

## Seven New Counties

Local government in Iowa, like other social and political institutions, has developed according to the needs of the times. As in the natural world, mutations have sometimes occurred. The first counties, created during the early years of settlement, were very large. Erected primarily for the maintenance of law and order, their size and shape were not very important. Boundaries were not intended to be permanent.

In September, 1834, while Iowa was still a part of the Territory of Michigan, two counties had been established in the area west of the Mississippi River. Dubuque County comprised all of the Black Hawk Purchase which lay north of a line drawn "due west from the lower end of Rock Island". Des Moines County comprised that part of the Purchase which lay south of that line.

On December 7, 1836, after the Iowa country had become a part of the Territory of Wisconsin, Des Moines County was divided into seven counties. Government land surveys, however, had scarcely begun in the Iowa country, and consequently the county boundaries did not follow township lines. Though rivers and other natural landmarks were



utilized, the county boundaries were mainly artificial lines computed by distances. Thus, the counties were peculiarly irregular, and a map of the area had the appearance of a "crazy quilt".

Lee County was first described. Beginning at the "southern outlet of the Skunk river," the line ran northwest to a grove at the "head of the northern branch of Lost Creek", thence due west to the line between ranges seven and eight, south along that range line to the Des Moines River, down that stream to the Mississippi, and up the Mississippi to the point of beginning. Van Buren County lay west of Lee, and Henry County north of Van Buren. Des Moines, Louisa, Musquitine, and Cook counties bordered on the Mississippi River, separated by lines running straight west from a point fifteen miles above Burlington, another point twelve miles above the mouth of the Iowa River, and another point twenty-five miles "in a straight line" farther up the Mississippi. This inaccurate method of measurement resulted in leaving a strip of land only about four miles wide and forty miles long to constitute Cook County. Musquitine and Louisa counties, like Cook County, extended from the Mississippi River westward to the western limits of the Black Hawk Purchase. Each, however, was well proportioned and much wider than Cook County.



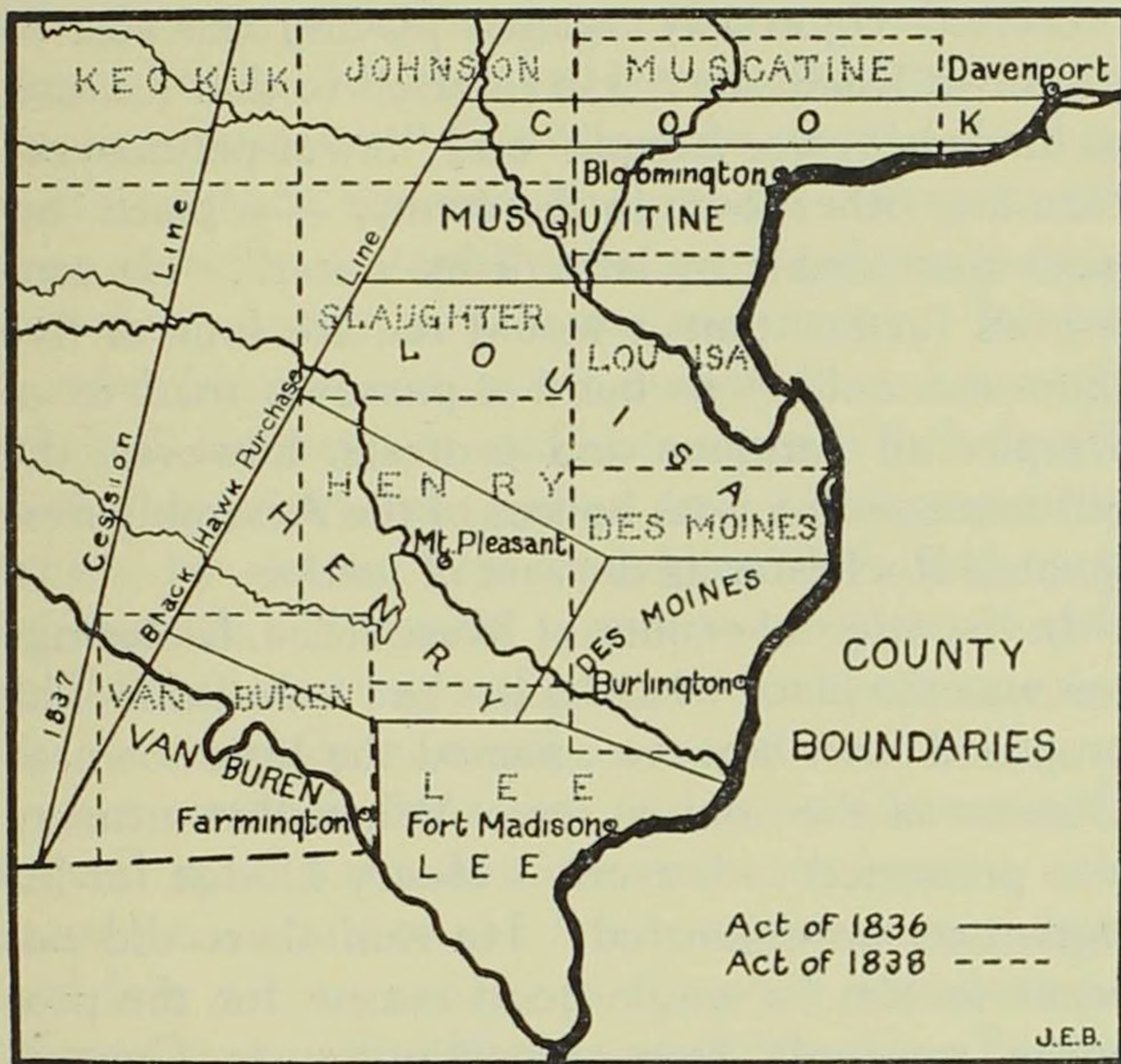
In December, 1837, the original county of Dubuque was divided into fourteen counties. Unlike the counties previously established, these counties were laid out in rectangular form, and for the most part their boundaries followed township lines. The three southern counties of this group — Scott, Cedar, and Johnson — were supposed to adjoin the northern counties to be reformed from the make-shift counties of Cook and Musquitine. Actually their boundaries did not conform to the existing counties on the south.

