

STATE LIBRARY OF IOWA



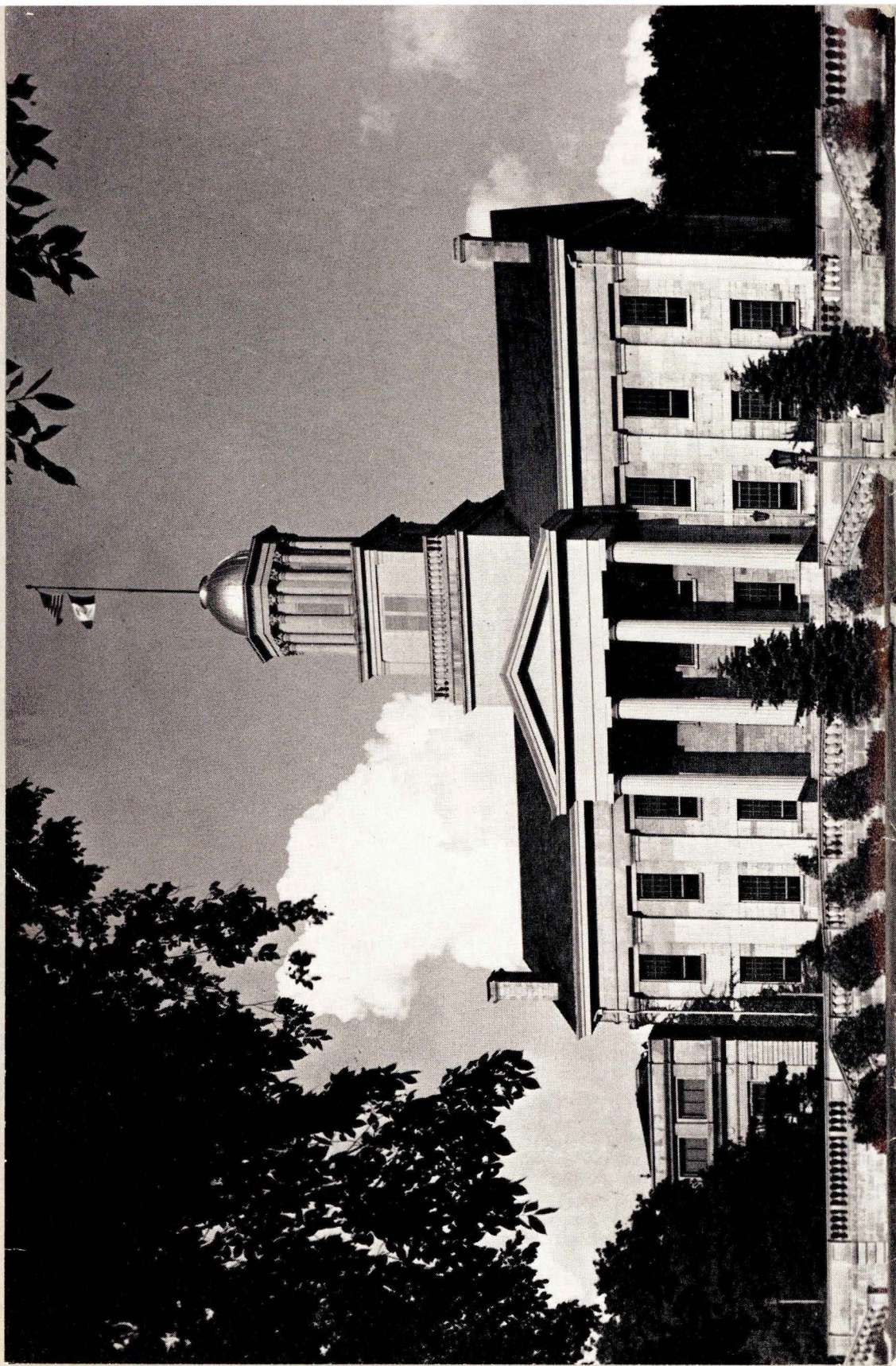
3 1723 02104 2999

F  
622  
.04  
S61  
1949

# Old Capitol



IOWA, Capitols, History



*OLD CAPITOL*

# Old Capitol

THE STORY OF A BUILDING AND  
OF HOW IT CAME TO SYMBOLIZE  
THE STRENGTH AND ENERGY OF  
A STATE AND A SCHOOL

*STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA*

*Iowa City : 1949*



HE STORY OF IOWA'S OLD CAPITOL IS the complete record of the state's advancement, from the days of the midwestern Indians down to our own time. The monumental stone building, around which the State University of Iowa has grown for a hundred years, was beginning to look down upon the valley of the Iowa River while the Sac and Fox Indians were still lingering in eastern Iowa.

