

## The Centennial Exposition, 1876

The year of the nation's one hundredth birthday anniversary was packed with events — Washington, D.C. was rocked with political scandals, George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry troopers met their end at the Little Big Horn, and communities throughout the land celebrated the centennial of the founding of the Union. Nothing, however, caught Americans' imagination and interest more than the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The grand and awe-inspiring buildings, the thousands of objects and exhibits, and the crush of visitors made the Exposition grounds one of the most exciting places in America during the summer and fall of 1876.

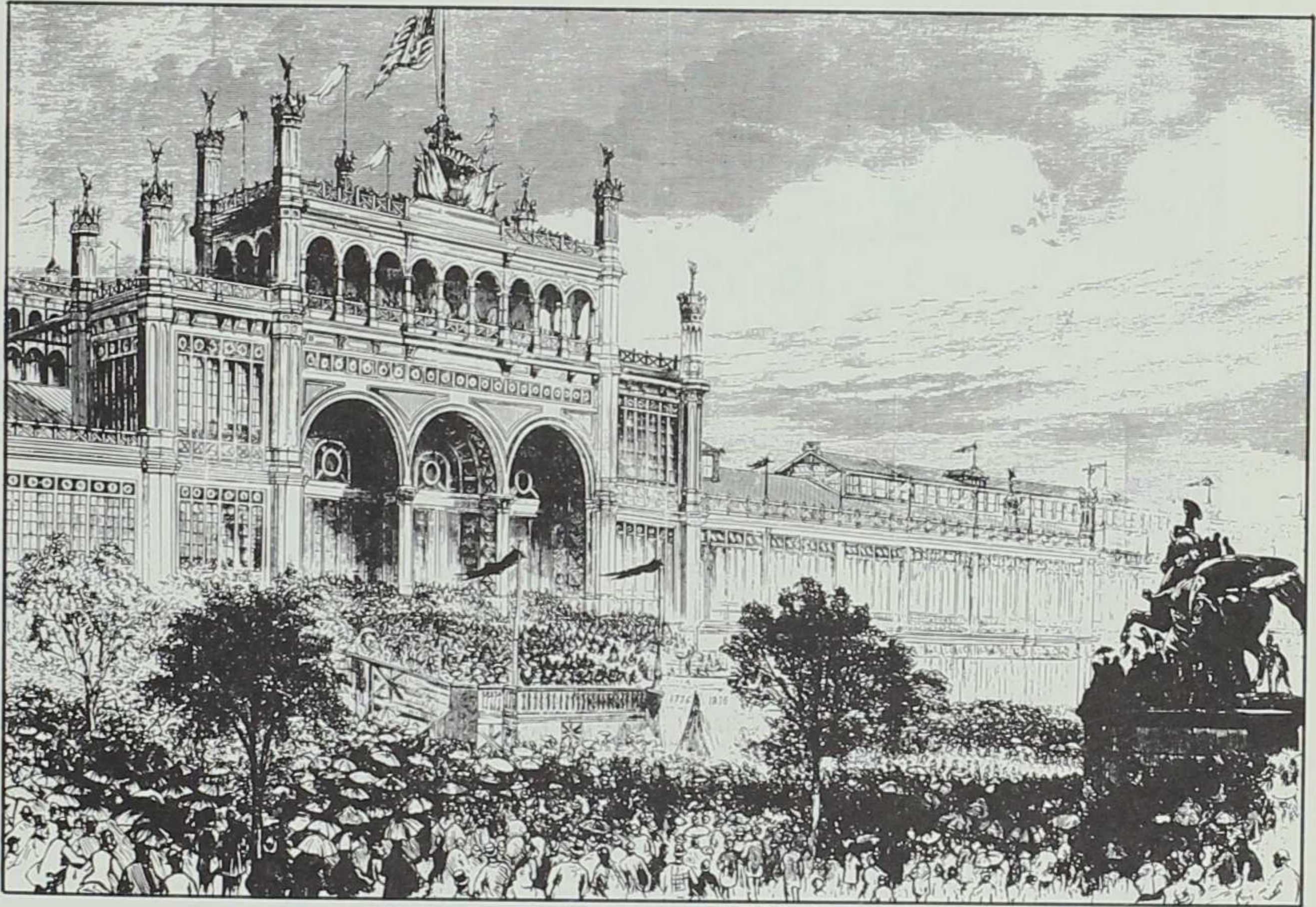
The Centennial Exposition had first been proposed to the U.S. Congress in 1869 in a memorial sent to Washington by the Franklin Institute and Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In 1871, Congress passed a bill "to provide for celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of American independence by holding an international exhibition of arts, manufactures and products of the soil and mine, in the city of Philadelphia and State of Pennsylvania, in the year 1876." Commissioners from each state were nominated by the governors and appointed by the President. Iowa was represented by Robert Lowry of Davenport and alternate Coker Clarkson of Grundy Center. The Exposition was financed in part by federal funds, but also by

