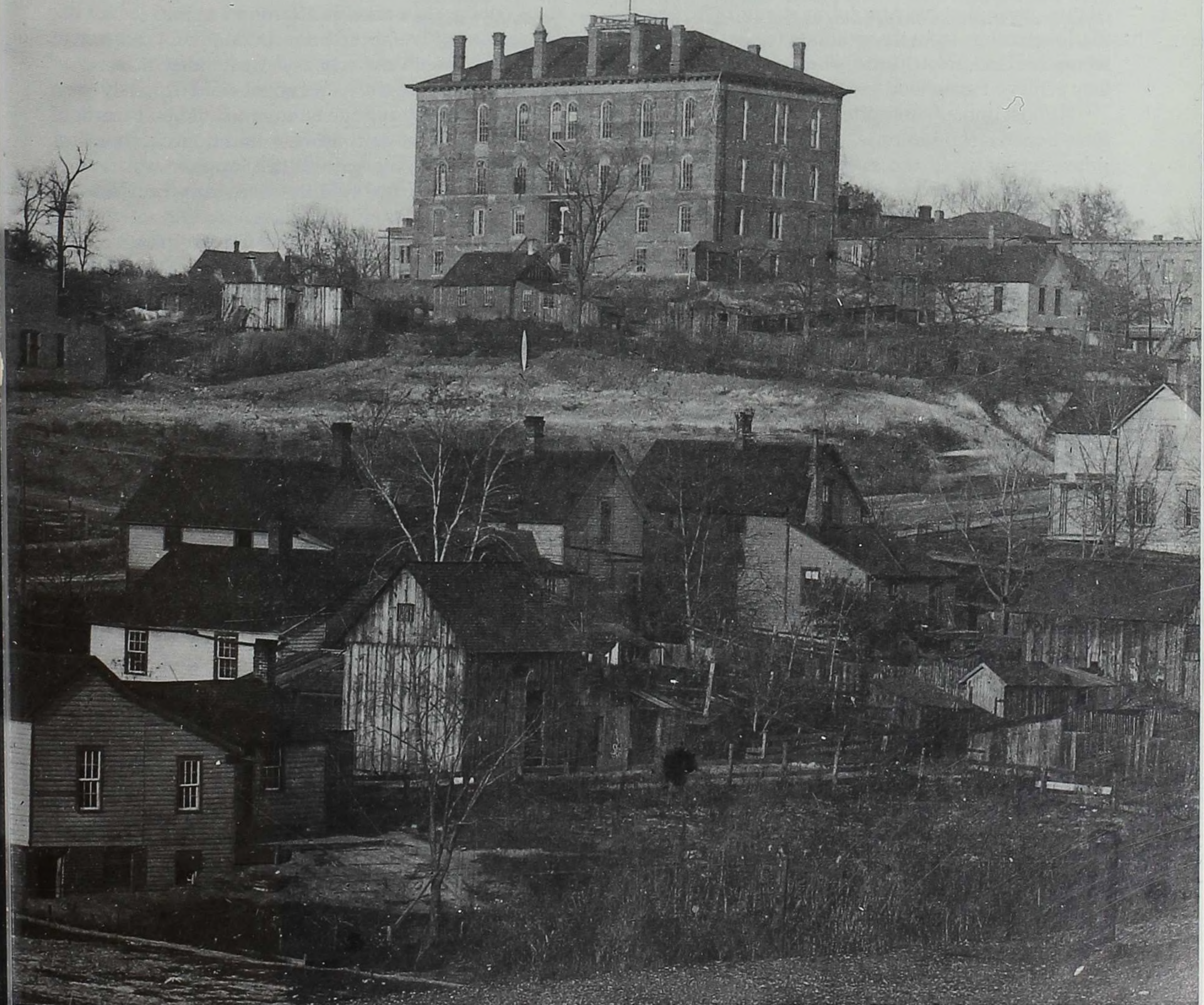


# Iowa's Forgotten Statehouse

## *The Brick Capitol in Des Moines, 1857-1892*

*by Philip G. Hockett*

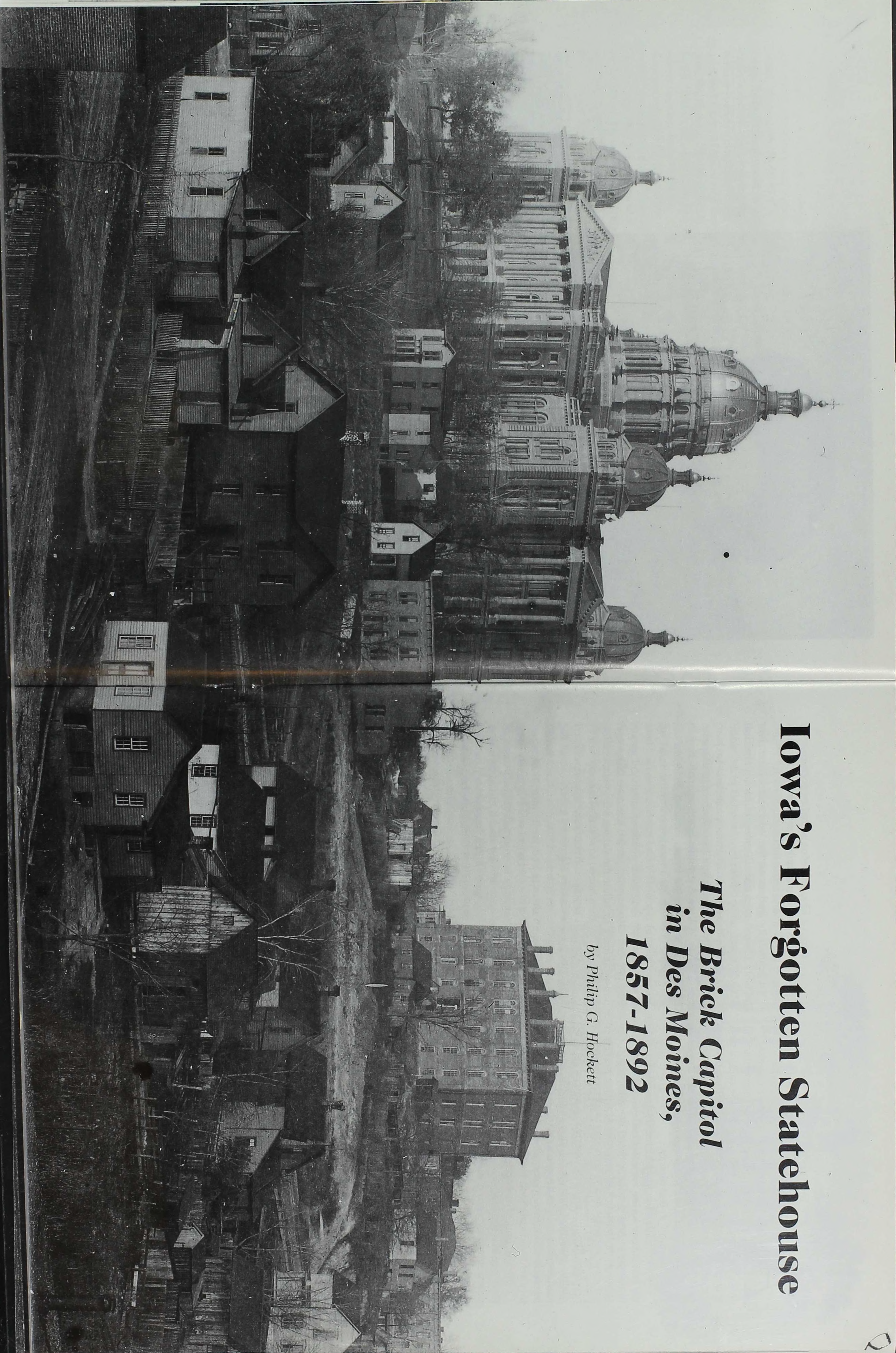


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**A**t the foot of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument south of the capitol building in Des Moines, a tiny stone plaque marks the historic location of the most obscure public building of any importance in Iowa, the brick structure that served as the capitol for a quarter of a century, from 1858 to 1884. Although it was the seat of state government for 15 years longer than the "Old Capitol" in Iowa City, it is safe to say that most people living in Iowa today have never heard of the "Brick Capitol" in Des Moines.

Yet its foothold in Iowa history is firm. It served as the statehouse during critical decades in 19th-century Iowa—as settlers gradually filled the state, regiments marched off to the Civil War, and railroads branched across the prairie. Within the Brick Capitol's halls, the newborn Republican Party asserted its power, and legislators wrangled over prohibition, suffrage, and railroad regulation. Iowa's population tripled during those formative decades, a process begun when Iowa Territory achieved statehood in 1846.

