

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.

The Iowa State Fair



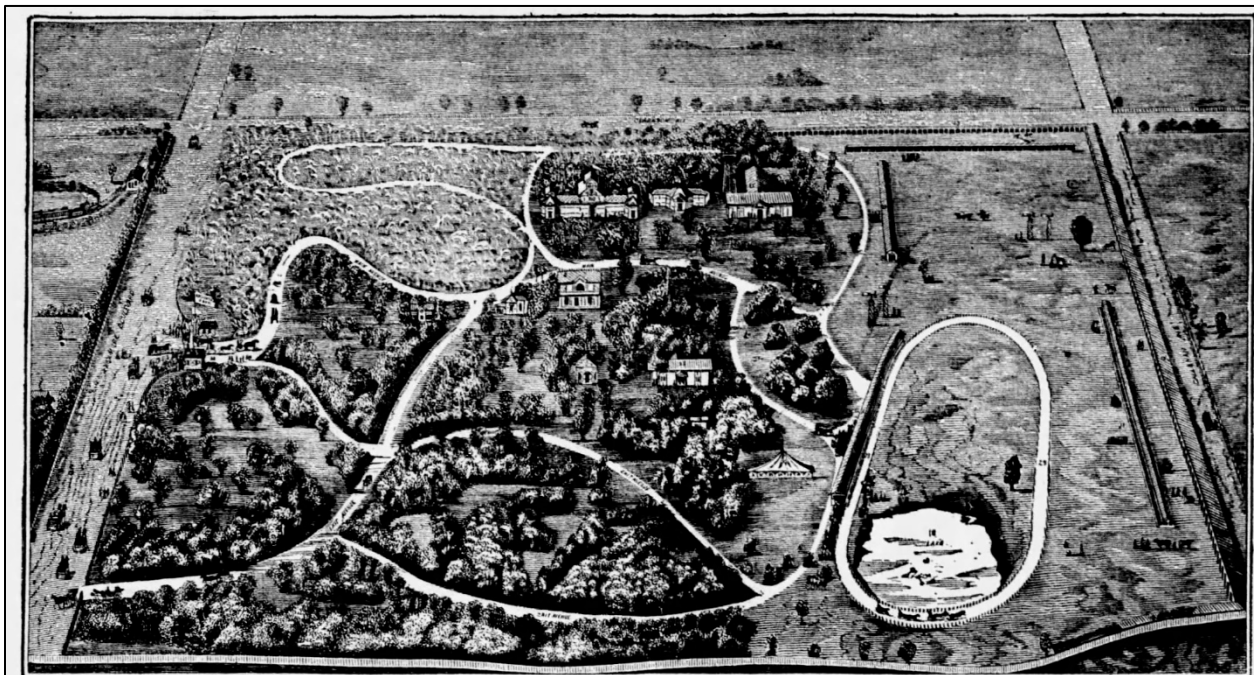
Iowa State Fair file photo

Throughout its history, the Iowa State Fair has been a unique institution, serving to educate, inform and entertain people from all walks of life. Annually attracting more than a million people from all over the world, the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines is Iowa's great celebration, a salute to the state's best in agriculture, industry, entertainment and achievement.

The fair moved to its present location in 1886. Prior to that, the fair moved around the state. The first Iowa State Fair was held for three days in Fairfield in October 1854. For the next 25 years, the fair moved from one county to another, giving cities like Fairfield, Muscatine, Oskaloosa, Iowa City, Dubuque, Burlington, Clinton, Keokuk and Cedar Rapids the opportunity to capitalize on dollars spent by visitors. But the fair also created expenses that were difficult to overcome, especially in smaller counties.

In 1879, the fair was moved to the middle of the state to the largely populated area of Des Moines in Polk County that afforded equal access for visitors from all corners of the state and was a hub for railroad transportation.

The fair took place on the west side of Des Moines in what was then a city park named Brown's Park, located between 38th Street on the east, 42nd Street on the west, Center Street on the north and Grand Avenue on the south.



