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THIS WEEK:

Clarence Aurner – 1863 - 1948, was an Iowa writer and historian. He has written books and articles detailing Iowa's early political adventures. The following writing by Clarence Aurner is an account of Iowa's relocation of the state capital from Iowa City to Des Moines. The story was published originally in the book *Iowa Stories*, volume 3, by Clarence Ray Aurner, Clio Press, Iowa City, 1917.

**Relocation of Iowa's Capital City
By Clarence Aurner**

It was certain that the capital city could not remain far east of the central part of the State, it was not expected that it would be moved quite so early as 1857. But settlers hurried into the State so fast that there was a demand for removal. In fact, ever since the admission of Iowa into the Union in December, 1846, there had been efforts in each session of the legislature looking toward a new location for the capital. It was quite uncertain just when the permanent capital would be established.

The people endeavored to make their wishes known through petitions to the legislature, more than twenty having been presented during a single session. These did not all favor one locality, for Fort Des Moines (now the city of Des Moines), Pella, Oskaloosa, and Red Rock were among the favored spots. Indeed, Oskaloosa was mentioned about as often as Fort Des Moines in those days and if the number of petitioners should be considered, the former city was far in the lead. That may have happened, to be sure, because of the older settlements in that part of the state. Pella also seemed to be very eager to obtain the location. It would have been an interesting fact for historians had the capital gone there, inasmuch as that town had been settled from its very foundation by a colony of Hollanders who came to Iowa in 1847 -- a remarkably industrious people, whose every purpose was devoted to building up a community worthy of an American state. ...But the capital city was not readily selected, when so many places were ambitious to have it. Besides, all the legislators were not convinced that it should be moved, since a capitol building costing a large sum of money, for those days, was already constructed. There was no lack of argument for leaving it where it was. At the same time it was plain to the leaders among the law-makers that it would soon be unwise to oppose the popular demand for removal farther west. Great inducements were being offered by ambitious cities, whose citizens pledged funds to save the State any expenditure of money, promised free sites for buildings and seemed ready to agree to almost any condition imposed by the legislature.

Gradually attention was being centered upon Fort Des Moines as the natural place for the new capital. There were a good many reasons for this; among them the fact that it was quite near the geographical center of the State; that it was at the so-called head of navigation of the Des Moines River; and that it was in a region favored by large tracts of timber and underlaid with coal had great weight. At that time also, it was supposed that the river would be permanently navigable on account of the improvements then going on. It was clear, too, that the great farming region of Northwestern Iowa was just beginning to be developed and the old notion that it was a barren country was fast passing away. Nearly

200,000 people were added to the population of Iowa from 1854 to 1856 and much of this increase was in the northwestern part.

With this outlook the legislature which met in 1854-1855 passed a law to relocate the capital, with the provision that it should be placed within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, and that, of course, would permit the selection of Fort Des Moines as many desired. The Governor was required to name five commissioners to select a site, and by the law they were instructed to secure enough land for the capitol and other necessary buildings without any expense to the State. Besides, the citizens of the community were to provide suitable buildings for the State offices and for the legislature without cost to the State.

Thus far all went well, since no actual location had been selected; such action was only preparatory to the real decision wherein a good many, it seems, were selfishly interested. As often happens, some men sought their own benefits rather than the welfare of their great and promising State.

With the local quarrel about where the first capitol building should be set in the new city, we are not much concerned. It might be of interest, however, to some who live under the shadow of the present magnificent State Capitol. Much bitter feeling was aroused before the Commissioners decided to select a hill overlooking the present city on the east side of the Des Moines River. In later years, it was said that all of the commissioners, save one, had become personally interested in lands adjoining the site of the new capitol. Again, the temptation to profit by new and inviting ventures overcame men who were entrusted with a public duty.

After the location had been decided, it was necessary for some leading citizens to get together and find money to erect the building that the State required, and so a committee was appointed, some money was borrowed from the State school fund, and a three story brick building, sixty by one hundred feet, was completed before the session of the legislature commencing in January, 1858. In October, 1857, Governor Grimes issued his proclamation approving the buildings erected in Des Moines for the use of the legislature and the State officers. The law required this approval before the transfer of the offices should be ordered.

At that time in the history of Iowa, the only way to reach Fort Des Moines was by stage or up the Des Moines River by boat, and the latter method was not very certain. The railroad had just reached Iowa City, and to move the State offices and all that belonged to them was no small undertaking. The road to Fort Des Moines over which the State property must be taken was still in a pioneer condition, but it was regularly traveled by the coaches of the Western Stage Company which never permitted bad roads to interrupt its service. It was some time, however, before contractors could be found who would undertake to move the capitol furniture. Finally the citizens of Des Moines sent men and teams to help in the removal, when the task of transferring four heavy office safes one hundred and twenty miles across the prairies, over unbridged streams and the almost impassable bottom land of the Skunk River, was begun.

This work of moving was commenced rather late in the fall so that the storms of approaching winter came on before it was completed. Indeed, it is commonly said that the heavy office safe of the State Treasurer had to remain for some time on the open prairie even after it had been brought within the limits of Polk County. After the ground had frozen and sufficient snow had fallen, it was loaded upon bob sleds and drawn by, some say, ten yoke of oxen to the new capitol. There it was received with great satisfaction by the State officers, their deputies, and employees, who were well aware that it contained the gold and silver to pay them their usual salary. To all concerned it was gratifying to know that this greatest piece of furniture had finally reached the permanent capital.

The State officers left Iowa City on a November morning in 1857 as passengers of the Western Stage Company which, it seems, had offered to them a complimentary ride. They made excellent time over the one hundred twenty miles to Des Moines and arrived there the next day. The Des Moines House on Walnut Street became the headquarters of the distinguished company.

The employees of the State House at Iowa City started across the country about the same time as their superiors, but they were not quite so comfortably cared for in stage coaches. Had it not been for a kind-hearted citizen of the former capital city they might have found the journey expensive. As it happened they were taken a good share of the way free of charge, but before reaching the end of the trip they were stopped by a snow storm. The second day out the storm began in the morning and it grew worse during the day. By night they were still twenty-five miles from the new capital and at a farm house where they were cared for until the next morning. The third morning the snow was deep enough to hide the track, whereupon the volunteer driver of the private conveyance refused to proceed. He was not familiar, he said, with the road from that place to the new city at the Raccoon forks. In this dilemma, the travelers sought assistance from a farmer, who obligingly took his heavy wagon and loading in the trunks of their owners who used them for seats, he hurried them over the remainder of their journey.

When the members of the State family had become well settled in their new quarters the final act of putting the State government into operation there was begun. That was the coming together of the General Assembly, or the State legislature, on January 11, 1858. The machinery which controls the State in its law-making, its executive, and its judicial relations was now fully transferred to the capital in the Des Moines Valley.

Although the law for the removal of the capital had said that buildings for the use of the State should be provided without public expense, it is well known that after years of discussion and petition from those who had put themselves in

debt for this purpose, the State of Iowa repaid the amount. The money was returned to the school fund from which it had been borrowed, and thus two ends were gained: private debts were paid, and the school fund was not so poor. It might be said also that the State did what it should have done at first: namely, built its own buildings and thereby kept itself from obligations to individuals who had to borrow from public funds.