

Iowa in the 1850s • Isaac Wetherby Images • Race Relations in Early Iowa • Colorful Old Capitol
Spring 2007 • \$7

Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED



Front Porch

Dear Readers:

It was a grand night. A bitterly cold night, but a grand night.

On February 7, your State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI) celebrated its 150th birthday, in its birthplace, the first state capitol, in Iowa City. I say *your* State Historical Society because when a few visionary Iowans founded this organization in 1857 with the formidable task of collecting and preserving Iowa history, they did it for you—as well as for all the intervening generations and those that will follow.

The evening reception capped a day of activities here in the Iowa City center of SHSI, at which staff introduced visitors to just a few of the Society's treasures: stereographs, oral histories of working-class Iowans, World War II clippings, History Day projects, the conservation lab, 1860s newspapers, and 1960s photographs.

Staff member Mary Bennett, with her abundance of ideas and energy, spearheaded the February 7 celebration. It was her idea to hold the evening reception in Old Capitol, and there couldn't have been a more appropriate place. As guests stamped the snow off their shoes, period music wafted down from the second floor. Some climbed the spiral staircase to tour the recently restored building. Others chatted with author Marybeth Slonneger as she signed copies of her new book, *Wetherby's Gallery*, which showcases one of SHSI's finest collections.

In the elegant Senate chamber, Cyndi Pederson (SHSI administrator and Department of Cultural Affairs director) welcomed the guests as they were seated for the pro-

gram. Kind words about SHSI were shared by Lowell Brandt, a longtime friend of the Society; Margi Bonney, a former staff member who had flown in from California; and Christie Vilsack, former First Lady of Iowa, whose own understanding of her hometown of Mt. Pleasant and of the lives of all of Iowa's first ladies had deepened through her years of contact with the State Historical Society. Distinguished historian Robert R. Dykstra was the keynote speaker. His account of dramatic events in 19th-century Iowa appears in this issue—as do a gallery of Isaac Wetherby's rare images and an armchair tour of historic Old Capitol. So if you missed the party, we're bringing some of it to you right here. (Sorry, but the cookies were all eaten.)

Indulge me, for I like to think that there were others with us on February 7, 2007. Perhaps the spirits of the 1840s craftsmen and laborers who quarried the limestone, painted the walls, and shingled the roof of the capitol. And the legislators who in their boarding-house rooms pondered how they would vote the next day in the Senate chamber on the civil rights of African Americans. Surely we were joined by the well-to-do in 1850s Iowa City, who wore their best clothes to Wetherby's downtown studio to be photographed and then to an evening ball in the capitol. I like to imagine that there were still others cheering us on—decades of librarians, archivists, historians, editors, curators, and other devoted stakeholders determined to collect, preserve, and share Iowa's history. When you contact us at the State Historical Society of Iowa, you may not witness their spirits, but you will see the evidence of their work, for 150 years and counting.

Thank you for your endless curiosity about Iowa's past and your much-needed support of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor



From left: Cyndi Pederson, Robert R. Dykstra, Marybeth Slonneger, Margi Bonney, Lowell Brandt, and Christie Vilsack.

Iowa Heritage Illustrated

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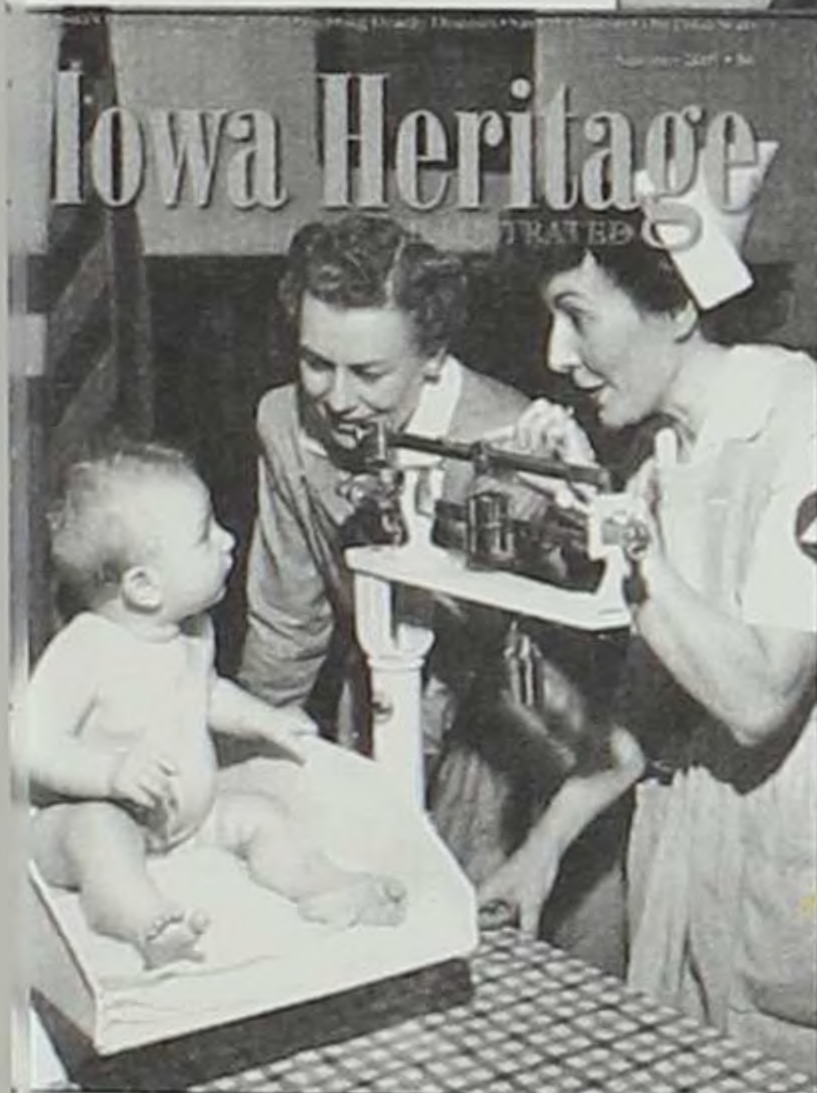
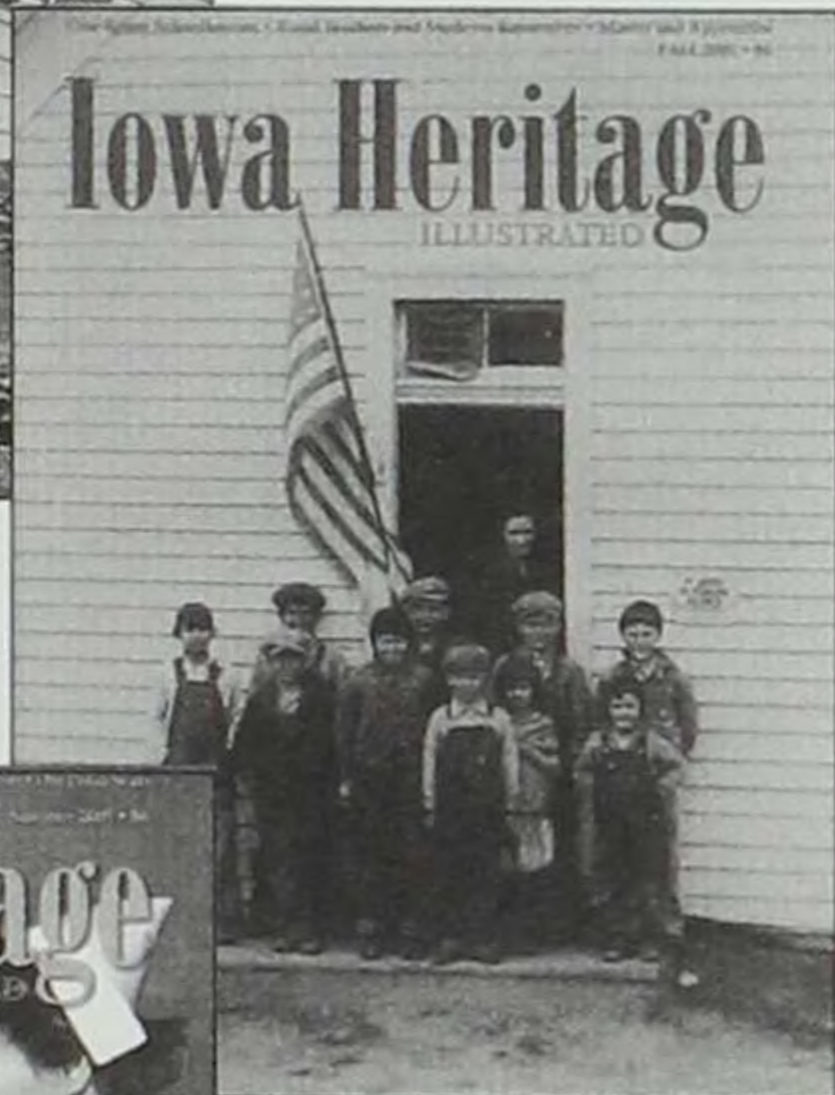
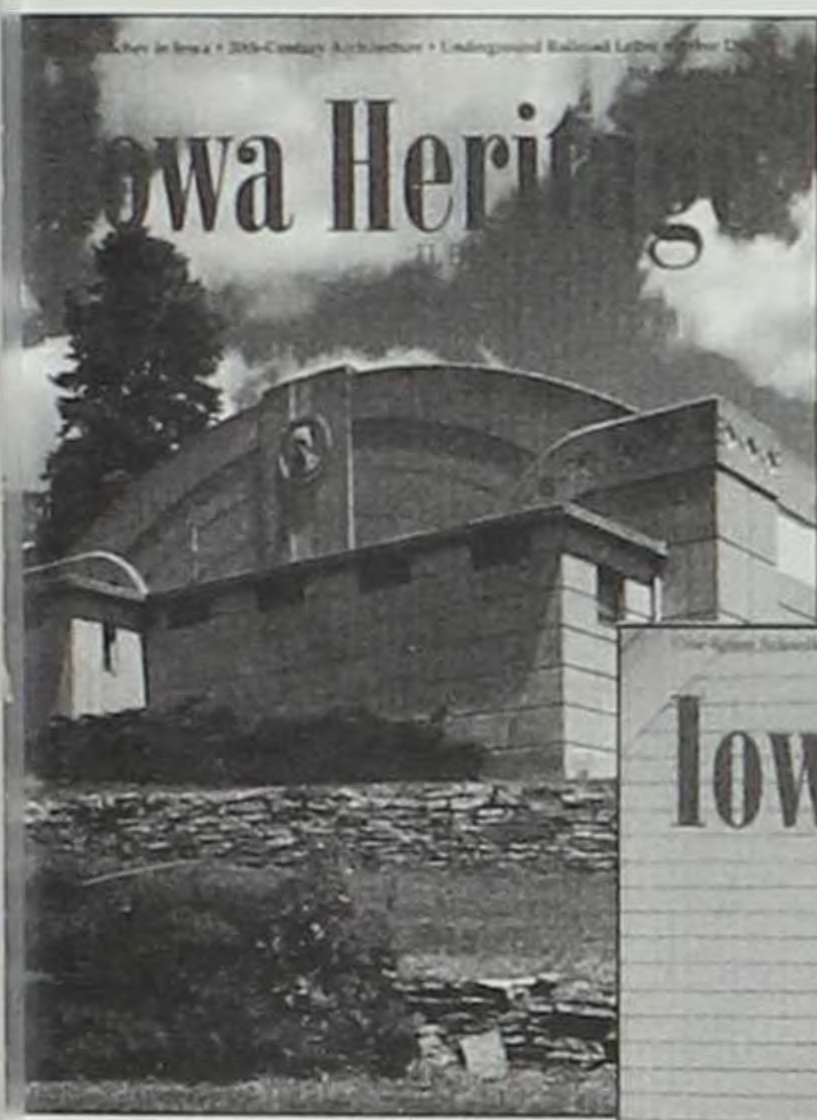
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STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY of IOWA

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Heritage

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Spring 2007, 88:1

Early Iowa

Photographer, Isaac Wetherby
struggling to get out a living.

Discipline in Iowa's Heroic Age

and have the satisfaction
of the black code
imposed on our State."



COLLECTION OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Isaac Wetherby, undated self-portrait



of paint can do
Iowa's first state capitol,
mes.

the governor's office in Old
Iowa. Looking out the windows
of the capitol, legislators, officeholders,
and the public saw what the future held for the

LOCATIONS

You're holding
the best tour guide
you can find
for traveling into
Iowa's past.

Iowa Heritage

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Rare photos
and rich history
in every issue.

Iowa Heritage

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Skilled as a painter and photographer, Isaac Wetherby created a legacy while eking out a living.

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"We shall carry the election and have the satisfaction of wiping out the last vestige of the black code that has long been a disgrace to our State."

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Isn't it amazing what a coat of paint can do for a room? In the case of Iowa's first state capitol, new colors bring back old times.

by Ginalie Swaim



Isaac Wetherby, undated self-portrait

COLLECTION OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY



On the Cover

Sunlight pours into a corner of the governor's office in Old Capitol, Iowa's first statehouse. Looking out the windows upon the dirt streets of Iowa City, legislators, officeholders, and clerks must have wondered what the future held for the fledgling state.

PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

W

elcome to mid-1850s Iowa. The first trains are steaming into the state. Lawmakers are pounding out a new constitution. The Meskwaki Indians, ousted from their traditional homeland in Iowa, are buying 80 acres of that homeland. John Brown is crossing the prairie, gathering supplies and support. The state capital is preparing to shift westward from Iowa City to Des Moines, along with settlement.

And now, in early 1857, the brand-new State Historical Society of Iowa is poised to document these historic times.

The East might have considered Iowa a youngster—it had been a state for only eleven years. But unlike most youngsters, Iowa already had a sense of its past—looking back at its roots while looking forward as a state.

Upcoming issues of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* will delve into how the history of the State Historical Society mirrors the history of Iowa. But this issue takes you back to the Iowa of the mid-19th century. Look into the eyes of a grocer's daughter, a Bohemian couple, a proud Mason. Take in an auction on the dirt streets of Iowa City. Walk farther down the street and into the limestone capitol, where impassioned debates echo through the halls.

For 150 years, the State Historical Society of Iowa has been preserving history as a way of connecting generations. This issue is a bridge to Iowans six generations ago.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor



Wetherby's Gallery of Early Iowa

by Marybeth Slonneger

On a sunny autumn day in 1854, the attention of 34-year-old Isaac Wetherby was drawn to a crowd gathering around the doorway of the limestone capitol (*above*). The square was surrounded by a white board fence, paid for by local businessmen to keep out grazing animals. As Wetherby steadied his heavy camera, oxen pulling a farm wagon loaded with melons passed in the foreground. Although the oxen moved slowly, they are blurred in the image.

The daguerreotypes that Isaac Wetherby produced in 1854 are the earliest photographic images of what was then the capital of Iowa, Iowa City. Wetherby was also one of the earliest portrait painters in the state. Painting and photography were Wetherby's

In 1853 Wetherby decided to leave New England during a severe economic crisis. While it would mean leaving the network of clients that he had established, he imagined a new life on the western frontier, which then included Iowa. Through a Tama County land agent, he purchased a warrant for a 40-acre wooded lot on Richland Creek on January 25, 1854. Late that spring he started west with his family and in-laws, leaving them in Rockford, Illinois, in July when he traveled on to Tama County to see his land. Then he went to Iowa City to register his deed at the land office there. While in town, he rented a small space on the second floor of a commercial building and opened a "Daguerrian Room." There is no indication in Wetherby's daybook of whether he had been planning to set up the studio or was inspired by the thriving capital.

According to Wetherby's daybook, his first customer climbed the stairs to his studio on August 1, 1854, posed for the camera, and then bought the daguerreotype in a matted case for \$1.50. Mr. Spencer, a schoolmaster, also stopped by that day to have a picture taken. Most of the other sitters in the first few weeks were not named in Wetherby's daybook, but then individual names begin to appear: Mr. Levi Kauffman, a nurseryman, and Mr. Williams of Williamsburg.

On August 14, Wetherby recorded in his daybook: "rainy & dull, no dags." But sunlight returned on the 17th and Wetherby reordered stock for \$7.00, probably from an Illinois supplier. He must have been pleased to read the announcement in the *Iowa State Journal & Sunbeam* that day that he "thinks of making a permanent residence in Iowa City. He understands also portrait painting."

On August 29 he wrote: "96° in the shade." On September 1, he noted: "Hot as the very d—I. got to 110° in shade." He was experiencing his first midwestern heat wave, but customers continued to arrive, undeterred by the heat. From influential lawyers to newly arrived immigrants, males and females, young and old, they all wanted to pose for his camera and buy their own finely detailed likenesses recorded on the sensitized metal, and set within an elegant case. Their faces document the 19th-century world of merchants, teachers, plasterers, children, doctors, society folk, and laborers.

After only three months, Wetherby closed his Daguerrian Room and returned to Rockford. Over the next few years, he traveled in Illinois and Wisconsin, setting up temporary studios, learning the new wet-plate technique and the ambrotype format, painting dolls' heads and political and advertising banners, and drawing illustrations for lecturers on temperance and phrenology. He also tried his hand at farming his land in Tama County, but the farm failed in 1859. He gave up his dream to be a farmer, auctioned off his farm equipment, wagons, rhubarb plants, and one peach tree, and mortgaged 20 acres of timberland.

Meanwhile, Iowa City had continued to grow (even though its residents already knew in early 1855 that the capital would shift to Des Moines). In September 1856, an Iowa City friend wrote to him that "there are a great many Brick buildings going up this season the place has altered very much." By 1861, Wetherby had returned to Iowa City, bought a small cottage, and set up temporary photography studios in a neighboring county.