Almost immediately after Iowa had become a state, there began a series of messy, sometimes comedic disputes over moving the capital from Iowa City to another location. Factions developed, petitions sprang up, and squabbles erupted. Commissions were named and dissolved, legislative bills were introduced and tabled. As the years after 1846 went by, the question of the capital's next locale grew more urgent but little closer to an answer until, in the mid-1850s, the settlement of Fort Des Moines, in Polk County, began to emerge as a favorite (over Pella and Oskaloosa). Still a young town, and south of the geographical center of the state, Fort Des Moines had little to recommend it except its location at the juncture of two major waterways. But in January 1855, a bill to make it the state capital passed an impatient legislature and became law. What remained were the exasperating problems of implementing it.

Governor James Grimes acted quickly to begin the process, but legal problems involving publication of notices delayed site selection for months. In April 1856 Grimes met with his appointed commission, instructing them to travel to Des Moines to decide on an exact spot for the new building. A quarrel over which side of the Des Moines River would be home to the structure had arisen out of a legislative stipulation that the new capitol was only temporary and must be built and maintained at no cost to the state. This had the effect of trans-

forming it into a kind of promotional opportunity for town-lot speculators and making a bitter open-market issue of its site and construction.

Community leaders on the west side of the river lavishly offered to donate 20 acres of land valued at \$100,000, with an option to buy "at a fair price" additional land with a speculative value projected at a quarter million. On the east side, a consortium of local speculators led by Willson Alexander Scott were offering to donate ten acres; Scott's terms included charging the state a lease of one dollar a year to occupy the building. He and his group probably had mixed motives. There is no doubt that they were public-spirited and generous, but they also counted on the presence of a statehouse building to inflate the value of the surrounding lots, which they then hoped to sell at a huge profit.

On April 21, Grimes's commissioners announced their choice—a level rise of ground a mile east of the Des Moines River, on the land donated by Scott. Bad feelings between the east and west sides of the river had seethed for months and now boiled furiously over. The west-siders' outrage later generated an investigation of charges of graft, bribery, and fraud in the selection of the site. Although the prolonged investigation proved nothing, the hostilities engendered survived in various forms for decades.

Despite outrage and investigation, nothing stopped Willson Alexander Scott's plans for the capitol. Early mention of progress appears in a letter written by his sister Lucinda, who visited Scott in May 1856 and wrote to their father in Illinois, "Alex requests me to say that he has just received from the governor specifications of the kind of a house he wants built and he [Alex] is going out now to make arrangements to have it commenced immediately." Since at the time the building of a new residence for Governor Grimes was neither necessary nor under discussion, the "house" she referred to was probably the new statehouse.

Indeed, sometime before the middle of May, Scott and his associates had made contact with an architect, and on May 16 the *Burlington Gazette* reported having seen drawings and detailed specifications of "the new (temporary) capitol building to be erected at Demoine City," commenting that they "reflected great credit upon the skill, taste and judgment" of the designer. Three weeks later the *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye & Telegraph* noted the architect's arrival in Fort Des Moines "to superintend" the construction of the building. The same drawings mentioned in the *Gazette* had now been placed on display in "the drug store of Dr. Shaw, in Exchange block, Walnut st." in Des Moines, where the designer had drawn more praise as "an excellent artist" whose

**Previous page: Modest in scale and splendor compared to Iowa's statehouse, the temporary "Brick Capitol" lies to its southwest in this circa 1890 photograph.**

SHSI (IOWA CITY)

“new work would add to his already well-established reputation as an architect.” Both Burlington newspapers identified him only as “Basset, of Burlington,” but he was almost certainly Amos G. Bassett.

Our knowledge of A. G. Bassett, assumed to be the Brick Capitol’s architect, is fragmentary. Born in New York in 1818, he would have been in his late thirties when given the commission for the new capitol. He was in practice in Burlington in the 1850s, first on his own and then as a partner in the firm of Bassett, Dunham and Frazee (see box below).

The process by which Bassett was selected to design the Brick Capitol is likewise unknown. In the mid-1850s, fewer than 30 architects practiced in Iowa (four of them in Des Moines). Not surprisingly the profession was concentrated in the eastern third of the state, particularly in Davenport. “Architect” was not as clearly defined a word then as it has been since about 1900. In 1856 these early professionals were often primarily engineers or contractors. They did not routinely share plan drawings with their clients unless asked and they sometimes worked without any, relying instead on pattern books and builders’ manuals. Their training was generally informal, perhaps only a short apprenticeship in the building trades. But as time went on, the term “ar-



“Crowning the hill on the East of our city, and visible for miles around, stands the new capitol building for the State of Iowa,” reported a Des Moines newspaper in March 1857. “It is an elegant and spacious edifice, and the first object which strikes the eye of the stranger when he approaches the city.” Within only a few years, the capitol’s dome was removed. This illustration of the statehouse in H. B. Turrill’s *Historical Reminiscences of the City of Des Moines* (1857) may have derived from Bassett’s drawings. The finished structure lacked some of the details of this illustration. For example, above, the elegant segmented arches over the doorways match those on the ground-floor windows, and the ornamental quoins that bracket the corners of the building extend even to the ground floor.

chitect” expanded to include individuals skilled mainly as designers and not always broadly knowledgeable about construction techniques.

Regardless of detailed specifications or drawings, the task of actually building the statehouse was complicated by its surroundings. The Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers flooded often and disastrously. Their lowlands, on which the divided town had come into being, became a fetid cottonwood swamp where hogs ran in whichever streets remained above water. Even with no

Little is known about Amos G. Bassett, the assumed architect of the Brick Capitol in Des Moines. A beloved 19th-century landmark in Burlington, the “Marion Hall” of 1852



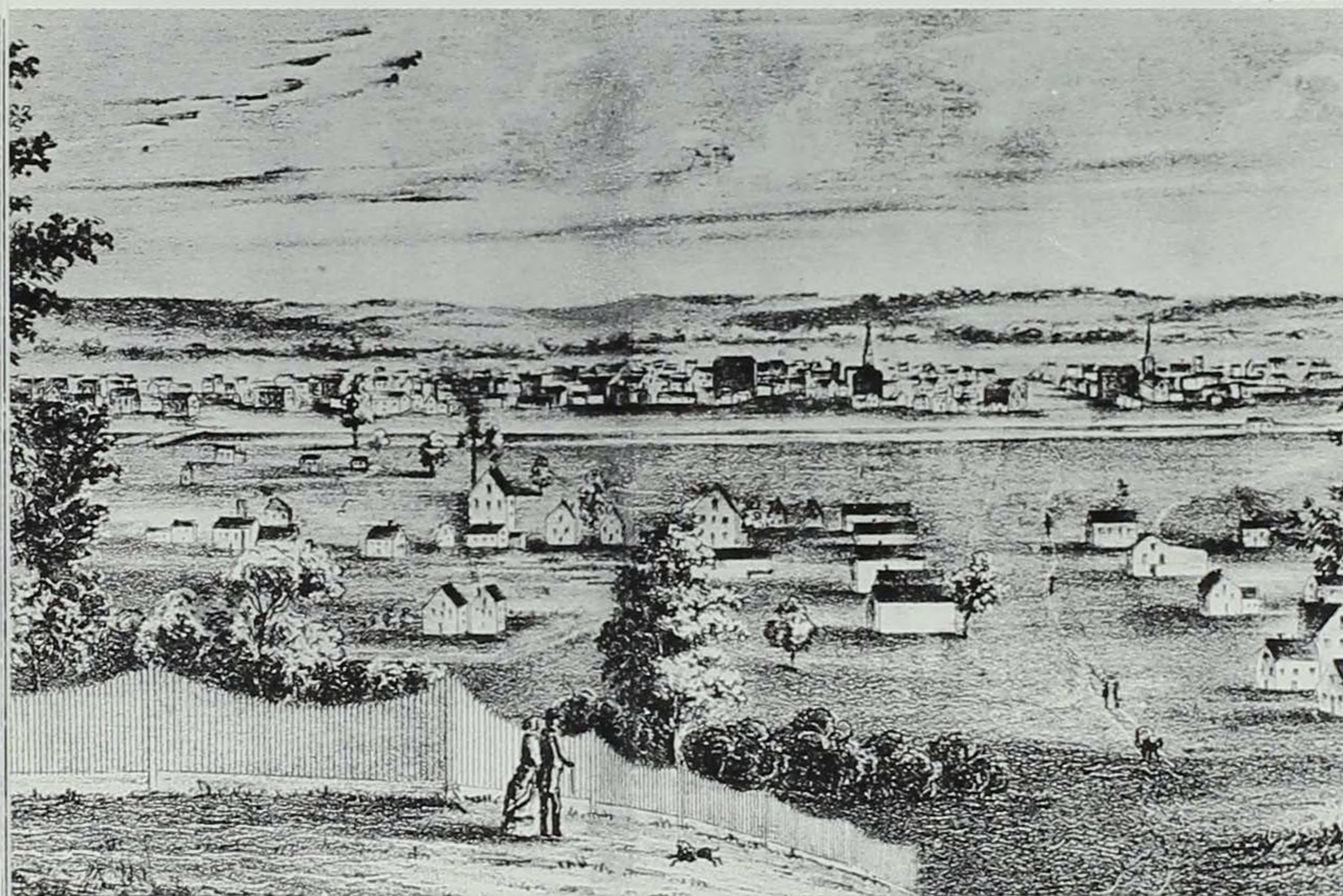
(below), is attributed to him. At various times it served as a civic auditorium, a city hall, and an all-purpose public building. Marion Hall endured into the 1920s as a local landmark.

