

OLD CAPITOL RESTORED

by Margaret N. Keyes

The task of restoring Old Capitol was a challenge—a challenge of research, of organization, and of building. Margaret Keyes, Professor of Home Economics and Director of Old Capitol at The University of Iowa headed the efforts to meet these challenges.

John Francis Rague's plan for Iowa's Old Capitol never was realized during the first years of construction. Financial problems, political squabbles, and the westward sweep of Iowa's population conspired to leave the Capitol unfinished by the time the seat of government was moved to Des Moines in 1857. Much of the original plan was left undone, most notably the west portico and an exterior decorative cornice.

The first attempt to complete the plan of the building came during the period from 1921 to 1923 when major reconstruction and fireproofing were approved for Old Capitol by the state legislature. The original drawings have never been located, but historical evidence is clear that a west portico was part of the plan. A photograph taken before 1901 shows several signs of the intended portico: a recessed area in the exterior cornice in the center of the west facade; the triangular pediment on the roof; and the platform which formed the base for the intended columns all indicate the portico was planned, but never built. During the 1920's reconstruction, pillars were added to complete the west portico.

This addition is the only major change to the outward appearance of Old Capitol since its original construction.

The interior of the building, however, was altered many times during the 113 years it served the daily needs of The University of Iowa. The building provided classrooms, offices, and space for chapel services and meetings of nineteenth century literary societies. To accommodate these changing needs, frequent alterations were made to interior walls—sometimes moving them to expand an area, at other times adding walls to create more interior rooms. The State Board of Education specified in 1923 that the reconstruction should assure historical authenticity and integrity. The Board said: "That in the reconstruction of said building, the exterior shall not be changed in its appearance, structure or design and only such change shall be made in the interior of said building as is necessary to properly carry out the purpose and intent of this act to make said building fireproof or substantially so and to reproduce said structure without change in any of its original parts."

The last classes held in Old Capitol, those of the College of Law, were moved to Gilmore Hall in 1910. Afterward, the building served exclusively as offices for the University administration. In the 1960s, the rapidly expanding University outgrew the modest 120 x 60 foot building, and its

space proved inadequate to house the administration.

In 1970, Willard L. Boyd, President of the University of Iowa, announced that the Old Capitol would be restored. Administrative offices were removed to other quarters, and research began. Boyd appointed an advisory committee with Mrs. Virgil M. Hancher, Iowa City (wife of former University President Hancher) as chairman, Frank T. Nye, Cedar Rapids, as vice-chairman, and Margaret N. Keyes, Iowa City, as director of research. Students, faculty, staff, friends, and alumni of the University joined them on the 45-member committee. E. W. Henderson, Jr., of Ferry and Henderson Architects, Inc. of Springfield, Illinois, served as consulting architect to the restoration project.

The task of restoring Old Capitol began with study. The research staff combed through primary sources

—sources that could give firsthand accounts of the building's planning and construction—in order to compile as much information as possible about the building. It was necessary to know many details about the planning and construction of Old Capitol before major decisions could be made as to how the restoration should take shape. The Journals of the House and Council of the Territory of Iowa, the Journals of the State of Iowa, the Laws of Iowa, the Iowa Code of 1851, original vouchers for the expenditures of federal funds granted to the Territory (located at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.), newspapers, books, memoirs of people associated with early government or the construction of Old Capitol, and other sources were searched thoroughly.

Unfortunately, the original plans for the building could not be found. The House Journal of 1840 contained a com-



This pre-1901 photo shows clearly the recesses just below the roof and the platform intended for a west portico. The original plan evidently called for a portico, but it was not completed. The west portico was added during the 1920s. (courtesy of The University of Iowa)

mittee report that described the building's floor plan, but there was no indication of what was actually built or whether the plans should be read from left to right. Lacking documentary evidence, the researchers looked to the physical evidence of the building. When the plaster was stripped from the interior walls, many new architectural clues were revealed. The location of previous walls, for example, appeared as bricked-up recesses. Several questions were answered by a careful study of the bared walls.

One of the mysteries was the question of whether or not a gallery had been built in the House Chamber. Benjamin Shambaugh in *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* (Iowa City, 1939) said a gallery was planned, but never built because of lack of money. Yet, the researchers found frequent references to a gallery in journals and newspapers of the 1850s. The walls provided the answer. Under the plaster were the telltale signs of supports—the gallery had been built.