With the start of the Civil War, Wetherby enlisted in a local company, but it did not form as planned. Instead he was ordered to Camp McClellan in Davenport to paint numbers and initials on regimental drums, knapsacks, and haversacks. In September, he steamed down the Mississippi River to Benton Barracks in St. Louis

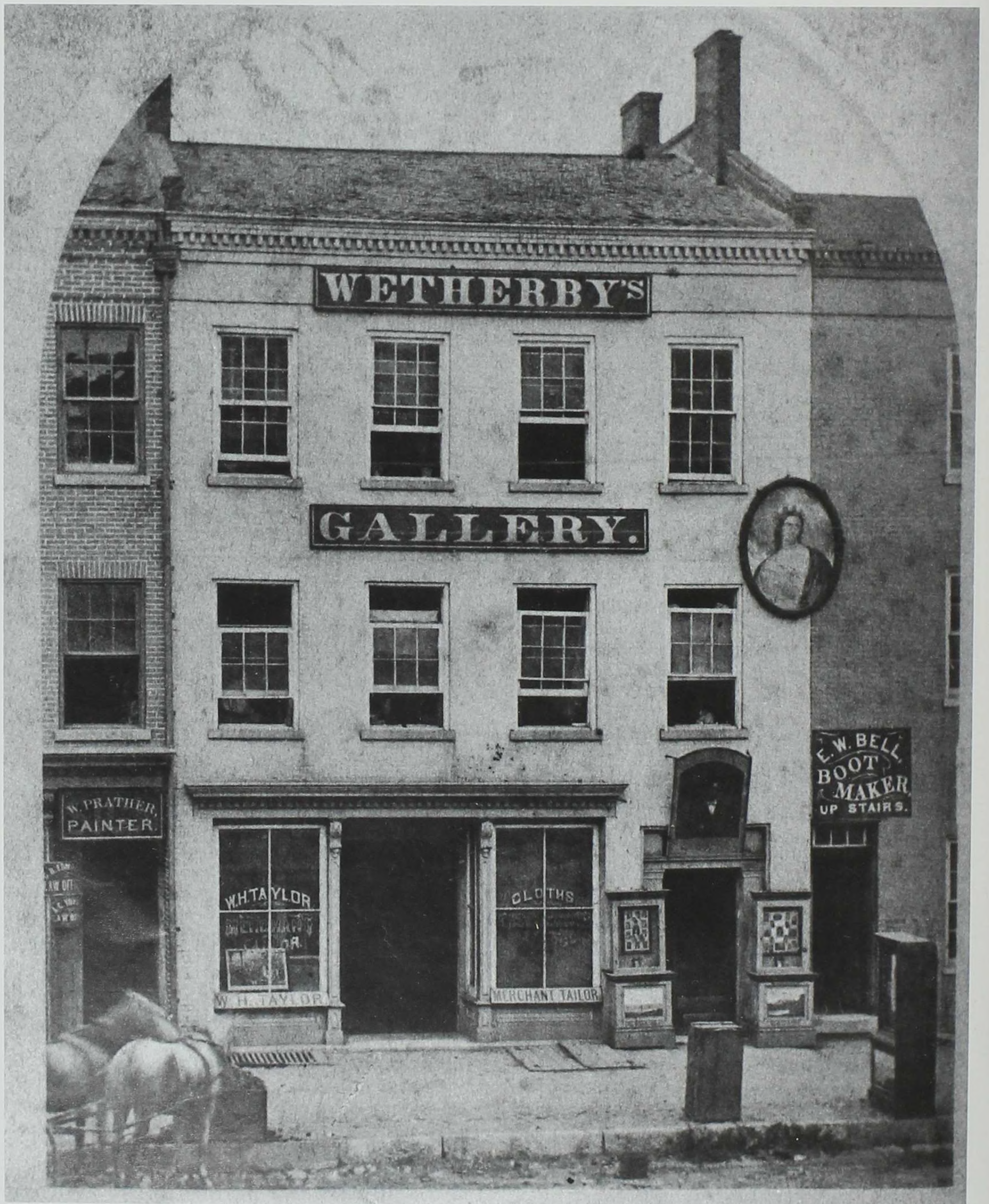
with the 11th Regiment in pursuit of more lettering. He earned enough money from the work to buy his son a pair of shoes.

The heady atmosphere of war created such a demand for photographs of soldiers and their loved ones that Wetherby seized the opportunity. Again he rented a small space in Iowa City, this time above a tobacco store, and called it the Wetherby Gallery.

The quickness of the decision may indicate that it was not entirely thought out, for Wetherby was soon out of photographic supplies. Two regiments were stationed in town at Camp Pope and "there is a rush for pictures. Can not get stock to do with." He again ordered supplies from Chicago, but they arrived just after the soldiers had left by train. Iowa City was now "dull," he



Wetherby's customers could choose between an oil portrait for about \$18 or a daguerreotype for about \$1.50. This glass nameplate measures 3½" x 7½".



wrote, with "three [photographers] in town." Nonetheless, when a spacious set of rooms became available in a third-floor space across the street, he opted to move (and remained there for 12 years). Later in the war, the government instituted a luxury tax for commercial photography, and he was taxed from March 1864 to May 1865, when the gallery was at its most prosperous.

In the decade after the war, Wetherby appeared to be despondent, suffering from depression as well as from loss of revenue during the hard economic times. His own home was mortgaged to his father-in-law to pay bills. There was a series of small legal disputes in circuit court over land he still owned in Tama County. In 1873, in poor health, he turned the studio over to his older son. In 1876 his younger son died unexpectedly. A comment at the end of his daybook, dated 1882, suggests increasing disillusionment. He recalled the years that he ran the Wetherby Gallery until "my health gave out—go to the land for health—made money—none since—lost 12 or 13 hundred \$ during the Panic of 1873—4—5—6—trust no one—paint not many portraits." He had paid his bills, provided for his wife and children, sold off his land, and sought alternative jobs, but ultimately he just scraped by.

By 1885, Wetherby had chosen to leave Iowa City. It is not known if he ever returned for a visit (he often lived apart from his wife and family). From Perry, in central Iowa, he wrote a friend about winning the best portrait-in-oils premium at the Iowa State Fair that year and mentioned the compliments he was now receiving. "These Artists at Des Moines were so much Pleased with my Pictures they call me the 'Veteran & Distinguished Boston Artist.' I do not know as I can Stand so much Praise." He had heard that life-drawing classes using a nude model had been offered in Des Moines the previous winter and now he was being urged to start an art school there. "Glad to see so much attention for Art. it looks well for the future of this new Country."

Many years were left in Wetherby's career that are

Left: The street-level entrance to Wetherby's upstairs studio was flanked by cases displaying examples of his ambrotypes. Two landscape paintings were mounted below. A portrait above the doorway and an oval portrait higher up advertised his painting skills. This was one of three locations that Wetherby rented for his studio during his years in Iowa City. All were on Clinton Street, which faced the state capitol.



Wetherby lettered this cotton banner and painted a daguerreotype in a hinged case on it. Such banners are extremely rare. Size: 27 1/2" x 46".

unrecorded. He invented and applied for a patent in Philadelphia for a revolving scenery backdrop. He and a Mr. Denison founded a business that combined copying photos and operating an art school and health resort called Wetherby's in Rock Valley. The town had a population of 100 in 1880. It is hard to believe that there were enough students to support an art school there, or to find lucrative portrait commissions, but Wetherby probably also traveled to nearby communities looking for sitters. The move to Rock Valley would have represented a new start like the one he had made two decades earlier. Now he was touting the "high grade

of people in the northwest corner of Iowa [more] than any other part of the state." He believed its winters were warmer and a good three weeks shorter than those in Iowa City in Johnson County, which was "a good place to emigrate from." Little is known of his undertakings, other than that he practiced art and photography in northwest Iowa between 1887 and 1897.

Wetherby was 83 years old in 1902 and worked at the Quenemo Sanatorium in Kansas for two years (perhaps as a janitor). He died in 1904, and his body was brought back to Iowa City and buried in Oakland Cemetery—where some of the lifelong Iowa Citians he had once painted and photographed were also buried.

Isaac Wetherby practiced his arts for 60 years. Of the nearly 500 canvases that he painted, only a handful have been identified. Of his photographs, hundreds of images are lost. A few rare daguerreotypes dating from the mid-1850s and 1,450 glass-plate negatives survive in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. The following pages showcase samples of this astonishing collection of images of early Iowa and the people who lived there.

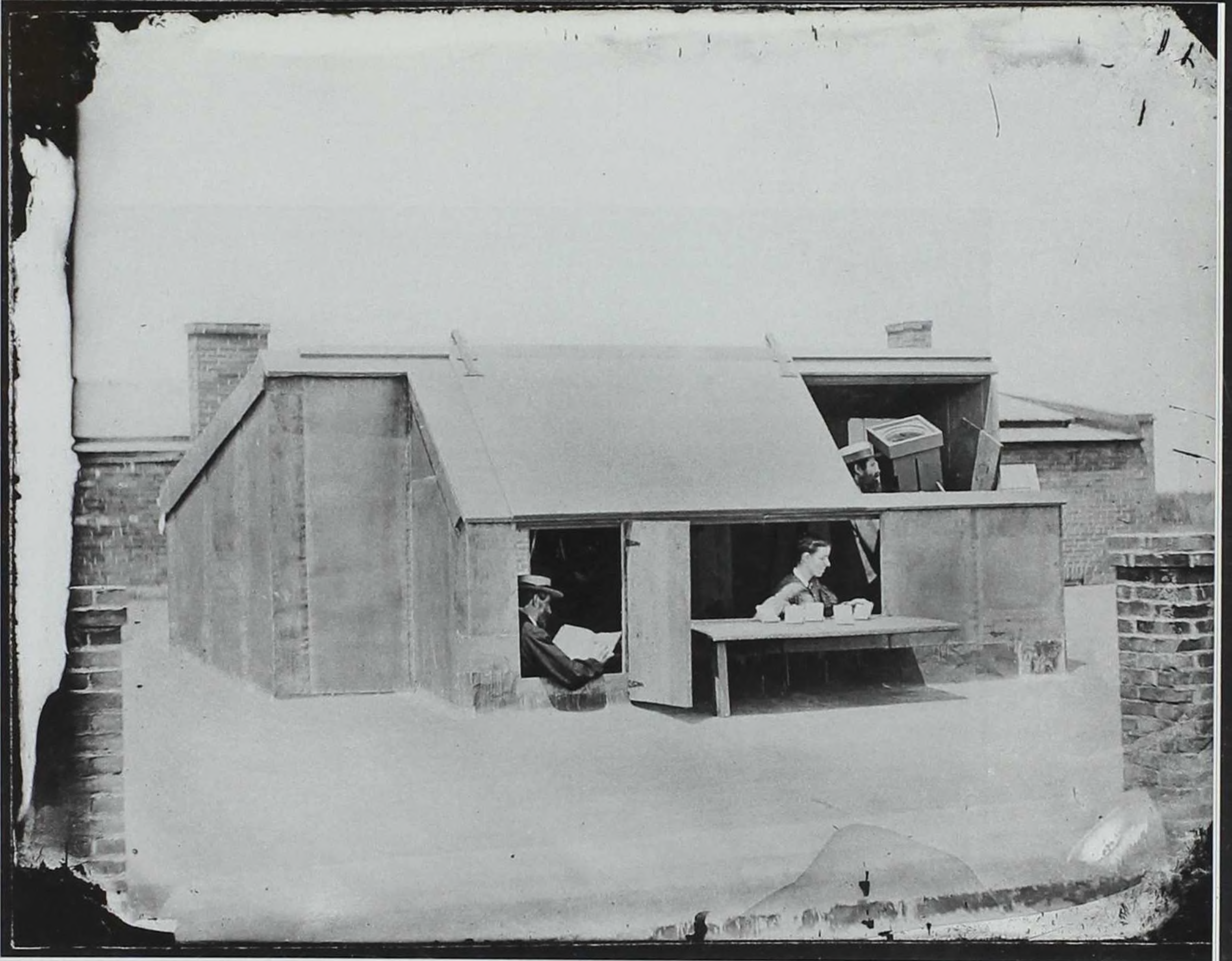


Wetherby's customers relaxed in this gallery before their sittings in his Iowa City studio. Portraits and landscapes fill the walls, and a stereoscopic viewer rests on the table. The gallery was praised locally as one "that just suits the artistic eye."

*Marybeth Slonneger is the author of *Wetherby's Gallery: Paintings, Daguerreotypes, & Ambrotypes of an Artist (Iowa City: By Hand Press, 2006)*. She has a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa in intermedia with a special interest in photography and a journalism degree in book design. She lives in Iowa City, about a block away from Wetherby's home.*

Right: Graduating doctors from the University of Iowa (circa 1870) strike dignified poses. Large group photos were taken under Wetherby's skylight. To prepare a glass plate, he put a drop of emulsion on the center of the glass and rocked it slowly to spread the solution. The final image would be matted so it did not matter if the emulsion did not cover the entire plate—hence, the dark, uneven edges. And because the mat obscured all but the intended subject, the photographer could ignore what was in the periphery. These areas often reveal the inner workings of the studio, such as head clamps on an adjustable pole (far left), reflectors, backdrops, drapes, studio props, and even the occasional parent propping up a baby.

Skylights were common in early studios. Wetherby added one during the Civil War years, when demand for photographs was high. The individuals here appear to be Wetherby (with book); his employee, Mary Johnson; and his partner, James G. Evans. Evans is holding a Woodward Solar Camera, an early enlarger. Wetherby hired Mary Johnson —“my good & faithful printer”— in 1862, after her husband died at the Battle of Shiloh.

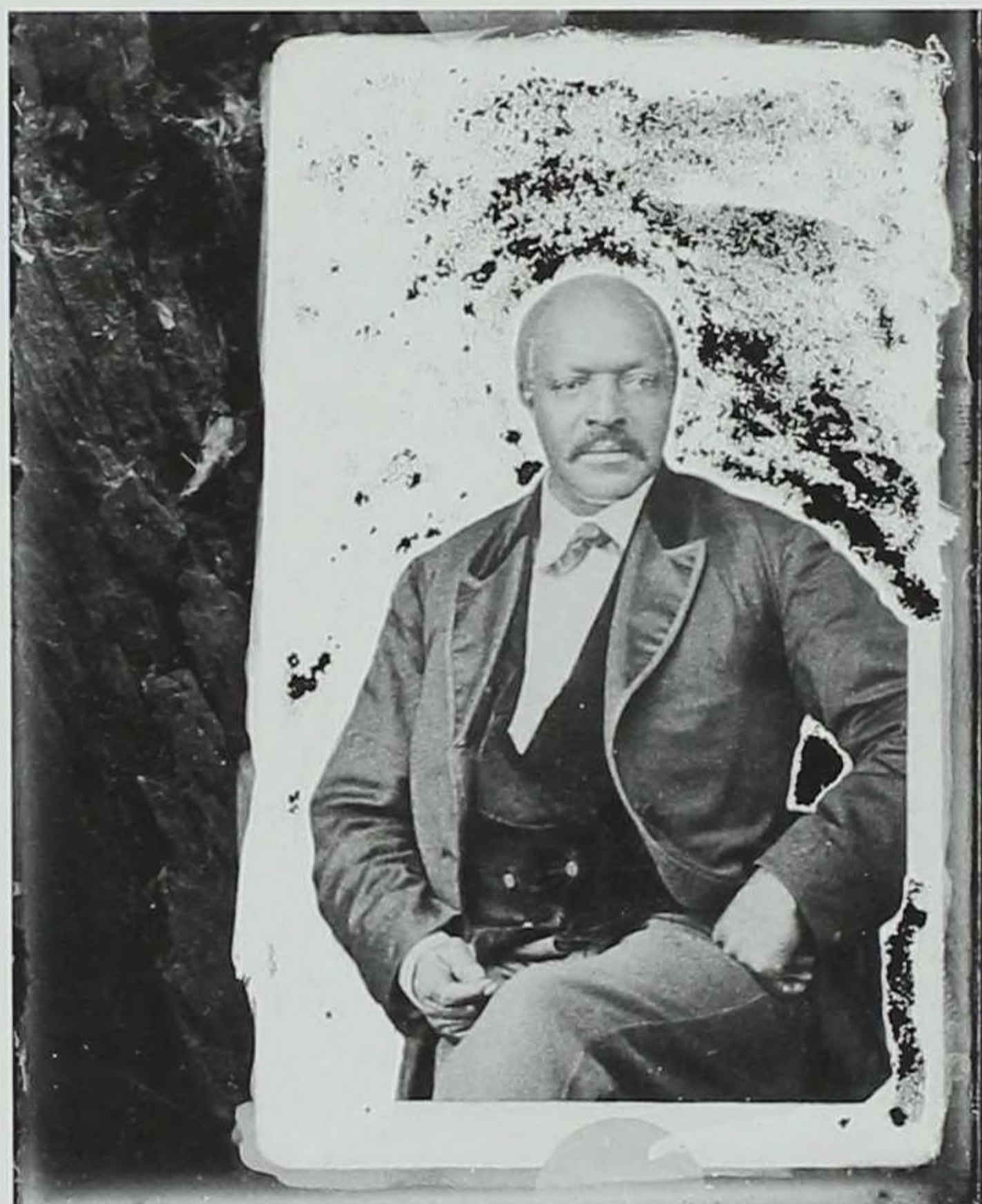




From the upper story of a nearby hotel, Wetherby photographed covered wagons and buggies in the commercial center of Iowa City, the young state's capital. This 1854 daguerreotype shows Clinton Street, between Iowa Avenue and Washington Street. Most early daguerreotypes were studio portraits taken under optimal lighting conditions, so Wetherby's choice of taking early daguerreotypes of the state capitol and the surrounding town life was most unusual. The bluish tarnish results from chemical interaction over the decades.



