

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.

Moving the National Capital

The seat of the national government was changed 12 times before it was finally established at Washington in 1790. Since then, there have been three distinct movements to relocate the national capital.

The first attempt was induced by the burning of the Capitol by the British in 1814.



[Burning of Washington](#), August 1814

The second effort to relocate the national capital occurred in 1846. That year, Iowa's First General Assembly convened at Iowa City. Representative S. B. Olmstead introduced a joint resolution to move the national seat of government to the Raccoon Forks of the Des Moines River. The motion was tabled indefinitely.

H. R. file, No. 27, Joint Resolution in relation to the removal of the seat of government of the United States to the Raccoon Forks of the Desmoines river;
Was read a second time, when,
Mr Montague moved that the same be indefinitely postponed;
And the question being put, Shall the said resolution be indefinitely postponed?
It was decided in the affirmative;
So the said resolution was indefinitely postponed.

[Journal of the House of Representatives, 1846](#)

The third and most threatening effort to move the capital city came after the Civil War. This third movement originated in the Mississippi Valley and almost assumed the proportions of a national issue.

The experience of the Civil War highlighted the nonstrategic location of Washington as the seat of government since the center of the nation had shifted with the increase of population to the Midwestern states.

Also, the government had outgrown its location in Washington and efforts to obtain appropriations for extensive improvements were being made. Representatives from the Midwestern states questioned whether new and expensive buildings should be erected in Washington or at some other, more centrally located site.

NATIONAL CAPITAL CONVENTION.
Removal of the National Capital Recommended—The Mississippi Valley the Centre of Population—The West the Seat of Empire—No Further Improvements in Washington Needed.

New York Herald,
October 22, 1869

On February 10, 1868, during the second session of the Fortieth Congress, Representative H. E. Paine of Milwaukee offered a resolution that "the seat of government of the United States ought to be removed to the valley of the Mississippi."

The entire Iowa delegation, William B. Allison, Grenville M. Dodge, Asahel W. Hubbard, William Loughridge, Hiram Price, and James F. Wilson, voted for the resolution.

Mr. Paine submitted the following resolution, viz :
Resolved, That the seat of government of the United States ought to be removed to the valley of the Mississippi.
 The same having been read,
 Mr. Paine moved the previous question; which was seconded and the main question ordered and put, viz : Will the House agree thereto ?

And it was decided in the negative, {	Yeas	77
	Nays	97
	Not voting	15

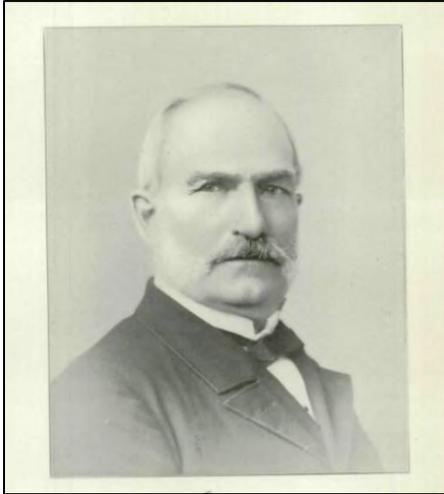
The yeas and nays being desired by one-fifth of the members present,
 Those who voted in the affirmative are—

Mr. William B. Allison Oakes Ames George W. Anderson Samuel M. Arneil Delos R. Ashley James M. Ashley Samuel B. Axtell John Baker John Beatty John F. Benjamin Henry P. H. Bromwell Ralph P. Buckland Albert G. Burr Benjamin F. Butler Samuel F. Cary John W. Chanier Reader W. Clarke Sidney Clarke Amasa Cobb John Coburn	Mr. Burton C. Cook Shelby M. Cullom Grenville M. Dodge Ignatius Donnelly John F. Driggs Ephraim R. Eckley Benjamin Eggleston John F. Furnsworth Thomas W. Ferry Joseph J. Gravely Asa P. Grover Abner C. Harding Isaac R. Hawkins William Higby William S. Holman Samuel Hooper Benjamin F. Hopkins Asahel W. Hubbard Morton C. Hunter	Mr. Ebon C. Ingersoll Norman B. Judd George W. Julian William Lawrence Benjamin F. Loan John A. Logan William Loughridge Rufus Mallory Samuel S. Marshall Joseph W. McClurg James R. McCormick George F. Miller William Mungen Carman A. Newcomb David A. Nunn Godlove S. Orth Halbert E. Paine William A. Pile Luke P. Poland	Mr. Hiram Price Green B. Raum Lewis W. Ross Philetus Sawyer John P. C. Shanks Worthington C. Smith John Taffe Lawrence S. Triable Charles Upson Robert T. Van Horn Cadwal'r C. Washburn Ellihu B. Washburne Henry D. Washburn Martin Welker Thomas Williams William Williams James F. Wilson William Windom Fred'k E. Woodbridge.
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[Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, February 10, 1868](#)

This was the first time a proposition for the relocation of the national capital was ever entertained. And competition amongst Midwestern cities soon began. Cincinnati, Chicago, Indianapolis, Kansas City, and even Keokuk, Iowa, were all thought to be ideal sites.

A National Capital Convention was called to meet in St. Louis on October 20, 1869. The governors of all of the states were invited to appoint two delegates for each congressional district and four each from the state at large. Eighty representatives from 17 states and territories, mostly from the West, attended.



