

The Capitol at Burlington

In the midst of the debate at Belmont early in 1837 over the location of the capital of the Territory of Wisconsin, Jeremiah Smith, a Council member from Des Moines County, made an unexpected offer. He proposed that, if the Wisconsin legislature would meet for the next session at Burlington, he would provide a building, to be erected expressly for the Legislative Assembly without cost to the Territory. That offer closed the discussion. It was accepted by the legislature in an act which located the seat of government at Burlington until March 4, 1839, unless the public buildings at Madison, chosen as the permanent capital, were sooner completed.

Belmont in the present State of Wisconsin was the first capital of Wisconsin Territory. The town and capitol building had been hastily built to provide a temporary home for the Legislative Assembly. Some citizens had protested against the location of the capital at that place from the beginning, and so scant were the comforts and even necessities which were afforded the legislators there, that the question of finding another commanded serious attention.

Jeremiah Smith had been a member of the last Legislative Assembly of Michigan Territory and a member of the Council in the first Wisconsin Territorial legislature which met at Belmont. He was a merchant and a farmer, and "the wealthiest man in the county" of Des Moines. His offer to construct a suitable building at Burlington for the legislature might be considered both a gift and an investment, for the capitalship was perhaps the best boom for business and a rising town which any circumstance could afford.

The new capitol was constructed in the summer of 1837, facing the Mississippi River on Front (formerly Water) Street between Columbia and Court in the "fairest portion" of the village. It was a two-story frame building, forty by seventy feet in size. The second story was for the Council, and the House of Representatives was to occupy the lower story. Each chamber had a lobby separated from the chamber proper by a railing. Heat was supplied from hearths, and a stove was placed in the lobby after the Assembly had been in session for a month. A carpet for the lobby floor was ordered at the same time, as well as the "necessary convenience for hats and cloaks".

On October 12th, when the building was nearly completed, the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* described it as contrasting

favorably with the capitol at Belmont: "The edifice is commodious, handsomely built, and well arranged for the purposes of legislation; and in all respects, we think we may promise the members very comfortable accommodations this winter. The halls are larger, and much better adapted to the purposes for which they are intended, than those at Belmont." As a "very great improvement", a desk was furnished each member in place of the single table supplied in the earlier session. The building was finished in the latter part of October.

The night of December 12, 1837, was cold. Logs which had blazed all day smoldered in the fireplaces of the capitol. Suddenly, about two o'clock in the morning, John C. Madden, engineer of the steamboat *Smelter*, lying at the wharf nearly opposite the capitol, noticed flames in the Council chamber. The village awoke to his alarm. Townspeople and members of the legislature hurried to the blazing scene.

By the time help arrived, the fire had already spread to adjoining buildings. Little attempt could be made to curb the progress of the flames for the town had no fire fighting equipment. Men worked frantically to save the furniture in the capitol and merchandise in the stores. Spectators futilely watched the fire continue its course along

the block of seven buildings, chiefly groceries and storehouses, among which was one owned by Jeremiah Smith. In a few hours much of the business section of the frontier town was destroyed. The winter sun rose on smoking ruins. The property loss was estimated to be \$20,000.

A committee appointed by the Council to investigate the origin of the fire reported that according to the testimony of John C. Madden, Joseph T. Fales, the doorkeeper of the House of Representatives, Smith Bowen, and J. B. Snowden, the fire originated in the chimney of the Council chamber. No one was to blame. The calamity was "the result of accident alone". The Council moved to a room above the newspaper office and the House of Representatives was "comfortably quartered in the upper story of Webber & Reney's new building".

Jeremiah Smith suffered the greatest loss, probably as much as \$7000. He had no insurance or claim against the Territory. The only reward for his generosity was the prestige of Burlington as the capital city. That advantage had already been realized. So complete was the financial loss to the donor of the legislative hall, however, that the Secretary of the Territory, W. B. Slaughter, wrote about it to George W. Jones, the Delegate of the Territory in Washington. "A good deal is

due to Major Smith", he declared, for his enterprise in erecting the temporary capitol, "and still more for his patriotism in thus providing for the convenience & comfort of the Representatives of the people. We can only appreciate such motives and conduct when we contrast them with the miserly selfishness of the great mass who seek their own advantage to the exclusion of the interests of all others. I hope you will exert yourself to procure a sufficient sum to reward him amply for his loss and for all his exertions and patriotism." The records, however, do not indicate that Delegate Jones acted upon the suggestion of the Secretary.

Besides the losses of Jeremiah Smith and other citizens, Burlington's prosperity in its early development suffered a severe shock by the fire. Nevertheless, "there is a buoyant and elastic spirit, and an active enterprise among our people," observed the *Territorial Gazette*, "which will, we feel confident, sustain them in this emergency, and which in the end will bring them triumphantly out of all difficulties." The conflagration did not deprive Burlington of being the capital of Wisconsin Territory, nor of the honor of becoming on July 4, 1838, the first capital of the Territory of Iowa.

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