Born in Bohemia (today's Czech Republic), Frank and Catherine Bittner came to Iowa City in 1864 and lived in Goosetown, a Czech quarter of the city. Having this ambrotype taken in their new country may have represented a significant expense for the Bittners. Note that Wetherby scratched the names of the subjects on the outer edge of the glass plate.



Born a Kentucky slave, Albert Nuckals bought his and his wife's freedom. In Davenport he was a janitor at Griswold College, and their daughter Eudora was the first black graduate of Davenport High School.



Posed with her skirt billowing around her, this woman is believed to be Sue King. Daughter of a widowed carriage-maker, she first worked as a bookkeeper and later headed the Iowa City Life Insurance Company.



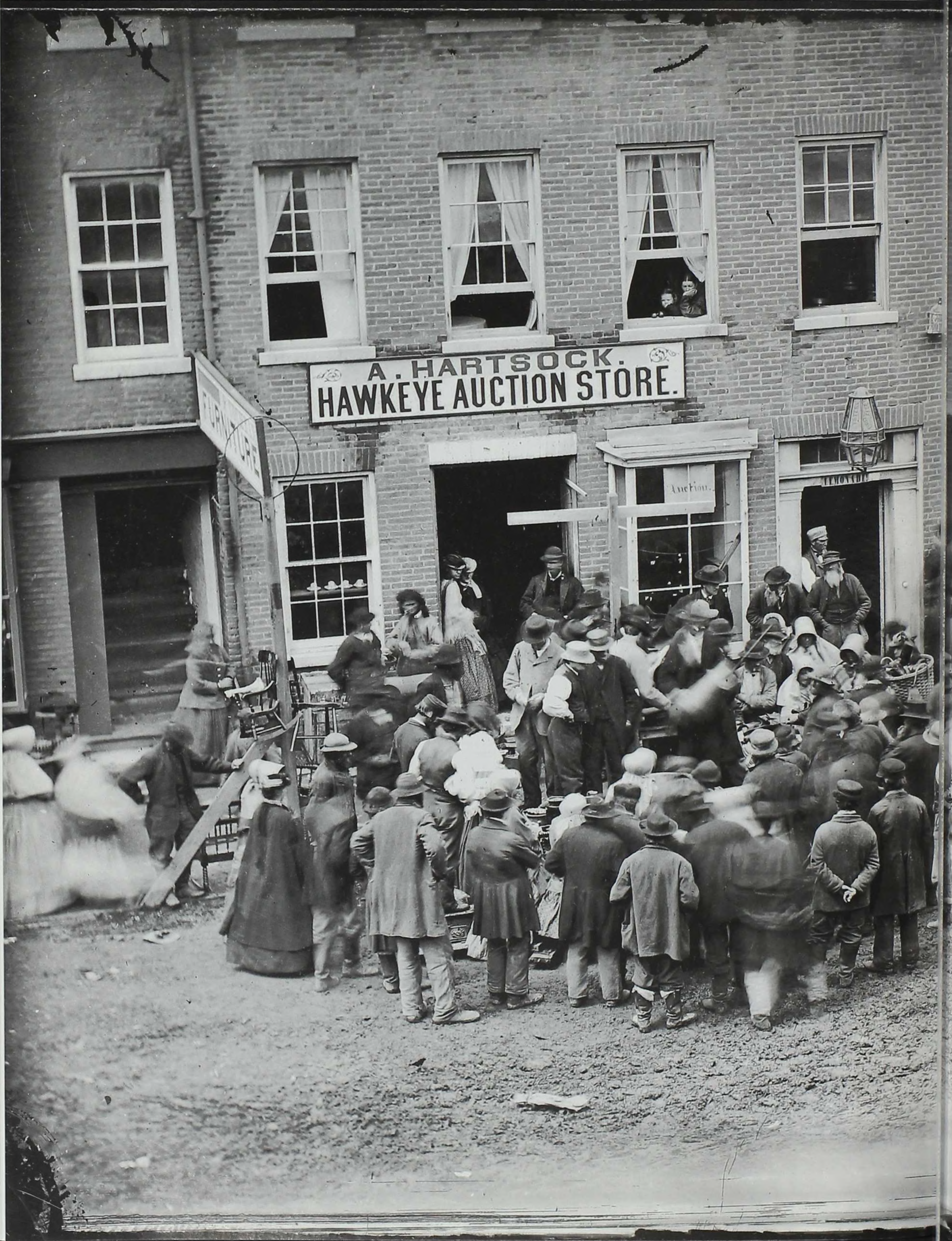
Wetherby photographed Hiram W. Love in two roles: as a stern Civil War soldier in uniform (above) and as a proud father helping his child hold still (right). Love was a machinist and tinner and served in the 2nd Iowa Cavalry.

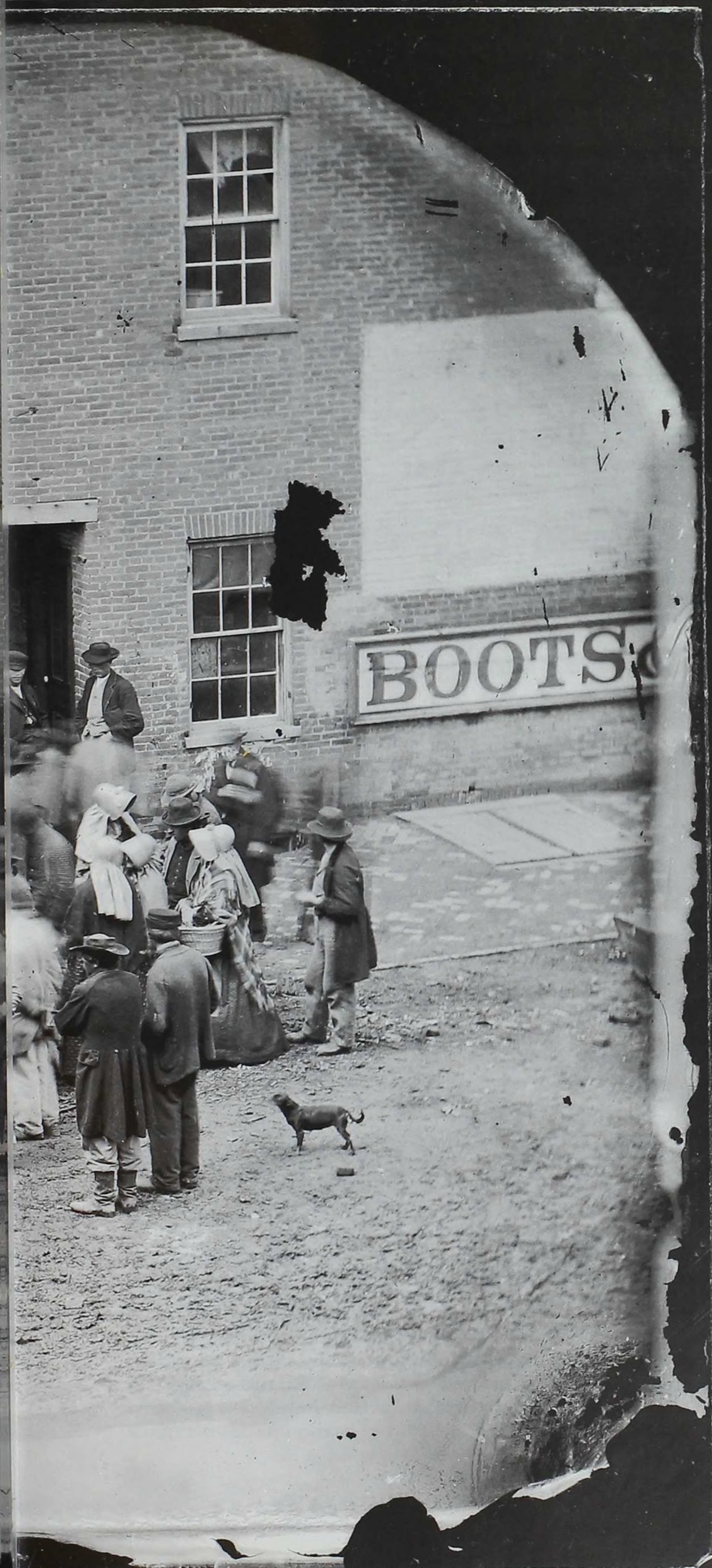




Barbara Kostelecky was born in Bohemia about 1846 and settled with her family in Iowa City in the early 1860s. She lived with her widowed mother and cabinet-maker brother. The brocade chair and floor covering appear often in Wetherby's images, although some subjects posed before an elaborate backdrop and were dressed in more elegant clothes than Kostelecky's.

A. HARTSOCK.
HAWKEYE AUCTION STORE.





Women in bonnets and men in soft hats gather around auctioneer J. G. Starkey, outside Aaron Hartsock's Hawkeye Auction Store on Clinton Street. A man on the auctioneer's platform appears to be leaving with a butter churn; a woman and child watch from a second-story window; and a dog stands attentively in the dirt street. On the far left, several chairs are set up below a smaller sign advertising Hawkeye Furniture.



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This Meskwaki man, from the tribe's settlement near Tama, wears beaded leggings, necklaces, and other regalia. The image is labeled "Wild Indian." Wetherby must have thought that the man should be photographed in a more naturalistic setting because he is posed by a paper "boulder" draped with vines, branches, and leaves, and in front of a painted backdrop of hills. Although Wetherby had an early interest in Native Americans, he viewed them and certain immigrant groups in the stereotypical way of his era.



John Page, a saddler, sits in a fringed chair with his hand resting on a beehive. Keeping bees may have supplemented his income.



Miss Bliss, a milliner, poses awkwardly by a balustrade. Note the light reflector on the left and the painted backdrop on the right.



The image of this maid bears Wetherby's handwriting on the right edge: "lives at Mr. Oakes the Brick Maker." Nicholas Oakes lived in a stately Italianate-style brick house on East Court Street, completed in 1858.



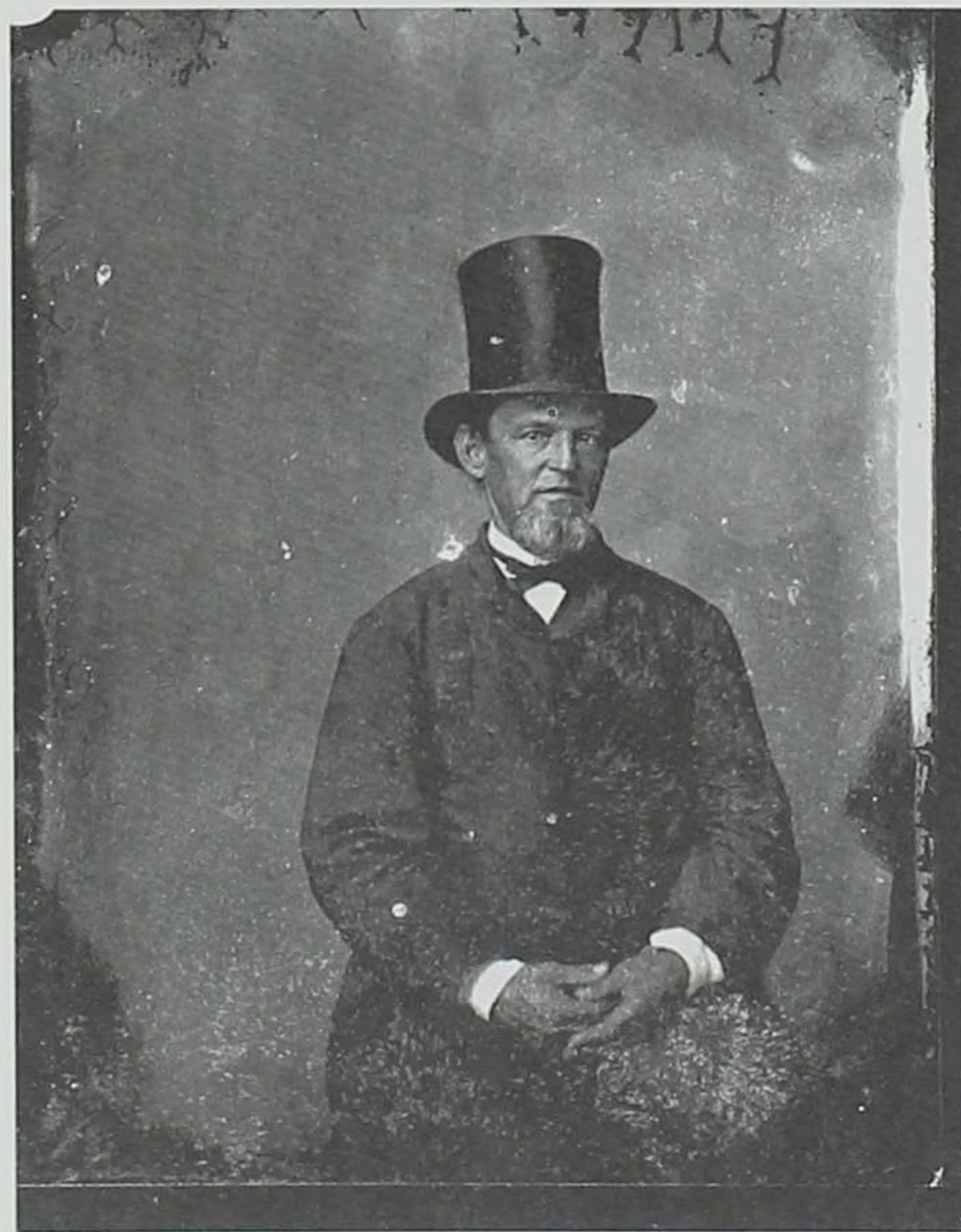
Ninety-year-old David Greeley was Wetherby's close friend and he traded board in his home for portraits by Wetherby of the Greeley family. Wetherby also painted campaign pictures of Lincoln and Douglas on Greeley's wagon.



Although unidentified, this buoyant mother and smiling children are unique among Wetherby's generally somber subjects.



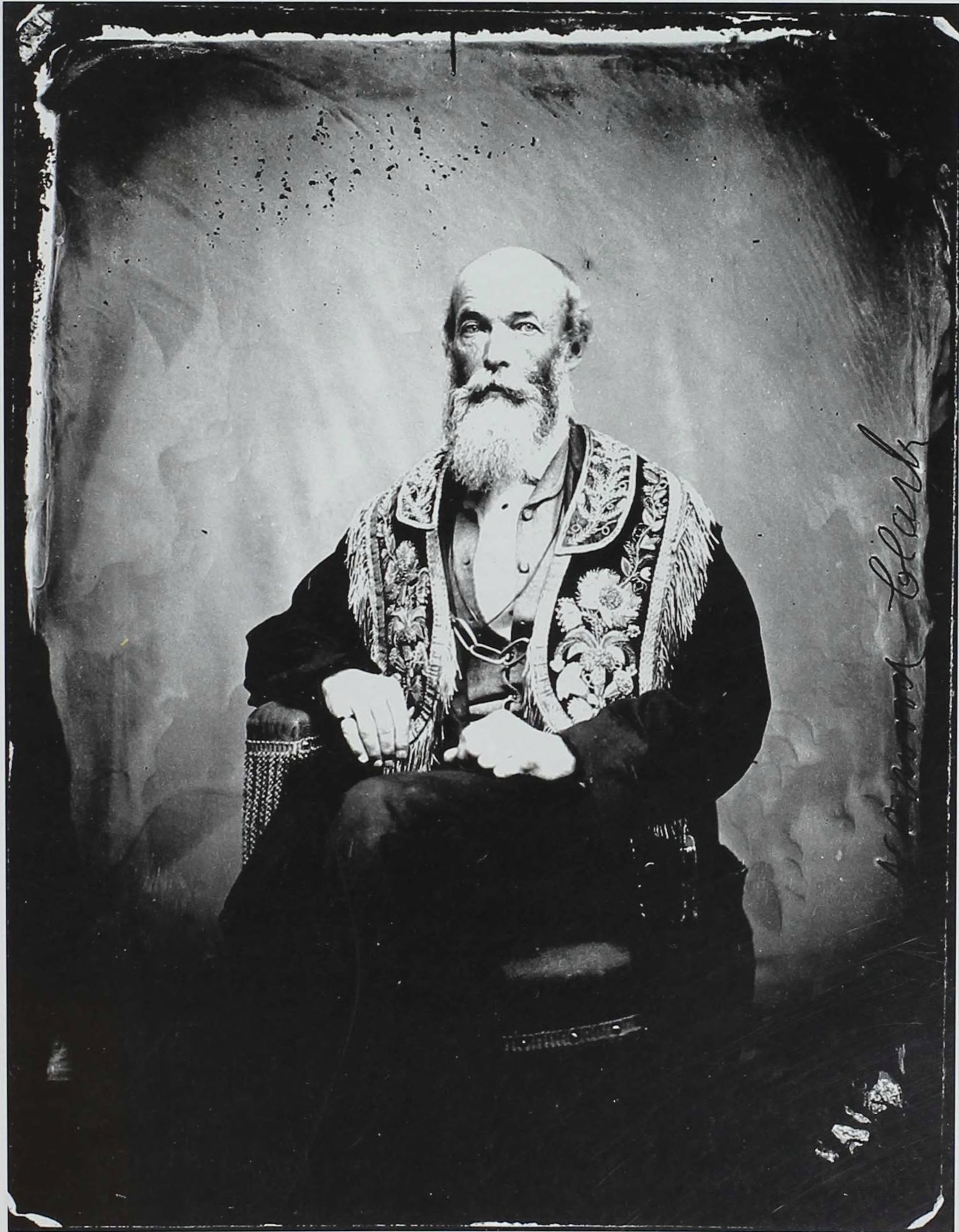
John L. Bowers was probably a member of a Johnson County farm family of that name. The cause of his facial disfigurement is unknown.