It was from the Indian that the white man got the name of "Iowa." The red man loved that name. It was his description of natural beauty in the Iowa country. The site of Old Capitol, as staked out by territorial commissioners, was placed in the very heart of the Indian's Iowa.

Iowa Territory had been officially organized July 4, 1838. A vast portion of its area was still the

domain of the red man. Only six years earlier, the Sac and Fox Indians had retained the border lands of the Iowa River when they relinquished their claims to eastern Iowa. This reservation was made in the treaty of 1832, which provided for the first westward movement of the Iowa tribes. A second treaty, negotiated in 1836, was necessary before the United States government could fully extend its dominion over the stream which the Indians called "Iowa." It was natural that the earliest of Iowa's white pioneers should borrow from the Indians this deep affection for the river and the border lands over which the name of Iowa had the greatest significance.

The treaty of 1836 released a large section of Johnson County, then the geographical center of that part of Iowa which was being turned over to the United States by the Sacs and Foxes. When the first legislative assembly of Iowa Territory convened in Burlington, in the fall of 1838, it immediately appointed commissioners to locate the territorial seat of government in Johnson county. By the same act, the assembly decreed that the new capital should be known as *Iowa City*.

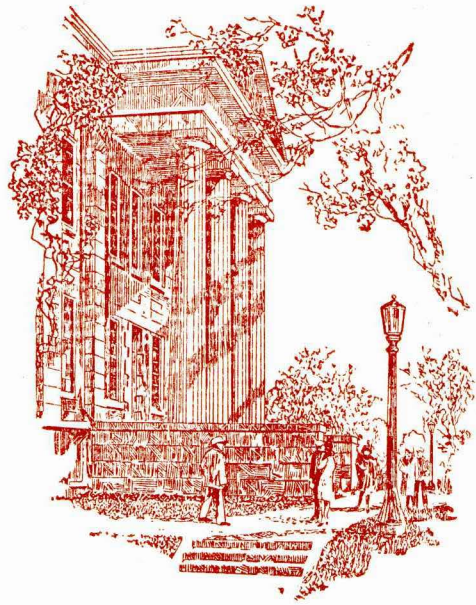
That same year, on July 4, the vanguard of settlers in Johnson county had assembled in celebration of territorial recognition and had invited their Indian neighbors as guests of honor. At the head of the red men's delegation was Poweshiek, famous chief of the Foxes. From *The Palimpsest* there comes this quotation from the speech made by Chief Poweshiek on the occasion: "Soon I shall go to a new home and you will plant corn where my dead sleep. Our towns, the paths we have made, and the flowers we love will soon be yours. I have moved many times and have seen the

white man put his feet in the tracks of the Indian and make the earth into fields and gardens. I know that I must go away and you will be so glad when I am gone that you will soon forget that the meat and the lodge-fire of the Indian have been forever free to the stranger and at all times he has asked for what he has fought for, the right to be free."

Only a few months later, the stakes set by the territorial commissioners awaited the workmen who were to begin construction of Old Capitol. They stood there in the wild Iowa country, not far from the spot where Poweshiek had spoken. A few scattering claims had been made in that vicinity, but no cultivation or improvements had been started within sight of the hill on which Old Capitol was to stand. Even the government land survey came several months after the selection of the site.

Nothing is more sharply defined in Iowa history than the passing of the Old Capitol area directly from the hands of the Indians into the hands of modern civilization and its builders. The lack of any prolonged transition period is absolute. Men with axes and stakes went to the Indian's hill and there they established the site of the territorial capital and Old Capitol itself. And through it all, Poweshiek and his tribesmen were friendly. Their regret had been beautifully expressed by their Chief, yet there is no record of bitter resentment. Poweshiek did not propose to stand in the way of progress. He gave to Old Capitol the oldest, perhaps the best, of its traditions.

