

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.

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of the Capitol Rotunda

There are several photographs of the Capitol interior from the time the building was completed in the 1880s, and there are a handful of photographs of the Capitol interior taken in the 1890s and early 1900s.

This is the only known photograph taken from the whispering gallery level looking down onto the second-floor rotunda. The source of this photograph is unknown, but we know this photograph was taken after 1885 and before 1906.



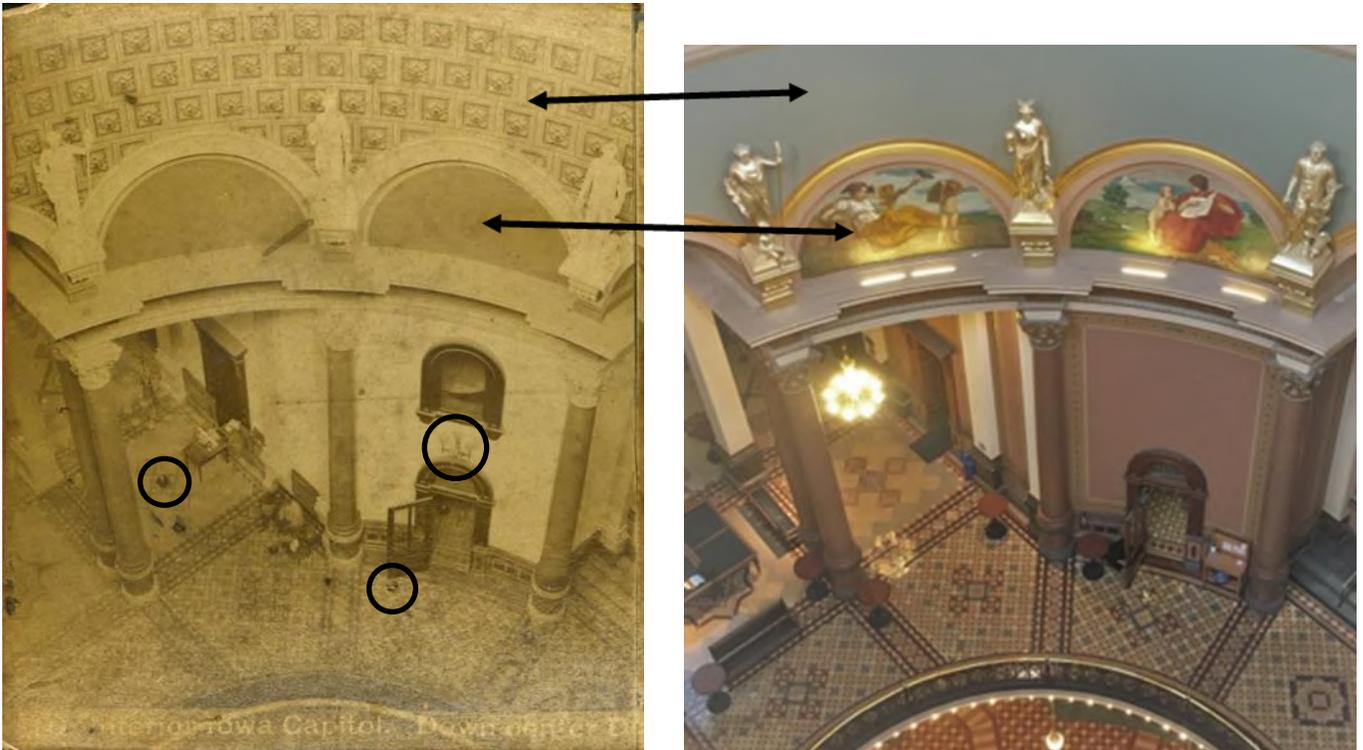
The empty half-moon-shaped frames, the arched window above the door, and the statues are the clues to dating this photograph.

The statues, done by S. Cottin, have the date 1885 etched in the base of 4 of the 12 statues. The 3 showing in this photograph from left to right represent Peace, Commerce, and Agriculture.

The arched windows do not appear in any photographs taken after the fourth Capitol Commission finished its work in the Capitol about 1907.