This drawing from a Report on Resources and Industries of Des Moines compiled by the Board of Trade in 1884 shows Brown's Park, site of the first Iowa State Fair held in Des Moines. At left is Sycamore street (Grand avenue now), which was extended when the fair opened in 1879. At top left is a train running along a spur built by the Rock Island Railroad to transport fair visitors from the main line. Street at top (marked Clarkson avenue) is about where Forty-second street

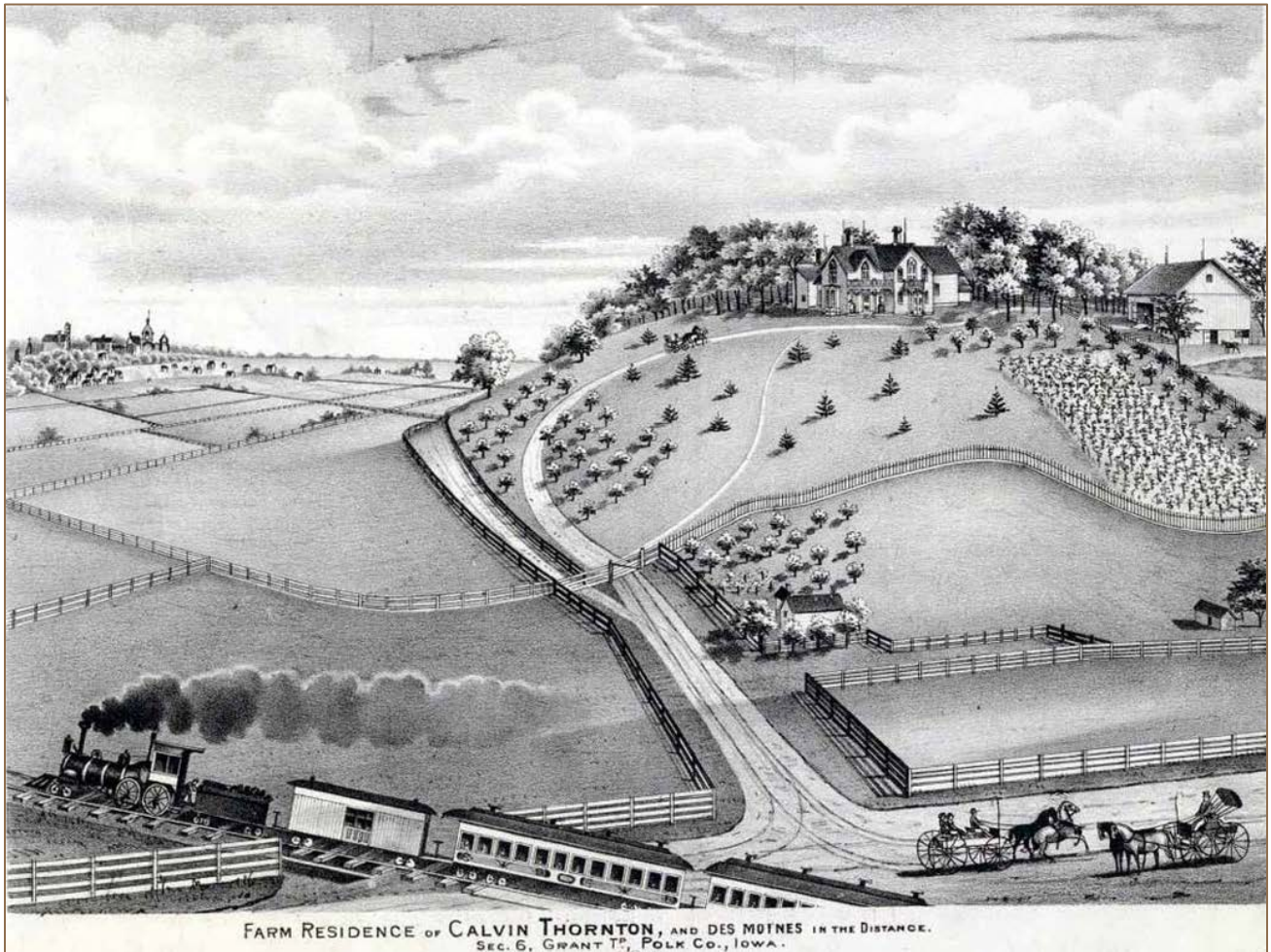
is now. Street at right, marked Callanan avenue, is about Pleasant street line today, and at bottom, Thirty-eighth street. At right, the race track around a small lake was in front of a stadium seating 4,000. The cattle barn, sheep pens and swine sties were in a field east and north of the track. Last relic of Brown's Park State Fair was frame building, once a horse barn, which was razed in 1953 to make way for Pigott, Inc., building at 3815 Ingersoll avenue.

