LEGISLATIVE SERVICES AGENCY
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Pieces of Iowa's Past

This Week:

The Rise and Fall of the Court Avenue Viaduct in Des Moines

January 29, 2020

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 italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

The Rise and Fall of the Court Avenue Viaduct in Des Moines

In 1913, the Executive Council through the Capitol Extension project hired E. L. Masqueray to design a plan for the Iowa State Capitol grounds. That plan included a viaduct over Court Avenue. Masqueray's focus was the placement of the proposed Allison Memorial. This memorial was the prominent feature, winning out over the already established Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, which, in Masqueray's plan, would be moved to the east side of the Capitol.

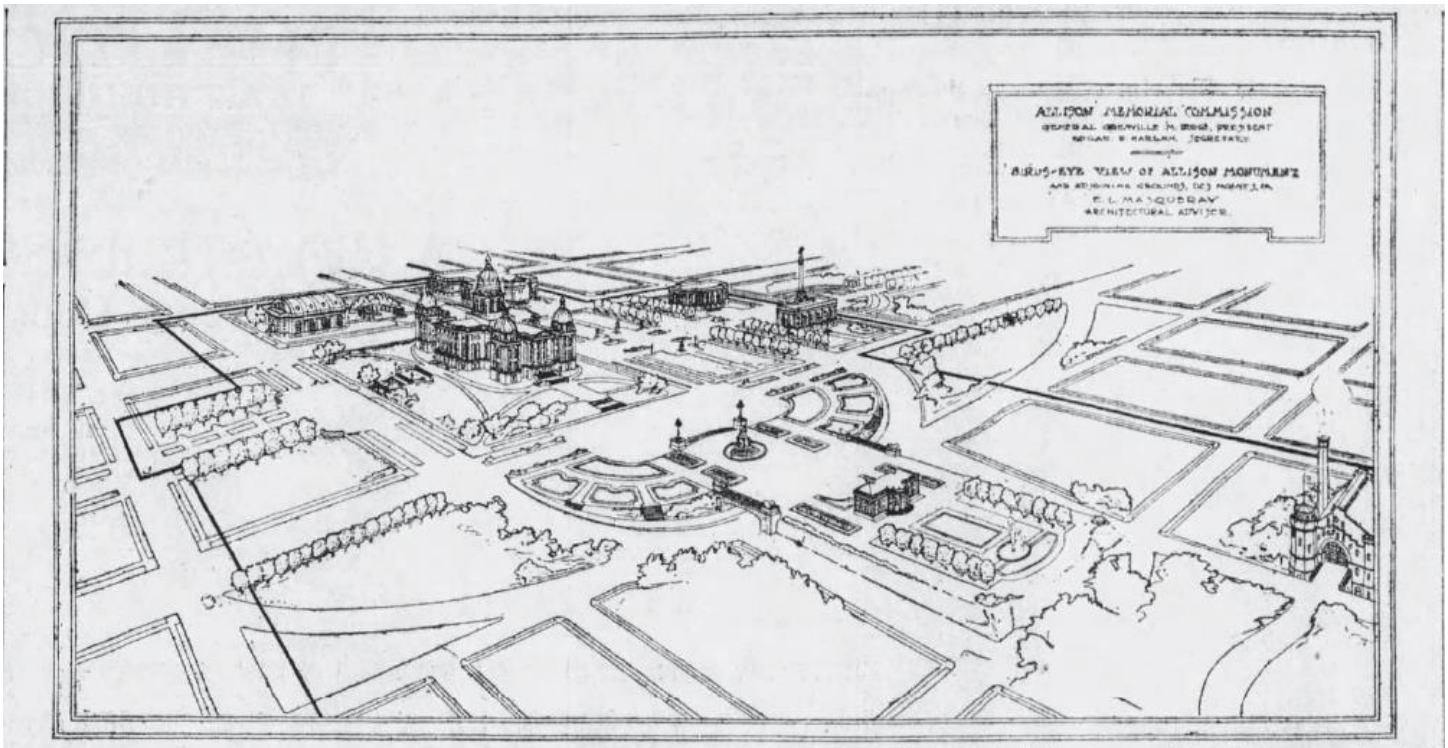
E. L. Masqueray

The future Allison Memorial would sit prominently to the south. The addition of a viaduct allowed for extended green space around the proposed Allison monument. In May of 1916, the Executive Council awarded a contract to Koss Construction Company of Des Moines, Iowa, to build the viaduct, and in June of that year, O. W. Crowley was named the Superintendent of Construction for the Court Avenue viaduct project. Crowley was a civil engineer and lived just two blocks from the construction site.