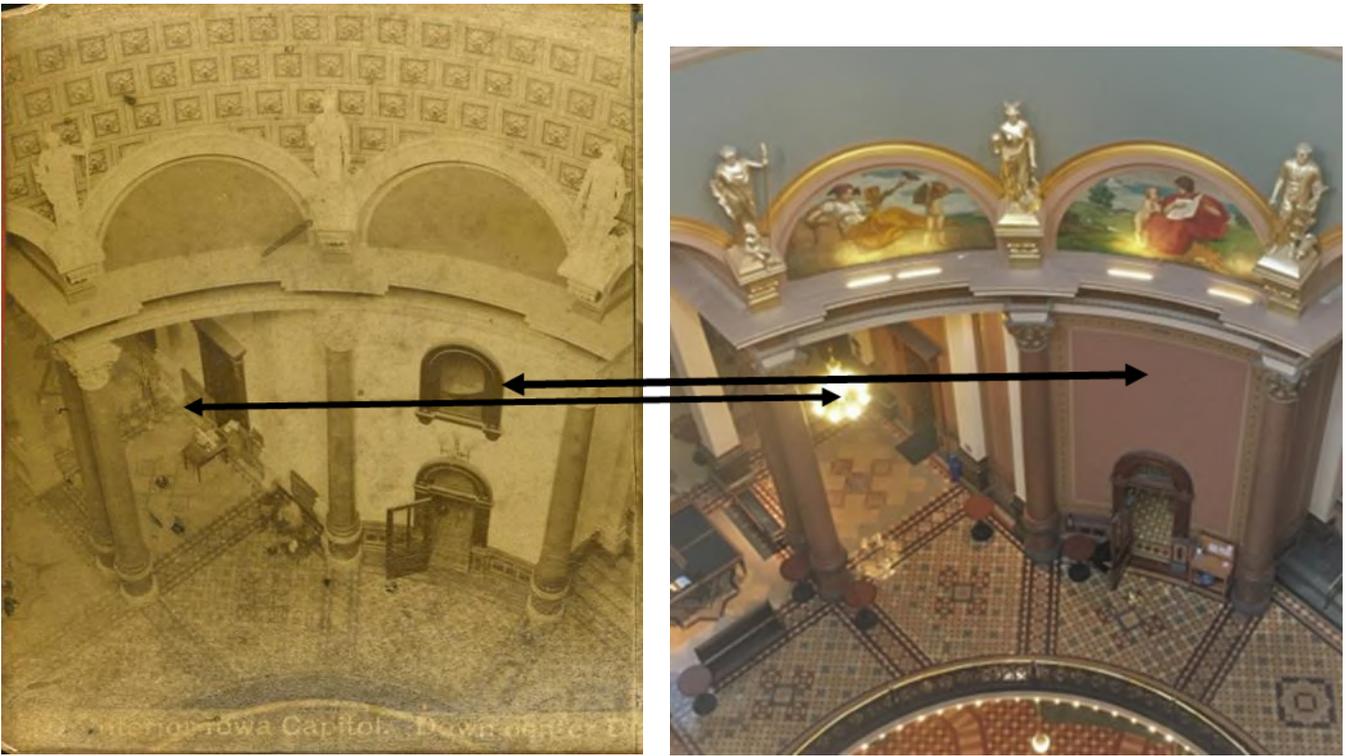
Several spittoons appear in the photograph. The open door leads to the third floor visitors' gallery in the Senate and is also the only stairway that leads to the top of the dome.

The gas light sconce above the door was removed when the building was wired for electricity. The walls in the public spaces were left unpainted until the early 1900s.



The 12 standing statues were the only artwork in the public spaces at the time the building was completed in 1886. The original stencil design behind the statues, created by Ettore Miragoli, was a coffer design matching the upper dome. In the early 1900s, this design was painted over by Elmer Garnsey. Garnsey was hired by the fourth Capitol Commission (1902-1906) to decorate the public areas of the Capitol.

The lunettes, or half-moon-shaped paintings, were commissioned by the fourth Capitol Commission. The eight paintings, created by Kenyon Cox, were added to the Capitol in 1906 and represent the progress of civilization. The arched frames were empty from 1886 to 1906. The two paintings shown represent Commerce and Education.



Electric lights were added to illuminate the lunettes and the statues. The light fixtures today are reproductions of the original gas chandeliers. The original gas fixtures, removed in the early 1900s when the building was wired for electricity, were simply thrown away. Original photographs like this one were used to recreate the chandeliers.

The arched windows above each of the four rotunda doors leading to the third floor visitors' galleries are still visible inside the four circular staircases. The windows would have allowed light from the rotunda into what were probably dimly lit stairways.



Photos of the top and bottom of the arched window above the rotunda door from the inside of the staircase.