Surprisingly, fireplaces were found in the four corner offices on the first floor. Apparently, these were the first sources of heat in these rooms, although the fireplaces were later bricked over and cast-iron stoves installed. There was no evidence of fireplaces on the second floor, but stovepipe holes clearly indicated the method of heating in use there.

Through the careful study of documents, physical evidence, and historical photos (showing, for example, the style of window shutters) the research team was able to prepare an accurate and authentic picture of the building. Working with the architects, plans were



The walls of the Supreme Court Chamber, stripped of plaster, revealed the bricked-over fireplace and stovepipe holes. (courtesy of The University of Iowa, Don Roberts photo)

drawn, and restoration construction began.

Research into the physical appearance of the building itself progressed well during the first years of work, but despite intensive efforts, none of Old Capitol's original furniture could be found. The disappearance of most of the furniture apparently stemmed from the removal of the building's contents in 1857 when the seat of government moved to Des Moines. All of the furnishings in Old Capitol were loaded onto bobsleds and oxcarts for the winter journey to the new capital. When the teams mired down in mud and snow, most of the furniture was dis-

carded and left to rot. There was no way of finding out how much—if any—of Old Capitol's furniture reached Des Moines.

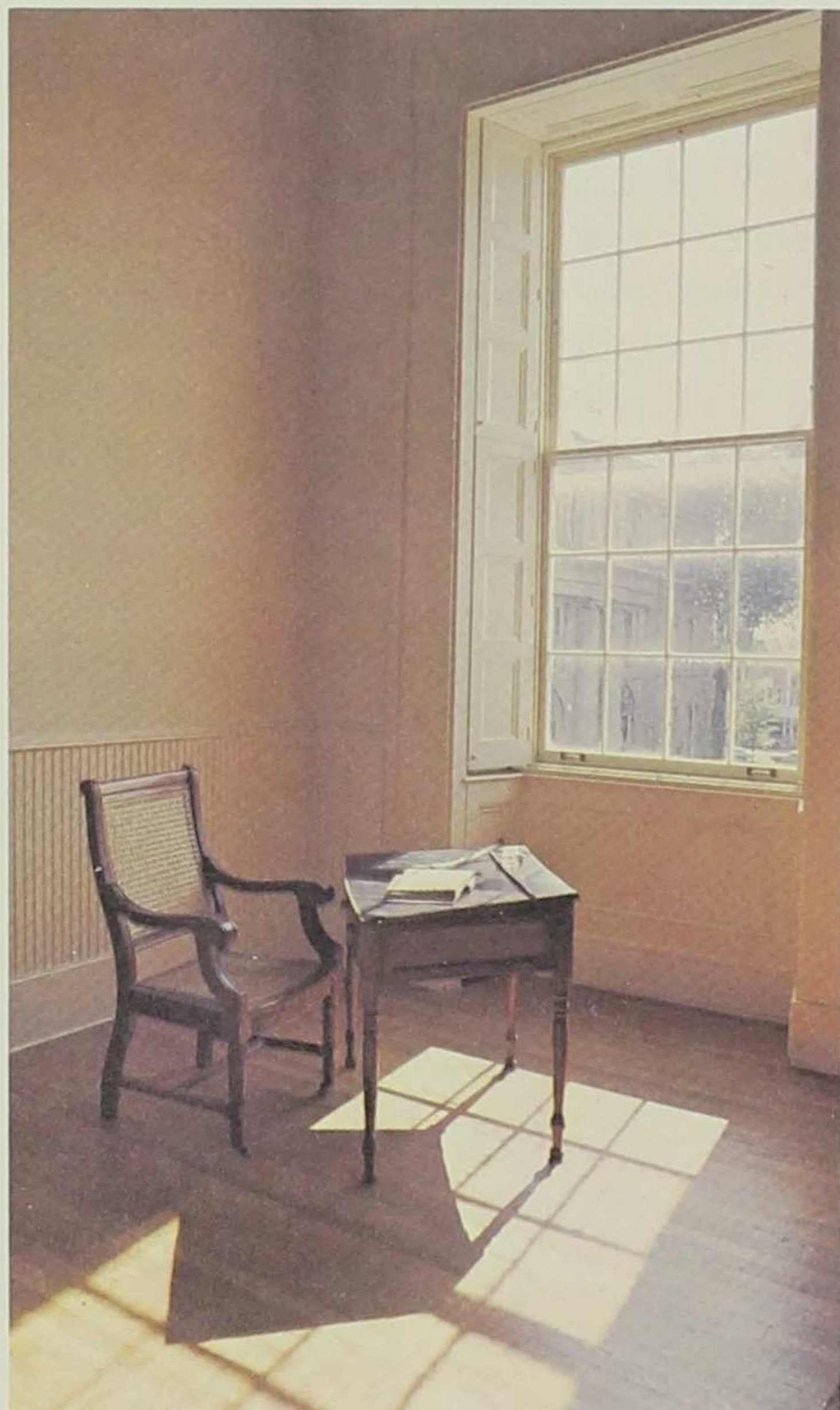
The lack of surviving examples left only two avenues: to find appropriate furniture of the 1840-1850 period for use in the restored building and to reproduce copies of furniture patterned after actual pieces used in other, similar state capitols of the time. These plans were put in motion, and on July 29, 1974 came the first break in locating the original furniture. Wendell W. Davis, a workman on the restoration project, saw an advertisement for an auction sale in What Cheer, Iowa: "... walnut chair (from Old State Capitol in Iowa City)." The chair was examined, purchased, and, indeed, appears to be one of the original chairs from the House Chamber. Records in the National Archives showed 26 cane chairs were purchased for the House Chamber in 1839. The chair from the What Cheer auction had the original cane holes under upholstery that had been added later. It also had an imprint, "State of Iowa Custodians," stamped into the underside of the frame. The newly-purchased chair served as a model for 26 cane chairs reproduced by the Norman Schanz Furniture Company of West Amana, Iowa.