Bassett also designed the second of four Fremont County courthouses in Sidney, a turreted “Elizabethan” structure completed in 1860. Contemporary sources referred to it as “the best building in Sidney” and “the most attractive feature of the town.” By some accounts it was an edifice too imposing for Sidney; building cost overruns led to a lawsuit between Bassett and Fremont County. Bassett won, but three years later the building was severely damaged in an explosion rumored to have been engi-

neered by residents of nearby Hamburg, which had been campaigning to become the county seat. Fire destroyed the building in 1888.

After completing the Sidney courthouse in 1860, Bassett “furnished the design” for a new “Methodist Protestant” church across the Missouri in Nebraska City, Nebraska. In 1863 he was described by a local paper as “Architect and Builder of the Sidney Court House and other of the best buildings in the West.” It has not been established whether any of his work is extant. He moved to western Iowa in the late 1850s but the details of his later career and the date of his death are unknown. —by Philip G. Hockett

SHSI (IOWA CITY): SOUVENIR OF BURLINGTON, IOWA, 1891



**Des Moines in 1857 (the year "Fort" was dropped from its name and the city was incorporated). That year an immigrant guide promised that the town of 5,000 was "destined speedily to become a rich and populous city" thanks to its "energetic and public-spirited business men." Others with less boosterism called it a "shabby" little town subject to "mud embargoes."**

flooding, a downpour could transform the place into a wasteland of mud. Much of Willson Alexander Scott's extensive property lay safely above the flood plain but near an ancient forest of oaks and hickories. Bobcats and an occasional mountain lion still haunted the timber, and wild turkeys foraged for acorns. Wild strawberries and red lilies dotted the grasses. It was in this beautiful but formidable setting that work now began on the second state capitol of Iowa.

Although Fort Des Moines faced explosive growth between 1850 and 1860 (its population increased sevenfold), like all frontier towns it had only a primitive infrastructure. Reaching it over land was a grinding struggle on horseback or by stage, and the only other means of access was by flatboats or steamers on the river (the railroad would not reach the area until 1866). Transporting quantities of heavy material overland was difficult, so the builders of the new capitol were largely dependent on whatever was available locally. As it happened, they were not badly supplied, by local merchants or by Scott. Although most of Scott's holdings were in real estate (a dangerously volatile commodity in the 1850s), he also appears to have owned a sawmill, a coal mine, a quarry, a brickyard, a blacksmith shop, teams for hauling, and a quantity of dressed hardwood from the forested areas of his property—all useful resources

for someone about to build a statehouse.

A rough but functional chain of command deriving from Scott's resources and personnel came into existence in response to the needs of the moment. Scott's deputy at the sawmill, M. H. King, took the builders' daily orders and relayed them to John Slatten. Noted for his "thorough knowledge of western timber," Slatten was in charge of cutting and dressing the wood for the structure's post-and-beam framing. Most of the carpenter work and joinery was entrusted to John Bryan, described later as "one of the finest mechanics the city [had] ever known." He was assisted by William Lowry. Two kilns fired bricks less than a block from the construction site. One kiln may have been Scott's; the other probably belonged to either William Harris or S. A. Robertson (both supplied at least part of the brick). Although Scott is

named in several sources as the Brick Capitol's "contractor," he shared much of this responsibility with John Hyde. On September 19, 1856, a John Haskins (or Huskins) was appointed "foreman on the work" and remained in that position until September 1, 1857, when the structure was nearly complete.

What role this arrangement left for architect A. G. Bassett is unknown. It is possible that his involvement had ended by the time Haskins took over, and that his concept of the building was not being realized to his own satisfaction. Because Bassett's drawings and plans of the Brick Capitol have been lost, it is hard to be sure how accurately the finished structure reflected his concept. His name seems to drop from even the earliest accounts by the summer of 1856.

Construction of the statehouse stretched through the autumn and into the winter. By October the masonry was finished and interior work could begin in whatever protection the walls offered against cold and wind; the winter of 1856/57 was severe and can only have slowed the builders' progress. In any case, Governor Grimes was forced to abandon his hope that the new capitol would be ready for the 1857 legislative session.

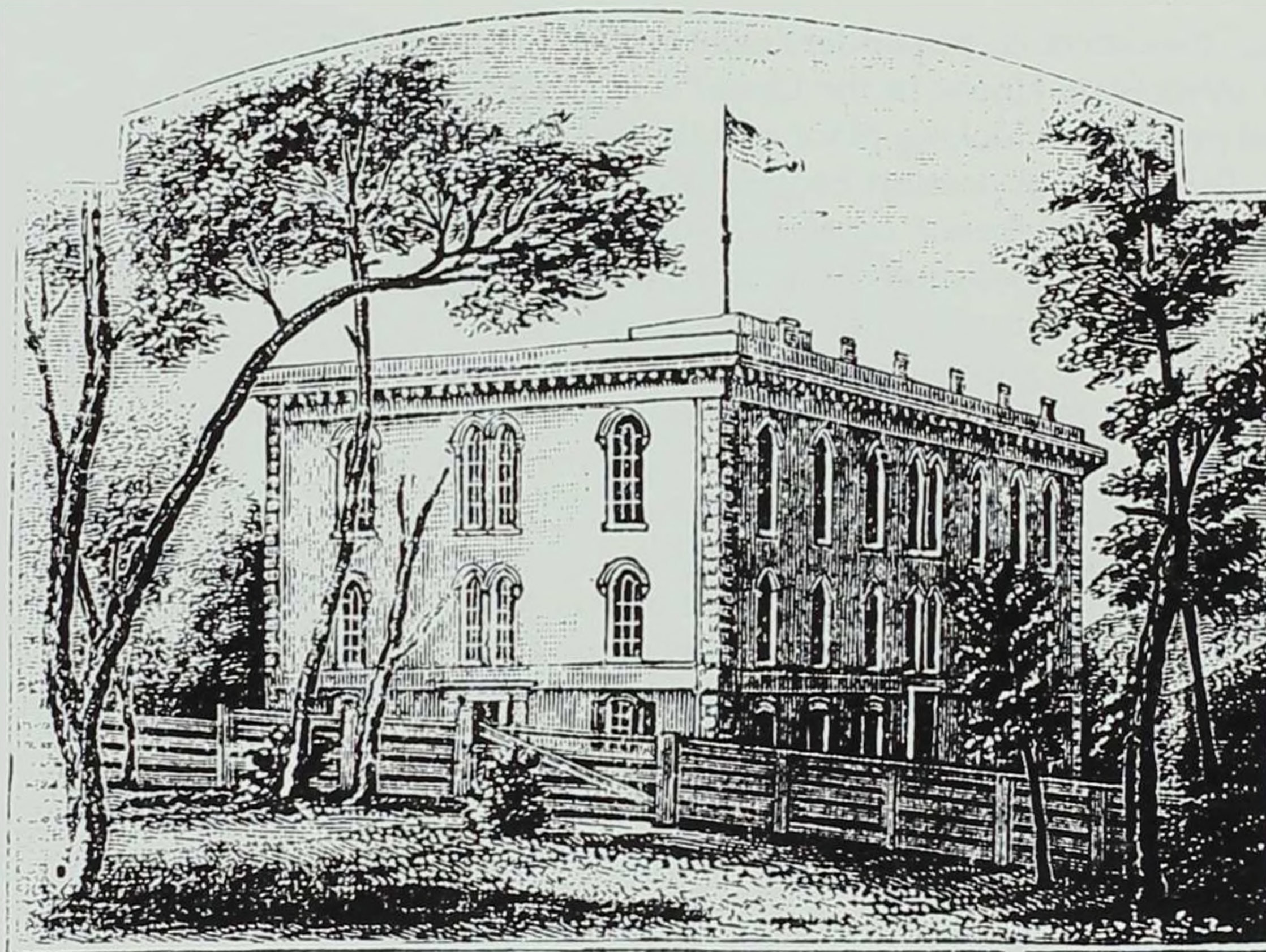
There was an additional problem. Even though by now the emergence of a capitol building in Des Moines could not be ignored, the issue of its location clung stub-

bornly to life, and disquieted muttering about it was audible from Iowa City, still the seat of state government. As late as January 12, 1857, a bill was introduced to repeal the 1855 law designating Des Moines as the capital (it was tabled the next day.) Shortly afterwards, "diagrams" of the new statehouse surfaced in Iowa City, and on about January 21—perhaps in response to the hostile bill—they were displayed to the lawmakers by a Dr. Davis, who pronounced the Brick Capitol a "fine-looking building" and "a better house than the one now occupied."