Farmer, speculator, alderman, and merchant, Charles H. Berryhill sold his first dry goods out of a trunk stored under his bed. A county history notes that Berryhill "finally became insane and died."



Sarah Bloom was the mother of eight and wife of Moses Bloom, a Jewish clothing merchant from Alsace, France. Moses Bloom was a popular Iowa City mayor and later was elected to the state legislature.



J. Norwood Clark poses proudly in his Masonic shawl. Clark was born in Philadelphia in 1814 and was trained as a shoemaker by his father. He settled in Iowa City in 1853 and opened a general store called the Old Curiosity Shop; drums and toys filled its bay window. Of the six children born to him and his wife, Jane, only one survived. Norwood was elected city marshal, assessor, treasurer, and township clerk and trustee, and was a high-ranking Mason.



Harriet Hope Glenn was the daughter of a local grocer turned banker. H. S. Perkins, a Boston music professor, discovered and nurtured her fine contralto voice when he conducted a six-week music academy in Iowa City. Glenn later studied and performed in Europe. Wetherby photographed her in 1871.



This appears to be a self-portrait of Isaac Wetherby, dressed as a hunter with haversack, gun, and restless dog. He was around 50 at the time of this photograph. His son Charley was taking more responsibility at the studio and selling popular, new photographic formats (including cartes-de-visite) and a variety of frames and cases. Wetherby was giving himself up to painting more portraits and coloring photographs. Although he lived in Iowa City until 1885, his prolific years in the community were ending. His massive photographic legacy at the State Historical Society of Iowa testifies to his premier role as recorder and artist in mid-19th-century Iowa.



Race, Courage, and Discipline in Iowa's Heroic Age

by Robert R. Dykstra

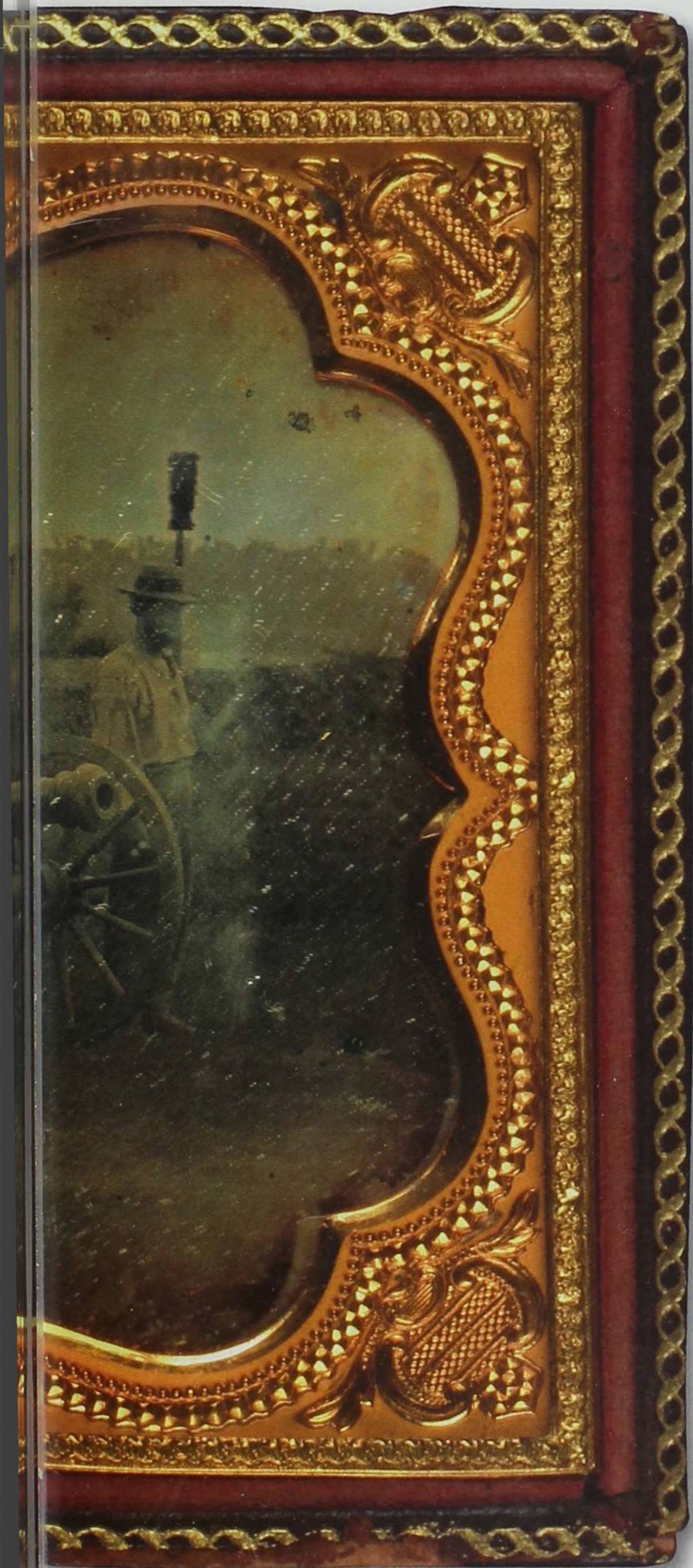
A hundred and fifty years ago the people of Iowa knew they lived in "interesting times," that the eyes of America were upon them.

The Mississippi & Missouri Railroad had laid track into the Hawkeye State in 1855, only to pause indefinitely in Iowa City. As at any frontier railhead, the need to off-load westbound travelers and cargo, then crowd everything into wagon transportation, inflated prices and triggered a wild whirlwind of speculation in horses, groceries, warehousing, and building sites. The *New York Tribune's* Horace Greeley, antebellum America's most respected journalist, wearily climbed down off the train, looked Iowa City over, and reported to the nation that "almost every one here who isn't getting drunk is getting rich."

But an issue of far more consequence than the price of stallions and corner-lots swirled through the streets of Iowa's capital. To the west, American slavery had begun to embrace its doom. All Iowans, whether they liked it or not, found themselves caught up in the great political slide into civil war.

In May of 1856 a savage little prequel to the nation's impending crisis flared up in Kansas Territory, where

Armed Free State volunteers and emigrant parties detoured in Iowa City and crossed southern Iowa into Kansas Territory, bypassing proslavery vigilantes in Missouri. Here, within an elegant daguerreotype frame, is an extremely rare image of a Free State battery, 1856.





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proslavery and "free state" paramilitaries jockeyed for supremacy. Since Missouri, a slave state, was supporting the proslavery militias in Kansas, near-neighbor Iowa became a conduit for hundreds of free state fighters and their equipment—including almost 2,000 guns illegally smuggled out of the state arsenal in Iowa City. Volunteers arrived there by train, rendezvoused, organized themselves, then set off toward Kansas afoot or on horseback.

To supervise the recruits and funds raised back in New England a few of the biggest names in the anti-slavery cause detrained in Iowa City: Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, young Frank B. Sanborn. Other free state celebrities arrived from the other direction, from the war zone itself, among them the flamboyant free state militia leader Jim Lane, whose "Lane Trail" across thinly populated southern Iowa became the supply route and line of communications between Kansas and Iowa City, with support groups along the way.

Not until autumn did the United States Army finally intervene to stop the fighting, and Kansas simmered down.

Months before the presidential vote of 1856 it was clear that "Bleeding Kansas" had driven Iowans into the arms of the nation's newly formed Republican Party, which opposed slavery's spread into the West. "Iowa is more deeply interested than any other State in saving Kansas from the grip of the Slave power," reported William Penn Clarke, a prominent Iowa City activist. Dr. Howe, writing back to Boston from Jim Lane's forward supply base at Quincy in Adams County, agreed. "The people of Iowa are all in a blaze of indignation," he wrote. He predicted a great victory here for the new party. And so it proved.

The month before the November presidential election the most die-hard antislavery guerrilla of them all

slipped out of Kansas with a price on his head. "Captain" John Brown rode through Iowa City, then located his new military headquarters among the abolitionist Quakers near West Branch, knowing they would keep his presence a secret. There he began training his most trusted associates (four of them Iowans) for an attempt to foment a great slave uprising at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

It was, of course, a breathtakingly fatal miscalculation. But John Brown's martyrdom in 1859 did accomplish his transcendent purpose. The raid on Harpers Ferry powered America to the very threshold of the Civil War—a war that ended with the death of chattel slavery.

It's no surprise, then, that even before the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861, reflective Iowans felt the press of world-historical events, felt themselves living in "heroic" times. This prompted them to think seriously about preserving their collective memories of the pioneer past, before it was too late, by officially archiving them in a state historical society. Iowa City's Samuel Kirkwood, destined to lead the Hawkeye State through the first years of the Civil War as governor,

was the idea's presiding genius in the legislature. He stiffed a demand that the proposed historical society be located in Burlington, or that it move west when the seat of government shifted from Iowa City to Des Moines in 1857. He did so by tying it institutionally to the fledgling University of Iowa, then successfully fought off efforts to move the university, too. The upshot was that on January 28, 1857, in the statehouse in Iowa City (today called Old Capitol), Governor James Grimes signed a bill, Senate File 77, establishing a publicly funded State Historical Society of Iowa.

DAILY IOWA STATE DEMOCRAT, 11/4/1856


DEMOCRATS

TO THE POLLS, TO THE POLLS.
And Clear the Decks for a Brilliant Victory!!

*"Yankee Doodle an a bend,
 It is as plain as figures—
 BUCHANAN is the WHITE MAN'S friend
 And Fremont goes for the NIGGERS!"*

IN FAVOR OF Universal Education, Equal Rights, Free Suffrage, the Union of the States, the People of Kansas making their own laws, **WHITE MEN** governing America—and

OPPOSED TO Negro Suffrage, Amalgamation, Black Republicanism, Political Priests' Beecher-Rile Companies, Bloody Fights in Kansas, Negro Equality, and Negro Rights in general.



White Men's Democratic Ticket.

FOR PRESIDENT
JAMES BUCHANAN,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.
FOR VICE PRESIDENT,
JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE,

Davenport's Daily Iowa State Democrat published this blatantly racist ad for the "White Men's" ticket right before Election Day, 1856.

But that late January day had not yet ended. Elsewhere in the stately limestone building, delegates called together to write a new state constitution voted on a resolution brimming with portents. They instructed their Committee on Education and School Lands to consider "making provision for the education of the children of blacks and mulattoes." John Parvin, the delegate offering this successful resolution, hailed from Muscatine. In his desk was a petition he would spring on his fellow delegates within a few days.

The petition had originated in a recent meeting at Muscatine's African American church. Its black signatories strongly objected to the exclusion of black children from Iowa's publicly funded schools. And, while they were at it, they also demanded political equality with whites, the vote and "all the [other] rights and privileges of citizenship."

Muscatine's black community provided Iowa's most dynamic expressions of black agency. Its story began with the Mathews clan, newly freed slaves brought from Maryland by their former owner as sawmill workers. A few years later the figure destined to be the state's foremost black activist, Pennsylvania-born Alexander Clark, arrived in Muscatine as a teenager. Within a decade he had expanded from barbering into real estate and other successful local ventures.

In 1848, in a show of solidarity with similar communities all across the northern states, Muscatine's blacks began celebrating West Indian Emancipation Day each August as an ironic protest against the continued existence of slavery in the United States. In 1851 they built an African Methodist Episcopal church, one of the very first established anywhere in the trans-Mississippi West.

Four years later they addressed their first petition to the Iowa legislature, asking relief from an unjust abridgement of their civil liberties. In 1856 they petitioned the General Assembly a second time, again asking for the repeal of discriminatory legislation. By then they had persuaded many of their white friends and well-wishers to join in; the document, organized by Alexander Clark, carried the names of 122 Muscatine males, white as well as black. In 1857, as noted, they

petitioned again, with 129 Muscatine whites sending along a parallel petition. The first name on the white petition is that of the immigrant Irishman Henry O'Connor, who would become an outspoken advocate of black citizenship well into the postwar era.

With strong support from the larger community, Muscatine's African Americans gained a persuasive voice in the coming discourse about the civil equality of blacks, the question of African American equality before the law. Nationally, this was a key "wedge issue," an ancillary to the slavery question that would divide white America long after slavery ceased to exist.

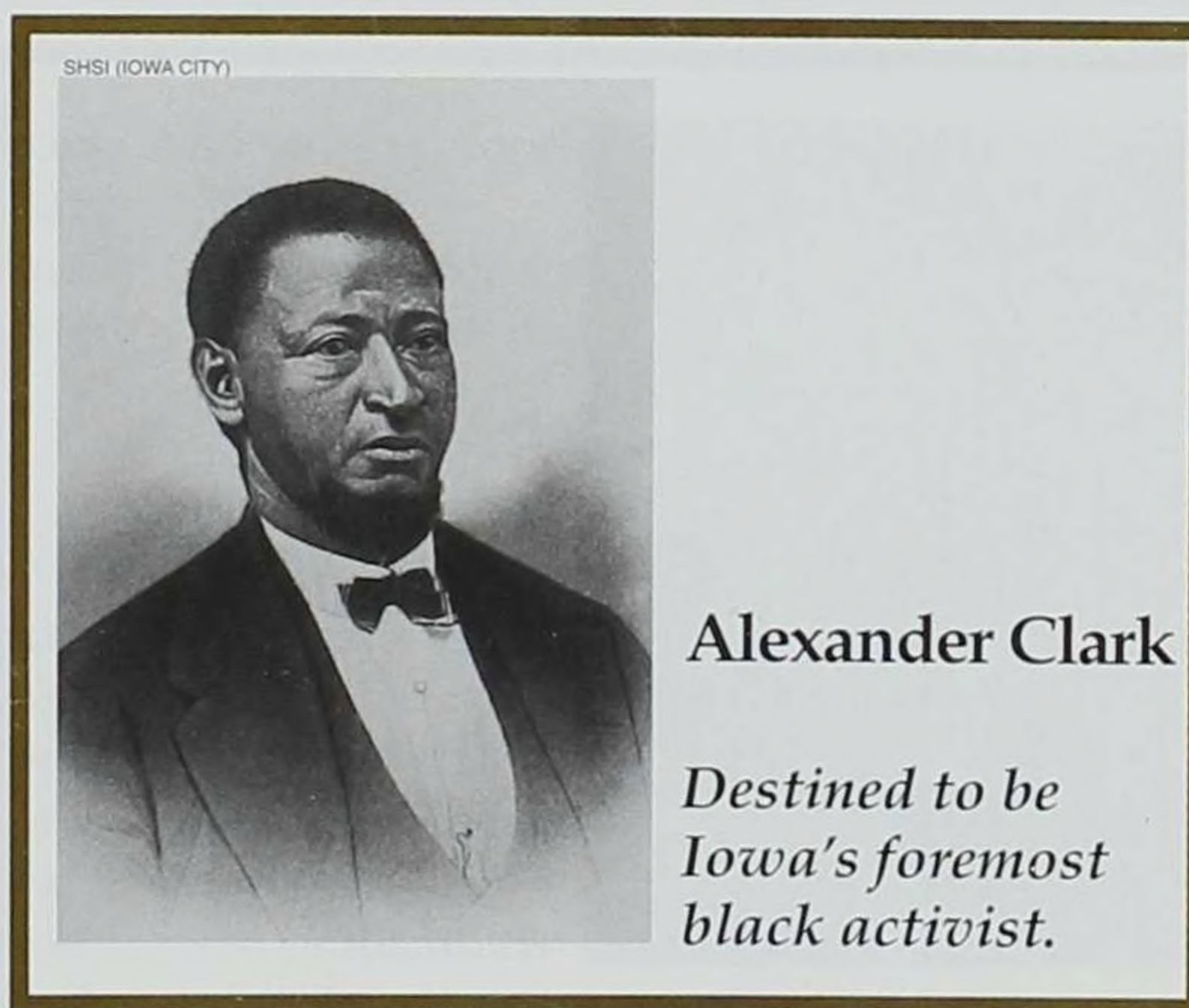
On a humid August day in 1857, with rain predicted, some 80,000 white male Iowans went to the polls to decide whether to extend voting rights (thus full citizenship) to black Iowans. A crushing majority—a super-landslide, 85 percent—said No.

That 1857 outcome hardly needs explanation. Attitudes toward slavery aside, the Midwest in the middle of the 19th century was notoriously racist, antebellum Iowa arguably the most racist of all. In fact, it may well have been the most racist state in the Union outside the South.

Iowa's 1838/39 "black code," as it was called, reads like that of a slave state. It banned interracial marriage, forced black residents to post bond for good behavior, disallowed black testimony in litigation involving whites, excluded black children from the public schools, excluded

people of color from welfare benefits, from practicing law, from being counted in state censuses, from being considered in legislative apportionment, from serving in the militia, from sitting in the legislature, and—most important of all—from voting.

And then there are the "onlys," "firsts," and "worsts." In the 1840s Iowa was the only free state whose legislators refused to support the Wilmot Proviso, a congressional measure that would have banned slavery from the West. In 1850 it was the only free state whose U.S. senators both voted for the notorious Fugi-



tive Slave Law, which forced northerners to collaborate in catching runaways from the South. In 1851 it was the first state to pass an act forbidding entry to African American migrants. Then its 1857 vote came within a half percentage point of being the worst referendum defeat for equal rights on record.

