

# Capitol Colors

by Ginalie Swaim, editor

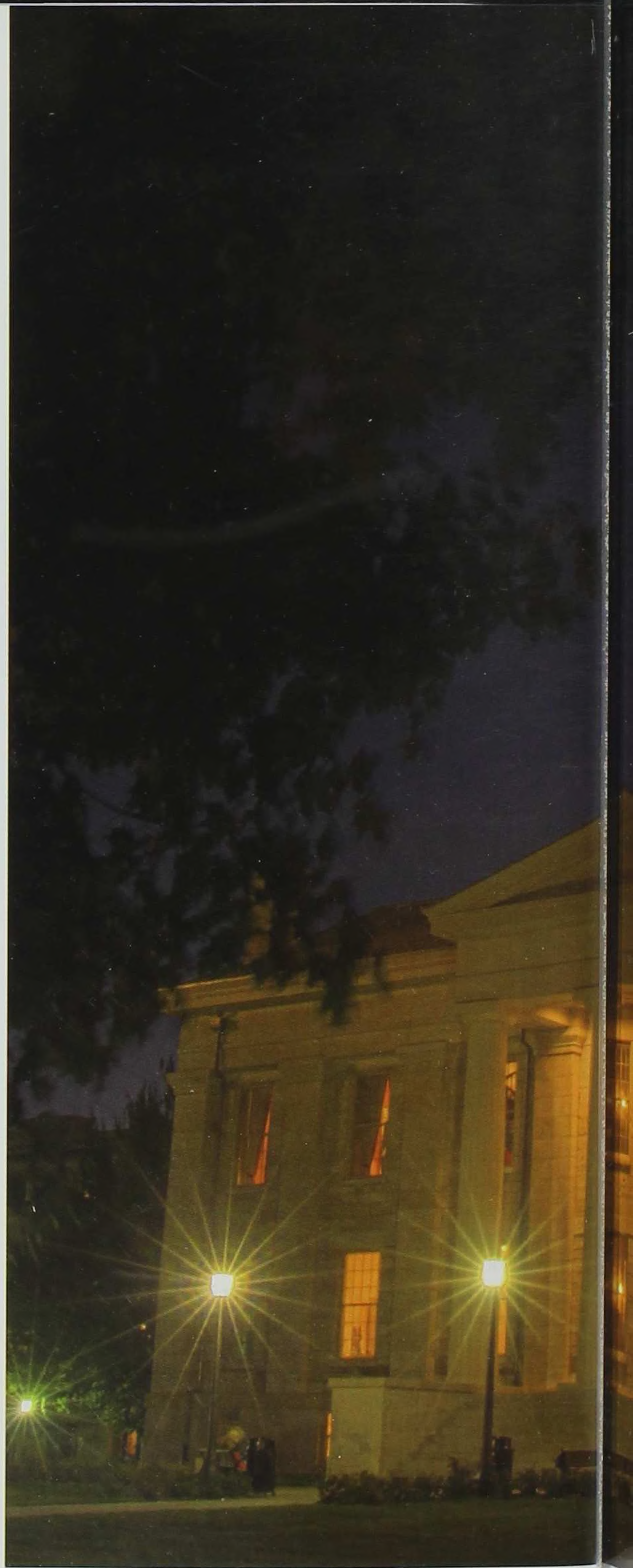
Look closely through the second-story window, on the far left. See the sliver of red? And on the far right, hints of blue and green? Come closer. Climb the granite stairs, open the enormous door. You're in for a glorious surprise.