This can only have irritated many of the legislators. There was a feeling that the rush to erect a temporary capitol was undignified and that there was no reason the gem-like little neoclassical building that had served as the territorial and state capitol for 16 years in Iowa City should not continue in use until a permanent one was ready in Des Moines. (Besides, no one in Iowa City at the time could envision the spectacular gains from the consolatory trade-off of 1847 designating Iowa City as the future site of a state university.)

Although its location was still a live issue seven months into the Brick Capitol's construction, its progress resisted all disapproval. In March 1857, John Haskins provided a Des Moines newspaper with a detailed description of the building's interior. Probably more a recitation of the measurements from A. G. Bassett's plans than an indicator of its actual stage of completion, Haskins's description may have been intended to portray the statehouse as far enough along to discourage any further agitation against Des Moines.

By July 4, 1857, although eight months behind Governor Grimes's projected date, the Brick Capitol was regarded as essentially finished, and it served as the site of a patriotic rally at which the builders' assistant, William Lowry, ran the flag up over its dome. In October, the governor traveled from Iowa City to Des Moines to inspect the structure, and on the 19th he pronounced it completed and ready for the 1858 legislative session. There was nothing more its opponents could do. On November 25, Iowa City's *Weekly State Reporter* fired a



This idyllic rendering of the Brick Capitol shows the loss of the dome and the addition of chimneys and a fence, as compared to the drawing on page 23. To mark the end of the first legislative session held in the new building, in 1858, and to thank Des Moines citizens for their warm welcome, lawmakers arranged a "grand ball and festival" in the statehouse. As B. F. Gue recalled, "Desks and carpets were removed from the floor of the house, fine music provided, and an elaborate feast spread in the supreme court room. The gay festivities were kept up until near morning."

last volley: "Thus winds up the scheme of fraud, bribery and corruption; and the elegant structure reared in this city for the use of the state . . . must be exchanged for an indifferent pile of brick farther west, until the Legislature shall see fit to burden the people with the uncalled for expense of building another State House."

Whatever else it was, however, the new capitol was not merely an "indifferent pile of brick." Although unpretentious, the structure that awaited the governor's inspection was a modestly attractive edifice of three stories, 100 feet from end to end and almost 85 feet from its foundation to the tip of its dome. The seams of its tin roof glinted in the sunlight, and dashes of white stone trim accented the fresh brick's autumnal color. Its discreet Italianate detailing elevated it to something like stylishness, and a correspondent for the *Burlington Gazette* reported that the senate and house chambers were "fitted up with taste and elegance, and more conveniently arranged than those of the former State House."

With a few settlers' rough dwellings nearby, the Brick Capitol was an unpretentious, democratic temple, open to anyone and tolerant of any neighbor. "Scattering timber lies immediately back of and about the build-

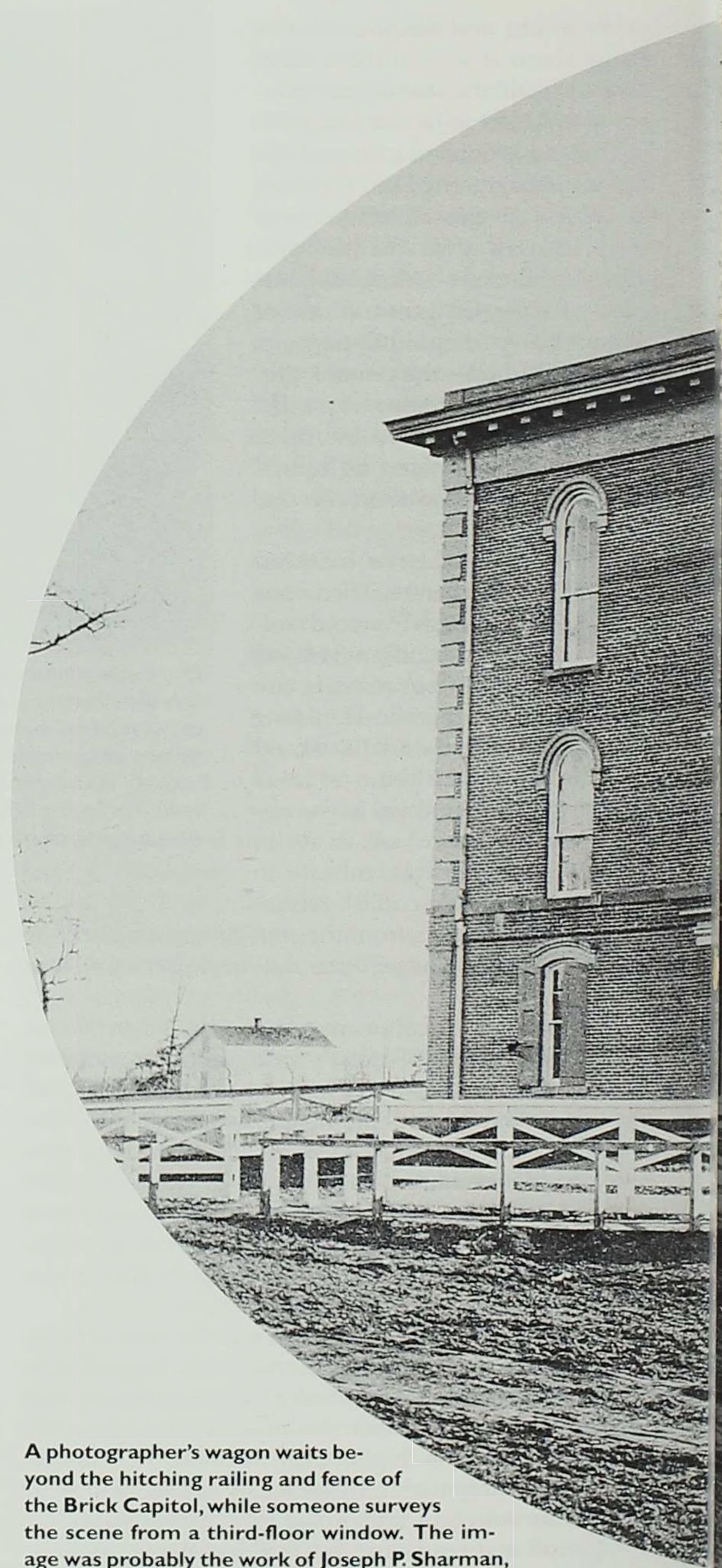
ing," the *Gazette* correspondent went on, "and I presume no other State House in the Union is as 'back woods' and primitive a looking place as this."

In spite of, or possibly because of, its "back woods" aspect, the statehouse conferred some badly needed glory on the unpolished community, whose new identity it reassuringly confirmed. Its rough-gem aspect was what people would remember about it. Forty years later Benjamin F. Gue, a pioneer legislator and former lieutenant governor, recalled the new capitol in the context of its wild setting: "The streets leading to it were . . . simply wagon tracks made through a long stretch of low, swampy river bottom, and up a steep ungraded hill, where the yellow clay soil rolled up on the wheels of the vehicles which tried to fathom the depths of the mud, like the prairie sod from a huge breaking plow. One long straggling walk of native lumber boards, warped and slippery, could be seen strung out lonesome and wabbling in the direction of the new brick capitol."

With the building completed, it was necessary only to transport the fixtures of government from Iowa City to Des Moines. The onset of bad weather and 120 miles of roadless prairie between the two capitols subjected the movers to an ordeal lasting several days. Within a few miles of the Brick Capitol the heaviest of four safes had to be abandoned, and it stayed there until a deep cold snap hardened the ground enough to bear its weight. The safe was the state treasurer's and held most of the money earmarked for salaries. Eventually it was dragged into town on a sled pulled by ten yoke of oxen. By the time the legislature convened in mid-January, the weather had undergone a complete change, and the Brick Capitol began its official life in conditions described as "ideally clear and almost abnormally warm . . . 'like an Indian summer dropped into the lap of winter.' "

**T**he sparse literature on the Brick Capitol often refers to its style as "Ionic." A Burlington correspondent, in fact, stated that it had been built "after the Ionic, or rather 'composite,' style of architecture." As used in the mid-19th century, "Ionic" could signify either the style of the crowning capital of a column or else a certain kind of overall appearance characterized by a prevailing simplicity, often with plain frontal masses set off by pilasters. Little specifically "Ionic" detailing appears in the extant images of the Brick Capitol exterior, though more may have been utilized on the inside; lacking photographs of its interior, we cannot be sure.