contributions from Philadelphia, the state of Pennsylvania (and surrounding commonwealths), and private subscriptions.

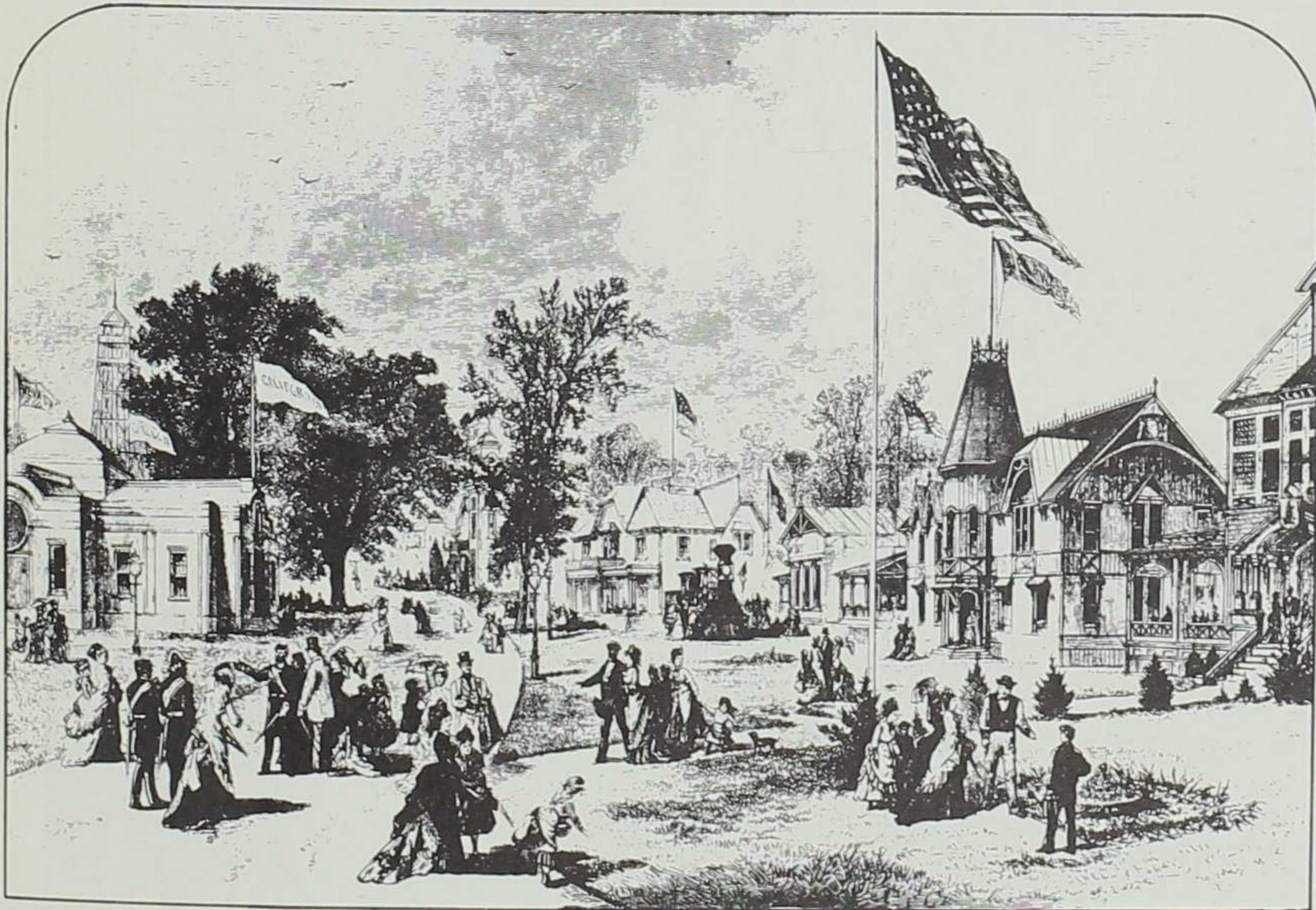
Undoubtedly many Iowans made the trip eastward to view the display. Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Simpson of Clarence, Iowa, for example, junketed to Philadelphia in September, following a side trip to Washington, D.C. (where they visited most of the nation's public buildings). They arrived in Philadelphia on September 8. Visiting the Main Exposition Building the next day, Mr. Simpson confided to his diary that he could not "describe the magnificence, everything was so grand." His wife recorded that during their first day's tour they saw such diversities as tableware, carved mantelpieces, jewelry, communion services, tea sets, an elephant tusk, and what purported to be the nation's oldest piano. During the remainder of their week at the Exposition, the Simpsons saw everything from the "Monster" Corliss engine to a 1307 pound Chester White hog.