For one thing, the newly formed boundaries of Scott County cut off and absorbed the east end of Cook County. Johnson, likewise, included the west end of Cook County and a small area in the northwest corner of the original county of Musquitine. To further complicate matters there was a considerable area between Cedar County and what remained of Cook County which in fact was not included within the boundaries of any county.

Meanwhile, a bill to redefine the boundaries of the seven southern counties was adopted by the Legislative Assembly. This bill proposed to retain the names of Lee, Van Buren, Des Moines, Henry, and Louisa counties, to substitute the name "Wayne" for "Musquitine", and to form a new county called Slaughter. Moreover, the county seats were named in the bill.



Over the location of some of the county seats a controversy arose. For example, district court had been held at the town of Farmington in Van Buren County. While the new bill was pending,



however, 72 citizens petitioned the Legislative Assembly to change the seat of justice to Rochester. Another petition with 196 signatures requested the selection of a site by a vote of the people, and 173 persons wanted a commission to make the selection. A group of 186 citizens petitioned for the



legislature to establish the county seat at Bentonsport.

When the Council was considering this problem, Arthur B. Inghram of Des Moines County protested vigorously against placing the seat of justice at Rochester. He referred to that location as having "fewer friends" and "fewer petitioners" than any other town in the county — a place "almost inaccessible by land or by water". He contended further that it would require four or five thousand dollars to build a passable road to it. Despite all petitions and protests, however, the bill as passed by both houses of the Assembly designated Rochester as the seat of justice.

In the original county of Musquitine, Bloomington was the place where court had been held. The proposed law, however, named the little town of Geneva as the county seat. When this measure was presented to Governor Henry Dodge for his signature, he demurred. He said there did not occur to him "a single good reason for the proposed removal" from Bloomington to Geneva. With regard to the seat of justice in Van Buren County, he advocated a selection by a vote of the people. Because of these two objectionable features in the bill, the Governor, on December 20, 1837, vetoed the measure.

Thus at the beginning of the year 1838 county



government in the Iowa country was in turmoil and county boundaries were in a very apparent state of confusion. The boundary and county seat bill, however, revised to meet the Governor's approval, was passed and signed on January 18th. According to this measure the northern boundary line of Muscatine County was pushed farther northward and the west line was moved eastward, thus reducing materially the length of the county and designating its present boundaries. In this manner Muscatine County absorbed what was left of Cook County. It was also made to include the area lying between Cedar and Cook counties, which, by the act of December, 1837, had been left outside any county jurisdiction. This act also established the "seat of justice" for the county at the "town of Bloomington".

The southern boundary of Louisa County was moved northward and the west boundary was moved eastward to the line between ranges four and five, corresponding to the west boundary of Muscatine and Des Moines counties. Thus Louisa County was made much smaller than the original county of Louisa. The seat of justice was located "at the town of Lower Wappello".