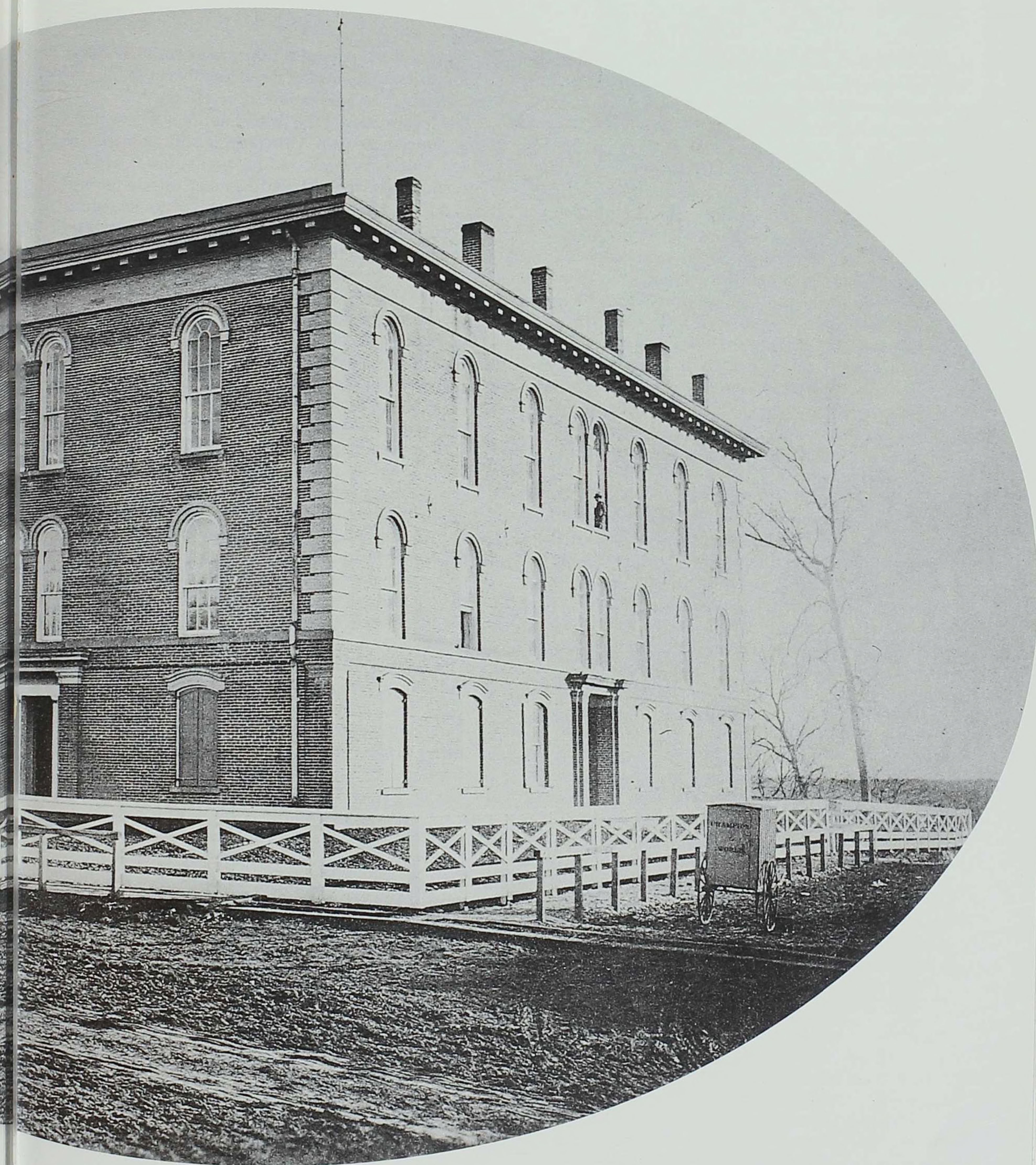
The exterior does show, however, Italianate detail-



A photographer's wagon waits beyond the hitching railing and fence of the Brick Capitol, while someone surveys the scene from a third-floor window. The image was probably the work of Joseph P. Sharman, who photographed other east-side Des Moines structures in 1867.

SHSI (DES MOINES)





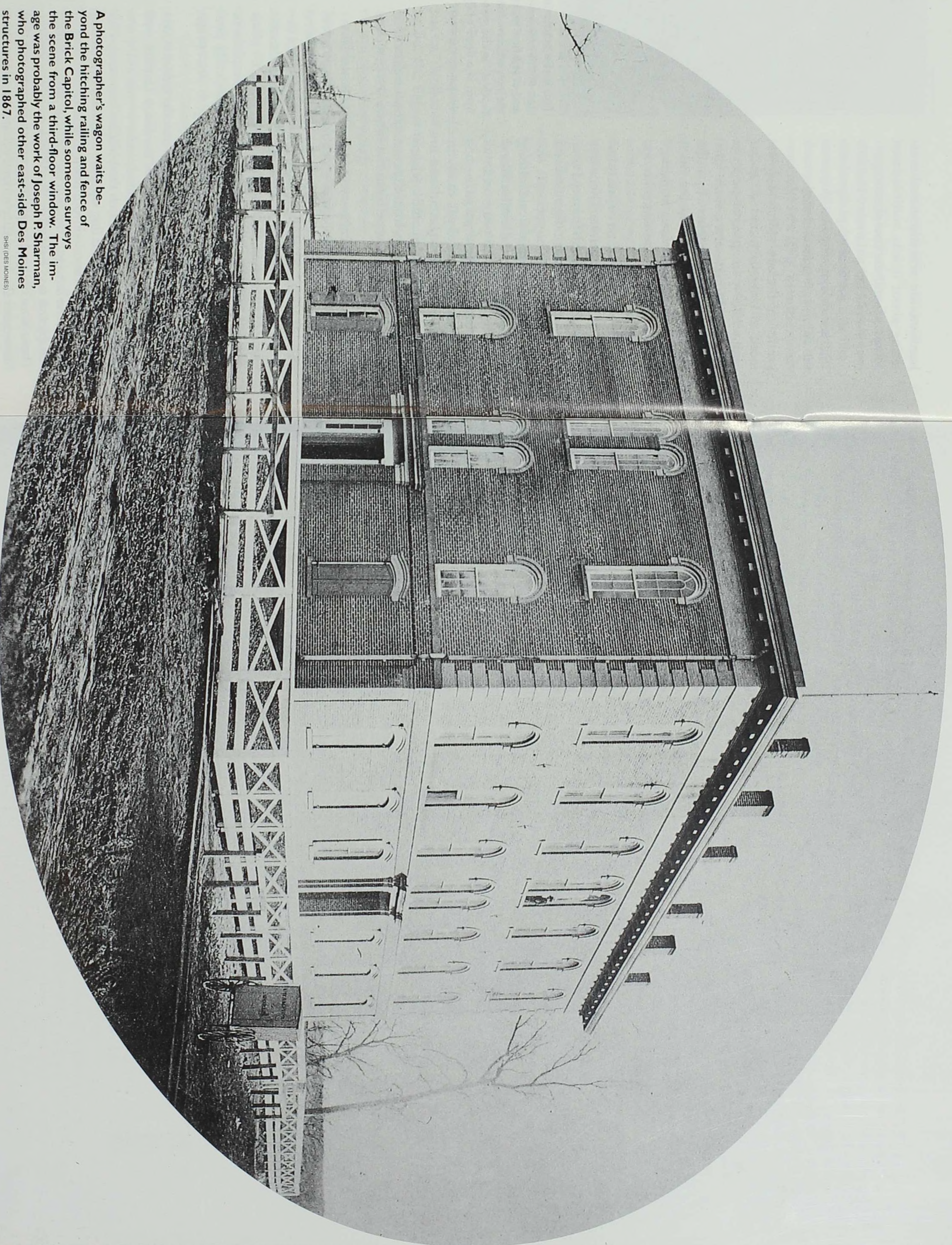
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SPHS (DES MOINES)

ing. By 1857 the Italianate style was nearing the crest of its long-lasting American popularity. Based on the asymmetrical layout of farmhouses seen by English travelers in the Italian countryside in the late 1780s, it had made its way to America in about 1837. It caught on quickly and was used in a wide variety of building types, especially private homes, into the 1870s. Besides irregular floor plans and eccentric placement of towers, the Italianate style was above all characterized by certain features of ornamentation—round-headed windows, roof brackets, and the accentuation of corners with ornamental quoins of light-colored stone. (Fine examples of Italianate architecture survive in Iowa; in fact, the “Old Main” building on the Iowa Wesleyan College campus in Mt. Pleasant is particularly close in concept and detailing to the Brick Capitol.) These ornamental elements were also applied to other architectural styles or to no particular style. This floating vocabulary of Italianate adornment filled many architects’ immediate needs for fashionable ways to trim plain buildings. The Brick Capitol was such a structure, essentially a modest brick box beneath its Italianate frosting. It neither resembled the grand-operatic edifice that succeeded it in 1884 nor owed anything to John Rague’s earlier capitol built in Iowa City.

Perhaps accidentally, the Brick Capitol looked to a time before Iowa had even formed a part of the Louisiana Purchase, when America’s colonial statehouses were not always required to fill symbolic roles and often were basically meeting halls usable for a variety of public functions besides lawmaking. Built to serve only as a temporary statehouse, the Brick Capitol in a sense represented a survival of this tradition and was frequently the site of rallies, religious gatherings, school exercises, and other public events. It may have been this link to a bygone era, among other things, that drove the *Daily State Register* to ridicule the structure as an “antediluvian pile” in 1871, when it had been standing only 14 years.