Newspaper

The Des Moines Register

Des Moines, Iowa – December 28, 1913



The drawing printed above shows a bird's-eye view of the capitol and its environs as it will look when the proposed improvement shall have been completed. The plans were drawn by E. L. Masqueray, architectural expert and adviser to the Allison memorial commission.

From the *Iowa Official Register*

This is an excerpt from the 1913-1914 *Iowa Official Register,* Executive Council reports on the Capitol Extension project:

CAPITOL EXTENSION.

May 7, 1913—Contract with E. L. Masqueray of Saint Paul, architect and artist, for improvement and beautification of grounds additional to the capitol at 2 per cent of the amount paid to contractors for such improvement and beautification, authorized.

May 9, 1913—L. A. Jester was employed to assist council in purchasing extended capitol grounds, the salary for the first montn's service $250.00 for such time as he found necessary to give to the work.

July 11, 1913—A. C. Parker was employed as additional counsel in extension of capitol ground trial.

December 18, 1913—Capitol grounds extension and improvement warrants and resolutions approved.

December 24, 1913—Proposal of George M. Bechtel & Co. to purchase warrants was accepted.

This is an excerpt from the 1917-1918 *Iowa Official Register,* Executive Council reports on the Capitol Extension project:

May 31, 1916—Contract for Court avenue viaduct awarded to Koss Construction Company.

June 6, 1916—Proposal of F. F. Balzer for additional excavating accepted.

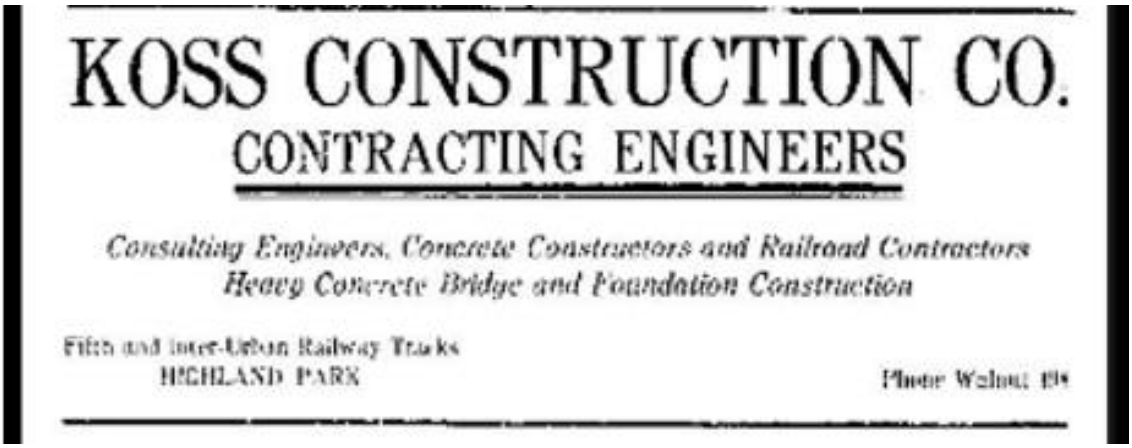
June 7, 1916—Conference had with City Council and others relative to changing grade of East Grand avenue.

June 8, 1916—Changes in width of roadbed and grade of East Grand avenue again considered and former order granting widening of street was rescinded, leaving said streets as at present.

June 14, 1916—O. W. Crowley appointed superintendent of construction on Court avenue viaduct.

From the *Des Moines City Directory*

This is an advertisement from the 1916 *Des Moines City Directory:*



KOSS CONSTRUCTION CO.