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





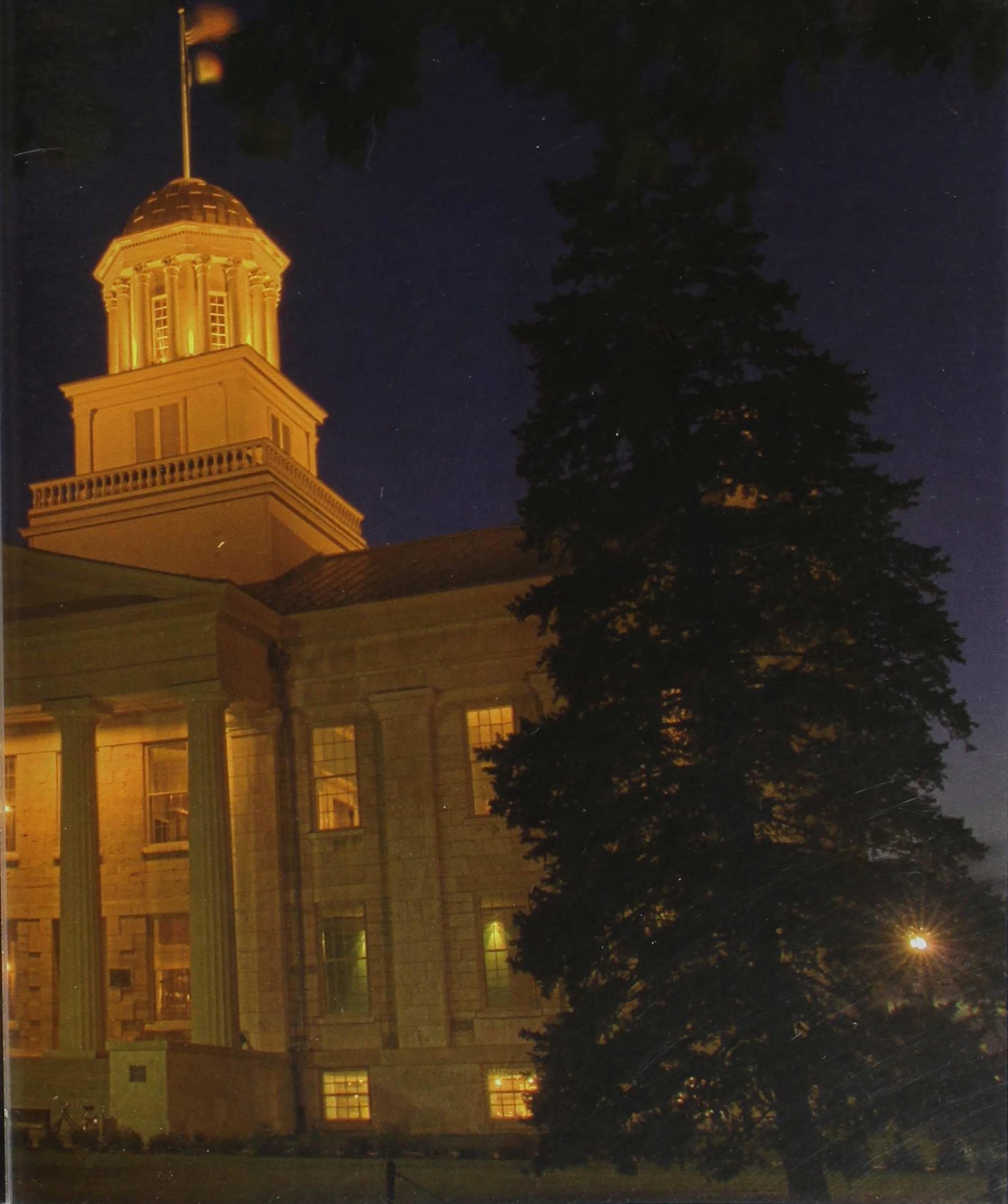


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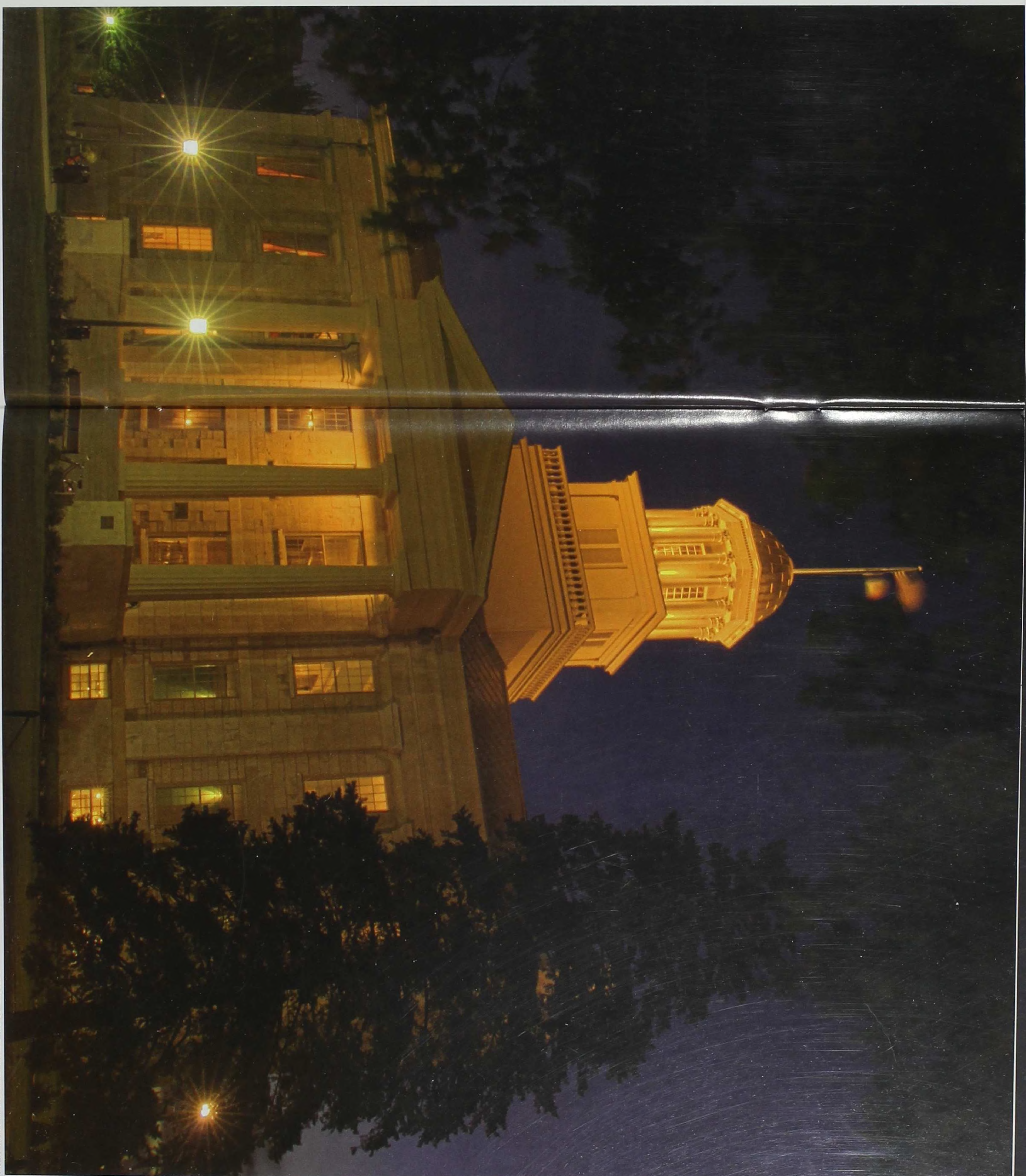


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PHOTO BY TIM SCHOON, OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS PUBLICATIONS

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 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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"The main difficulty to prompt payment lies with the *tax-payer*." If interest rates exceeded the delinquent penalty, "tax payers will not pay till the *last moment*, and sometimes escape all together."

He had more to say. "Probably no state in the Union, with the comparative resources, has bestowed more sparingly upon her institutions and officers." Perhaps the increase in taxable property would "justify a hope, that in a short time the State will be able to erect her asylums, and other public buildings, encourage institutions of learning, and advance all her enterprises, without the fear of financial embarrassment."