Researchers ran into the same difficulty when they searched for originals of the desks for the House Chamber. They could find none and were forced to develop a design based on desks used in the capitols of Illinois and North Carolina. A contract for manufacturing the desk reproductions was about to be awarded when a letter came from Dr. Paul R. Beall, Winter Park, Florida.

Beall told the story of "the nice little desk from Old Capitol" which had been given to his grandfather, a former superintendent of grounds and buildings at the capitol in Des Moines. Photographs showed a desk strikingly similar to the researched design. Today, 26 reproductions based on the Beall desk, also made by Schanz, are in the restored Housed Chamber of Old Capitol.



Workmen install steel support beams for the gallery in the House Chamber in November 1974. (courtesy of The University of Iowa, Don Roberts photo)



Desk and chair from the House Chamber. (John Schultz photo)

Similar problems arose over the carpet. Original vouchers showed the purchase of yards and yards of carpeting for the building, but gave no description to the type of a carpet, the pattern, or the colors. There were, however, many descriptions in secondary sources of the designs and colors of carpet available in the 1840s and 1850s. A commonly-used carpeting of Brussels construction was considered appropriate for the building. By pure chance, the writer met Peter and Mary Louise Grinnell of Fairhaven, Massachusetts who owned a piece of mid-nineteenth cen-

Note on Sources

This article is based on research in several kinds of documents and publications. Government sources include the *Journals* of the Iowa Territorial House and Council and the *Journals* of the Iowa State House and Senate between 1839 and 1857. Also helpful were the *Laws of Iowa*, Chapter 157 and *Legislative and Contingent Expenses of the Territory of Iowa*, Account No. 81,345, 1839 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.). Newspaper accounts used include the *Iowa City Daily Republican*, June 27, 1856 and the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, December 13, 1854. More recent sources consulted were the *Report of the Special Committee of the State Board of Education*, July 3, 1923 and "UI's Old Capitol to be Preserved as Historic Site," in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, July 18, 1970. An annotated version of this article is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City.