CONTRACTING ENGINEERS

Consulting Engineers, Concrete Constructors and Railroad Contractors
Heavy Concrete Bridge and Foundation Construction

Fifth and Inter-Urban Railway Tracks
HIGHLAND PARK

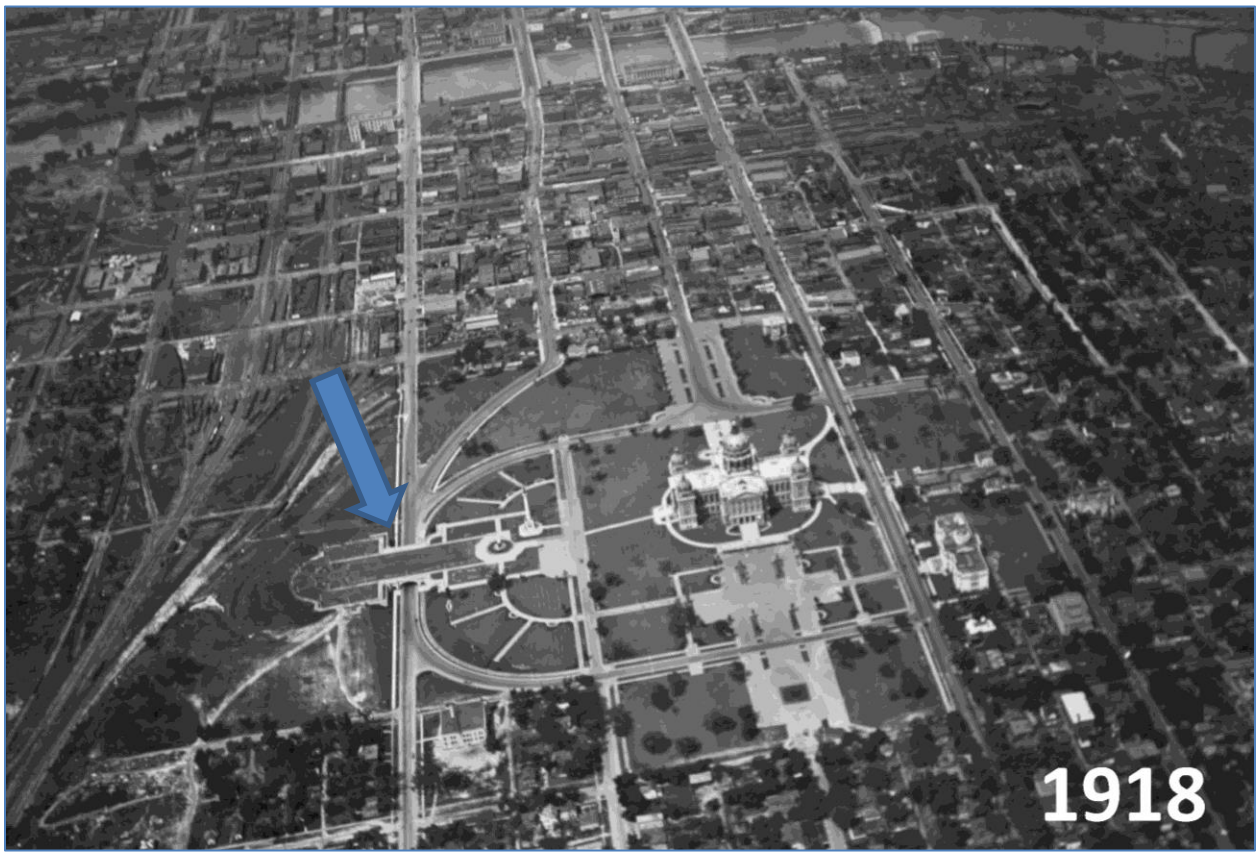
Phone Walnut 18

This is an excerpt from the 1917 *Des Moines City Directory:*

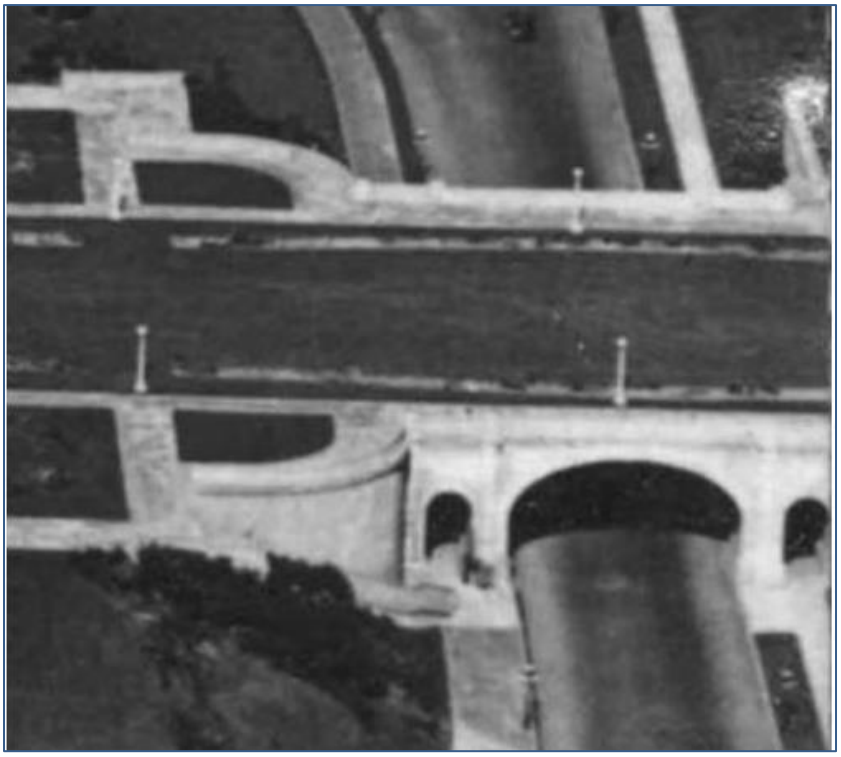
Crowley Ella M osteopath 302, 517½ Walnut rms Victoria Hotel
Crowley E Frank student Still College of Osteopathy bds 614 Grand
Crowley Leonard (c) janitor Princess Theatre res 301 Arthur
Crowley Mary slsldy Wilkins Bros res 829 8th
Crowley Orville civil eng bds 1141 e Grand av
Crowley Paul W dep State Dairy and Food Com res 3114 1st
Crowley Ralph T (c) lab res 1187 14th
Crowley Stephen A clk S & L Drug Co rms Batchelor's Hotel

The Court Avenue viaduct during construction.

The Court Avenue viaduct is completed.



This aerial photo shows the completed viaduct in 1918.