What was the nature of this Indian country, this hill which looked down upon the valley of the Iowa River? To the Indian it was Iowa at its best—a combination in compact area, of streams, woodlands, and the



open prairie. Picture this scene at the beginning of Old Capitol. Imagine the structure of stone effaced. In its place there stands the Indian sentinel on the hill. Here is the tribe's protection from its enemies. Food is within easy reach. In the timber are deer and wild turkeys in great abundance. Out in the open country, it is only a few steps to the feeding places of the prairie chickens. Along the secondary streams, the beaver is building his dams and huts. This is not a flight of fancy. It is history. It describes the setting of Old Capitol at the time when the site was marked and plans went forward for immediate construction of the building.

The Territorial Legislature had specified that the commissioners were to meet on May 1, 1839, at the town of Napoleon, in Johnson County. From this base of operations they were to proceed to the selection of a

capital site within the boundaries of that county. Chauncey Swan, John Ronalds, and Robert Ralston were the commissioners. The presence of two was necessary to give validity to any action undertaken in the name of the commission. On the morning of May 1, Swan was the only member who had arrived at Napoleon. Noon approached and neither of his associates had appeared. Fragments of authenticated history coming down from that period describe the dramatic climax which brought one of the other commissioners to Napoleon a few minutes before midnight. A youth named Philip Clark volunteered to ride to Louisa County, where John Ronalds resided. This involved a trip of thirty-five miles each way. There was no road, only a trail across the prairie. There were no bridges where streams had to be cross-



ed. In spite of these handicaps, Clark completed the circuit of seventy miles and returned to Napoleon with Ronalds just in time to fulfill the provisions of the law.

Having thus far conformed to the order of the legislature, the commission was now ready to visit and compare prospective sites. Three days later they made their decision in favor of a natural amphitheater of hills, bluffs and river valley. This superb natural setting for a capital city was found two miles up the river from Napoleon. On a hill which looked down the river into the valley and up the river along high bluffs of stone, they marked the ground for Old Capitol. As the work progressed, the third commissioner, Ralston, arrived and promptly gave his approval to the acts of the other two.

Working among the Indians of eastern Iowa through the entire early period of this narrative, was a priest who was destined to play a leading part in the history of Old Capitol. He was Father Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli, a native of Italy, who came to America in 1828 at the age of twenty-two. He was a student of classic architecture, and it was from him that several settlements, in the Territories of Wisconsin and Iowa, obtained designs for churches. One of his churches was in Burlington, and the record shows this Dominican priest offering his church for the use of the Territorial Senate in the fall of 1838.

The influence of Father Mazzuchelli is seen in the structural beauty of Old Capitol. Original plans are believed by some to be of his making, although the name of John F. Rague appears officially as the supervising architect.

A portrait of Father Mazzuchelli, a gift to Iowa

by the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, now hangs in Old Capitol, in the office of the president. The building itself, a masterpiece of Doric architecture, is widely considered his enduring monument.

Part of the credit for the general city plan is also given to Father Mazzuchelli. Iowa Avenue, extending east and west from Old Capitol, was made one-hundred-twenty feet wide. Other major streets, such as Clinton, Washington and Capitol, were given a width of one-hundred feet. Thus the builders of Iowa City provided in advance for the needs of the distant future.

Excavation for Old Capitol was under way soon after the commissioners had made their report. Natural quarries were found at the river bank, and the gathering of structural materials was started. On July 4, 1840, the cornerstone was laid. Robert Lucas, territorial governor, was the official in charge of the ceremonies. The picture of that historic occasion is fairly complete in early records. Settlements at the new capital had started. To this population was added a large number of visitors on that Independence Day. Some of Poweshiek's tribesmen were still lingering along the Iowa River, and they mingled with the settlers on Old Capitol hill.

The cornerstone contained the Declaration of Independence; Constitution of the United States; organic law of the Territory of Iowa; laws enacted by the first legislative assembly; the journal of the House of Representatives; a copy of each newspaper being published in the territory; and a scroll bearing the names of President Van Buren, Governor Lucas, and various Iowa officials.

For several years thereafter, the work on Old

Capitol progressed. It was a colossal undertaking when measured by the resources of the pioneer builders. The first stone was procured from the site on which the president's home now stands, at the head of Clinton street. The supply at this point proved inadequate, and Old Capitol quarry, ten miles up the river, was then established. The builders insisted upon cut stone of large dimensions. They used individual stones with an estimated weight of eight thousand pounds. These enormous blocks were floated down the river on rafts. Some of the records suggest that stone for special use was brought overland from Cedar Valley, on the Cedar River. Giant timbers were cut on the ground and were bound into trusses with hand-wrought iron.

