

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides monthly, 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.

Gilding the Capitol Dome

For more than a century, the golden dome of the Capitol has been a symbol of Iowa government and politics.

The dome, which rises 275 feet above the Capitol grounds, is covered in 23-karat gold that is so thin that 250,000 sheets pressed together would measure only 1 inch thick.

The Iowa Capitol dome has been gilded a total of five times in its 140-year history.



First Gilding, 1882 to 1883

The Capitol dome was gilded for the first time during the Capitol construction from 1882 to 1883.

Capitol Commissioners' reports state they purchased 50 pounds of gold size, or adhesive, and 367 packages of gold leaf.

Hastings and Company of Des Moines was contracted to gild the main dome, the braids and the balls of the four small domes. The original cost, not including scaffolding or paint, was \$3,662.00.

Seventh Biennial Report of the Board of Capitol Commissioners; 1884

24	THE NEW CAPITOL.	[A 9
Varnish, gallons.....		48
Dryers, gallons.....		55
Wood-filler, pounds.....		4,188
Putty, pounds.....		2,485
Gold size, pounds.....		50
Gold leaf, packages.....		367
The cost of gilding the main dome and the tholus of the lanterns, and the balls of the small domes was—		
For size.....	\$	45.00
For gold leaf.....		2,741.50
For labor.....		875.50
Total.....	\$	3,662.00

Second Gilding, 1905

In a letter to the Capitol Commissioners in April 1905, August Bilz and C. F. De Foe itemized the cost of gilding the dome for the second time.

They agreed to furnish the lumber, build the scaffold, and sand and paint the main dome for \$1,200.00. They also agreed to sand and scrape all the parts that had been gilded, recoat with one coat of red lead and one coat of gold color, then coat with gold size. Finally, the agreement included covering all parts that had been gilded with either Kemps or Hastings brand gold leaf for a sum of \$4,416.80.

The agreement also included scaffold and the same process of preparation and gilding the braids of the four small domes for a sum of \$1,831.60. Preparing the copper of the four small domes would be an additional \$900.00.

W. H. Coe Manufacturing Company of Providence, Rhode Island, furnished the gold leaf for the project. The gold was guaranteed to be 23 ¼ to 23 ½ karat in ribbon or roll form; each roll contained 67 feet. The contract also allowed any unused gold to be returned and credited. The total cost for the entire project was \$8,348.40.

Des Moines, Iowa
April 14, 1905

Iowa State Capitol Commission,
Gentlemen:

We, the undersigned, hereby agree to do the following work on the Iowa State Capitol building, as follows: To furnish lumber and build all scaffolding to the main dome for regilding, painting, and sanding same, for the sum of \$1200.00,

We further agree to sand paper and scrape all parts that have been gilded; and to recoat with one coat of red lead, and one coat of gold color, sandpapering between coats. Then coat with gold size, and cover all parts that have been gilded, heretofore with Kemps or Hastings 22k patent gold leaf or other approved brands paint all parts, that have been painted with two coats of best lead and oil, in color as approved, also sand the same on last coat, for the sum of \$4,416.80. We further agree to scaffold the four small domes for the sum of \$300.00.

To sandpaper and scrape all gilded parts and coat with one coat of red lead, one coat of gold color, size with gold size, and cover with 23-k. Kemps or Hastings patent gold leaf, or other approved brands, for the sum of \$1,051.60.

We further agree to paint all painted parts on the four small domes, two coats lead and oil, sanding parts wherever they were sanded before for the sum of \$900.00. The total combined bid for the entire work \$8,348.40, we agree to enter into contract and to furnish bond to do the work satisfactorily at these figures.

August E. Bilz

C. F. De Foe

Capitol Commissioners' Report; 1902 to 1906

a set of specifications were evolved. Bids for the complete work of painting and regilding the main and four smaller domes were sought, and propositions following were received:

Name	Main Dome	Smaller Domes	Total
L. Haberstrom & Son, Boston.....	\$ 8,102.00	\$ 3,475.00	\$ 11,577.00
J. L. Nelson & Bro., Chicago.....	12,700.00	4,000.00	16,000.00
J. F. Sturdy (including removal of old paint and gold, also gilding 8 foot below dome).....			25,602.00
Bilz & Defoi, Des Moines.....	5,616.80	2,731.60	8,348.40

The lowest bidders, local men of experience in applying gold leaf, and of established integrity, were asked to enter into contract and furnish surety company bond for full amount of contract price. The Commission reserved the right to purchase all gold leaf and supply same to contractors for use on domes.

