservation, he prepared the nomination of the Cornell College Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places, and served as founding chair of the Mount Vernon Historic Preservation Commission as well as chair of both the Linn County Historic Preservation Commission and the Linn County Historical Society.

Today Thomas is professor of history and chaplain emeritus of Cornell College. Although he retired in 1996, he continues to teach, and in 2004 he authored Volume 2 of *Cornell College: A Sesquicentennial History, 1853–2003*.

—John Liepa, Board of Trustees  
State Historical Society of Iowa



**Richard H. Thomas (center) receives the 2007 Petersen/Harlan Award from Cyndi Pederson, executive director of the Department of Cultural Affairs, and John Liepa, representing the State Historical Society of Iowa Board of Trustees.**

## The Politics of History

by Richard H. Thomas

Receiving the Petersen/Harlan Award from the State Historical Society of Iowa genuinely humbles me. It means a great deal to me, and I thank all those who supported it for me. It is hard to realize that I am now part of a company of former colleagues and friends I have long respected and admired as major contributors to Iowa history. As I stand here I sense the presence of many colleagues and friends over these past 40 years—those who taught me, nurtured me in the ways of Iowa history and the workings of Iowa politics. I have been blessed with wonderful mentors and supporters—too many to mention in these brief remarks. I gladly admit that I would not be here if