The nature of the masonry is revealed by the statement that the foundation walls are six feet thick. The basement walls have a uniform thickness of four feet. Under all door and window openings there are inverted arches, thus evenly distributing the great weight of the super-structure along all sections of the foundation wall. The greater portion of the first and second story outer wall is three feet thick.

The pictures of Old Capitol provide their own description of its appearance. Its dimensions are one-hundred-twenty feet north and south and sixty feet east and west. Each of its porticos is supported by four massive pillars. The east and west fronts are also ornamented by stone pilasters which are nearly four feet wide and stand out twelve inches from the surface of the walls. Supporting the dome are Corinthian columns with capitals of imposing beauty.

Territorial assemblies, six sessions of the state legislature, and three constitutional conventions were

held in Old Capitol. Use was being made of it several years before the building was fully completed for the housing of all departments of the state government. In the aggregate, the period of construction covered the total of fifteen years. The total cost to the Iowa government was approximately \$125,000.

It was in Old Capitol that the territorial legislature became the state legislature when Iowa was admitted to the Union, on December 28, 1846. Before that assembly had adjourned, it had created the State University of Iowa by constitutional enactment. The date of the University's founding is February 25, 1847, only two months later than the beginning of Iowa statehood.

When the seat of government was moved to Des Moines, in the fall of 1857, Old Capitol passed into the hands of the University for perpetual guardianship. Organization of the University had been completed, and actual instruction was in progress. Some indication of the early enrollment is to be found in the record showing that one hundred twenty-four State University of Iowa students enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. It was during this period, in 1864, that Agassiz visited the University and made his study of the coral reefs along the Iowa river.

From this chapter of Old Capitol's history a faded print survives to tell its tragic story. It shows Old Capitol draped in mourning after news came announcing that President Lincoln had been assassinated.

To Old Capitol there came some hundreds of men and boys who had seen service in the Civil War. By free tuition and otherwise, the legislature encouraged their attendance at the University.

As the University grew in attendance, other

buildings were provided, but Old Capitol continued to occupy its place of pre-eminence. It has remained continuously as the central figure of the University—the sentinel on the hill—the source and symbol of all the University's traditions. Old Capitol at one time housed several academic departments of the University. The last of these to move into its own building was the College of Law. Since the transfer of these departments, Old Capitol has served the University as administrative headquarters.

After more than three-quarters of a century of service, some of the timbers of Old Capitol began to show the marks of time and natural disintegration. This brought the warning of the need for steps looking toward long-time preservation. The Thirty-Seventh and Fortieth General Assemblies made appropriations for this purpose. Structural steel was substituted for the old wooden beams and trusses. A settling in one corner was permanently corrected. A general fire-proofing was carried out, but in no place was the reconstruction permitted to change the original plan. The work of restoration and preservation was completed in 1924.

Today, Old Capitol looks across its central campus into vistas revealing more than one-hundred modern University buildings. It sees more than sixteen thousand students annually. Over the old Indian country into which it was born, it sees a University city exceeding twenty thousand in population. It sees the abundance of trees and all the natural landscape splendidly preserved.

In early autumn the first fallen leaves, driven by the wind, begin to skitter crisply across the walks and lawns. Old students returning and new students

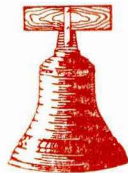
coming to the campus for the first time gather at Old Capitol for a ceremony on Induction Day. Here they renew the annual pledge of loyalty to the traditions of Old Capitol and the founders of Iowa.



## OLD GOLD

O, IOWA, CALM AND SECURE ON THY HILL,  
Looking down on the river below,  
With a dignity born of the dominant will  
Of the men that have lived long ago;  
O, heir of the glory of pioneer days,  
Let thy spirit be proud as of old,  
For thou shalt find blessing and honor and praise  
In the daughters and sons of Old Gold.