Drawing compiled by the Board of Trade in 1884 shows Brown's Park, site of the first Iowa State Fair held in Des Moines. Des Moines Tribune, August 17, 1965

In 1884, the Iowa Legislature allocated \$50,000 for the purchase of land "somewhere in Iowa," with the condition that the city had to match the state funding. The citizens of Des Moines raised the money to match the Legislature's, so the Board of Agriculture purchased 263 acres of land from Calvin Thornton for \$175 per acre.

The agricultural interests of Iowa are undoubtedly greater than any other, and have most largely contributed to our high standing in the sisterhood of States. Only about one-third of our territory is under actual cultivation, and yet Iowa ranks among the very first in agricultural products, and undoubtedly the first in agricultural probabilities. I notice, and with pride, that only one other State in the Union has a cattle valuation equal to our own—and when it is remembered that it is territorially nearly three times as large, the comparison is to our advantage, and justifies me in the declaration, that all things considered, Iowa is entitled to the first place in the column. That this is largely due to the work of the State Agricultural Society, needs no argument at my hands. Our State fairs have become the great attraction, not only to our own people, but largely to the citizens of other States; and now that the fair has a permanent abiding place, cannot but increase in usefulness, and become the pride of all the people.

The amount appropriated by the last General Assembly, supplemented by a like sum contributed by public spirited citizens, has been expended in the purchase and improvement of suitable permanent grounds near the city of Des Moines, for the use of the Society, in accordance with the law. These grounds comprise 266 acres, and are admirably located, both as respects accessibility to visitors, and convenience to exhibitors. An additional sum should be appropriated to enable the officers to fit up these grounds in a manner becoming this great State, and make such permanent improvements as are necessary to the success of its fairs. The Society estimates an expenditure of fifty thousand dollars will be required for this purpose, and inasmuch as all expenditures in this interest, are directly to the advantage of the State, I heartily concur in the suggestion, and recommend the appropriation. There ought not to be a dissent to the proposition.



Farm Residence of Calvin Thornton purchased by the Iowa Legislature as the permanent and present location of the Iowa State Fairgrounds on the east side of Des Moines. [Polk County Iowa Gen Web Project](#)

The present location known as the Iowa State Fairgrounds near the eastern city limits of Des Moines was secured in 1885. The new grounds, between University and Dean Avenues from East 30th Street to East 36th Street, were dedicated on September 7, 1886, with addresses by Governor Larabee and other notables.

When the Board purchased the land, there were four buildings. By fair time, the State Agricultural Society had erected 54 buildings, including Pioneer Hall, which is still on the grounds today. When the fair opened that year, there were buildings, sheds, booths, concession stands and entertainment venues.

In 1900, management of the fair by the State Agricultural Society was taken over by the Board of Agriculture. In 1923, the Iowa General Assembly created the Department of Agriculture as well as a separate State Fair Board to manage the fair.

Originally, the Board consisted of the Governor, the Secretary of Agriculture, the president of Iowa State University, one elected director from each of six Congressional Districts, three at-large directors, plus a secretary/manager and treasurer elected by the Board. Following redistricting in 1991, this was modified to include two directors from each of five districts, with no at-large members.

Due to an Iowa Code change in 2002, delegates of six geographic Board districts elected two Board members each, increasing the number of Board directors from 10 to 12. Still in operation, the Board gathers at a convention each December to elect directors. Delegates from Iowa's county fairs elect Board members.