For Americans who could not visit the Exposition in person, magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* provided the experience vicariously by publishing a series of engravings based on sketches of the Exposition grounds. Following is a sample of the illustrations of the Exposition from *Harper's*, including a feature on Iowa's exhibit in Agricultural Hall. □

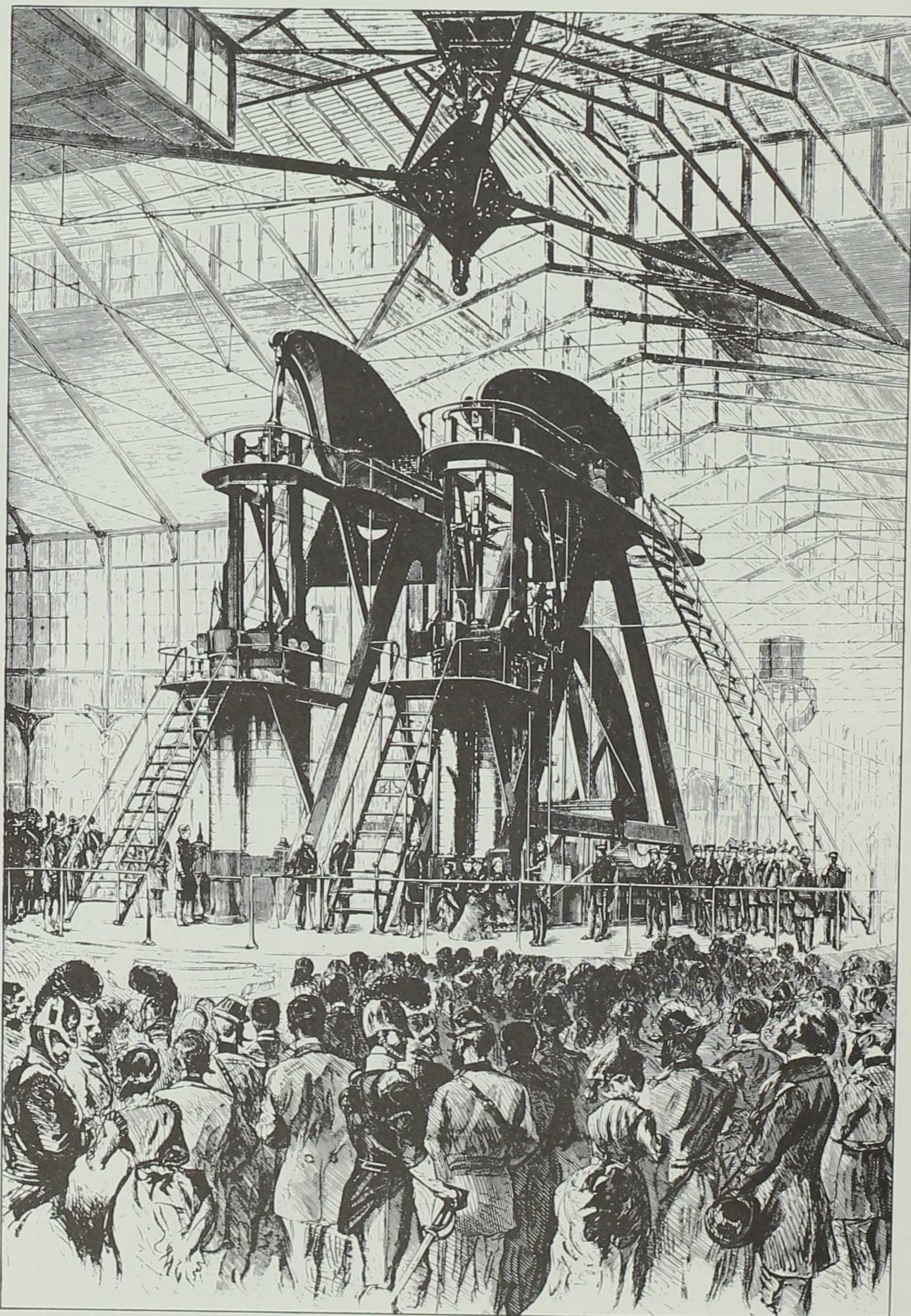
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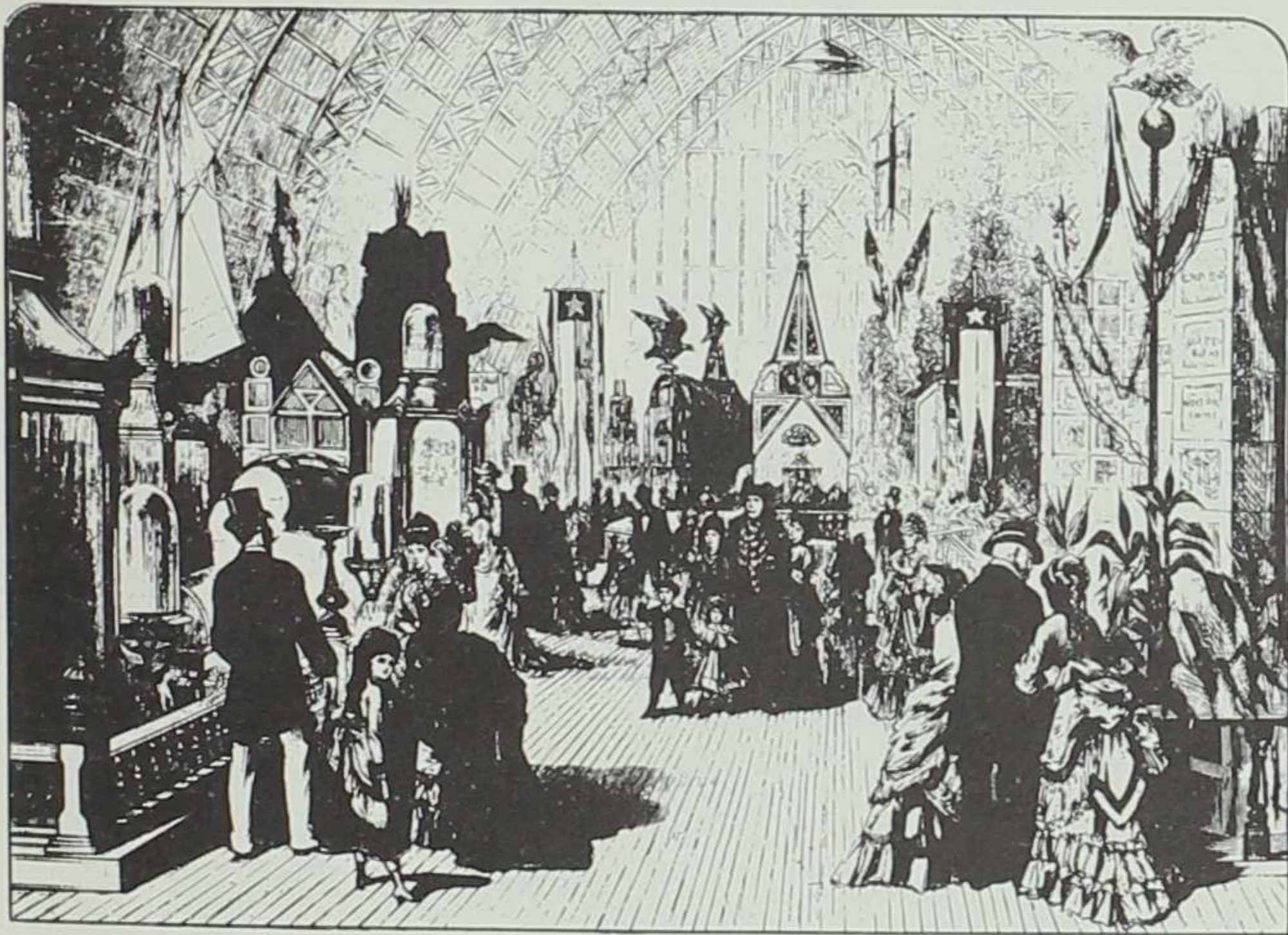
*The Exposition's opening ceremonies, May 1876.*