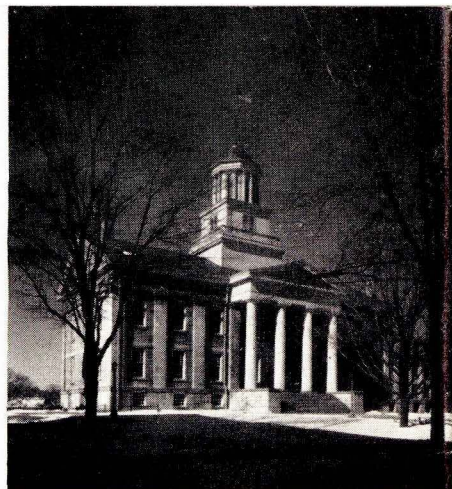
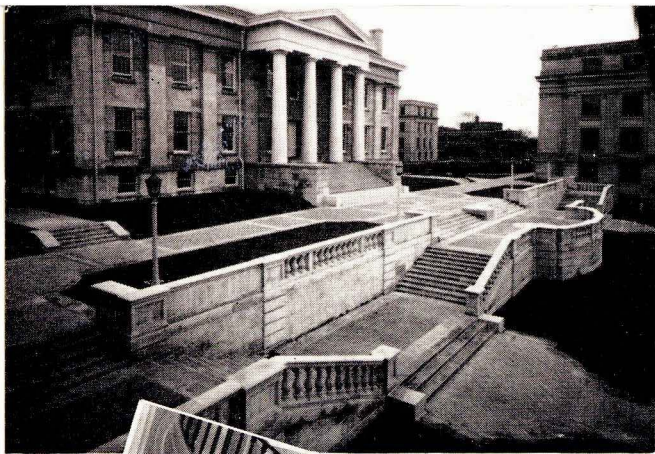
We shall sing and be glad with the days as they fly  
In the time that we spend in thy halls,  
And in sadness we'll part when the days have gone by  
And our paths turn away from thy walls;  
Till the waters no more in thy rivers shall run,  
Till the stars in the heavens grow cold,  
We shall sing of the glory and fame thou hast won  
And the love that we bear for Old Gold.



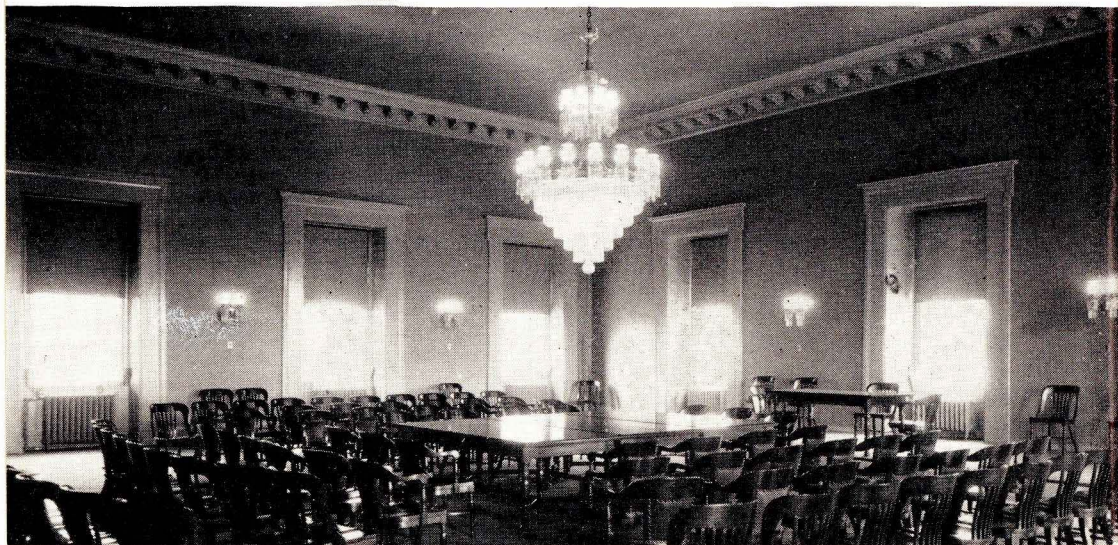
*A fading print shows a crowd assembled before Old Capitol to mourn the death of President Abraham Lincoln.*



*This photograph of Old Capitol, with an ox team passing in the foreground, was made at the Johnson County Fair of 1853.*



TOP LEFT: the steps at the west approach to Old Capitol, scene of many lectures and convocations. TOP RIGHT: the majestic old building in the dead of winter. LEFT: the spiral stairway with its unique reverse curve. An ordinary spiral stairs curves only in one direction, but this one changes direction—a variation conceived by an ingenious builder. BELOW: the House Chamber on the second floor, where many important meetings are held. Doctoral examinations are given here, and visiting lecturers are heard here as well as in the Senate Chamber across the hall. The first floor and basement contain the offices of the President and other administrators.





F  
622  
.04  
S61  
1949

*Old  
Capitol*