Iowa State Fair Secretary/Managers

Iowa State Agricultural Society

J.M. Shaffer, Fairfield, 1854-1856
J.H. Wallace, Muscatine, 1856-1863
J.M. Shaffer, Fairfield, 1863-1874
John R. Shaffer, Fairfield, 1874-1894
P.L. Fowler, Des Moines, 1894-1899
G.H. Van Houten, Lenox, 1899-1900

Iowa Board of Agriculture

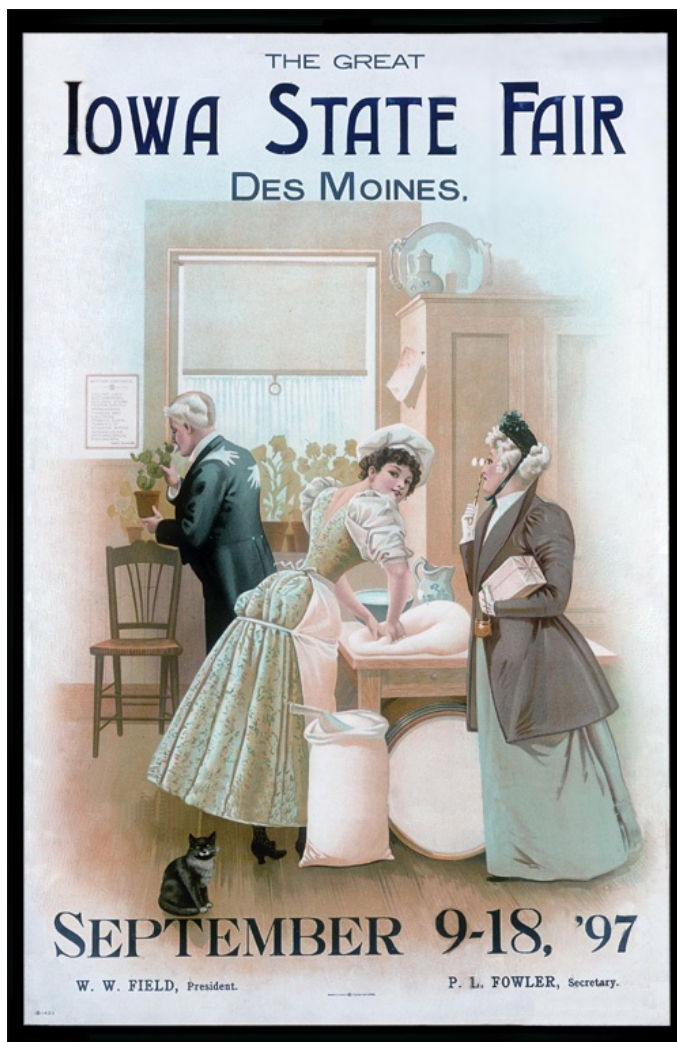
G.H. Van Houten, Lenox, 1901
J.C. Simpson, Des Moines, 1901-1911
Arthur R. Corey, Des Moines, 1911-1923

Iowa State Fair Board Secretary/Manager

Arthur R. Corey, Des Moines, 1923-1941
Lloyd B. Cunningham, Des Moines, 1941-1962
Kenneth Fulk, Des Moines, 1962-1977
James D. Taylor, Des Moines, 1977-1985
Marion Lucas, Des Moines, 1986-2001; CEO 2001-2002
Gary Slater, Des Moines, 2001; CEO 2002-2023
Jeremy Parsons, Des Moines, CEO 2023-present

By statute, the Board is the custodian of the fairgrounds and is charged with the management of the annual fair. The secretary/manager takes direct charge. The law provides that all operating expenses, maintenance, etc. shall be paid out of the fair's receipts unless there is a special appropriation made by the Legislature.

Special appropriations have been made since 1902 by the General Assembly for the construction of permanent buildings, purchase of additional land and grounds improvement. Tax money has never been used for salaries, amusements or operating expenses. The title of the fairgrounds and all property belongs to the State.



Iowa State Fair ad from 1897

From simple beginnings, the Iowa State Fair has grown to be the single largest event in the state of Iowa and one of the oldest and largest agricultural and industrial expositions in the country.

The inspiration for the original novel "State Fair" by Iowan Phil Stong, three motion pictures and Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway musical, the Iowa State Fair is without a doubt the country's most famous state fair. Its 450-acre grounds and adjoining 160 acres of campgrounds are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sources:

[Iowa History Journal](#), Iowa State Fair: Historical highlights of an Iowa icon.

[Historical Highlights of the Iowa State Fair](#), a publication of the Iowa State Fair, 2023.