Directly west of the newly formed counties of Muscatine and Louisa, and occupying most of the area that was formerly the western half of the

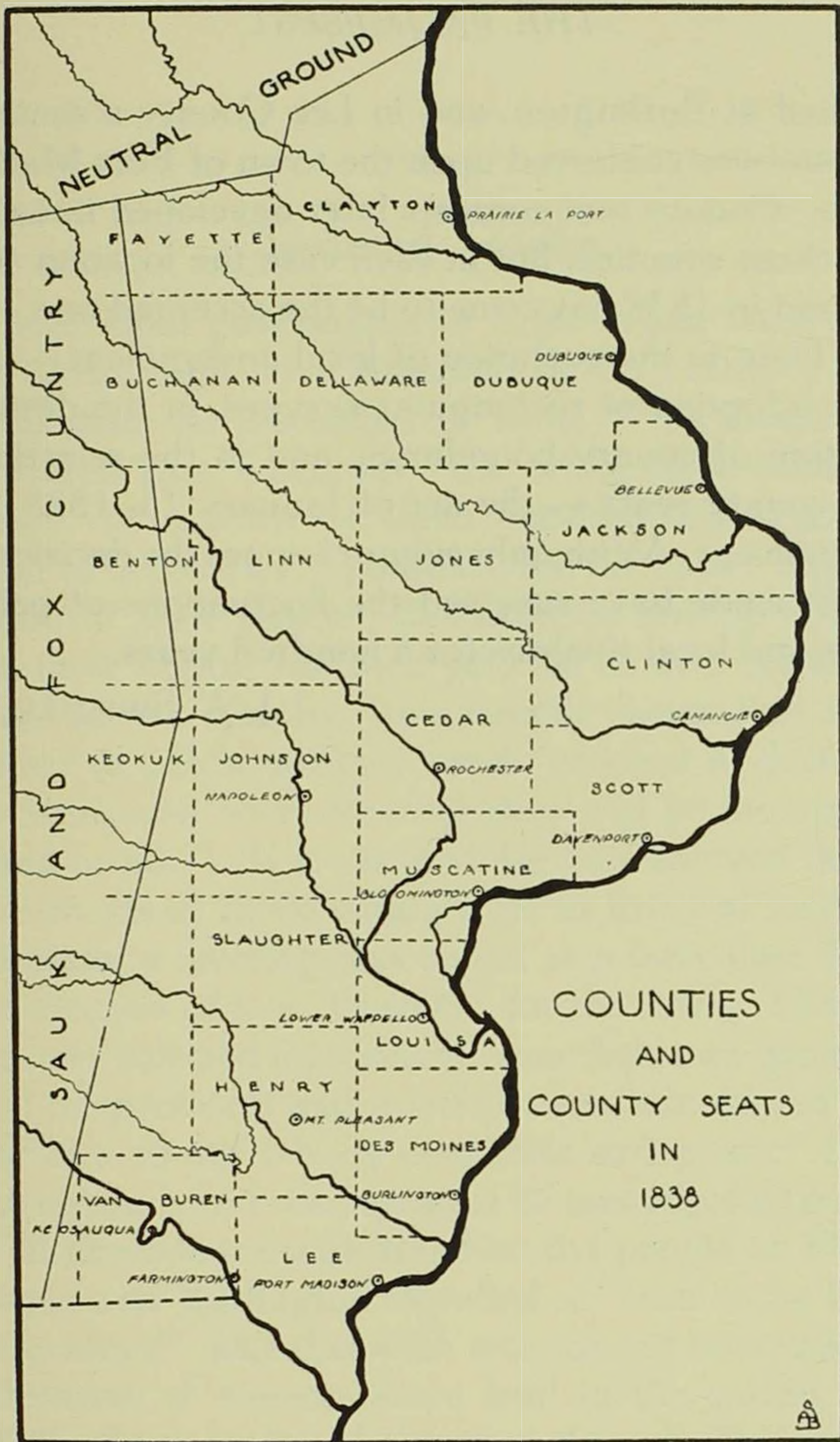


original counties of Musquitine and Louisa, was a new rectangular area called Slaughter County. The town of "Astoria" was designated as the seat of justice. In reality, however, the "town of Astoria" never developed. Only one house was ever erected there. This may have been used temporarily as a courthouse, but its history is brief, and its location is not now known. Perhaps it was near the present site of Ainsworth. Slaughter County, like its erstwhile seat of justice, was destined to have a short existence. With boundaries somewhat altered, it later became Washington County.

By the act of January 18, 1838, Van Buren County, like Muscatine, was given its present boundaries, while Henry, Des Moines, and Lee counties were given boundaries similar to those which they now possess.

In Van Buren County the seat of justice was fixed temporarily "at the town of Farmington", and provision was made for the voters to determine the ultimate location. At an election held in October, 1838, it was decided to move the seat of justice to Keosauqua — a more nearly central location within the county. In Henry County the seat of justice was established at Mount Pleasant, and no serious attempt has been made to change it. The capital of Des Moines County was estab-







lished at Burlington, and in Lee County a similar honor was conferred upon the town of Fort Madison. County seat contests later developed in each of these counties, but in each case the location selected in 1838 has come to be the accepted one.

Thus, in the evolution of local government — in the adoption of rectangular surveys, in the designation of county boundaries, and in the selection of county seats — the act of January 18, 1838, is significant. With only minor changes the decisions then made have survived the fluctuations of politics and local rivalries for a hundred years.

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