

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.

March 20, 2013

THIS WEEK: Building the Iowa State Capitol

BACKGROUND: PETER DEY (*Iowa Biographical Series*, edited by Benjamin F. Shambaugh)

Peter A. Dey was born on January 27, 1825. The youngest of five children, he was born in Romulus, New York, the son of Anthony and Hannah Dey. When he was five years old, the family moved to Seneca Falls, where he attended Seneca Falls Academy. In 1840, Dey enrolled at Geneva (later Hobart) College and graduated in 1844.

Dey's career began in 1846 at the age of 21 when he was hired as an engineer with the New York and Erie Railroad. His first work was the extension of the line through the Delaware River valley in Pennsylvania, completed in 1848. Dey then worked for the Cayuga and Seneca Canal until 1850, when he helped design enlarged locks on the Erie Canal. By 1850, he was convinced of the growing importance of travel by train, and he moved west to design rail lines for the Michigan Southern and the Northern Indiana companies. When those were completed as far as Chicago in 1852, he joined the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad to build a line to the Mississippi River.

In 1852, Dey's career was associated with extension of railroad lines across Illinois. By 1853, plans called for the extension of the railroad line into Iowa, and Dey was chosen to be head engineer. In May of 1853, Dey and his surveying party crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa.

In 1856, the federal government made land grants of more than 1.5 million acres of public land to fund the construction of four railroad lines across Iowa. Dey established his home in Iowa City at that time and constructed a house "at the point where Clinton Street intersects Church Street. High on a bluff overlooking the Iowa River above the quarry used to build the Stone Capitol." On September 11, 1857, Peter and Catherine Dey moved into their new home.

Even as the Iowa survey was proceeding, Dey was sent to Omaha to begin the surveys for the transcontinental railroad across the plains.

Dey was appointed chief engineer in 1864, and outlined the route through Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah. General Grenville Dodge was released from military service to assist him, and Dey began work for the Union Pacific Railroad.

After his resignation, Dey returned to his home in Iowa City, where he became an active local businessman and politician. He was appointed to the Examining Board and the Building Committee of the State University of Iowa; South Hall and North Hall both were built during his tenure. Dey also organized and was president of the Iowa City Elevator Company. Dey surveyed a railroad line between Dubuque and Keokuk through Iowa City, although it was never completed. In 1872, Governor Samuel Merrill appointed him as one of four members of the Board of Capitol Commissioners to superintend the construction of a new state capitol.

In 1878, the Iowa Legislature authorized a Board of Railroad Commissioners, and Governor John Gear appointed Dey as one of the three men to supervise railroad operations in Iowa. For the next 10 years, Dey was reappointed four times by three Republican governors—Gear, Buren Robinson Sherman, and William Larrabee—although he was a prominent Democrat who had served as delegate to the 1876 national convention that nominated Samuel Tilden. Legislation in 1888 forced the election of railroad commissioners. Dey was defeated in 1890, but won election in 1891 and served until 1894. In all, he spent 14 years as a capitol commissioner and 15 years as a railroad commissioner.

In Iowa City, Dey served on the Board of Curators of the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1887 until 1910, serving as president from 1901 until 1909. During his years on the board, the society began publication of the Iowa Journal of History and Politics and the Iowa Biographical Series.

*(Integrity in Public Service by Jack T. Johnson)
(Published by the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 1939)*

Building the Iowa State Capitol

(Building a State Capitol, Chapter 20)

The Commissioners selected to direct the construction of the New Stone Capitol were well chosen. Peter A. Dey was a trained engineer; Robert S. Finkbine was an experienced builder; John G. Foote was a retired merchant; and Maturin L. Fisher was a leader in education and politics and a student of architecture. Without exception the Board of Capitol Commissioners was competent to achieve satisfactory results in the erection of a public building.

The controversy over the quarry to be worked for the stone for the Capitol was still unsettled; and the criticism of the building's foundation was a current topic when the new Board of Capitol Commissioners assembled in Des Moines. Thus, on April 17, 1872, at their first meeting, the four members were confronted with problems of organization and the technique of procedure.

The chief questions confronting the Commissioners were: Should the foundation stone already in place be removed? What new quarry should be