From 1857, flash forward eleven years to a chilly November day in 1868. By then almost all of Iowa's black code restrictions had gone by the board. But African American men still did not have that ultimate badge of citizenship: the right to vote. An 1868 ballot proposition aimed to grant it. Over 200,000 white male Iowans cast ballots on the question. This time a solid majority—57 percent—said Yes. Not bad: from 15 percent Yes to 57 percent Yes in little over a decade.

Though not many today realize it (including most Iowans), the Hawkeye State's 1868 equal suffrage referendum is an extraordinary event in the history of race relations in America.

No, there was nothing new and different about holding referendums on equal rights. Various free states and territories held about two dozen such referendums in the years before the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution banned whiteness as a voting qualification. But what makes Iowa's two black suffrage votes unique is that while its 1857 referendum was one of the worst defeats on record, the 1868 proposition was the only success anywhere in open political combat, in a straightforward popular vote.

What requires explanation is that 1868 victory for civil rights. Maybe it was just a fluke? No way. It was an oddity, but it was no accident. Iowa became almost uniquely "liberal" in the aftermath of the Civil War. In 1867 it was the second state in the Union to desegregate public schools, second only to progressive Massachusetts. In 1873 Iowa's Supreme Court struck down segregated public accommodations. In so doing it em-

ployed a definition of racial equality far in advance of its time. In 1880 Iowans for a third time voted on an equal rights question, this time on opening the legislature to African Americans. That proposition won by 63 percent—the largest majority ever recorded for any 19th-century equal rights proposition.

Well, everybody says, Iowa probably had few black residents. That's true; as late as 1880 black Iowans totaled less than 1 percent of the population. But so what? No northern state save New Jersey had a black population of as much as 3 percent. Besides, the tiny percentage of Iowa's blacks in 1857 was about the same as it was in 1868—so that can't account for the vastly different white voting behavior.

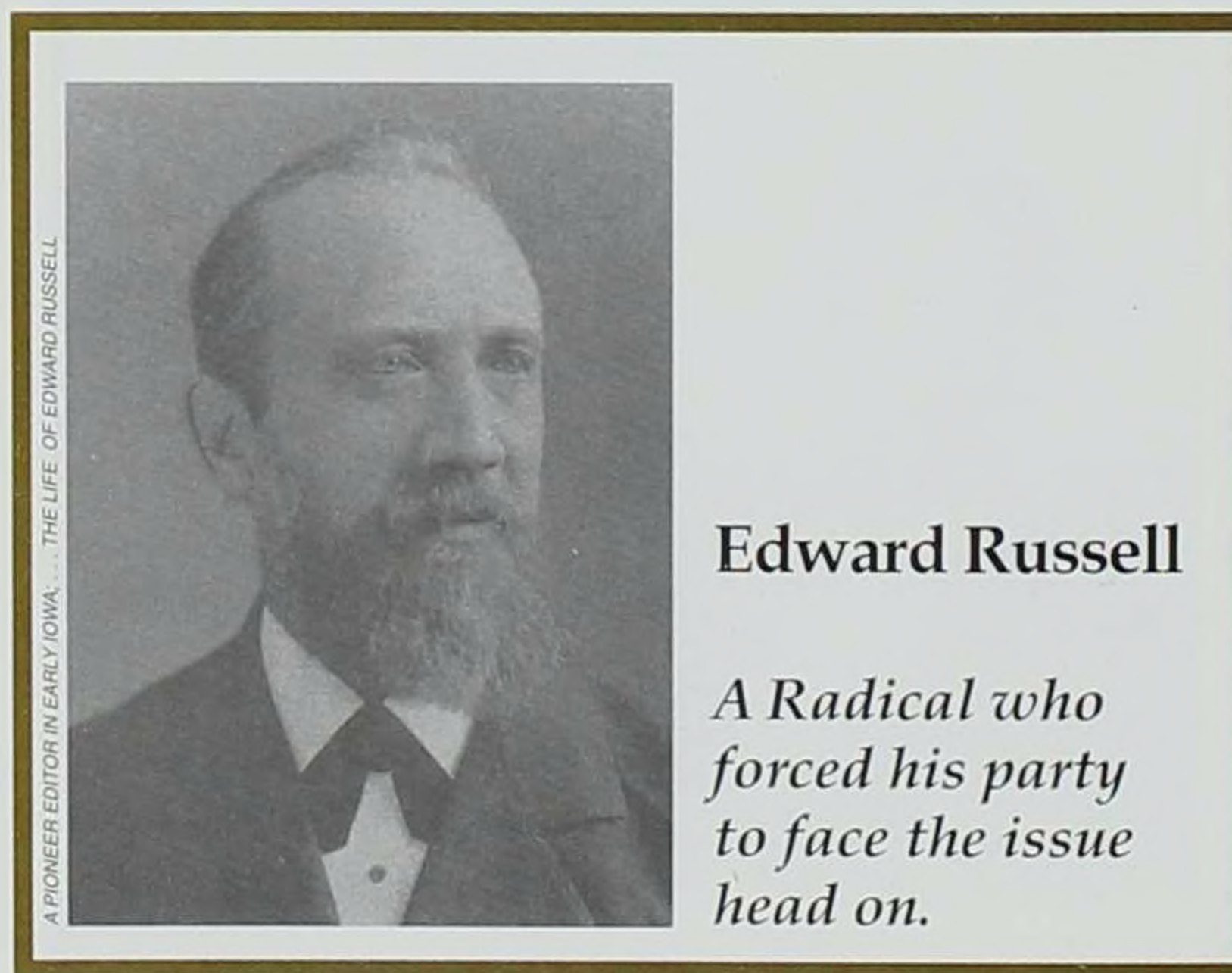
The 1857 outcome came to be reversed by the 1868 outcome mainly, it seems to me, because of four factors. The first factor was the lethal impact of the Civil War. Virtually half the white population of military age in Iowa donned blue uniforms and went south to fight for the Union.

With them went Iowa's own black regiment, the 60th U.S. Colored Infantry, its battle flag sewn by the black women of Muscatine and Keokuk. All its officers, in accord with War Department policy, were white, but its top enlisted man, its sergeant-major, would have been Alex Clark. But the military doctors refused him because of a bad leg.

In all, of the 76,000 Iowans who left home nearly one-fifth never came back. A larger proportion of Iowa servicemen met death than did the fighting men of most loyal states. Although hard to measure, it seems clear that few Iowans were in

any mood to indulge the defeated South in its impulse to continue slavery under some other name. And that the state's own black community had contributed a fighting regiment to the cause spoke eloquently to the issue of African American citizenship.

The second factor was that Iowa's early Republicans "had the right stuff." As a preliminary note, to understand the political context of the time, the most important thing to know is that in the last 150 years the two major political parties have switched positions.



Edward Russell

A Radical who forced his party to face the issue head on.

Until the mid-20th century, it was the Democrats who were the economic conservatives, freaks about local control, hostile to equal rights. In contrast, it was the Republicans who were development-minded, champions of social reform, unafraid of big government.

But the politics of race changed all that. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s, which began paying attention to black poverty and to some civil rights demands, detached African Americans from their traditional loyalty to the party of Abraham Lincoln and moved them into the Democratic Party. After World War II the Democrats embraced the broad-based civil rights movement that climaxed in the 1960s, thereby chasing white southerners out of their party. Since then the socially conservative "solid South" has been not Democratic, but Republican. And as the South goes, so goes the Grand Old Party.

In Iowa in those days virtually no support for social justice ever came from the state's Democratic Party and its in-your-face racism.

The third factor was that the Republicans carried the election of 1865. During the Civil War's final months the question of black voting rights stirred America. It was widely acknowledged that the ex-slaves of the South would have to be politically empowered so as to protect themselves from some form of re-enslavement. Yet, Republicans asked themselves, how could black suffrage be honestly forced on the South when several northern states didn't allow African Americans to vote?

Here was a dilemma. Pushing for black enfranchisement in the North would very likely cause a white backlash and huge Republican losses. Most everywhere the party of Lincoln pushed the panic button. In some northern states, moreover, top Republicans were proving as negative on black citizenship as Democrats. In Ohio, for example, the leading Republican candidate for governor said he'd simply reject the nomination should his party dare include an equal suffrage plank

in its platform. And he sent his campaign manager to see that it never happened. It didn't. He got elected. And black citizenship in Ohio never had much of a chance in the early postwar years.

In Iowa the issue took a much different turn. In 1865 Edward Russell, a British-born Davenport editor, a Radical, forced his party to face the issue head on. Two months after Lee's surrender the Republicans held their state convention. Nearly 700 of them met in Des Moines, probably the largest public gathering in the history of the state at that time. Russell, a delegate, got on the platform committee. But he found the committee majority deathly afraid of straightforwardly endorsing equal rights. So he offered an amendment to the platform

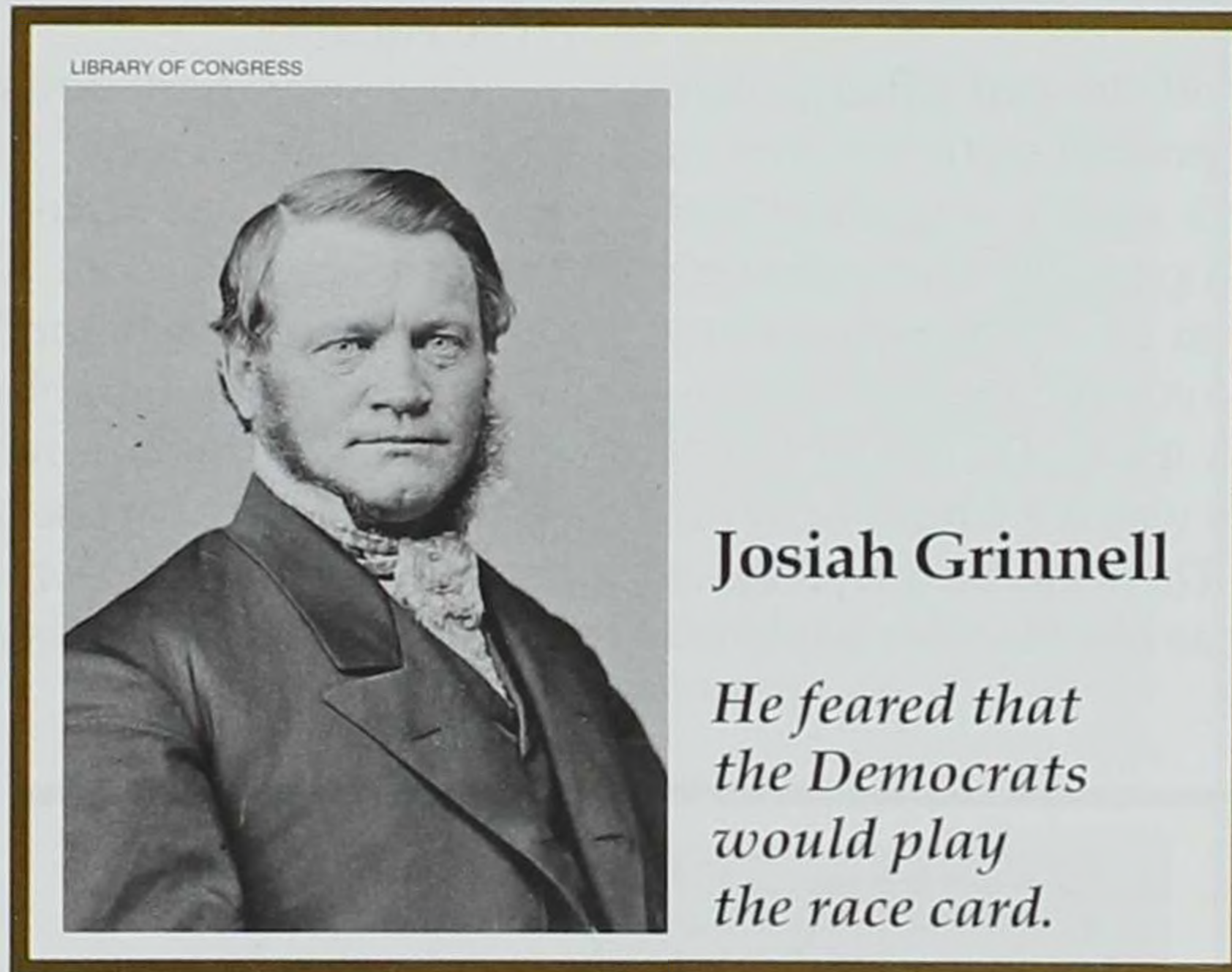
from the convention floor: "we are in favor of amending the Constitution of our State by striking out the word 'white' in the article on suffrage."

This set off an uproar. Several delegates urged Russell to withdraw his motion. He refused. In the ensuing debate, two Iowa congressmen, the highest-ranking pols there in Des Moines that day, faced off on the Russell amendment.

Josiah Grinnell spoke for the fearful. Grinnell was born and raised in New England, a clergyman, lawyer, and gentleman farmer. In the 1850s he came west and became one of Iowa's most respected antislavery activists. Elected to the wartime Congress, he was the only consistent Radical among Iowa's U.S. senators and representatives. As such he urged that southern blacks be granted the vote.

But when it came to his own state, Grinnell was what psychologist Robert Merton terms a "nonprejudiced discriminator"—that is, despite an apparent lack of prejudiced feelings, he supported racial discrimination for contingent reasons. He was, in other words, not exactly a profile in courage.

Grinnell said he opposed Russell's amendment not from a belief in black inferiority but because, if passed, the Democrats would respond by playing the race card. That would surely cost the Republicans the upcoming gubernatorial election.



Josiah Grinnell

He feared that the Democrats would play the race card.

Grinnell's congressional colleague, Hiram Price, then jumped to his feet. Born a Pennsylvania farm boy, Price was now a wealthy, highly respected banker and railroad capitalist in Davenport. Like so many of Iowa's best Radicals, he was a converted Democrat. At the convention he served with Russell in the Scott County delegation. His colleagues' treatment of Russell fired him up.

Price unleashed ferocious off-the-cuff remarks that, as one conventioneer put it, "poured forth in a torrent of righteous indignation." The speech was short and to the point: "The Republican party is strong enough to dare to do right, and cannot afford now, or at any other time, to shirk a duty. The colored men, North and South, were loyal and true to the Government in the days of its greatest peril. There was not a rebel or a traitor to be found among them. They ask the privilege of citizenship now that slavery has been forever banished from our country.

"Why should the great freedom-loving State of Iowa longer deny them this right? Not one reason can be given that has not been used to bolster up slavery for the past hundred years. The war just closed has swept that relic of barbarism from our land; let the Republican party have the courage to do justice.

"I have no fear of the result in a contest of this kind. We shall carry the election and have the satisfaction of wiping out the last vestige of the black code that has long been a disgrace to our State."

Recalled an awestruck witness, "The timid delegates were shamed into silence." As another phrased it: "The Convention . . . being unwilling to stand committed even in appearance against the principle of negro suffrage, adopted the amendment by a large majority, and the universal expression of the delegates . . . was that inasmuch as the issue must be squarely met, it might as well be met this year as next."

The conventioners, as would be said today, front-loaded the unexpected issue into gubernatorial politics. Surprised Republican voters across the state suddenly learned of the issue within the next few days from their newspapers.

It had been a brave—if impetuous—action. But two months later political courage began to ebb when the Democrats fielded what one of them proudly called a "white man's ticket." They designed it to appeal to racists of both parties, especially demobilized soldiers, whose experiences in the South led them—or at least some so thought—to be especially hostile to racial equality.

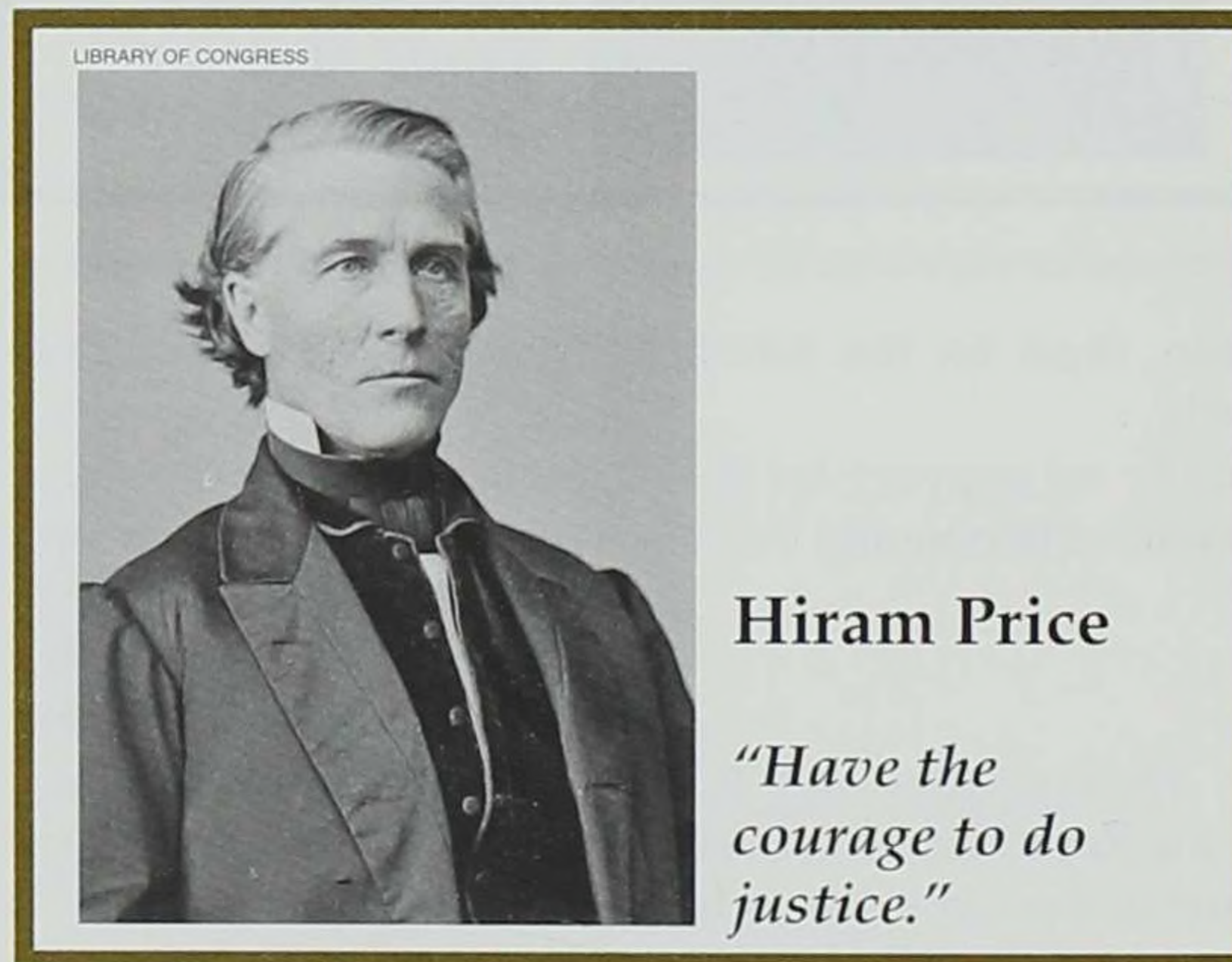
Thus was born Iowa's short-lived "Union Anti-Negro Suffrage Party." Its nominee for governor was, of course, an outspoken white supremacist, Colonel Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., a nephew of the famous Democratic U.S. senator from Missouri.