**T**he Brick Capitol grew old quickly. The first intense flush of civic pride in it faded as plans for a permanent capitol began taking tentative shape. As early as 1861, a note in the Des Moines city directory dismissed the Brick Capitol as “an edifice entirely unworthy of the dignified name it bears.” It had probably been within the previous year or two that it suffered the embarrassment of losing its dome, which had caused the structure’s walls to crack. It was a crucial loss because this modest tower, although mostly ornamental,

had at least identified the building as a capitol. Without the dome, the unassuming Brick Capitol could be, and was, mistaken for a schoolhouse or a hotel.

The legal status of the Brick Capitol was a troublesome question as well. Officially, it still belonged to Willson Alexander Scott and his group, but it had become a burden to them. They had relied on community support to underwrite some of their expenses in building it, but in the wake of the fraud investigation, those on the west side of the river retaliated by withholding any share of the money for construction. Remaining sources of funding had dried up in a financial panic that swept the country in late 1857, just as the capitol was nearing completion.

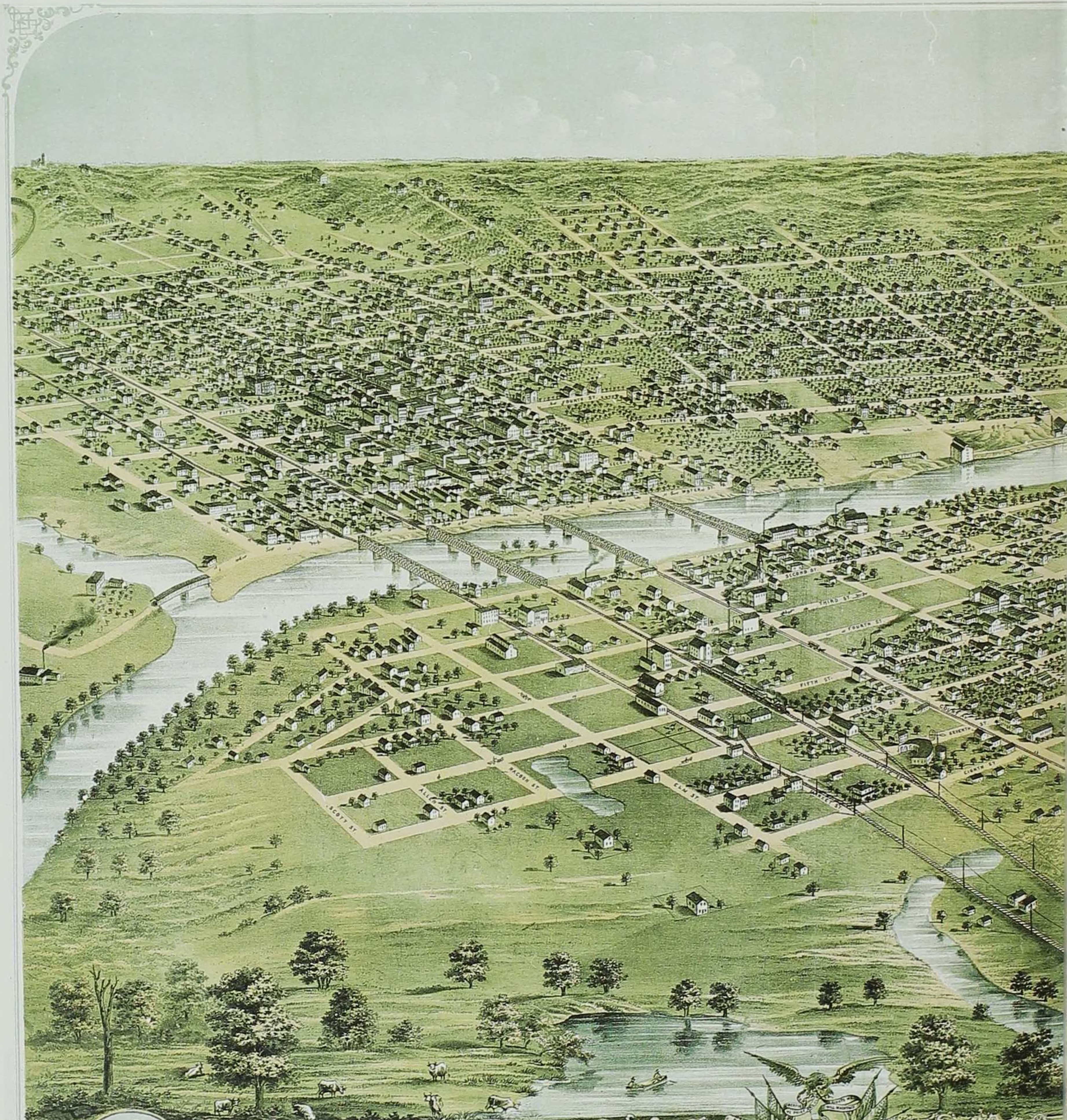
To see the project through, Scott had been allowed to borrow money from the state school fund, at ten percent, but his ability to repay the loan was dwindling steadily. Ruined by the expense of completing the building and by the collapse of land values in the aftermath of the panic, he tried to cover his losses by traveling to Pike’s Peak to prospect for gold, but he died on the journey in 1859. By then the state had already been paying for maintenance of and modifications to the Brick Capitol, and Scott’s death made it clear that the building must soon revert to public ownership. But despite a strong recommendation by Governor Ralph P. Lowe in 1860, four more years went by before the transfer actually occurred. In the meantime the Brick Capitol was stalled in a limbo between private owners who no longer wanted it and a state government hesitating to take it over.

Meanwhile, its structural integrity had proven to be poor (perhaps much unskilled labor had been utilized in its construction). After cracks had appeared and the dome had been taken down, iron stabilizing rods were run through the building from east to west. In his annual message in 1868, Governor William M. Stone drew attention to the unsafe condition of the building and the necessity of fixing it. Even though the Brick Capitol had always been intended as a temporary statehouse, the laying of the permanent capitol’s cornerstone was still three years away, and the brick structure would have to house state government for at least ten more years. By this time, however, the legislators needed no encouragement, because no one knew what the building would do next. In January 1868, large chunks of plaster had fallen on the heads of the Railroad Committee,

**A crowd, several in top hats, spills onto the steps of the Brick Capitol. Although undated, the photograph was taken sometime after the 1868 renovation, when the building acquired a new foundation and a new ground floor.**

SHSI (IOWA CITY)





PUBLIC SCHOOL

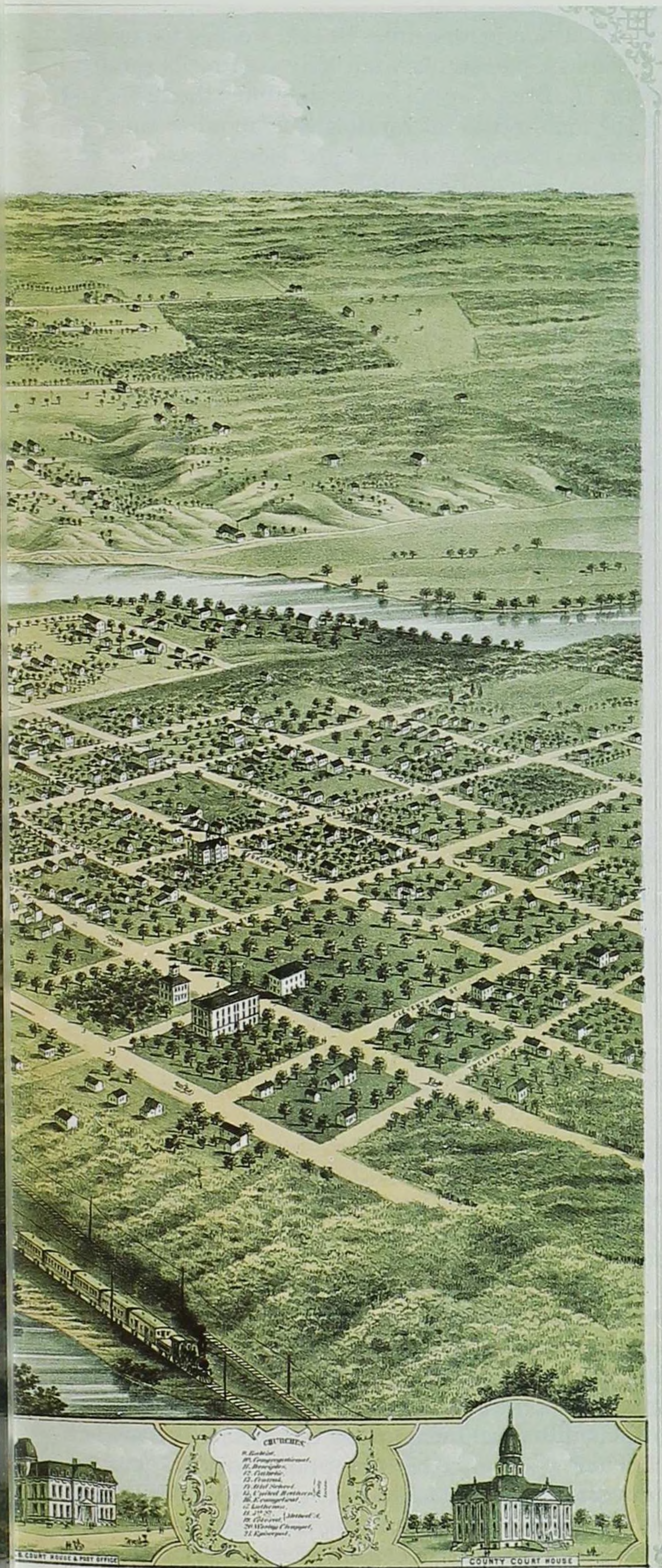
- PLACES TO WHICH**
1. Capital
  2. Court House
  3. Grand Hotel
  4. Public School
  5. State Capitol
  6. State Prison
  7. State Penitentiary
  8. State Armory
  9. State Warehouse
  10. State Office Building