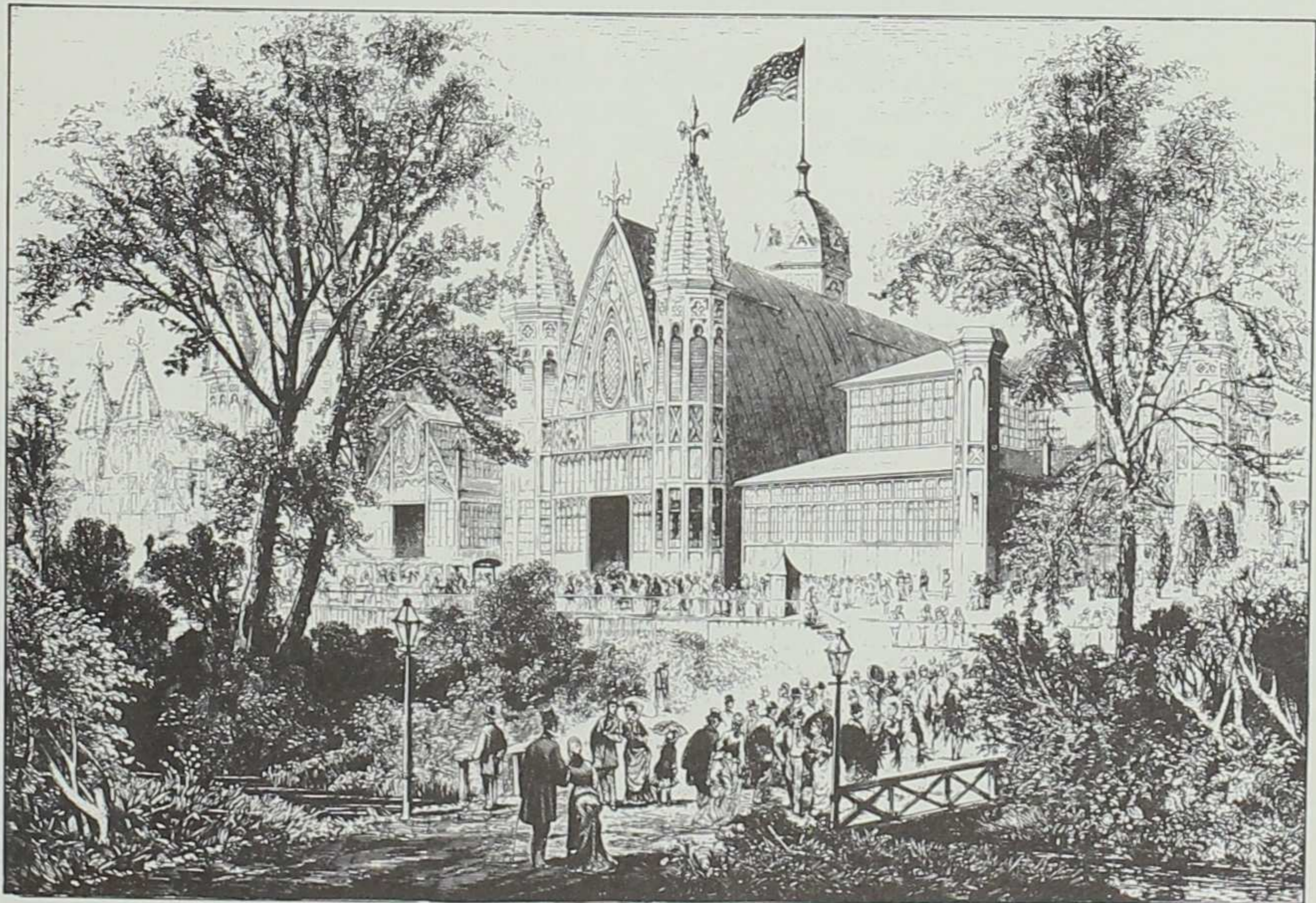
*The individual states erected buildings on State Avenue. The Iowa building is in the center, flying the American flag.*