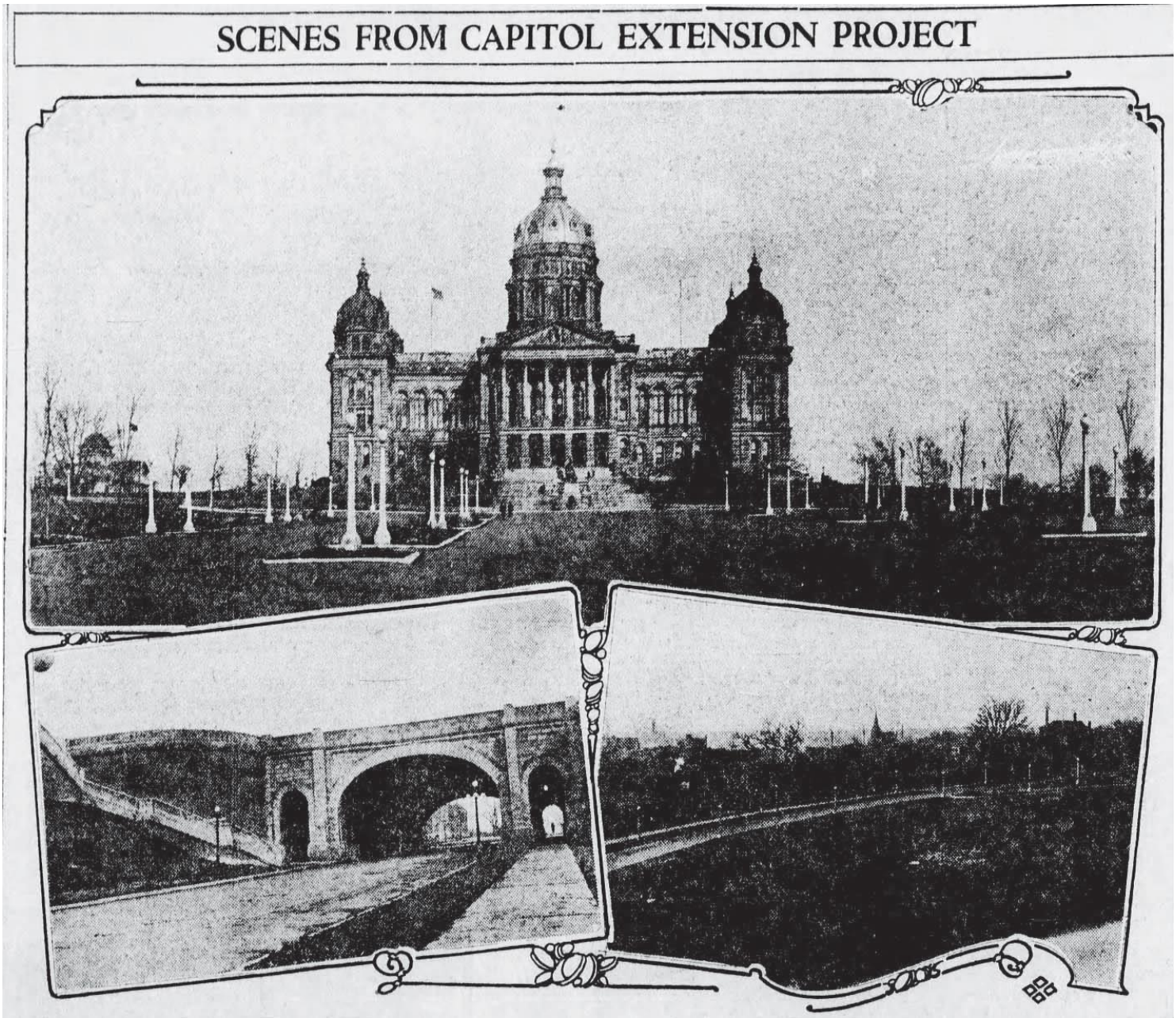


This is a closer look at the viaduct from overhead.

Newspaper

The Des Moines Register

Des Moines, Iowa – March 16, 1919



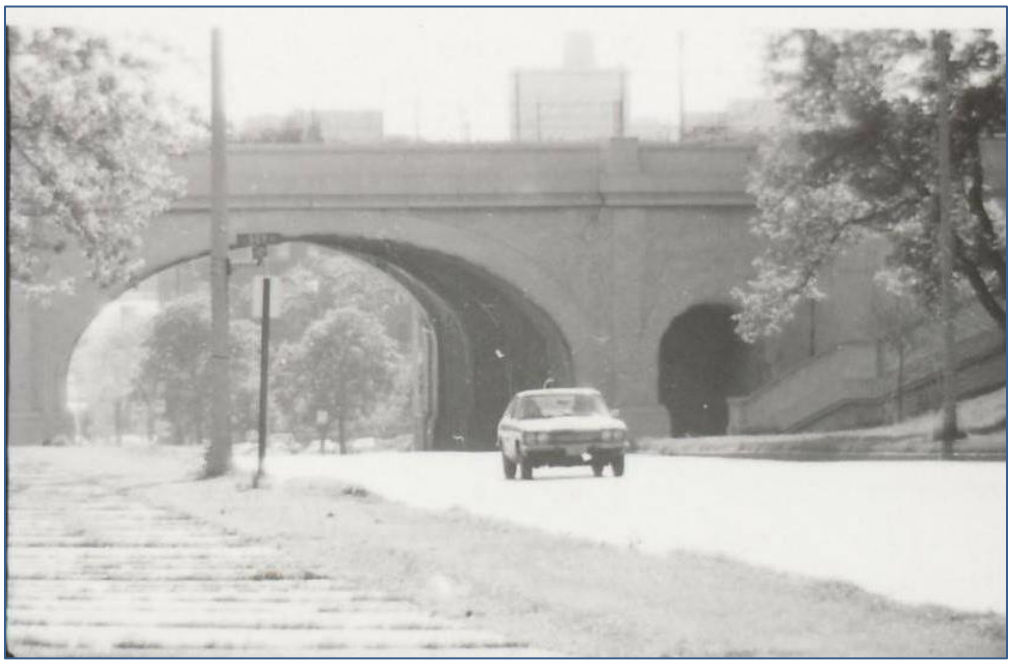
This is a view from the viaduct, looking north toward the Capitol. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument is at the left, and the Allison Monument is in the center.

Looking west toward downtown Des Moines from inside the viaduct.

The viaduct included beautiful flower gardens, bushes, street lamps, and sidewalks. It allowed pedestrian access to the southernmost part of the Capitol grounds. Des Moines natives remember the custom of honking the car horn while driving underneath the viaduct.

About 75 years after its construction, the decision was made to remove the viaduct due to safety concerns.

Recently, discussions continue within State government to build a bridge or walking path across Court Avenue, but no plans have been adopted.