The leading gold leaf manufacturers of America were asked to submit prices with samples upon the quantity of gold required for the work, a special beaten leaf being called for of 23½ karat fineness. The gold leaf was purchased from the Coe Mfg. Co., of Providence, R. I. During the application of the leaf several strips were picked at random from various rolls and the Commission had same assayed by the American Smelting & Refining Company, the gratifying result showing a fineness of 999.50, or over 23½ karats.

The surfaces of the dome were cleaned, scraped, and sandpapered, then given a coat of red lead and oil; then English Oxford ochre, lead and oil; then Kemp's oil size, after which gold was applied in the usual manner. Subsequent to the completion of this work, the method of applying the gold was endorsed by dome gilders not previously consulted by us. We therefore believe that the gilding of the dome has been done by most approved methods, and for a reasonable expenditure of money. The appropriation available for this purpose was \$8,320.00.

The domes were first gilded nearly twenty-five years ago, its durability being considerably beyond what is usually considered the life of such construction. The domes are now in at least as good condition as originally, and another quarter century will doubtless elapse before regilding will be necessary.

Third Gilding, 1927

In 1927, the Legislature appropriated \$33,000 for "painting historical and capitol rooms, domes, etc. ...". Records are unclear as to how much of that appropriation went to gilding the domes. Newspaper articles note a \$25,000 request for the work. Other sources state \$14,000 to \$16,000.

Senate Journal; 1927

On Calendar. Senate File No. 432. ✓
April 5, 1927. BY APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE. ✓

A BILL FOR

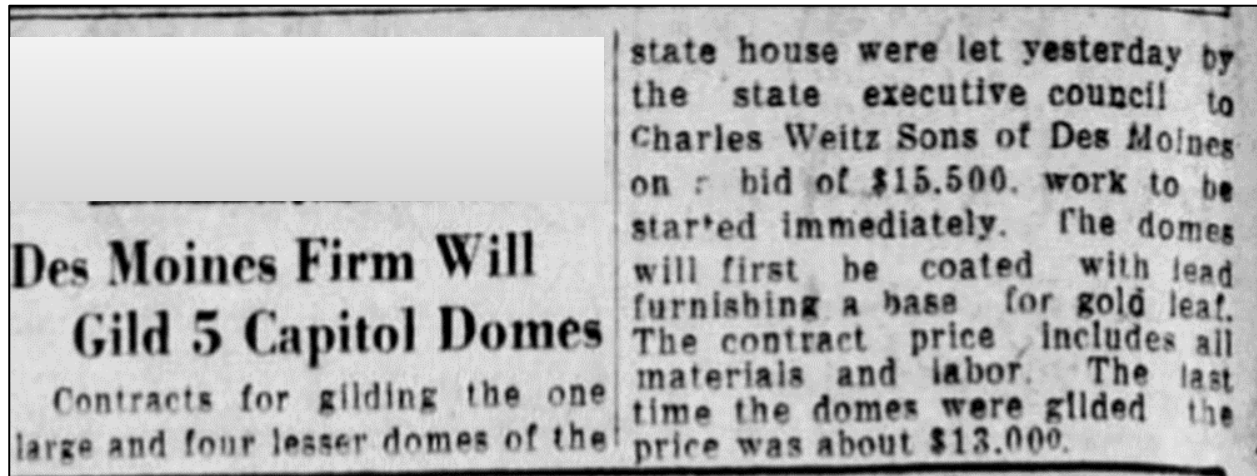
An Act making an appropriation to pay for repairs upon the state capitol and historical buildings.