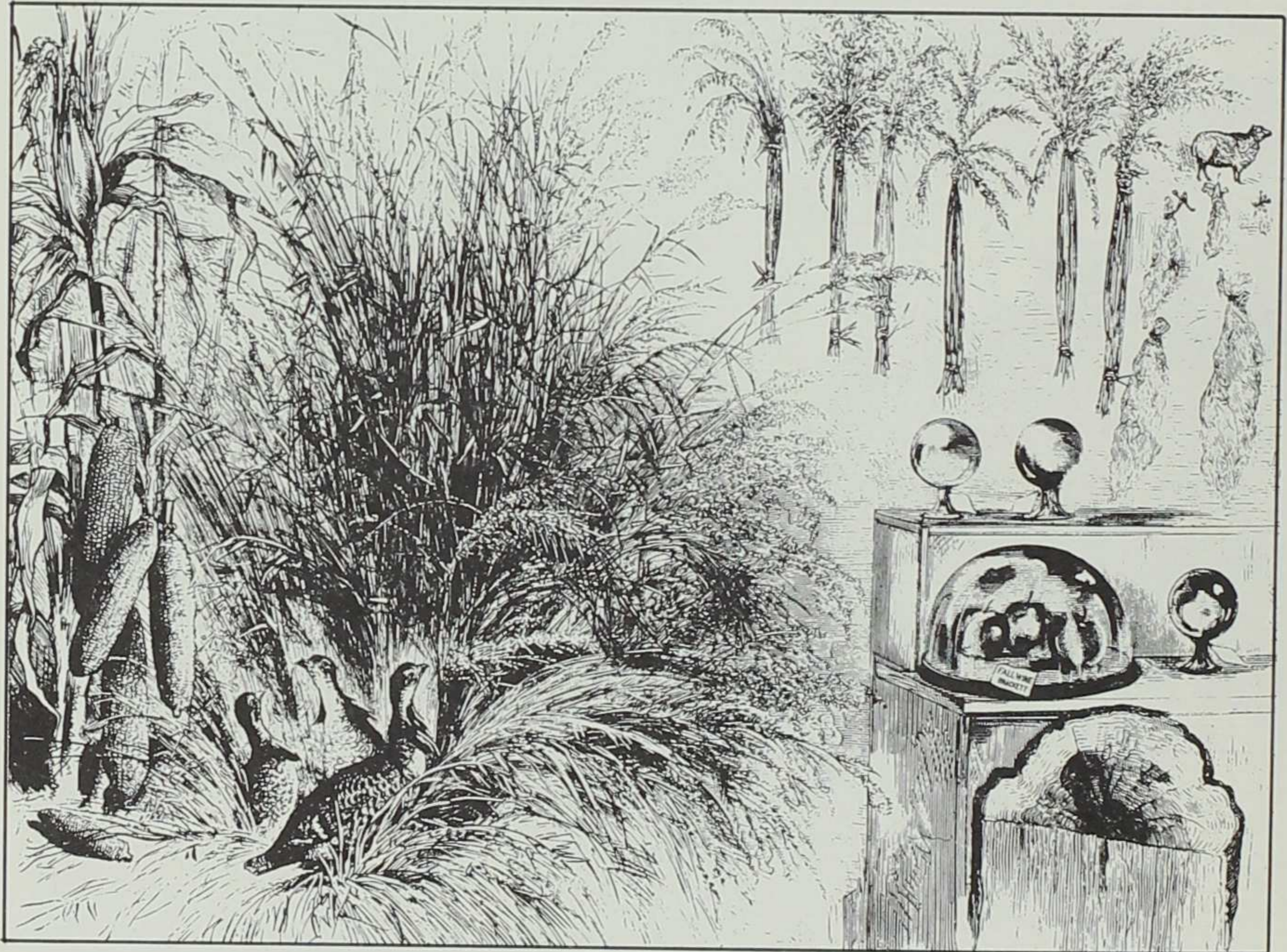


*The great Corliss steam engine, one of the Exposition's major attractions. Shown here are U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant and Brazilian Emperor Dom Pedro starting up the engine.*



*The profusion of exhibits was mind-boggling. Here visitors tour part of the offerings of Agricultural Hall (pictured below).*