Newspaper

The Des Moines Register

Des Moines, Iowa – April 27, 1989

Viaduct should be razed, Capitol commission says

By CHARLES BULLARD
Register Staff Writer

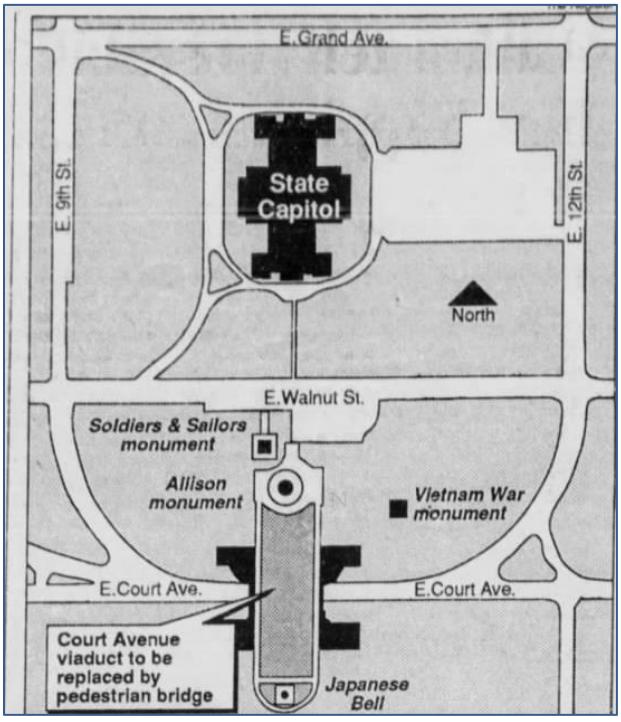
The ornate Court Avenue viaduct south of the Iowa Capitol should be razed for safety reasons and replaced with a pedestrian bridge, a state commission decided Wednesday.

The pedestrian walkway should include design elements from the Capitol and the historic Court Avenue bridge downtown so it blends with the century-old Statehouse, the Capitol Planning Commission agreed.

The project would be half as expensive as a 1988 plan scrapped Tuesday that called for removing the deteriorating viaduct and rerouting Court Avenue.

That proposal, which also was endorsed by Des Moines officials, would have routed Court Avenue traffic onto Walnut Street and eliminated a stretch of Court Avenue south of the Statehouse so Capitol visitors still could reach formal gardens on the south side of the avenue.

Visitors now can stroll across the top of the viaduct to reach the gardens. In fact, the 160-foot-wide via-



duct is topped with soil and plantings. Maintaining access to the gardens will become more important if the Des Moines Japanese Teahouse and Garden Association is successful in raising money for a proposed Japanese friendship garden south of Court Avenue near a Japanese bell there.

Jack Walters, director of the Iowa Department of General Services, said rerouting Court Avenue would have cost nearly $3 million, much more than originally estimated. In addition, up to eight houses between East 14th and East 15th streets and between Walnut Street and Dean Avenue would have been removed. "I didn't want to take people's homes," Walters said.

Shifting all the traffic from Court Avenue to Walnut Street would have made Walnut as busy as Grand Avenue and created congestion, Walters said.

For those reasons, Walters said he favors razing the Court Avenue viaduct and replacing it with a pedestrian bridge. The pedestrian walkway, he said, would cost only about $1.6 million. Replacing the viaduct with a 160-foot-wide replica, which was not part of either plan, would cost about $3.2 million, he said.

City Planning Director James Grant said Des Moines officials would accept a new pedestrian bridge. But Grant said city officials would like to see the design reflect the 19th-century architecture of the Statehouse.

The present Court Avenue viaduct is at the east end of the street, and the Polk County Courthouse is at the west end, he said. If the new pedestrian bridge is designed appropriately, it could be the eastern focal point of Court Avenue, Grant said.

Walters said it is too late to request money for the project from this year's Legislature, so he'll ask the 1990 Legislature. Although the viaduct has been declared unsafe, $100,000 was spent to stabilize its deteriorating surface so traffic could continue to drive under it for a few more years, he said. However, the sidewalks under the viaduct have been closed because of the danger to pedestrians.

The Des Moines Register

Des Moines, Iowa – July 9, 1992

COMING DOWN

BOB NANDELL/THE REGISTER

About 4,000 tons of dirt that crowned the Court Avenue viaduct near downtown Des Moines have been hauled away as work continues to demolish the structure, which had been deteriorating. The project, which caused the closing of Court Avenue south of the Capitol, is expected to be completed about Aug. 1. This view is from the southwest.