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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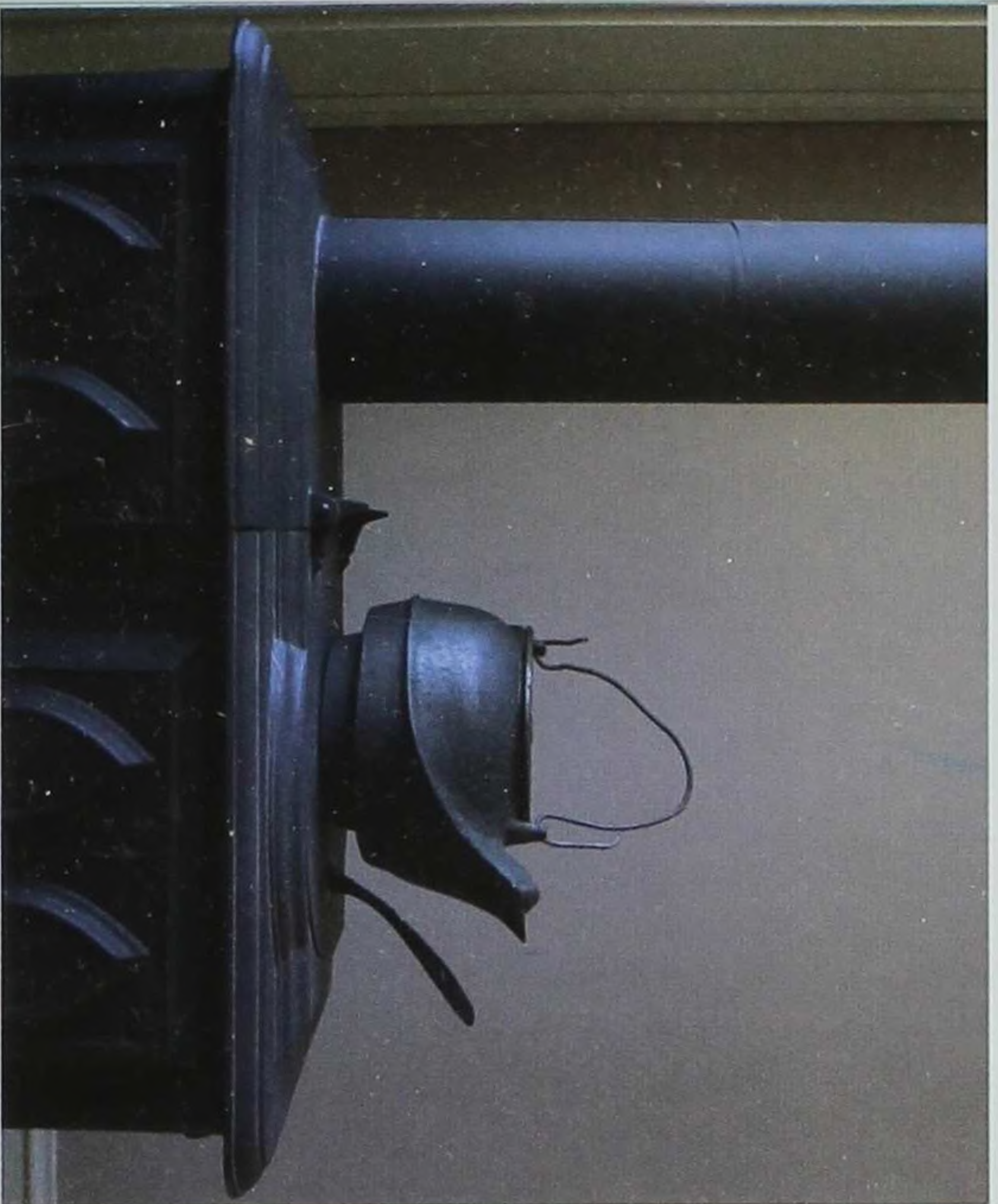


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PHOTO BY THOMAS JANSOHN

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."