Be It Enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa:

1 Section 1. There is hereby appropriated out of any funds in
2 the state treasury not otherwise appropriated the sum of
3 or so much thereof as may be necessary for the payment of expense
4 of repairing the state capitol, historical buildings and grounds
5 under the supervision and direction of the executive council, such
6 money to be expended as follows, to-wit:

7	1. Painting historical and capitol rooms, domes, etc.....	\$ 33,000
8	2. Rewiring building and new secondary feeds.....	10,000
9	3. New temperature control system.....	8,000
10	4. New roof for heating plant.....	750
11	5. Repair roof, porch and truss rods for Board of Health	
12	building	1,000
13	6. Repairs to windows, and metal weather strips for House	
14	and Senate and Historical building.....	2,500
15	7. Repairs to plumbing capitol building.....	4,000
16	8. Repairs for down spouts and gutters of all buildings.....	500
17	9. Repairs to roof of Historical buildings—new tile.....	250
18	10. Repairs for coal and ash hoist.....	500
19	11. Repairs to fire walls and to boilers, rebuilding of	
20	boiler grates and new circulating pumps.....	14,500

The contract for the third gilding of the dome was awarded to Charles Weitz and Sons.

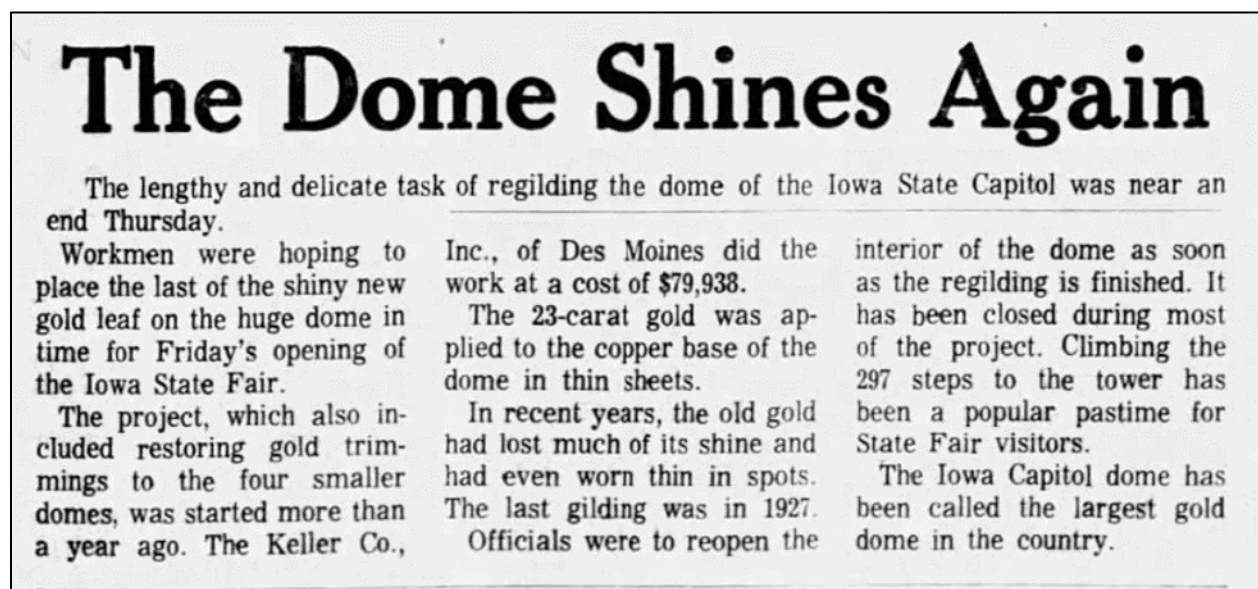


The Des Moines Register; July 7, 1927

Fourth Gilding, 1964 to 1965

In 1964, Keller Co. of Des Moines won the contract for gilding the dome for the fourth time.

The work began in June 1964 and ended in August 1965. The gold leaf cost \$26,000, took eight months and cost a total of \$79,938.00. The cost included coating the copper dome with a base of red lead and then white lead, before the gold size and gold leaf were applied.



Des Moines Tribune; August 19, 1965

Fifth Gilding, 1998 to 1999

The most recent regilding of the dome occurred from 1998 to 1999. The cost of the 150 troy ounces of gold leaf that cover the dome is \$160,000 and equals about 1/3 of the total \$481,736 cost of gilding.

Evergreen Painting Studios of New York won the contract for the regilding. Twin brothers Terry and Tim VanderWell, Des Moines natives, were employed by Evergreen at the time and in charge of the project.



1999 gilding in progress. (Photo: RDG Planning & Design)

According to experts, if the process is done correctly and depending on the local conditions, the typical life span of gold leaf covering is about 30 to 35 years. This estimate means the next gilding of the Capitol dome will be sometime in the 2030s. It is speculated that the cost will be about \$1 million.