

Iowa's First State Capitol

“Old Stone” in Iowa City

Territorial Governor Robert Lucas selected Burlington as the first capital of the Iowa Territory. The Legislature convened in November 1838, at the Zion Church. The Council had 13 members, the House had 26.

The first Territorial Legislature decided to move the capital farther west. A commission sent out to select a location in Johnson County in May 1839, consisted of Chauncey Swan, John Ronalds, and Robert Ralston. They chose the permanent site for the capital indicating the place by a slab driven into the ground about where the Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City now stands.

At this time, the only building in sight from the spot where the stake had been driven was a half-finished log cabin. By the end of July, the town was already laid out, and a map had been drawn. People began to buy lots at Iowa City in August. Log cabins and frame houses seemed to spring up overnight. Plans for the capitol moved rapidly ahead.

Governor Lucas issued a proclamation changing the capital from Burlington to Iowa City on April 30, 1841. The architect for the capitol at Iowa City was John Francis Rague. He had only recently completed the plans for the Illinois capitol at Springfield

Although the capitol was still under construction, the 1841 session of the Legislature was scheduled to meet in Iowa City. To be certain the Legislature would meet in Iowa City and not some other town, the citizens promised to provide a rent-free building for the Legislature. In fact, Walter Butler, a citizen of the frontier capital, built the two-story frame building for the Legislative Assembly. A citizen paid for the costs of a capitol.

Called the Old Stone Capitol, the building was a late example of Greek Revival architecture. The walls of the Old Capitol were composed of porous Iowa limestone, giving the building a rough-hewn quality. The portico columns, pediment, bell housing, lantern (cupola), and dome are all wood, painted to imitate stone.

For 16 years, the seat of government remained at Iowa City. That thriving town beheld 14 sessions of the Legislature. Three constitutional conventions convened there, accomplish their work, and adjourned. It witnessed also, during those 16 years, a constant stream of settlers who came to push the frontier farther and farther toward the west. At each of the constitutional conventions and at all but two sessions of the Legislative Assembly or General Assembly, the question of relocating the capital arose.

Iowa became a state in 1846, with Iowa City still the capital. However, there was a feeling that the seat of government should be near the center of the area. The capital of Iowa was moved to Des Moines in 1857. All the contents of the capitol had to be moved to the new capitol. Moving the contents was a big task. There were no railroads in the state. Roads were only dirt ruts across the prairie. Bridges across streams and rivers had not yet been built. Along with the state papers, furniture and books, four large safes had to be hauled to Des Moines. When the teamsters ran

into a blizzard they had to leave the treasurer's safe on the prairie for several days until the storm passed. Then the safe was hauled on a bobsled over the frozen ground to Des Moines.

The Western Stage Company gave free transportation to state officials making the change. The members of the Seventh General Assembly, the first Assembly to meet in Des Moines, came to the capital by stage and wagon. Probably some walked. Many legislators traveled over 100 miles, with the thermometer reading 20 below. No railroads reached the capital then.

When Iowa moved its seat of government to Des Moines the Old Capitol was given to the University of Iowa. The building was used for classrooms and offices and soon became a symbol for the University. In 1970, the University stopped using the Old Capitol so that it could be restored. Six years later, it was reopened so that people could visit the building that had become a symbol of both Iowa government and public higher education.

In November 2001, a fire caused heavy damage to the Old Capitol, but restoration began soon after the fire.

More information:

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/TB/5965.pdf>

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/TB/24545.pdf>

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/resources/tourCapitol/pictorial/capitolPicsPast/capitolConstruction>