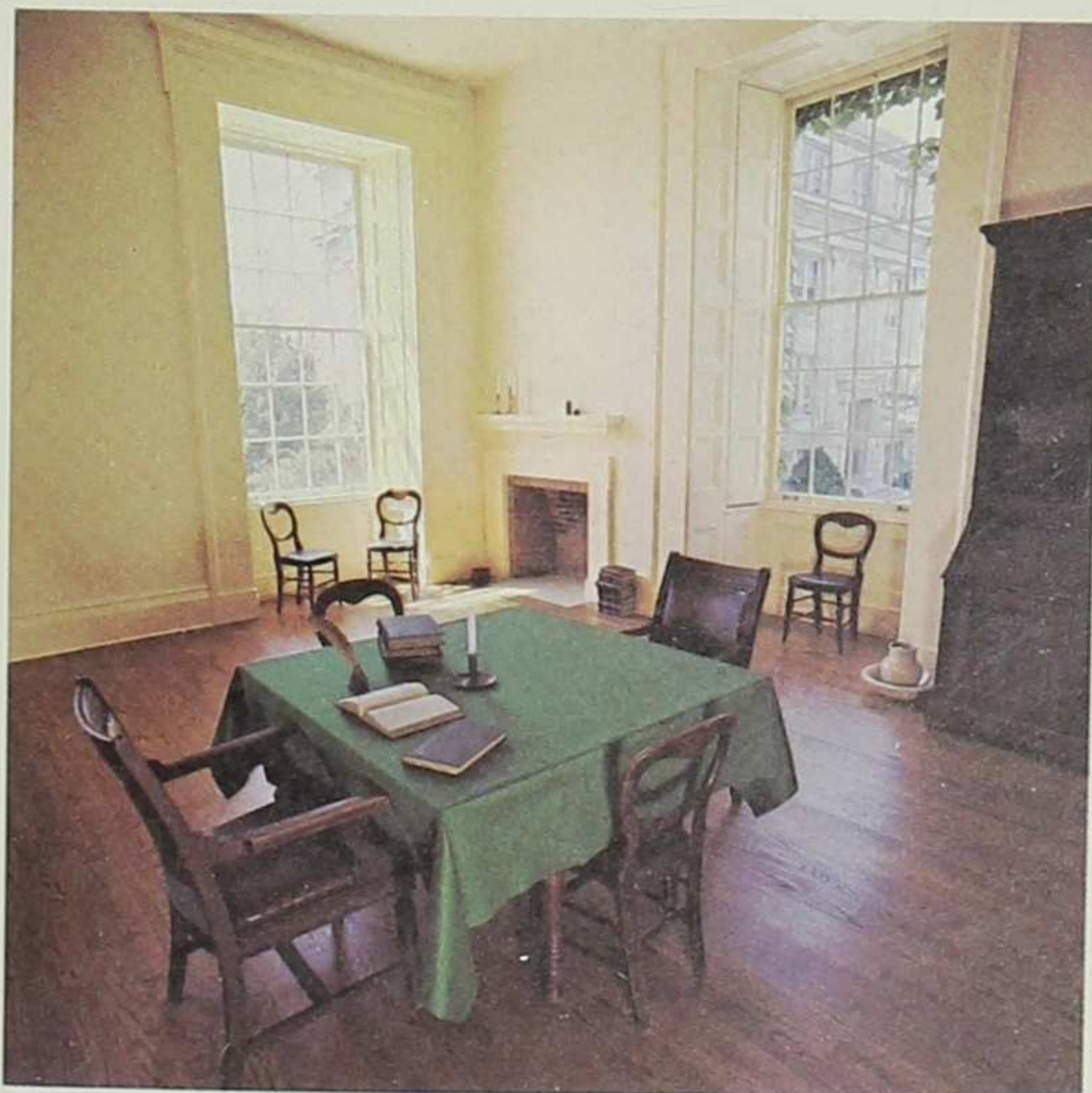
Readers interested in further reading may wish to consult two articles by Margaret N. Keyes: "The Gallery Will be Reserved for Ladies," *Annals of Iowa*, (third ser.) 42 (Summer 1973), 1-16 and "Piecing Together Iowa's Old Capitol," *Historic Preservation*, 26 (January-March 1974), 41-43. Benjamin Shambaugh's *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1939) is also a helpful introduction to the history of the building.

tury Brussels carpeting which they offered to loan to the project as a pattern. Both the Greek Revival borders and motifs and the color of the carpet sample seemed right for Old Capitol. The House Chamber is now carpeted with a reproduction of the Brussels carpet, made especially for the building by a Durham, England carpet mill.