But Iowa's Republican candidate, running for a second term, was a remarkable man who deserves far more honor than he's ever been given. Like Price he was a converted Democrat; like Price and Grinnell he'd helped found the state's Republican Party. Colonel William Stone then fought gallantly in the Civil War, returning home a badly wounded survivor of General Ulysses Grant's vast frontal assault on Vicksburg. Stone, who had stared directly into the face of death, was not about to run scared.

Neither was another military hero, Marcellus Crocker, who came out of the war as Iowa's most prestigious fighting general. Before tragically dying of tuberculosis that summer General Crocker urged that Stone be aggressive: "We must meet

this question," he forcefully advised, ". . . in such a manner as will insure the Right to prevail; and the sooner we do it, and the bolder we do it, the better."

Governor Stone complied. In his campaign he candidly admitted that he used to be a racial conservative. "I was so conservative," he said, "[that] I did not endorse Lincoln's preparatory proclamation of emancipation as heartily as many did . . . although by the time when he issued the final proclamation I was fully prepared to sustain it." He had also been, as a conservative, against putting African Americans into uniform, as many Radicals urged. But it had been ordered. Now he believed that "if they would take out of the war what the black men had done . . . as guides,



Hiram Price

"Have the courage to do justice."

teamsters, mechanics, laborers, and soldiers, the war would still be raging."

Stone admitted that he had doubted the wisdom of Ed Russell's amendment. Yet it was a *fait accompli* and within two weeks he had embraced the challenge it posed. He had also voted against black suffrage back in 1857, he said, but he'd since changed his mind.

Stone then discovered how effectively America's cherished ideals could be harnessed to equal rights. In a campaign face-off he cornered his racist opponent into objecting to the phrase "all men are equal before the law." "Well," said Stone, "this is the first time I ever heard an American citizen state that he did not believe in the equality of all men before the law." The audience exploded in applause.

Twenty years earlier, only the far-left "antislavery constitutionalists," as historians know them, had argued that the Founding Fathers had been deliberately abolitionist. Now that idea became the common currency of Stone's discourse. "I say that we [Republicans] carried out the spirit of the Declaration of Independence," Stone said, again to applause, "in that resolution, when we said that 'all men were equal before the law.' We stand where Madison and Franklin and Jefferson stood, when we asserted that 'all men are equal before the law.' We stand where stood the framers of the federal Constitution and where the men stood who fought the battles of the Revolution. . . . I tell you this principle that all men are equal, comes from the Almighty God Himself, and it must and will prevail."

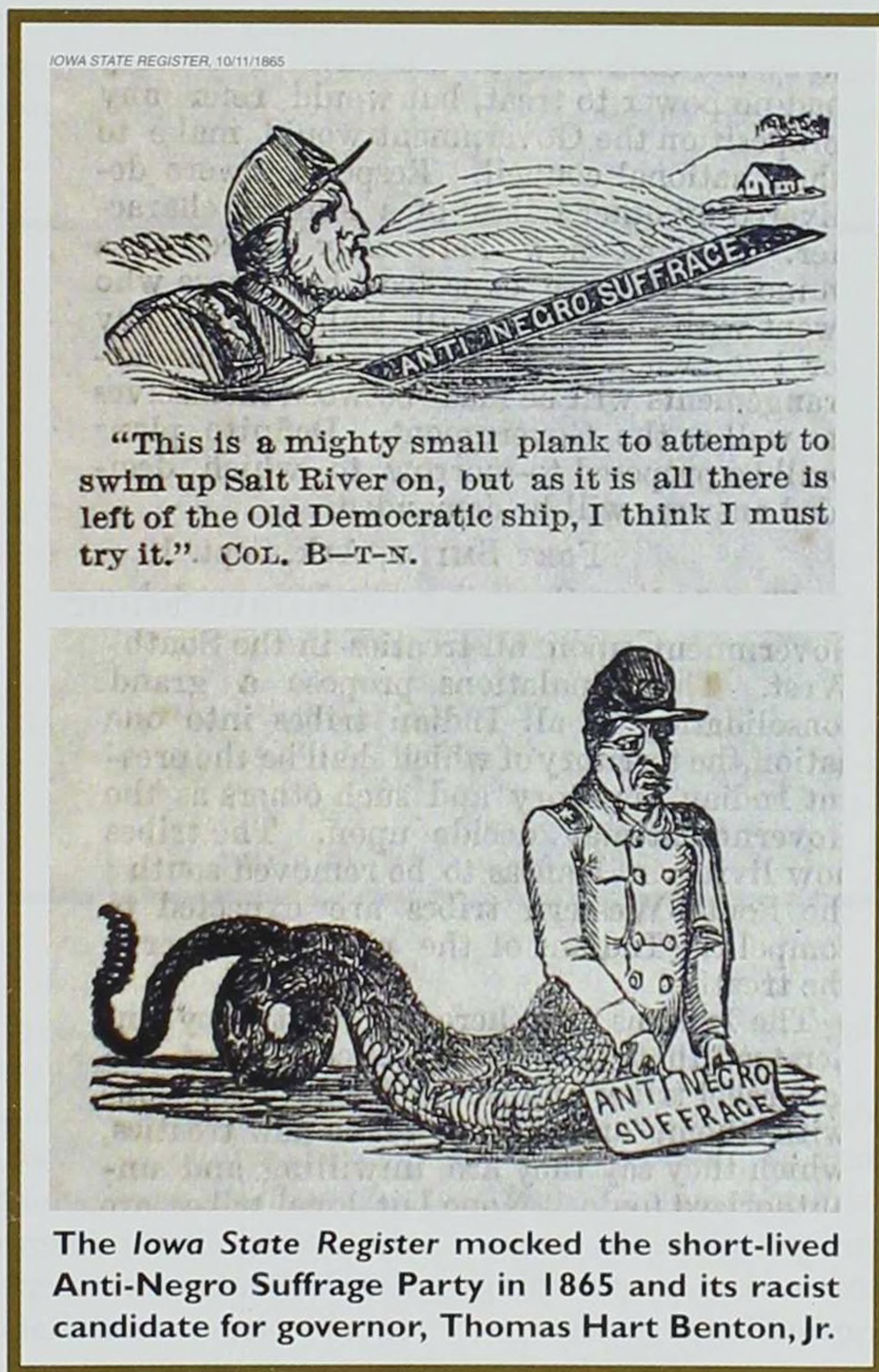
Governor Stone won reelection with a comfortable 56 percent of the vote. Reflected a Sioux City edi-

tor: "Stone has been elected upon the 'negro suffrage' platform . . . and therefore we may regard the popular opinion of the State as expressed in favor of the extension of the rights of citizenship to the black man. The contest is passed, the victory won."

Well, not quite. In states such as Ohio the question of black citizenship could go directly to voters in an up-or-down referendum once a legislative session gave the go-ahead. Not so in the Hawkeye State. Iowa required passage by two successive sessions before going to a referendum vote.

Aided by three petitions from Muscatine (two black, one white), impartial suffrage carried the 1866 legislature. Governor Stone, retiring from politics, then handed off the issue to a second Iowa ex-colonel who took command at the statehouse. In his inaugural speech Governor Samuel Merrill, echoing Stone's agenda, addressed the Republican rank-and-file. He ordered them to ignore the recent defeat of rights referendums in Connecticut, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas, and Colorado. Iowa, he said, must neither "emulate their cowardice nor share in their dishonor." Strong words indeed.

A newly elected legislature would again have to approve the question. Once again Muscatine's civil rights activists spoke up, prompting a meeting in Des Moines—on Lincoln's birthday, pointedly enough—of African American leaders and white supporters from all over the state. Eloquent speeches by Alexander Clark and Henry O'Connor, Iowa's new attorney general, preceded a petition addressed "To the People of Iowa," penned by Clark and signed by the black conventioners. "We claim to be of that number comprehended in the Declaration of Independence," it said,



The Iowa State Register mocked the short-lived Anti-Negro Suffrage Party in 1865 and its racist candidate for governor, Thomas Hart Benton, Jr.

"and . . . entitled not only to life, but to equal rights in the pursuit and securing of happiness and in the choice of those who are to rule over us."

Finally, just before the November 1868 referendum, word came from the late war's most famous living celebrity, General Grant, the Republican presidential nominee that year. As quoted by an interviewer, Grant said he "hoped the people of Iowa . . . would be the first State to carry impartial suffrage through unflinchingly." It had been defeated elsewhere, he said, "but he trusted that Iowa, the bright Radical star, would proclaim by its action . . . that the North is consistent with itself, and willing to voluntarily accept what its Congress had made a necessity in the South."

Iowans, as already explained, did as they were told.

Finally, the fourth factor why the 1857 defeat of the black suffrage vote was reversed in 1868 was that white Americans can be induced to "do the right thing."

It seems to me that this slice of Iowa's political history reflects something very important about the underlying nature of white racism in America. What it implies is that most whites are not inherently prejudiced about people of color, that racism is something other than bred in the bones, carried in the genes.

Interestingly enough, a generation of social scientists agreed. In the mid-20th century they probed the psychology of white racial attitudes and behavior. What they discovered was that any statistically average white population will not test out as uniformly prejudiced, but instead divide into three groups. About 15 percent will prove to be deep-seated racists, folks so prejudiced that changing their behavior and attitudes probably requires individual psychotherapy.

About 25 percent will prove to be committed egalitarians who will consistently support justice and equality for nonwhites, no matter what the context.

That leaves the majority—about 60 percent. These whites have no strong feelings one way or another,

but will simply go along with the crowd. They'll be racist or egalitarian depending on what they think is expected.

This 60 percent middle group has been labeled the "conforming majority." Its behavior will be dictated by the messages received from respected authority figures.

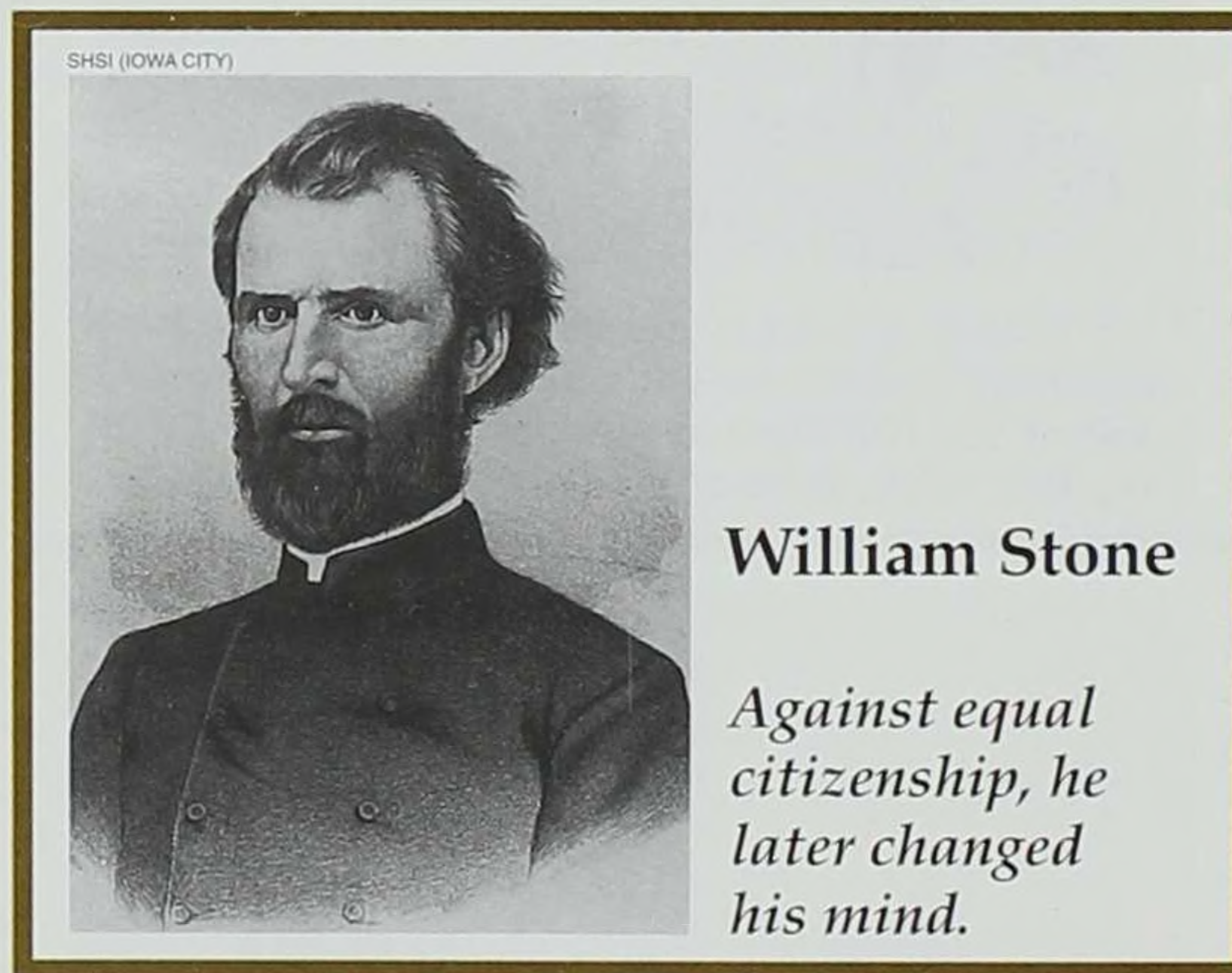
As an excellent example, take Americans' attitudes toward interracial marriage. As late as 1963 almost half the states had laws on the books that forbade marriage between blacks and whites.

And a solid two-thirds of Americans favored such laws against interracial marriage. But four years later the lofty justices of the United States Supreme Court struck down all those laws. Polled again on the issue, two-thirds now agreed that people should marry whomever they wanted, irrespective of race. That dramatic turnabout was not magic, just basic social psychology.

In 19th-century Iowa, men like Congressman Price, Governors Stone

and Merrill, and General Ulysses Grant were, at least among Republicans, enormously respected. When they spoke, the Republican majority, the rank-and-file, heard and obeyed. And nothing worked so wonderfully with this conforming majority, as Governor Stone discovered, than reference to that most quoted line in the Declaration of Independence: "all men are created equal." Never mind that its author was a slave-owner; his words possessed a majestic life of their own, resonating through the 19th century as sacred gospel, as literally the truth. Indeed, they became the ideological basis of the antislavery crusade and the 20th-century civil rights movement.

But, noted the psychologists, the best way to bring white behavior into line with egalitarian principles is simply to spring a new policy on the conforming majority without warning. At first there is anger, surprise, and grumbling, but the 60 percent soon comes around, falls into line, gets with the program. General Crocker intuitively sensed this truth when he wrote (as quoted earlier): "We must meet this question . . . and the sooner we do it, and the *bolder* we do it, the better."



Governor Stone was a conformer, not a Radical or a committed egalitarian. When Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, Stone was against it. But within three months he bought in. He had been against enlisting black troops, but once the War Department endorsed the idea Stone dutifully saluted. In 1857 he had opposed equal citizenship, and when the 1865 convention passed the Russell amendment, he thought it a big mistake. But within two weeks he was on the team, ready to step up to the plate.

As with Stone, so also with thousands of Iowa's conforming Republicans. In 1857 they said No to black suffrage—because the party bigwigs deemed it not ready for prime time, and they said as much. Eleven years later they voted Yes to black suffrage—because the Republican bigwigs told them to do it.

The behavior of only a minority of these Iowans (as many as 25 percent?) rose from strongly held egalitarian convictions. Instead, the political successes of 1865 and 1868 were primarily due to the conversion of the conforming majority by the courage of leaders, by the impress of party loyalty and discipline, and by the fact that Iowans' racial prejudices were a little like the proverbial Platte River: a mile wide and an inch deep, visible but deceptively shallow.