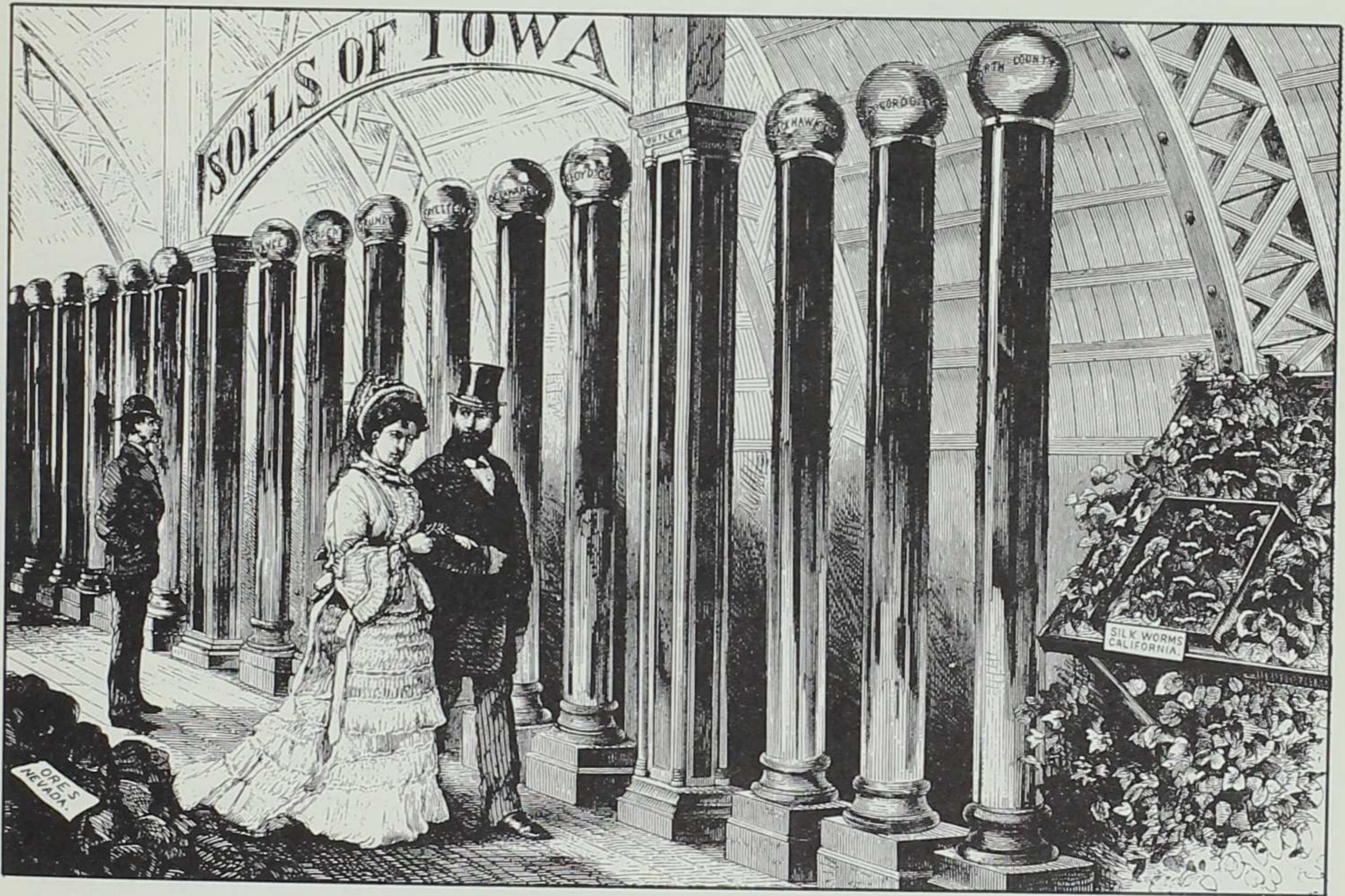




*Products of Iowa — Agricultural Hall.*



*Thousands of tourists arrived at the Exposition daily by train.*



The following short article is from Harper's Weekly, November 11, 1876, pp. 921-22. At that time, much of northern and northwestern Iowa's rich farm land was still undrained.

### THE CENTENNIAL SOILS AND PRODUCTS OF IOWA.

We give this page to two engravings illustrating the products of the State of Iowa and the varieties of soil peculiar to the region, as they are exhibited in Agricultural Hall. The soils are arranged within tall cylinders of glass, so as to give the visitor an idea at once of the different elements of which they are composed. Affixed to each cylinder is a map of the State, on which a small green spot indicates the county from which that particular sample of soil was taken.

The soils of Iowa are generally excellent, and in no other section is there a smaller amount of inferior land. The valleys of the Red Cedar, Des Moines, and Iowa rivers as high as latitude 42°30' present a body of arable land which, taken as a whole, for richness

in organic elements, for amount of saline matter and due admixture of earthy silicates, affords a combination that belongs only to the most fertile upland plains. North of this, the best agricultural region of the State, the lands are inferior, but still not unprofitable, and the lower grounds are either wet and marshy or filled with numerous ponds, and entirely destitute of timber. As an illustration of the extraordinary fertility of the soil in the southern portion of the State, we may cite the fact that the first planted corn crop having been destroyed last summer by the grasshoppers, the fields were replanted after the Fourth of July. The farmers were doubtful of the result, but the second crop attained a size which would appear incredible to Eastern people. The specimens shown in the Iowa exhibit average at least ten feet in height.