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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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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



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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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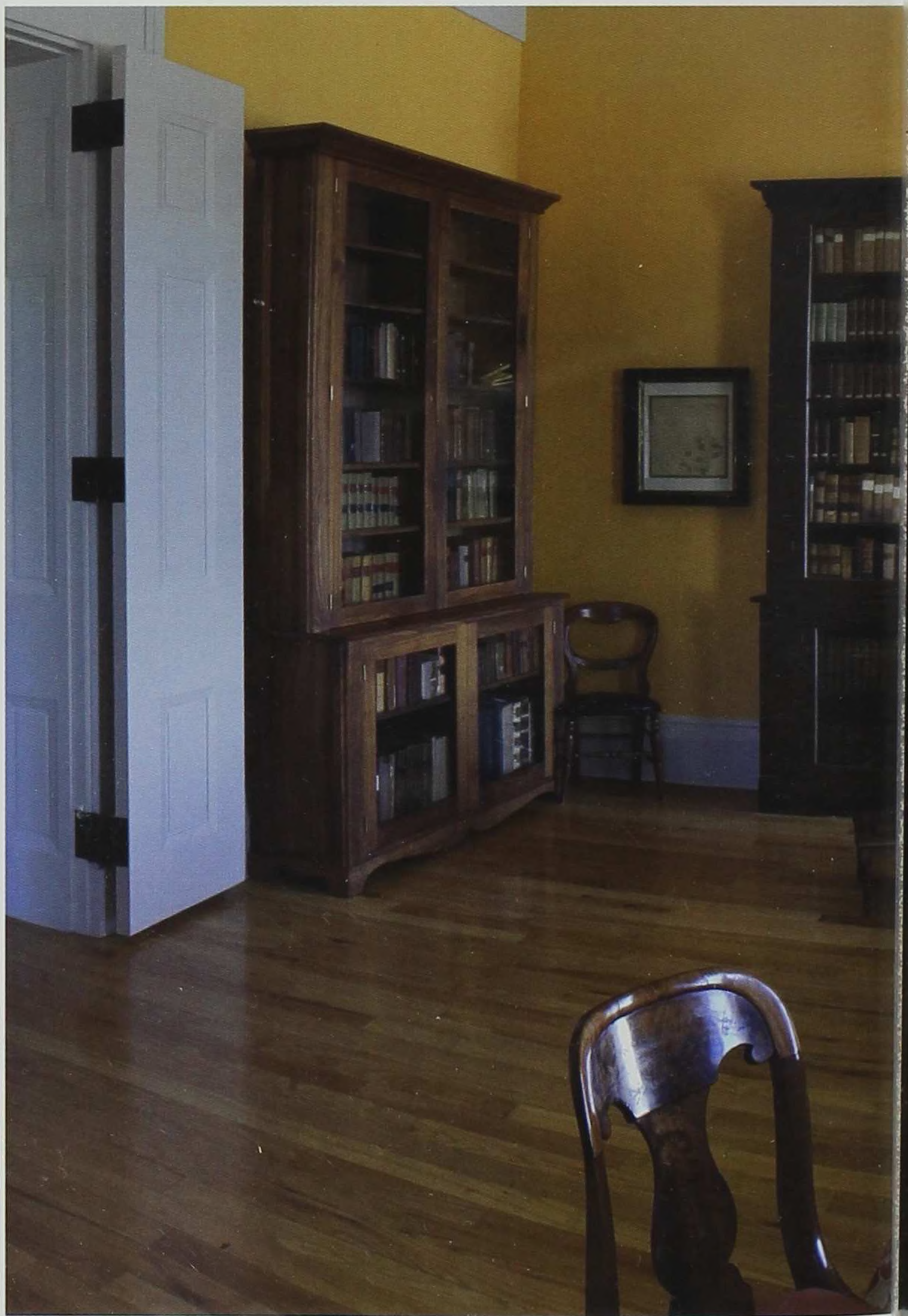
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Once Des Moines became the capital in late 1857, the Senate chamber was no longer a “theatre of stirring scenes and eloquent debate.” The spacious room served multiple purposes for the University of Iowa, first housing its natural history collections 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](http://www.uiowa.edu/~oldcap). Call 319-335-0548 or e-mail Shalla Wilson (Assistant Director of Pentacrest Museums) at [shalla-wilson@uiowa.edu](mailto:shalla-wilson@uiowa.edu) or Kathrine Moermond (Old Capitol Outreach/Education Coordinator) at [kathrine-moermond@uiowa.edu](mailto:kathrine-moermond@uiowa.edu).

NOTE ON SOURCES

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