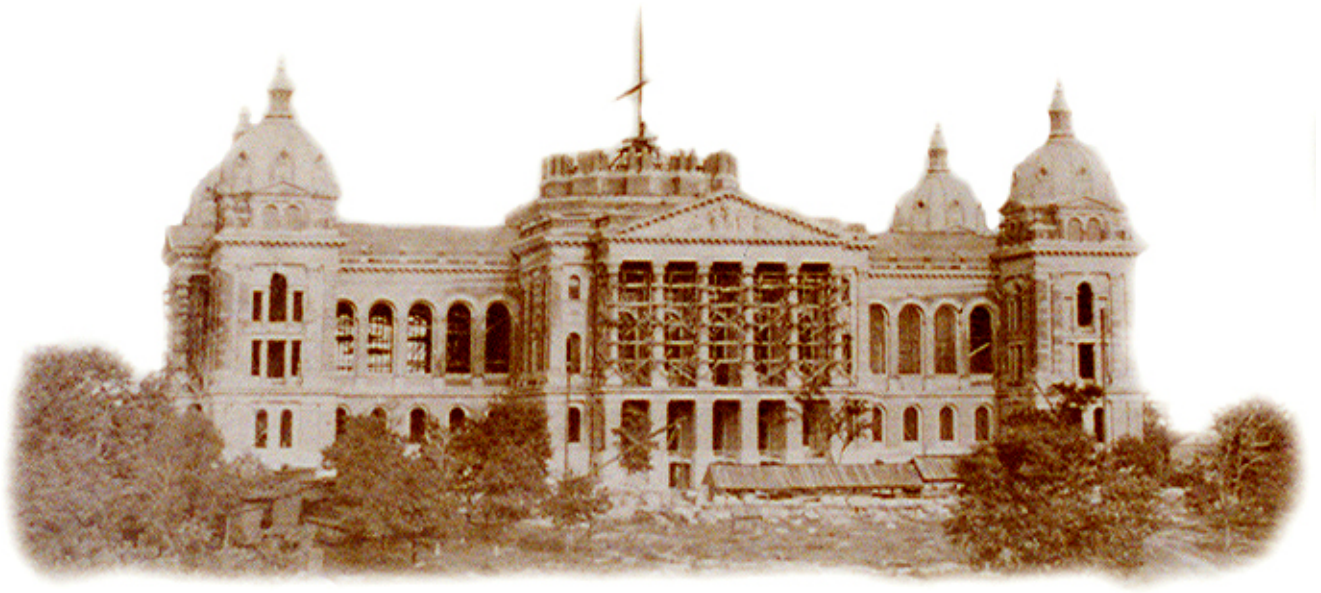
selected? How should the architectural design be modified? How should the new Board be organized? On these questions the Commissioners concentrated their immediate attention.



Peter A. Dey
(b. January 27, 1825 – d. July 11, 1911)

A committee consisting of Robert S. Finkbine and Peter A. Dey examined the foundation as constructed under the direction of the preceding Board. After mature deliberation this committee recommended that the entire basement walls be removed.

To Peter A. Dey's recommendation that every stone had to come out, Robert Finkbine said: "I had not gone as far as that, but perhaps you are right. Whether the Capitol costs the state fifty thousand dollars more or less is a matter that will soon be forgotten, but any failure in the foundation will be a source of regret as long as the building stands." This was the principle that characterized the attitude of the Board throughout the construction of the new Capitol.



Iowa State Capitol During Construction 1879

On February 5, 1879, Maturin L. Fisher died. His death was a great loss to the Commissioners because he was an expert on building material. He had served on construction committees of other State buildings. To fill the vacancy caused by the death of Mr. Fisher, Governor John H. Gear appointed Cyrus Foreman of Osage. Mr. Foreman took his seat on the Board on March 27, 1879.

The construction of a public building of the size of the New Stone Capitol at Des Moines required supervision of the most exact kind. In their fifth biennial report the Commissioners stated that "the walls of the entire building have been completed, the domes of the four pavilions have been constructed, and the whole building put under roof, except the main dome".

By 1881 the Board of Capitol Commissioners was able to announce that "the main dome has been constructed, and the exterior completed except the painting and gilding." Whether the dome of the Capitol was to be gilded or not raised an interesting controversy. Peter A. Dey later told the story in these words: "After the plans of the present dome were adopted there was marked difference in the taste of the commissioners. Messrs. Foreman and Dey insisted on gilding it; Messrs. Finkbine and Foote were decidedly opposed to gilding, assigning as a reason that gilding was an outcrop of the luxurious life and depraved taste of the period of the Grand Monarch Louis XIV. Governor Gear, near the close of his second term, was called upon to give the casting vote. He favored gilding. For some reason that I do not recall the question was again raised and Governor Sherman also voted for the gilding."

On June 30, 1886, the Board of Capitol Commissioners made their final report to Governor William Larrabee. The interior furnishings had been planned and the exterior had been completed.

On June 30, 1886, the accounts of the Commissioners showed that from the day of commencement to the day of completion the cost of constructing and furnishing the Capitol and landscaping the Capitol grounds amounted to \$2,873,294.59.

The expenditure of money had been under the direction of John G. Foote, who had been appointed superintendent of finance. To investigate the financial operation of the Board and to settle the Capitol accounts, the Twenty-first General Assembly authorized the Governor "to make a full settlement with said board of commissioners". Accordingly, Delos Arnold was appointed to audit the accounts.

Writing of the investigation, Peter A. Dey said that with "a determination to be thorough they spent a great deal of time, examined 3,735 vouchers and bills, carried out and verified all the labor pay rolls of sixteen years, compared the prices of labor and material with those that were being paid at corresponding periods and compared these bills and accounts with the warrants drawn by the Auditor. They found errors in thirty-one of these vouchers, sixteen were against the commissioners amounting to \$37.73, and fifteen in their favor, amounting to \$33.96, leaving a balance of \$3.77 against the commissioners."

A large measure of the credit for the exactness of the accounts must be given to John G. Foote. Writing in a reminiscent mood, Mr. Dey said of Mr. Foote that he "did not claim any special knowledge of mechanical construction, nor what material it was best to use under various conditions, but had an abiding faith in Mr. Finkbine's judgment. He rarely made any mistakes." A few days before his death, Mr. Foote related to Mr. Dey that he would "die happy in the thought that the building of the capitol was an honest and wise expenditure of public money and that ours was a trust faithfully carried out."

A more permanent tribute came from Delos Arnold who had investigated the accounts. In his final report to the Governor the investigator said that "it ought to be a source of gratification to the people of Iowa that they have such a magnificent capitol building, pronounced by eminent architects and builders to be the finest structure on the continent for the money it cost, and it should be a source of still greater satisfaction and pride that it was constructed by a board of commissioners, citizens of the State, upon whose official honor and integrity no breath of suspicion rests."