



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.

April 4, 2012

THIS WEEK: DATING AN EPOCH FROM PHOTOGRAPHS

BACKGROUND:

IOWA STATE CAPITOL GROUNDS EXTENSION PROJECT

The Capitol extension project began about 1913. The purpose of the project was to purchase land surrounding the Capitol in order to improve the beauty of the grounds and obtain enough land to build new structures and alleviate the overcrowding in the Capitol.

Senate File 538 levied a tax to pay for the purchase of the property. Van Buren and Wapello counties filed a suit against the state because it was believed by many people that this statewide tax was simply providing Des Moines with a "new park." This case was argued before the Iowa Supreme Court and the photographs that follow are a portion of the brief filed with the Court.

Dating an Epoch from Photographs

Photograph One

This photograph was taken from the Capitol looking south over Walnut Street and Court Avenue. Dating the photograph involves a process based upon what existed on the Capitol grounds and when. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument appears complete in the photo; therefore, the date was after 1897. The Allison Memorial was not yet built, so the date of the photo had to be before 1917.

With that information, and knowing the approximate addresses from the 900 to 1100 block of East Walnut Street and East Court Avenue, the next sources of information were city directories. The 1910 Des Moines City Directory places the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument and an apartment building (flats) in the 1000 block of East Walnut Street. It also places the Bentley & Olmsted Company at the southwest corner of East 11th Street and Court Avenue. In the picture, this is the building that appears to have windows across the entire roofline. The building appears to be quite new and somewhat out of place when compared to the surrounding structures.

Bentley & Olmsted manufactured boots and shoes. The company was also a wholesale supplier of boots and shoes. The aforementioned building in the picture housed the factory. The city directory confirms the Bentley & Olmsted Company had offices in Des Moines before 1900. The firm was located downtown on Court Avenue and for a short time on 3rd Street. The 1909 Des Moines City Directory places the business at East 11th Street and Court Avenue. By 1911, the business had moved to East 1st Street and Court Avenue. Newspaper articles from that time indicate that city leaders were working hard to keep the firm in Des Moines, but there is no specific information about the building and why a seemingly new building was only used for two years.



Photograph One

Photographs Two and Three

These pictures are of the same area looking from the south toward the Capitol. In these photographs, the Bentley & Olmsted building has been reduced to a pile of rubble. The second and third photographs are from a collection used as evidence in an Iowa Supreme Court case in 1913. The State of Iowa had authorized a Capitol extension project. This project involved levying a tax throughout the state to raise funds to purchase all land around the Capitol. The land would then be cleared of existing structures to create a park-like area around the Capitol. This levy was challenged by counties in the state, and the Iowa Supreme Court eventually decided the case.



Photograph Two



Photograph Three