I suppose we may wonder "what might have been" if all America was Iowa in the 1860s. As it happened, of course, equal rights lingered on as a bitter, even murderous issue, especially (but by no means exclusively) in the old Confederate states, where black subjection was thought as necessary to the southern economy of the postwar as of the pre-war years. In thousands of localities black civil equality did not finally materialize until a century after slavery's demise.

Today the emblems of interracial progress are plainly visible. Now we are seeing not the first generation of powerful African Americans, but the second. A second U.S. Secretary of State is black. A second U.S. Supreme Court justice is black. The second black governor ever elected holds office in Boston. Nationwide, 93 percent of registered voters tell pollsters they would support a qualified African American for president. And the second black man ever to mount a plausible campaign for the White House is testing that proposition. But . . . the black Ninth Ward of New Orleans remains a pathetic wasteland. There are more African American males in prison than in college. There are inner-city schools where, as Barack Obama tells us, the

rats outnumber the classroom computers. All of these facts remind us that some devastating combination of race, poverty, and official negligence won't yield to a simple up-or-down vote. There no longer seem to be unequivocal policy fixes, as there were as late as the 1960s.

Still, it's always good—perhaps it's even necessary—to have positive examples to encourage us. And the circumstances, the processes, and the strategies that won frontier Iowans to the civil equality of blacks remind us that there are egalitarian precedents as well as a racist tradition in America's past. ❖

*Robert R. Dykstra presented these remarks in the Old Capitol in Iowa City on February 7, 2007, marking the sesquicentennial of the State Historical Society of Iowa. They are excerpts from his book *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier*. A native Iowan and a former professor of history at the University of Iowa, he is emeritus professor of history and public policy at the State University of New York at Albany.*

NOTE ON SOURCES

For the full story of Iowa's encounter with black civil equality, from the 1830s through 1880, see Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; paperback edition, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997). The book includes the first full history of Iowa's antislavery movement, as well as the only study so far published for any state of grass-roots voting support for and against black civil equality. For another summary of some of the material see Dykstra, "Iowans and the Politics of Race in America, 1857–1880," in *Iowa History Reader*, ed. Marvin Bergman (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996).

Capitol Colors

by Ginalie Swaim, editor

Look closely through the second-story window, on the far left. See the sliver of red? And on the far right, hints of blue and green? Come closer. Climb the granite stairs, open the enormous door. You're in for a glorious surprise.

Old Capitol's interior glows like a box of jewels.

If you are one of the thousands of visitors who toured this National Historic Landmark in Iowa City before 2001, you may remember the soft, serene off-white interior. The space was calm, quiet, dignified—but not historically appropriate. Now it is.

Like Iowa itself, Old Capitol is a story of evolution and change. The Greek Revival-style building first served as the center of territorial and state government from 1842 to the fall of 1857 and therefore the stage for milestones in Iowa history: statehood, state constitutions, the emergence of the Republican Party, to name a few. Then, when the capital moved to Des Moines in 1857, the state handed the limestone building over to the fledgling University of Iowa, for which it has served multiple and diverse functions over the decades. But the first chapter of its story is solely about the state of Iowa in its earliest years.

Like all old buildings, especially those built with limited funds and often-changing uses, Old Capitol has gone through periods of major repair and upkeep. In the early 1920s, structural problems led to an extensive rehabilitation. In the 1970s, Old Capitol was restored and became a "living museum"—offering visitors the look and feel of an 1850s public building while functioning also as a venue for formal university events. In

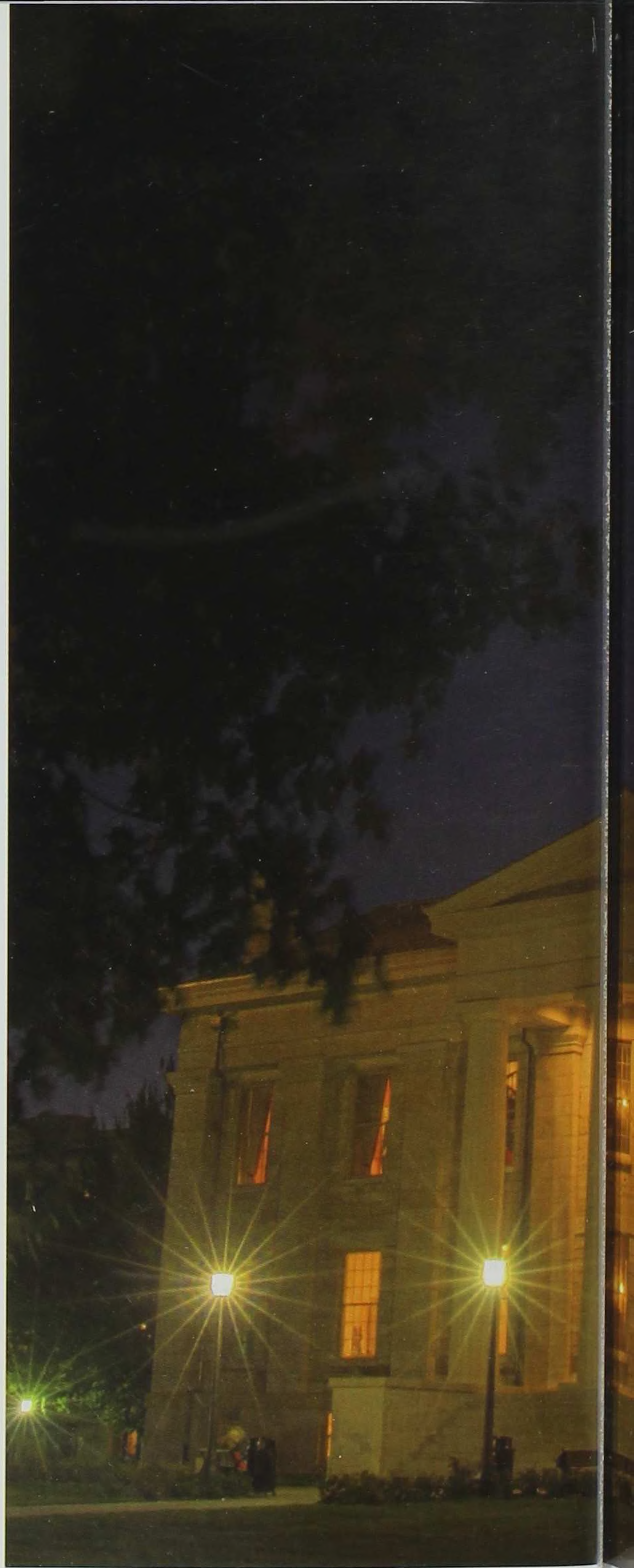




PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

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Look closely through the second-story window, on the far left. See the sliver of red? And on the far right, hints of blue and green? Come closer. Climb the granite stairs, open the enormous door. You're in for a glorious surprise.

Old Capitol's interior glows like a box of jewels. If you are one of the thousands of visitors who toured this National Historic Landmark in Iowa City before 2001, you may remember the soft, serene off-white interior. The space was calm, quiet, dignified—but not historically appropriate. Now it is.

Like Iowa itself, Old Capitol is a story of evolution and change. The Greek Revival-style building first served as the center of territorial and state government from 1842 to the fall of 1857 and therefore the stage for milestones in Iowa history: statehood, state constitutions, the emergence of the Republican Party, to name a few. Then, when the capital moved to Des Moines in 1857, the state handed the limestone building over to the fledgling University of Iowa, for which it has served multiple and diverse functions over the decades. But the first chapter of its story is solely about the state of Iowa in its earliest years.

Like all old buildings, especially those built with limited funds and often-changing uses, Old Capitol has gone through periods of major repair and upkeep. In the early 1920s, structural problems led to an extensive rehabilitation. In the 1970s, Old Capitol was restored and became a "living museum"—offering visitors the look and feel of an 1850s public building while functioning also as a venue for formal university events. In

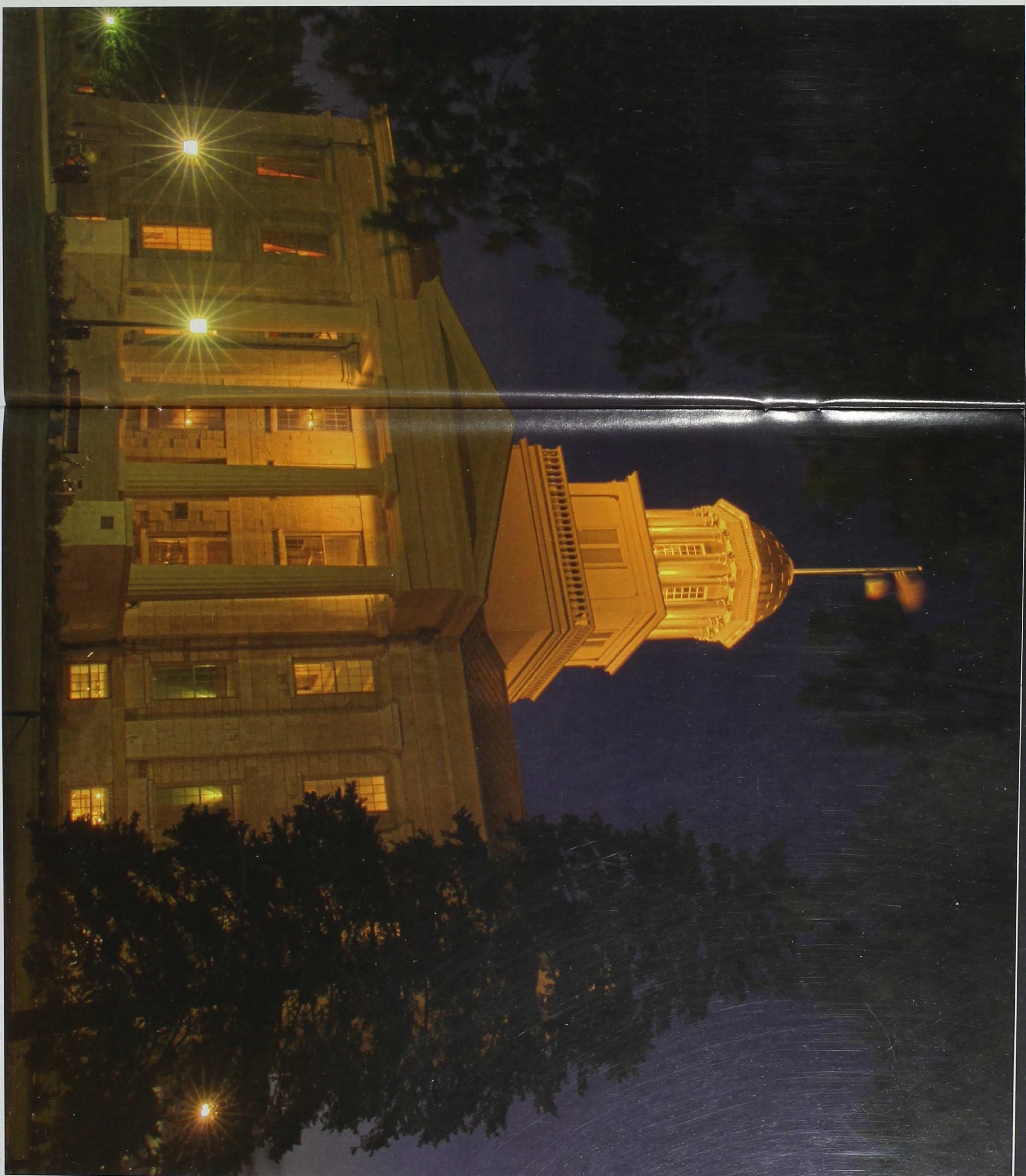


PHOTO BY TAL SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS



PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

2000 exterior restoration began—and then came to a dramatic stop on November 20, 2001. “Construction crews using a heat gun to remove paint set the dome ablaze,” writes Linzee Kull McCray in *Facing East & Facing West: Iowa’s Old Capitol Museum*. “Local firefighters responded, and their quick actions, as well as the foresight of the planners of the 1920s rehabilitation project in which the fireproofing concrete cap had been installed between Old Capitol’s dome and roof, saved the rest of the building from fire damage. The dome and cupola were destroyed, however, and 50,000 gallons of water poured in from above, soaking walls and carpets and buckling wood floors.” The remarkable reverse-spiral staircase (*left*) held steady.

The University of Iowa turned tragedy into opportunity, embarking on plans to rebuild the destroyed portions, complete the exterior restoration, update heating, lighting, and security systems, create exhibit rooms and offices, expand museum and educational programming, and develop self-guided tours through rooms now bathed in rich colors.

One of the experts called in was David Fixler, an architect with EYP (Einhorn Yaffee Prescott), of Boston. His tasks included developing a historically appropriate color palette for Old Capitol.

Fixler and Pentacrest Museums Director Pamela Trimpe emphasize that the colors chosen are “historically inspired.” When Old Capitol was gutted in the 1920s rehabilitation, all of the interior walls and woodwork were removed—and with them any evidence of the actual paint colors. Only the two sets of columns (*top right*) on the first and



second floors remained. So Fixler's only paint clue was an off-white sample from a column—a paint color not unusual for wood columns, Fixler says, because the intent was that the wood would resemble expensive stonework.

But might the rooms and hall have been painted white also? "We spent a lot of time looking at old photos of Old Capitol," Fixler said. "Anybody who looked at the photos could tell that the building was not monochromatic. It was absolutely apparent. The trim looked white and the walls were dark."

The ten colors finally chosen were inspired by historic colors popular in the mid-19th century, in both private residences and public buildings. In particular, Fixler took clues from Greek Revival buildings like the statehouses in Springfield, Illinois, and Columbus, Ohio. From the early decades of the 19th century up through 1860, Greek Revival was a popular architec-

tural style for public buildings because it referenced ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy, and reinforced young America's democratic ideals.

"Greek Revival buildings tended to have these bold colors, and they became even bolder and richer as the country entered the high Victorian period," Fixler said. "For the young state of Iowa, constructing Old Capitol was a stretch, even though it's a very simple, modest building. It was never a fancy building, but it had character and dignity. Color was one of the few things that could be used to enliven it."

In assigning particular colors from the palette to particular rooms, Fixler explained that "we spent a lot of time studying how the light works in the building and where the sun comes in" (*below*). Some colors complemented rugs or furniture, others fit the purpose and character of a room. "You wouldn't have red in the Supreme Court," he said. "You would want something more somber."

BOTH PHOTOS BY TOM JORGENSEN, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS



Old Capitol's most visually commanding room is the House of Representatives chamber (right). At both the state and national levels, Fixler noted, the House "has traditionally been a little rowdier than the Senate, more passionate and unpredictable." Hence, while the Senate chamber is painted a rather dignified color named Jamestown Blue, the House is a vibrant Sultan Red.

Within the House chamber, Iowa's 26 representatives sat in cane chairs at walnut desks, the surfaces covered with oil cloth. Their attention was drawn to the Speaker, his desk raised on a platform and lit by camphene or whale oil lamps. Clerks scribbled at their desks flanking the Speaker. Reporters, seated at a table on the side or in the back, gauged each speaker while chewing their tobacco. From the gallery, onlookers witnessed contentious debates and fervent speeches (the crowd overflowed into the hall when Governor James Grimes delivered his inaugural speech in 1854).

Within the House and Senate chambers, the Iowa General Assembly considered bills, petitions, and resolutions important to everyday life in mid-19th-century Iowa: restraining livestock from running at large; regulating mills and millers; killing wolves (but protecting deer in certain seasons); constructing dams, ferries, and plank and graded roads; regulating the practice of medicine; and approving name changes of counties and towns. Should the Iowa constitution be printed in German, given the preponderance of German immigrants in Iowa? Should capital punishment be abolished? More critical, what about the spread of slavery, the rights of blacks? Some issues gave shape to Iowa's economics, population, and politics: giving land grants to railroads, allowing the Meskwaki in Tama County to "remain and reside" in Iowa, dividing the state into two congressional districts. Debates on prohibition would divide Iowa for decades to come.

The Senate and House chambers were used not



only by the General Assembly. Iowa City congregations sometimes used the chambers for public worship, and the Odd Fellows for a lecture. A professor of the local "deaf and dumb asylum" explained his teaching methods. The Iowa State Teachers Association, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and a state medical society were all founded here. The local Methodist Sew-



PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

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Of a more joyous nature were the celebrations held in Old Capitol. Desks were removed from the Senate chamber when Augustus Caesar Dodge hosted a ball

to mark his reelection to the U.S. Senate. At the elaborate celebration of the arrival of the railroad in Iowa City, tallow candles glowed in every window. Guests sampled pyramids of cakes three feet tall and raised their glasses in toast after toast. The more energetic celebrants danced until two in the morning.

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PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS



PHOTO BY TILL SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

As Iowa's second territorial governor, John Chambers was probably the first to use this office. (Burlington was the capital when Robert Lucas was Iowa's first territorial governor.) The furnishings Chambers and his successors might have used included a substantial "partners style" walnut desk like this one. With leg openings on opposite sides, two could sit at the desk. For traveling, the governor may have used a portable lap desk, with a pen tray and hidden compartments inside. The tall brass lamp—a *sinumbra* (Latin for "without shadow")—was a type of astral lamp, which produced a bright, efficient flame, and less smoke than tallow candles. On the floor is the ubiquitous spittoon, in this case a ceramic one. Vouchers



PHOTO BY THOMAS LANGDON

from the period reveal that hundreds were ordered.

Firewood, stored in boxes like this one, fueled the capitol's stoves and fireplaces. Cups of water from tin jugs may have cooled heated political arguments.





