

THE PALIMPSEST

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City of Certainty

Des Moines was a city of certainty a century ago. Designated as the State Capital of Iowa in 1857, Des Moines had grown from 3,965 in 1860 to 12,035 by 1870. During the latter year her citizens were looking forward with confidence to a growth that all believed Des Moines was destined to achieve—a growth far beyond the hopes of many of her most sanguine founders.

Gaining the State Capital was not the major factor in the growth of Des Moines. Indeed, the mere fact of becoming a capital seems to have had little effect on the population growth of most capitals in the United States. Actually, using the 1960 census, there are only ten State Capitals that exceed Des Moines in population:

Boston	697,197	Phoenix	439,170
Denver	493,887	Oklahoma City	324,253
Atlanta	487,455	St. Paul	313,411
Indianapolis	476,258	Honolulu	294,194
Columbus	471,316	Richmond	219,958
Des Moines	208,982		

The Census of 1960 reveals that there are sixteen State Capitals with populations ranging from Lansing with 107,807 to Providence with 207,498. Although they represent an impressive group of cities, not one of the following had attained the population of Des Moines in 1960:

Providence	207,498	Montgomery	134,393
Sacramento	196,667	Albany	129,726
Salt Lake City	189,454	Lincoln	128,521
Austin	186,545	Madison	126,706
Nashville	170,874	Topeka	119,484
Hartford	162,178	Trenton	114,167
Baton Rouge	152,419	Little Rock	106,813
Jackson	144,422	Lansing	107,807

To further demonstrate the fact that becoming the State Capital does not insure an unparalleled population growth, there are eleven cities ranging from Columbia with 97,433 down to Concord with 28,991, that have registered only modest gains. Finally, the following twelve State Capitals combined have a total population less than the capital of Iowa:

Carson City	5,163	Frankfort	18,365
Juneau	6,799	Helena	20,227
Dover	7,250	Augusta	21,680
Montpelier	8,782	Annapolis	23,385
Pierre	10,088	Bismarck	27,670
Olympia	18,273	Jefferson City	28,228
		Total	<u>195,910</u>

It must be noted that half of the above cities

date back to Colonial Days while the remaining six were established after Des Moines became the capital of Iowa. But, whether old or new, the population growth of these twelve cities was fairly typical of the smaller State Capitals.

To what, then, can one attribute the actual population growth of Des Moines? One cannot attribute it to Des Moines' rich agricultural location since every city, large and small, in the Hawkeye State, could lay claim to this admittedly important factor. Indeed, the growth of Des Moines was so phenomenal between 1860 and 1880 that she sprang from 7th to 1st place in population among Iowa towns, eclipsing Dubuque, Davenport, Keokuk, Burlington, Muscatine, and Iowa City, all of which surpassed Des Moines in 1860. The following shows the growth of the major cities of Iowa between 1860 and 1960, with special emphasis on the crucial period between 1860 and 1890:

	1860	1870	1880	1890	1960
Burlington	6,706	14,930	19,450	22,565	32,430
Davenport	11,267	20,038	21,831	26,872	88,981
Dubuque	13,000	18,434	22,254	30,311	56,606
Keokuk	8,136	12,766	12,117	14,101	16,316
Iowa City	5,214	5,914	7,123	7,016	33,443
Muscatine	5,324	6,718	8,295	11,454	20,997
Des Moines	3,965	12,035	22,408	50,093	208,982
Cedar Rapids	1,830	5,940	10,104	18,020	92,035
Sioux City	767	3,401	7,366	37,806	89,159
Council Bluffs	2,011	10,020	18,063	21,474	55,641

An important factor in stimulating such pheno-

menal growth was the printing and publishing industry. Less than three decades had elapsed since permanent white settlement had begun and yet the Census of 1875 showed Des Moines already publishing the following papers and magazines:

- Herald of Liberty* Joseph Eiboek Personal Liberty
Iowa School Journal 1859 Monthly C. M. Green Educational
Iowa Staats-Anzeiger 1869 Thursday Joseph Eiboek Personal Liberty
Iowa State Leader 1848 Daily State Leader Co. Democratic
Iowa State Register 1856 Daily Clarkson Bros. Republican
Iowa State Register Weekly Clarkson Bros. Republican
Plain Talk 1869 Saturday M. H. Bishard Republican
Western Farm Journal 1854 Friday Western Farm Journal Co. Republican
Western Jurist 1866 Mills and Co. Legal

Des Moines had become an important publishing center by 1875, vying with Dubuque and Davenport for top honors, just as it was destined to rival, indeed surpass, those two historic Mississippi river towns between 1870 and 1880. And, since lively, informative, local newspapers were a powerful factor in the growth of a town, it is not surprising that Des Moines should gain first place in population between 1870 and 1880, and then more than double its population, from 22,408 in 1880 to 50,093, in the decade ending in 1890.

Although good local newspapers could impress outsiders and stimulate growth, other factors combined to make the population of Des Moines zoom skyward. The winning of the State Capital, the rich agricultural hinterland, the proximity of productive coal mines, and the development of a complex railroad center, were important subsidiary assets that combined to attract new settlers. The high praise heaped on Des Moines by Eastern newspapers, such as the *Daily Graphic* of New York City on September 17, 1878, was publicity that could not be purchased. The article that follows, with eleven line drawings of outstanding homes and buildings, would have played no small part in focusing attention of prospective emigrants to Iowa on Des Moines.

Finally, however, and most important of all, it was the aggressive quality of the people who were lured to Des Moines in her formative decades that pointed the way to an ever-expanding industrial, commercial, and agricultural economy, liberally interspersed with a religious, educational, social, and cultural heritage.

They were a mighty group of Des Moines-minded men and women whose names must be carved deep in any obelisk of fame raised to their memory. They were dreamers, but they were also doers. They had an unwavering faith that their "city of certainty" would always stand at the forefront in Iowa, as well as in the Nation. For, in

1970, Des Moines could boast of *Look*, a magazine that ranked 4th in the Nation with 7,731,177 subscribers, and *Better Homes & Gardens*, ranking 8th with a circulation of 7,055,967, when measured by the official audits in 1967. In addition, Des Moines could point with pride to *Successful Farming* with a circulation of 1,330,991, and to 100-year old *Wallaces Farmer*, a magazine that has been a favorite on virtually every Iowa farm for over a century of time.

If Des Moines enterprise could produce a *Centennial History of Polk County, Iowa* in 1876, there could be little doubt but that the same forces will unite to produce a far more ambitious tome when the Nation celebrates the 200th anniversary of its birth in 1976.

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