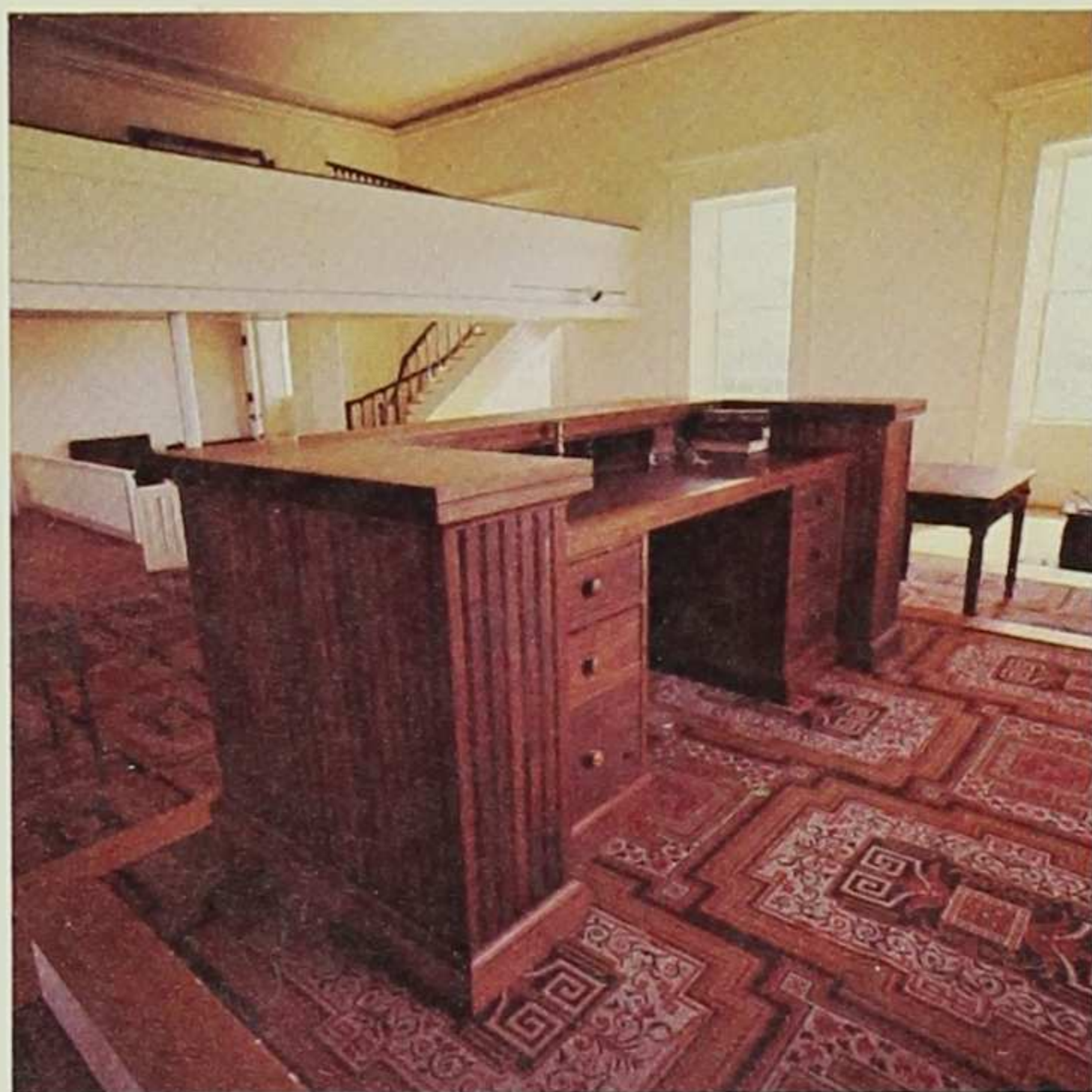
Information about other contents of Old Capitol was sought, and in some cases, found. Over 1000 books from the original library were located by research librarian Martha Esbin. The search for the actual volumes began after finding the two earliest library catalogues. If books were listed in the first catalogues and had dates before 1857, these were good clues, but a reference in the *Laws of Iowa* gave the clinching evidence. Each book in the Old Capitol library was to have the words "Iowa State Library" written at the bottom of page 30. Most of the



The restored Governor's Office on the first floor of Old Capitol. (John Schultz photo)



The Library. (John Schultz photo)



The specially-woven Brussels carpet in the restored House Chamber and a reproduction of the Speaker's desk. (John Schultz photo)



A legislator's traveling desk. (John Schultz photo)

original volumes turned up in the state libraries in Des Moines, the Division of the State Historical Society in Iowa City, or The University of Iowa Libraries. These agencies returned the books to Old Capitol, and private donors have also given original books.

These examples illustrate the satisfactions and frustrations that the researchers on the Old Capitol project experienced in the six years of study and planning for the dedication and opening of the building on July 3, 1976. We continue to locate more information on the building's structure and its contents, and the Old Capitol staff is optimistic that some of the remaining questions will be answered in the future. For example, no one knows what color the walls were painted. The original vouchers simply list the purchase of paint, without reference to color. It was impossible to analyze the nineteenth century paint layers because all of the original plaster was removed from the walls during the reconstruction of the 1920s. Perhaps some yet undiscovered source will one day answer this question. Old letters, diaries, newspapers, or any related documents of the mid-nineteenth century are sought eagerly in an effort to gain additional knowledge of Old Capitol and to strengthen what is already known about this unique part of Iowa's heritage. □