STATE CAPITOL

BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE CITY OF  
**DES MOINES**  
 THE CAPITAL 1868 OF IOWA.

SHSI (IOWA CITY); ORIGINAL AT LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



“burying them in a rubbish of mortar and lime,” the newspapers reported, and injuring at least one senator.

Major renovation began late that summer. S. A. Robertson, ten years earlier a supplier of brick for the building and now running an important contracting company, supervised a comprehensive operation that involved regrading the lots; replacing the tin roof with shingles; constructing a fireproof vault; and completing “various and sundry repairs of said building necessary to put it in good presentable shape.” The most impressive feat of the project—it must have drawn crowds of amazed spectators—was the raising of the entire structure on joists while a fourth story was constructed beneath it. This allowed replacement of the original foundation, which had been built of porous local stone and by 1868 had completely rotted from moisture. Early in December the *Des Moines Register* reported the work done.

**A**n additional step in the renovation was the execution the next summer of elaborate painted frescoes as interior ornamentation, as described in the *Register*: “The frescoing of the Senate Chamber and the House of Representatives was completed yesterday [July 15, 1869], and presents a decidedly beautiful and artistic appearance. The Senate Chamber is finished off with a beautiful center-piece in the ceiling, surrounded with an ornamental circle and panel work. Over the President’s desk, and over the entrance, are two large eagles, with wings wide-spread, and are very life-like sketches of the king bird. The walls are frescoed with large panels and columns, but one thing that mars their beauty is the dingy hat-racks that cross the column work, that had ought to find a place somewhere else.”

The reporter continued, “The Hall of the House of Representatives is finished off in a different and more imposing style. The walls have heavy Corinthian columns with heavy base, capital and architrave. The ceiling is ornamented and divided up into neat and showy panel work, the center having a circular ornament in stucco, and from which will hang a fine chandelier. Four allegorical representations of Art, History, Agriculture and Commerce, in an oval shape have been executed in a masterly manner. That of History, which also represents Justice, appears immediately over the Speaker’s

**Des Moines in 1868.** The Brick Capitol is the large building directly above the locomotive, in the lower right. The large square to its north would be the site of the new statehouse.



"burying them in a rubbish of mortar and lime," the newspapers reported, and injuring at least one senator. Major renovation began late that summer. S. A. Robertson, ten years earlier a supplier of brick for the building and now running an important contracting company, supervised a comprehensive operation that involved regrading the lots, replacing the tin roof with shingles; constructing a fireproof vault; and completing "various and sundry repairs of said building necessary to put it in good presentable shape." The most impressive feat of the project—it must have drawn crowds of amazed spectators — was the raising of the entire structure on joists while a fourth story was constructed beneath it. This allowed replacement of the original foundation, which had been built of porous local stone and by 1868 had completely rotted from moisture. Early in December the *Des Moines Register* reported the work done.

**A**n additional step in the renovation was the execution the next summer of elaborate painted frescoes as interior ornamentation, as described in the *Register*: "The frescoing of the Senate Chamber and the House of Representatives was completed yesterday [July 15, 1869], and presents a decidedly beautiful and artistic appearance. The Senate Chamber is finished off with a beautiful center-piece in the ceiling, surrounded with an ornamental circle and panel work. Over the President's desk, and over the entrance, are two large eagles, with wings wide-spread, and are very life-like sketches of the king bird. The walls are frescoed with large panels and columns, but one thing that mars their beauty is the dingy hat-racks that cross the column work, that had ought to find a place somewhere else."

The reporter continued, "The Hall of the House of Representatives is finished off in a different and more imposing style. The walls have heavy Corinthian columns with heavy base, capital and architrave. The ceiling is ornamented and divided up into neat and showy panel work, the center having a circular ornament in stucco, and from which will hang a fine chandelier. Four allegorical representations of Art, History, Agriculture and Commerce, in an oval shape have been executed in a masterly manner. That of History, which also represents Justice, appears immediately over the Speaker's

**Des Moines in 1868.** The Brick Capitol is the large building directly above the locomotive. In the lower right: The large square to its north would be the site of the new statehouse.

Desk; Agriculture in the West, Art in the East, and Commerce in the North. All of these representations are fine, and in keeping with the general execution of the work."

Proud of the artisanship, the *Register* concluded that "best of all, the work is from the hand of one of our own artists—Mr. [Martin] Hayken—and it speaks volumes for his skill and taste as an artist. That Iowa men should do the work for Iowa is one of the articles of our belief, simply because they can do the work as well, whether it be of the commonest or the most intricate, as the workmen of any other State, and it is but right and just that they should have every item of it."

Although the 1868 renovation was a conscientious effort by the state to make the Brick Capitol habitable and solid, the visual effect was unfortunate. The addition of a fourth story made it thick-waisted and dumpy, turning it at last into the "indifferent pile of brick" jeered at by the Iowa City papers ten years earlier. Almost nothing now remained of the architect's concept of the building. The city's extensive regrading of surrounding streets had exacerbated the problem. As the *Register* commented, "The streets around the Capitol are being cut down in such a manner as to leave the building humped up in prominence like a big toad on a little tusssock."

For the legislators there was a critical problem far worse than any violation of stylistic integrity. Despite the thorough renovation, alarming structural shocks went on plaguing the capitol. In 1873 one of its upper floors sagged deeply beneath a crowd of people. Although it did not collapse, gubernatorial inaugurations were apparently moved elsewhere after that. In April of that year, falling plaster again rained down on lawmakers, turning them into what newspaper accounts called "expert dodgers." During a blizzard in early December 1876, the structure rocked on its foundations. The tremor, the papers reported, was "plainly felt by all occupants." In March 1880 workers again braced up weak spots in the old statehouse, although, as the papers joked, nothing was done "about bracing up members of the Legislature."

**T**he first cornerstone of the new capitol was laid on November 23, 1871. As construction proceeded over the next 13 years, local journalists went out of their way to characterize the Brick Capitol as quaint and superannuated, referring to it variously as a "rattle trap," "an old rookery," and "a disgrace to the State." Although less than two decades old, the brick statehouse was now considered an antiquated hovel as the spec-

tacular structure four times its size arose to the north.

Newspaper taunts were only part of its predicament. The Brick Capitol had been built in the 1850s, just as the architecture of capitols was about to undergo enormous change. The addition of elongated wings and a colossal iron dome to the United States Capitol in the 1850s and early 1860s raised the bar on monumental architecture. States now wanted to copy its splendor and grandeur, and their growing governments desperately needed more space. The nation was coming into its own, and statehouse architecture could symbolize that "nationhood" as well as the U.S. Capitol did.

Always intended only as a temporary statehouse, the Brick Capitol had never been called on to meet such artistic and symbolic standards, but its innocence of them did not spare it years of invidious comparisons, and it ended its days as a mere object lesson in the vicissitudes of architecture. It was not that it lacked any symbolic value. Rather, the difference was that the new capitol's symbolic value was abstract and prefabricated while the brick building's was intimate and concrete, and had been earned.

The difference in the sizes of the two capitols was plain enough, but there were subtler differences, too. When illuminated by the sun, architecture is sometimes transformed, and a building's status as an idea emerges in the play between highlight and shadow. The new capitol's medallions and colonnades, its gilding and balconies and statuary friezes, gave it riches to offer the sun, while the Brick Capitol, with its plainspoken flat surfaces and minimal ornamentation, met the light bluntly and without mystery or ceremony.

Throughout the 1870s the Brick Capitol was seen as such an embarrassment that it was often omitted from maps and atlases even while it continued functioning as the statehouse. The worst of these omissions was probably from the important *Andreas' Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa* of 1875; a magnificent illustration of the new capitol graced its title page, as if it were an accomplished fact. At the time the new capitol was little more than a vast excavated hole. For all intents and purposes the Brick Capitol had become invisible.