[Governor Samuel Merrill](#)

To represent Iowa, Gov. Samuel Merrill appointed former Gov. Ralph P. Lowe, Iowa College (Grinnell) President G. F. Magoun, Maturin L. Fisher, and A. W. Hubbard from the state at large, while the 12 congressional district representatives were Augustus C. Dodge, James F. Wilson, Samuel J. Kirkwood, J. M. Tuttle, Grenville M. Dodge, H. E. Newell, G. M. Woodbury, A. H. Hamilton, W. E. Leffingwell, J. G. Patterson, Theodore Hawley, and Hiram Price.

The chief work of the convention was the adoption of resolutions. On the second day of the convention, the committee adopted a series of eight articles, which included condemning any and all further expenditures on improvements in Washington. All in all, the convention did not have much influence with the public and little attention was paid to the project.

National capital removal was made the subject of the Thirteenth General Assembly of Iowa. A report from the St. Louis convention was made to the governor, and a special message by Merrill was made to the General Assembly in January 1870.

A resolution was passed to instruct Iowa members of Congress "to use all honorable means to secure a removal of the national capitol, at the earliest day possible, to some central point in the great Mississippi valley."

JOINT RESOLUTION.

WHEREAS, The question of the removal and re-location, permanently, of the seat of government of the United States at some point more in consonance with the views and wishes of the people, is now agitating the public mind; and,

WHEREAS, The great Mississippi valley lies equi-distant from ocean and ocean, draining by her rivers one-half of the continent, and capable of floating on their bosom the commerce of the entire nation, crossed and re-crossed by the great arteries of commerce and travel, competing for the trade of the sea-board cities; and,

WHEREAS, Her unbounded natural resources, combining every element of future greatness, together with her rapid comparative increase of population, and the energy and intelligence of her people, all point unmistakably to her, in no distant future, as the seat of wealth, population, and manufactures of the Union; therefore,

Be it resolved by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa, That our Senators be instructed, and our Representatives in Congress requested, to use all honorable means to secure a removal of the national capitol, at the earliest day possible, to some central point in the great Mississippi valley, and to that end, that they be instructed and requested to oppose further appropriations of the public moneys for the erection of buildings at the present seat of government.

Resolved, That the Sceretary of State be requested to forward authenticated copies of this preamble and resolution to each of our Senators and Representatives in Congress.

[Journal of the House of Representatives, 1870](#)

Iowa representatives in Congress were instructed and requested to oppose further appropriations of the public moneys for the erection of buildings in Washington.

In 1870, during a congressional debate in the Senate upon the appropriation of \$250,000 for the extension of the Capitol grounds in Washington, James Harlan, representative of Iowa, called for the reading of the resolutions adopted by the Iowa Legislature on that subject and then began an argument for capital removal.

FRIDAY, MAY 27, 1870.

The following memorials, petitions, and other papers were laid on the Clerk's table, under the rules, and referred as follows:

Also, resolutions of the general assembly of the State of Iowa, in favor of removal of the national capital, to the Committee for the District of Columbia.

[Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, May 27, 1870](#)

When the vote on the appropriation was taken, only ten senators cast their ballot against it. James Harlan and James B. Howell of Iowa were among them. A vote in the House on a similar provision recorded five of the six Iowa representatives among the nays.

In October 1870, a second National Capital Convention was held in Cincinnati. Again, Merrill responded by appointing a strong delegation of 24 prominent men of the state, including Ralph P. Lowe, Benjamin F. Gue, Charles Beardsley, Samuel J. Kirkwood, George F. Magoun, Hoyt Sherman, and M. L. McPherson. Only four of them attended the convention and the delegations from other states were similarly low. The campaign for capital removal seemed to be halting.



President Ulysses S. Grant

At the opening of Congress, December 5, 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant gave his second annual Message to the Senate and House of Representatives and recommended appropriations for capital improvements.

He also delivered a short speech on December 21, 1870, offering his personal opinion on capital removal.

Speech

[Dec. 21, 1870]

I cannot thank you appropriately for the honor you have done me in calling upon me this cold and blustering night, nor would I detain those out of doors to hear a speech. Knowing that you are to make calls at other places, upon gentlemen who no doubt will thank you in appropriate terms, I will only say that it has been my desire to see this great national capital built up in a manner worthy of a great and growing republic like ours. As to the removal of the capital, I think that is improbable in the extreme. Nor do I believe that the removal should be subject to a mere majority of the representatives of the people elected for a single term. I think the question of removal, if ever presented, should go through the same process at least as amendments to the Constitution, even if there be the Constitutional power to remove it, which is not settled. This language may seem rather unpopular for a person coming from the part of the country I do, but it is expressed with earnestness, nevertheless, and without reserve. Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention and kindness.

Washington Evening Star, Dec. 22, 1870. USG responded to a demonstration by Washington, D. C., firemen, Boys in Blue *et al.* O. D. Barrett also spoke, thanking USG "for his efforts to preserve the Union, and for his expressions of kindness toward the District, especially for having declared that the capital can be removed by no less a power than that required to erase an article from the Constitution." *Ibid.*

Congress passed the capital improvement appropriations bill that Grant requested. With that, the movement for removal of the capital collapsed. Washington remained the nation's capital and removing it never again became a serious national issue.