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PHOTO BY THOMAS LANGDON

Heating the capitol itself was a financial challenge. Although cast-iron stoves worked better than the four original fireplaces, precious heat surely drifted up towards the 16- to 18-foot ceilings. Legislative reports show that firewood was one of the largest operating expenses.

Records also show that curtains of "velvet, sattinett, calico, marenoie, and chintz" were purchased for the capitol. But even though the heavy merino wool drapes were long enough to pool on the floor, they would hardly have blocked drafts of cold winter air. Nor would they have absorbed the noise in a building brisk with the business of a new state.





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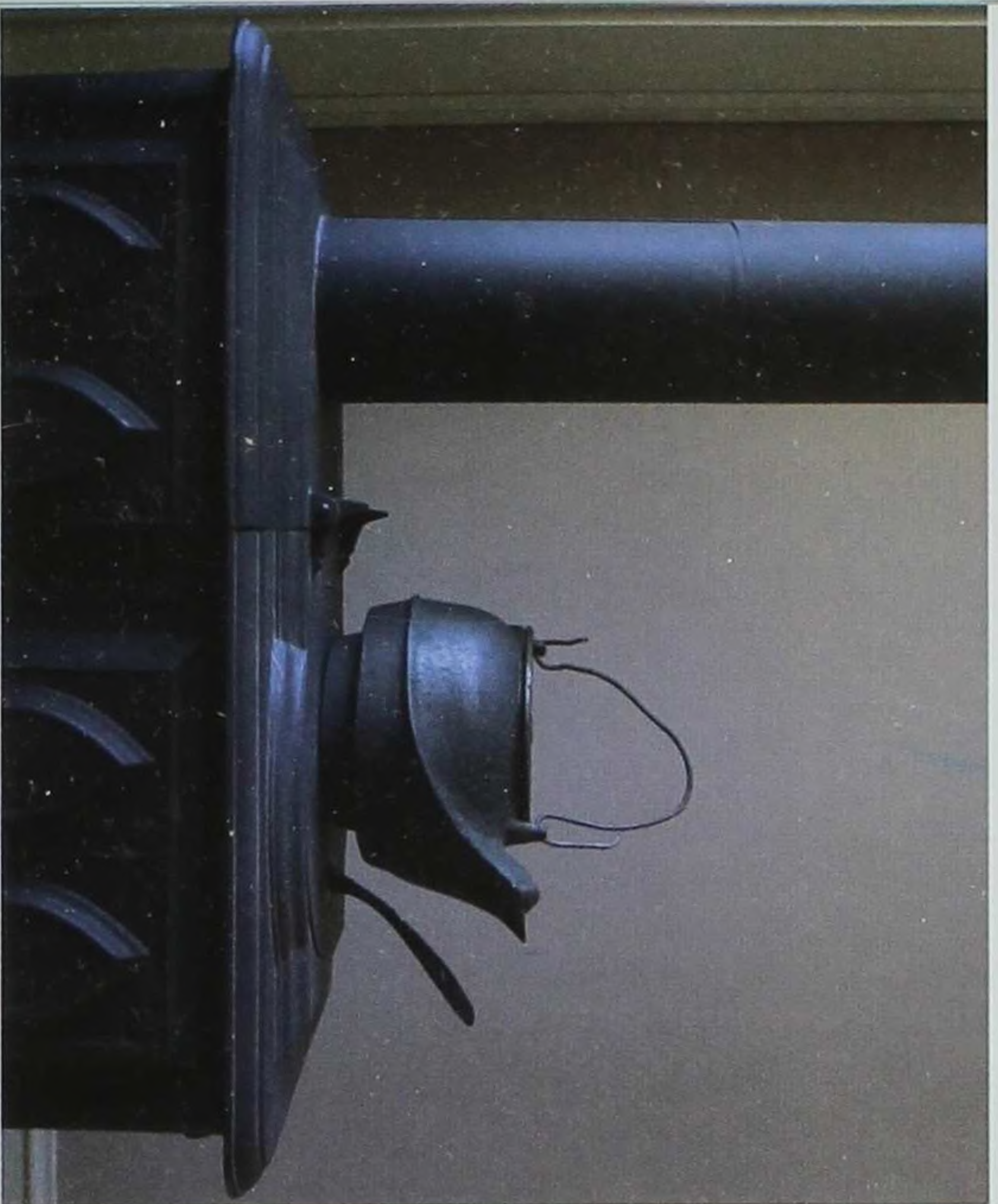


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PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS



PHOTO BY THOMAS JANSOHN

Within this chamber, the Iowa Supreme Court presided. Of the three earliest justices, Chief Justice Charles Mason was remembered as "a man over six feet in height [who] carried himself erect, a habit formed during his military education at West Point. He was an attentive listener; arranged his thoughts carefully before clothing them in words; not much given to talking; rather reticent than otherwise, yet capable of being very interesting when he did talk, and having a quick sense of humor that brought with it a cheery smile and a twinkle in his eye."

Years later, Mason described his associate justice Joseph Williams as "affable and amusing" and "a man of very quick parts [who] seemed to arrive at just conclusions as if by intuition." Mason considered Thomas Wilson "a closer legal student [who] formed his opinions after more thought and reflection."

The Supreme Court heard cases ranging from women's property rights and child custody, to the exclusive rights to operate a ferry crossing on the Mississippi, from claim jumping to horse racing, from treaties to murder.

Ruling on one case in 1854, Justice George Greene decried "the alarming increase of railroad, steamboat and stage disasters." The case concerned damages claimed by injured stagecoach passengers. "With horses gentle and well broke, with coaches and harness good and strong, with drivers sober, prudent and skillful, a stage coach line might be regarded as managed with human care and foresight" and therefore not liable. But he noted that in "Iowa's level prairie country . . . nearly every accident may be traced to drunken or grossly careless drivers."





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Morgan Reno believed that a well-selected library collection "gives tone and stability to society, wisdom and force in legislation, peace and quietness to domestic regulations, and character to a free people."

As Iowa's second territorial librarian, Reno reminded legislators in 1841, "We soon expect to emerge from the condition of an infantine dependent of the general government, to a star of the first magnitude in the glorious constellation of American states." As did each territorial and state librarian, he pleaded for even a modest appropriation to buy more books, periodicals, and maps. "Well selected Libraries conduce greatly to the stability and force of a Nation."

Iowa officials and legislators could borrow books, and certain favored citizens could use them within the library during legislative sessions. The library was open two afternoons a week. During legislative and court sessions, it was open daily, nine to noon, and from two to nine at night, hours when only the meager light of candles and lamps aided the readers.

The room was not always a quiet place. According to one story, a legislator attacked a newspaper editor in the library, giving him "so thorough a beating that blood flowed freely and began to form a pool on the [new] carpet." The territorial secretary burst through the door: "You d-----d scoundrels. What are you spoiling my carpet for?"

The original library collection had been selected by Territorial Governor Robert Lucas in 1838, before he had arrived in Burlington, Iowa. "Previous to leaving Ohio," he wrote, "in June last, (with the assistance of several literary friends,) I made out a catalogue of such standard works as are deemed most important as the foundation of a public library, and put the catalogue into the hands of an agent in Cincinnati to make the purchase for me. Those books that could be



PHOTO BY THOMAS LANGDON

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When the capital moved from Burlington to Iowa City, so did the books. The collection comprised roughly 300 reports and 900 books (many in multivolume sets). The largest categories were jurisprudence, law, history, science, and, surprisingly, poetry. Smaller categories were theology (Lucas requested works of "all denominations of Christians, as well as the Mahomitan

Koran"), biography, politics, medicine, education, and voyages and travels. Twenty-six maps, an atlas, and multiple issues of a dozen or so periodicals completed the collection. In sum, the categories suggest what Lucas thought essential for Iowa's first official library.

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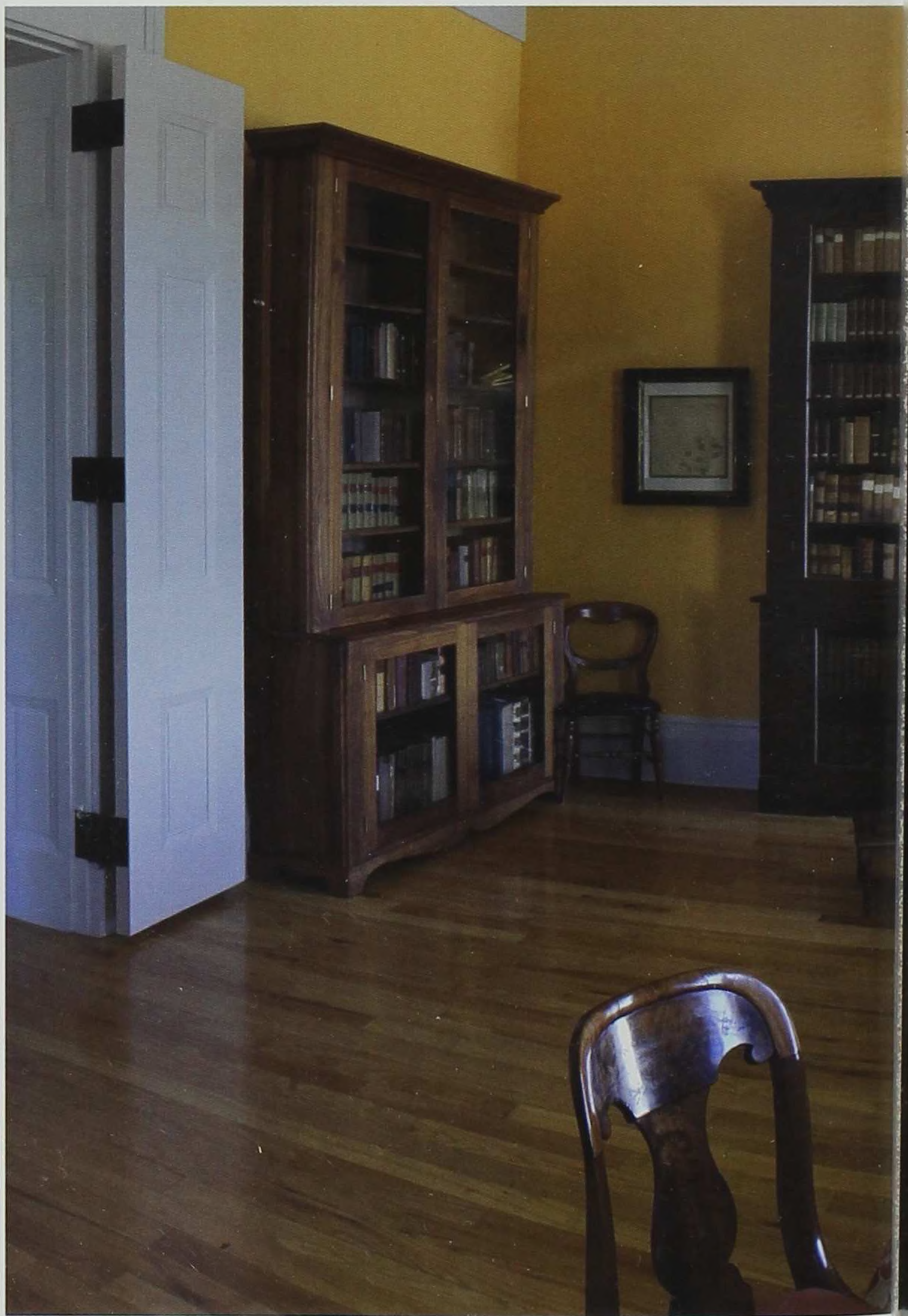
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PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

Once Des Moines became the capital in late 1857, the Senate chamber was no longer a “theatre of stirring scenes and eloquent debate.” The spacious room served multiple purposes for the University of Iowa, first housing its natural history collections of botanical and geological specimens and a library. In later years, the room was used for classes, the law library, and the registrar’s office. Although most of Old Capitol now reflects the 1850s, the Senate chamber (*above*) has been restored to its elegant appearance after the 1920s restoration, when it became the site of faculty

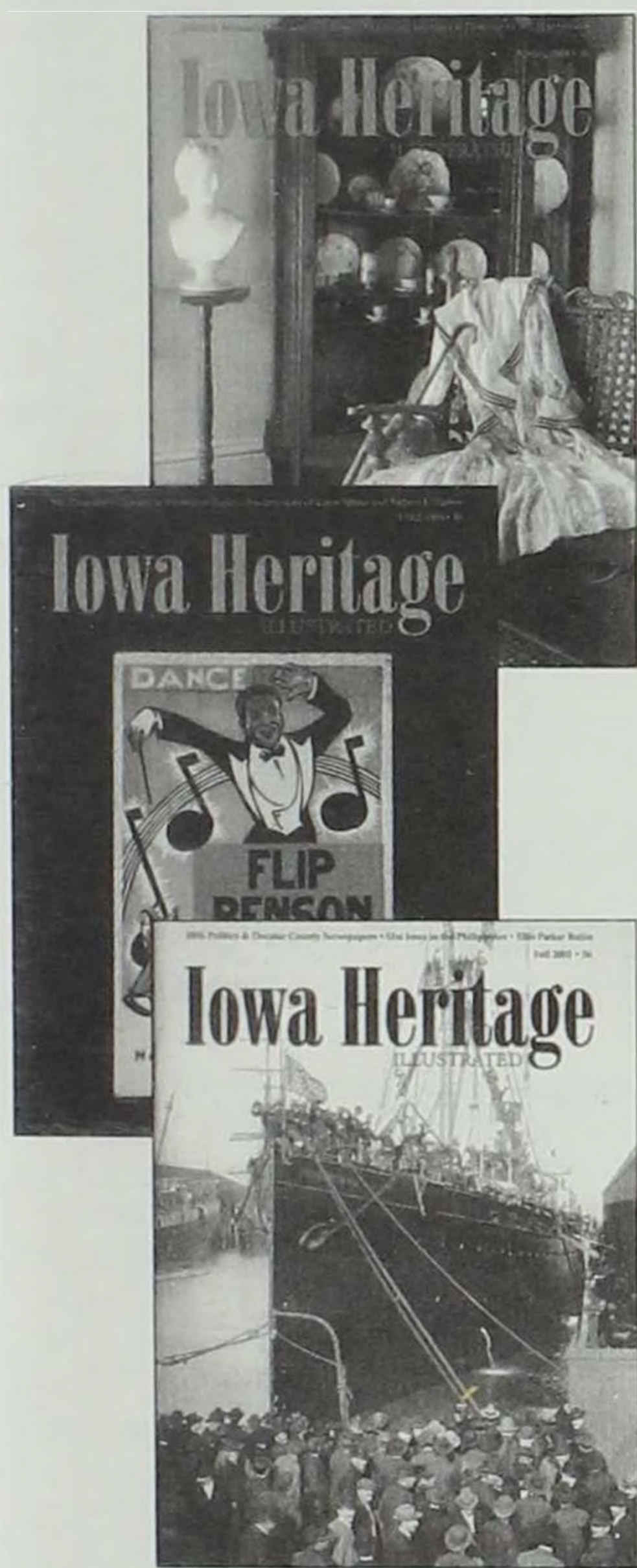
and public meetings and Ph.D. dissertation defenses. Today it is used for receptions, meetings, lectures, concerts, and receptions.

Long the icon of the university and the architectural centerpiece of its Pentacrest, Old Capitol is also a landmark of Iowa’s evolution from territory to state. With rooms now painted in rich hues, it assures us that the past was as colorful as we’ve always imagined. ❖

For more information on Old Capitol in Iowa City, visit www.uiowa.edu/~oldcap. Call 319-335-0548 or e-mail Shalla Wilson (Assistant Director of Pentacrest Museums) at shalla-wilson@uiowa.edu or Kathrine Moermond (Old Capitol Outreach/Education Coordinator) at kathrine-moermond@uiowa.edu.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The editor thanks Shalla Wilson and Pam Trimpe at the Old Capitol for their assistance, and David Fixler at Einhorn Yaffee Prescott for an interview. Major sources include: Linzee Kull McCray, *Facing East & Facing West: Iowa's Old Capitol Museum* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2007); Margaret N. Keyes, *Old Capitol: Portrait of an Iowa Landmark* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1988); Richard Lord Acton and Patricia Nassif Acton, *To Go Free: A Treasury of Iowa's Legal Heritage* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995); Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); legislative reports, 1841–1857; Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1939); Martha Esbin, “Old Capitol Library,” *Annals of Iowa* 42: 7 (Winter 1975); and John C. Parish, “Perils of a Pioneer Editor,” *Palimpsest* 2:8 (August 1921).



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One in a Million

SHSI (CITY), PHOTO BY CHARLES SCOTT



Among the millions of items in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa is this small album (*shown here at actual size*). Inside are 83 gem-size tintypes. The album covers are dark blue, tooled leather with a delicate gold design. Although tintypes were common in the 1860s, an assembled album like this one is somewhat unusual.

The album's only identification is "The Iowa Legislature of 1868," handwritten on the first page, though the 83 tintypes do not include every legislator. Only two of the tintypes are identified: Senator John Meyer, of Newton, and "L. F. P." for Senator Leonard F. Parker of Grinnell. Historians of Iowa politics will recognize

the faces of some of the legislators, and with some detective work more could be identified by name, perhaps even categorized by age, occupation, role in the Civil War, and political stands on timely issues.

Others of us will satisfy our taste for history by simply turning the thick, gilt-edged pages to observe the wonderful variety of beards! And who, we wonder, is the intense young man on the bottom right? Or, on another page, the sleepy-eyed boy who looks to be about 13? Or, on the album's final page, the young woman wearing a bonnet bedecked with flowers and tied with a huge bow under her chin?

— Ginalie Swaim, editor