As a land speculator and promoter, Willson Alexander Scott had been confident that imposing private dwellings would rise in the shadow of the Brick Capitol. Instead, it had drawn up to itself a coverlet of small, balloon-frame wooden houses. Along with apartment buildings and, at one time, a church, they crowded almost to its doors. The concept of a parklike campus surrounding the capitol had not existed in 1856 but arrived with the present building and was implemented in steps over the next 75 years; the last of the ramshackle





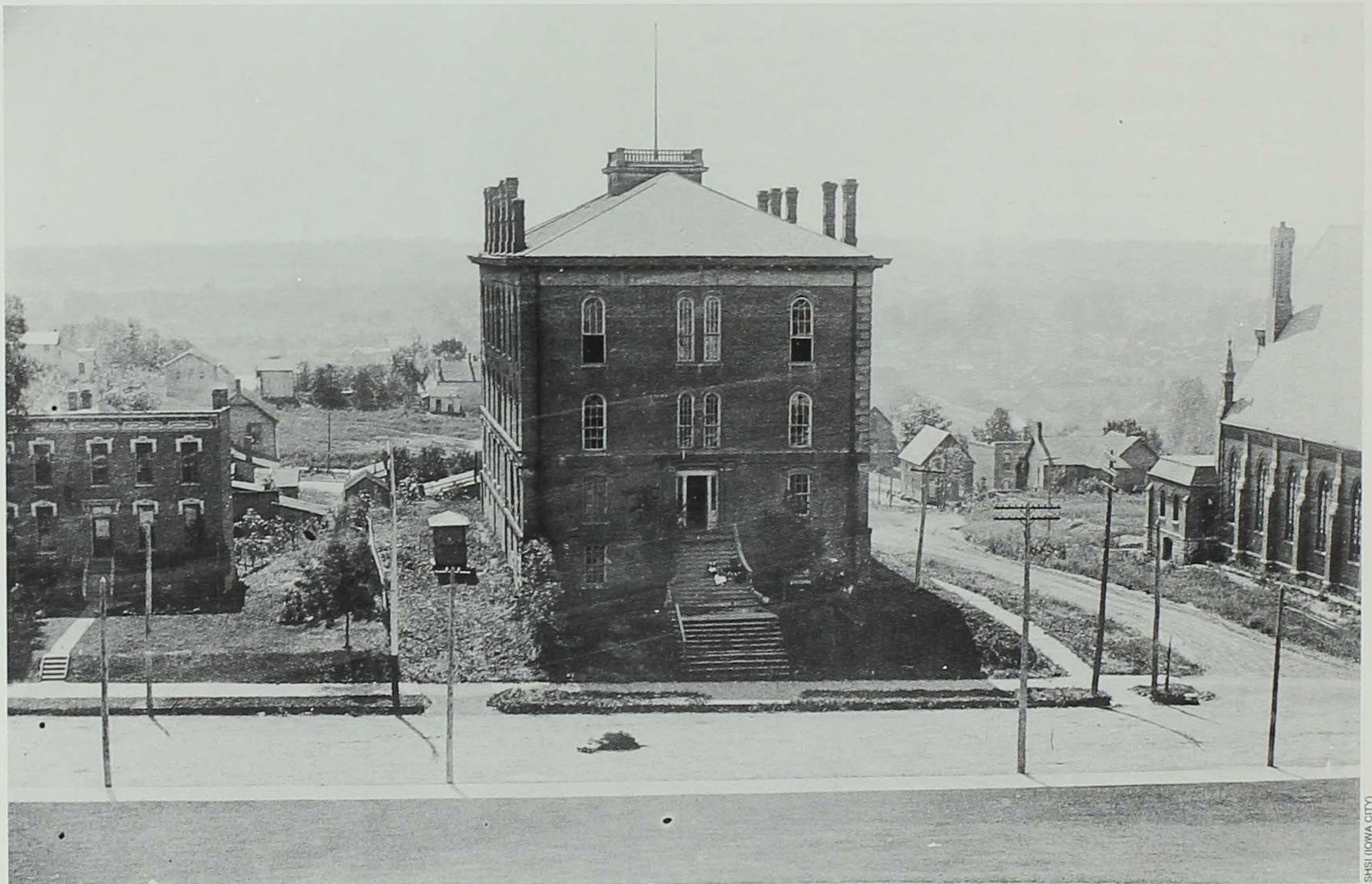
SHSI (IOWA CITY)

The Brick Capitol and a handful of frame houses and sheds are a stark contrast to the splendor of the new statehouse in this stereograph titled "Building the new capitol—Iowa South Front." Though barely visible here, scaffolding still circles its dome.

private residences in sight of the Brick Capitol were torn down only in the 1960s or later. Their disappearance completed a process in which a democratic temple was replaced by a Temple of Democracy.

As the functions of government transferred to the new capitol in stages between 1884 and 1886, the Brick Capitol emptied out. The state was still occasionally approached by groups wanting to hold meetings or conduct Sunday schools in it, but the old, tolerant days were

gone and official attitudes had grown cautious about the public use of such buildings. Refusals of these requests were made on the grounds that it was "not deemed expedient to let rooms . . . to private parties." In 1888 state officials were authorized to sell it. Forty-two bids came in, but all of them (including the highest, \$5,905 from a Daniel Ford) were rejected without explanation. After that it stood vacant. It seems strange that it was not simply torn down in the 1880s, but al-



Passersby rest on the shaded north steps of the Brick Capitol, 1023 East Walnut—by now abandoned and missing panes of glass. The photo probably dates to between 1886 and 1892.

though it was a ruin and an eyesore no one dared suggest its demolition. In 1886 an anonymous writer in Des Moines's *Register* had noted that although an "unsightly object," the structure survived because of "the memory of the good . . . done to Iowa within its venerable walls."

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Fire in September 1892 gutted the Brick Capitol and left ruins.

The abandonment of the Brick Capitol was not total. As the elements gradually reclaimed it, it went on offering cover to anyone or anything. Bats and owls roosted in it; children played on the staircases and in the untenanted rooms; and the homeless, day and night, drifted in and out. Often they came to use the toilets but no one bothered to drain the privy vaults or fill them in; eventually the odor became unbearable and in May 1889, after numerous complaints, the city of Des Moines ordered the state to clean up the mess within ten days.

It may have been one of the old building's temporary occupants who started a fire in it on the afternoon of September 1, 1892. The blaze spread quickly, leaving nothing standing but the outer walls. The rich, native hardwood trim and paneling were ashes, and so were Hayken's elaborate frescoes.

After salvaging and demolition of the ruins, a now-obscure chapter of Iowa history all but closed completely. Within a few years, a long-awaited monument to Iowans who had fought in the Civil War was erected on the spot where the Brick Capitol had stood. (The site had been specified by the legislature in April of 1892.)

Nothing remained of the Brick Capitol except a scattering of documents and fewer than a dozen photographs.

Occasionally over the years, memories of the building would briefly reilluminate; sometimes it was during the sessions of the Pioneer Lawmakers' Association, which met yearly, with shrinking membership, until the late 1940s. In March 1941 one of these early lawmakers, John A. Storey, remembered the Brick Capitol, "especially by its seats and desks," as being like "the little old country schoolhouse" he had attended before the Civil War.

**F**or all its modesty, the building nevertheless had clearly represented an architect's vision and an important period in Iowa statehood. Exactly why it disappeared into complete obscurity, habitually treated by historians as an empty parenthesis in the annals of two better-known capitols, is unknown, and many questions surrounding it will probably never be answered.

The record is clear, however, on what was accomplished within the building. Indeed, the Brick Capitol had witnessed the enactment of legislation whose effects last to this day. Some was relatively minor, like an 1860 initiative encouraging organization of fire companies, but legislators in 1868 passed a proposed constitutional amendment (later ratified by voters) granting African American males the right to vote, and twelve years later, the right to hold public office. The Code of 1873 promulgated establishment of several public institutions including the mental hospital at Independence and the schools for the blind at Vinton and the deaf at Council Bluffs.

As a seat of government, the Brick Capitol had played its part as Iowa matured. In 1887, Daniel O. Finch, a leader in state politics for decades, took a moment to reflect on the "temporary" statehouse that had served the state for a quarter of a century. "Around it will always linger memories that the more stately edifice can never hold," Finch remarked. "That humble pile on the hill typified too many trials, too many privations, too much of the consecration of our lives in the building of a nation, not to be glorified." ❖

*Philip G. Hockett's article "Exposing Iowa's True Colors: Early Color Photography" appeared in the Spring 1997 issue. He is currently at work on a study of early color photographs of Iowa City and the University of Iowa. Research for this article stretched over ten years and was the source for his drawing (right) of what he believes the Brick Capitol looked like in about May 1858, with its dome still intact and before the addition of the fourth story.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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Annotations to the original manuscript are held in *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City).



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