

*Pieces of Iowa's Past*, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

**February 15, 2012**

**THIS WEEK:**

**IOWA STATE CAPITOL WPA PAINTING PROJECT**

**BACKGROUND:**

This article is copied from the Capitol Building Newspaper Clippings Scrapbook. The scrapbook contains clippings from 1906 to the 1970s and was compiled by the Iowa State Law Library.

This week's featured article appeared in the *Des Moines Sunday Register* December 6, 1936. The photograph of the **north Capitol steps**<sup>3</sup> appeared in the *Des Moines Register* June 30, 1937. **Governor Clyde Herring**<sup>2</sup> was in office during the time of the WPA work on the Capitol.

The Works Progress Administration was a national program created by order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1935 and funded by Congress through the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act. The program was headed by **Harry Hopkins**<sup>1</sup>. In 1939, it was renamed the Work Projects Administration. The goal of the WPA was to promote economic recovery by providing jobs to the unemployed during the Great Depression. Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA provided nearly eight million jobs. The projects

funded were initially aimed at infrastructure improvements. The focus then moved to public facilities and agricultural pursuits. Near the end of the WPA, funding projects focused on defense due to the United States' involvement in World War II. With war production came an economic boom resulting in low unemployment. Therefore, with the need gone, Congress terminated the WPA on June 30, 1944.



**Harry Hopkins**  
**FDR's federal emergency relief administrator**  
(b. August 17, 1890 – d. January 29, 1946)

### **Harry Hopkins<sup>1</sup>**

Born in 1890 in Sioux City, Iowa, Harry Hopkins grew up imbued with traditional Midwestern values of self-reliance, thrift, and pragmatism. At Grinnell College he studied American politics and the British Parliamentary system. He began his career working for charitable organizations such as the American Red Cross, New York City's Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, and the New York Tuberculosis Association. (from Weider History Group *Historynet.com*)

## **IOWA STATE CAPITOL WPA PAINTING PROJECT**

**First Painting in Many Years**  
(*Des Moines Sunday Register* – December 6, 1936)

## \$25,000 WPA Project Completed.

The Iowa legislature will come back early next month to a newly decorated statehouse.

The \$25,000 WPA painting project, in progress a year, has been completed, and Custodian D. B. Johnston faces the task of preparing the house and senate chambers and committee rooms for the arrival of the solons.

### **Meets Jan. 11.**

The legislature convenes Jan. 11. The task of grooming the statehouse will begin in earnest after the state cosmetology examination Monday.

The carpets must be washed and the chandeliers cleaned. The woodwork will be dusted and the swivel chairs (cost, \$40.90 each) which are used by the legislators will be brought out of storage.

Committee rooms, used by the old age assistance and motor vehicle departments, must be vacated.



**Clyde Herring<sup>2</sup>**

**Iowa Governor 1937-43**

(Photo from State Historical Society of Iowa)

(b. May 3, 1879 – d. September 15, 1945)

### **"False" Floor.**

The most revolutionary preparations must be made in the speaker's private office, where plumbing and photostatic equipment and a "false" floor of battleship linoleum must give way to the polished furniture and deep pile carpeting befitting the chambers of such a dignitary.

The photostatic equipment belongs to the motor vehicle department.

### **Moving.**

It is hoped that by moving the old age assistance office to another building enough room will be released in the basement to accommodate the overflow of the motor vehicle department which has been using the legislative rooms upstairs.

The 1937 session of the legislature should be outstanding. The members will work in brighter, fresher surroundings than any Iowa legislature for two decades.

### **Gold Leaf.**

Beginning last November, the senate and house chambers were completely redecorated. The decorations follow the original details, excepting as to the color scheme, which was lightened.

The color scheme ranges from a rich tan to warm rose and blue. The gold leaf was repaired. The heavy draperies were cleaned.

The house chamber is 79 feet wide, 91 feet long, and has a 49-foot ceiling. The senate chamber is slightly smaller. Twenty-two thousand feet of lumber were required for the scaffolding when the house chamber was decorated.

### **Not Since 1904.**

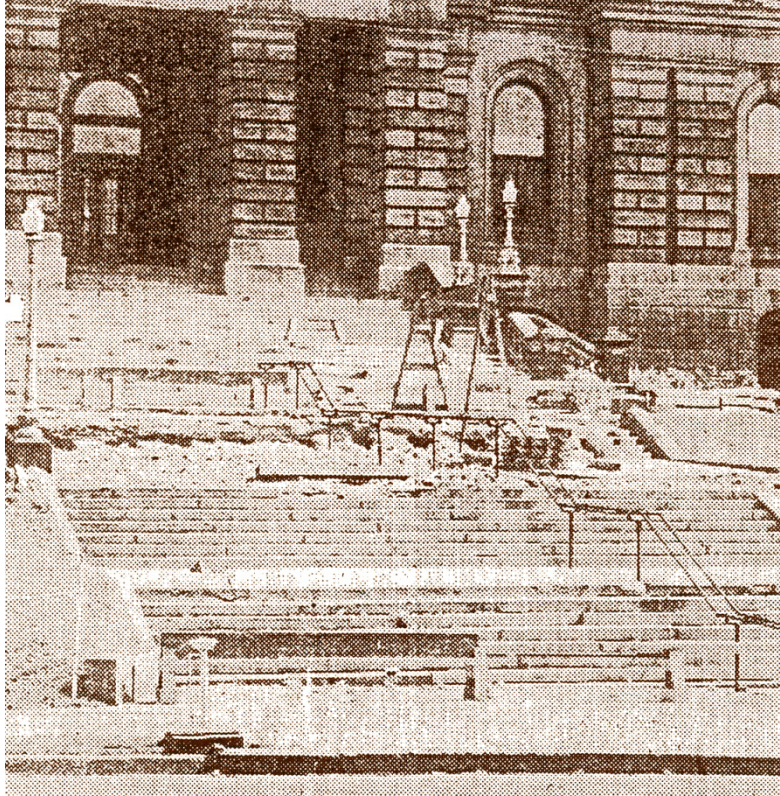
The project also included the painting of 1,037 windows and door frames and many thousands of feet of wall space; repairing and varnishing of 1,000 pieces of furniture, including 200 desks.

*The house chamber had not been touched by painters since its redecoration following the fire of 1904. The senate chamber never had been redecorated. The capitol was occupied in 1886.*

The interior is in relatively good condition, excepting draperies and carpets, badly worn, and the gallery seats in the legislative chambers.

### **Stone Work.**

The outside sorely needs attention, however. Stone work, which could not be replaced for less than a half million dollars, is badly weathered.



### **WPA reconstruction on north Capitol steps<sup>3</sup>**

*(The Des Moines Register, June 30, 1937)*

Mr. Johnston inspires the visitor with his affection for the building.

“Did you ever notice the marble work?” he asks.

You admit you haven’t paid much attention to it, whereupon he leads you to a door on first floor, with 19 different kinds of marble in the casing.

[There are 29 different kinds of marble in the capitol building.](#)

“Look at that piece of wood—it’s perfect,” Mr. Johnston continues, pointing to a walnut door casing in another wing of the building.

“And that painting,” he says, indicating the pioneer scene over the grand staircase, “seems almost to have another dimension when the lights are turned on—the figures stand out.”

#### **Massive.**

“I’ve been here over three years, and I’m just beginning to appreciate the building. We’re Americans, always in a hurry,” he adds, recalling his experiences in France during the war when he visited many buildings of architectural and artistic interest.

Then you go down into the basement, and on down into the subbasement, where you cannot fail to be impressed by the massiveness of the substructure.

### **Miles of Pipes.**

"When you consider that the cornerstone of this building was laid in 1871, and what they had to work with then, you begin to appreciate it," he declared.

Miles of pipes and conduits are used in heating, lighting and ventilating the building. Coal consumption at the capitol powerhouse now is 12 tons daily. It will be 24 to 26 tons daily in cold weather.