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.

Examining the Firsts: Scott's Grave

This year, the Ninety-first Iowa General Assembly began. Some of this year's *Pieces of Iowa's Past* articles will briefly examine the work of the First, Eleventh, Twenty-first, Thirty-first, Forty-first, Fifty-first, Sixty-first, Seventy-first and Eighty-first General Assemblies or observe interesting events that happened during those years.

The Forty-first General Assembly convened January 12, 1925, and adjourned April 3, 1925, an 82-day session. The governor of Iowa in 1923 was John Hammill. Lieutenant Governor Clem C. Kimball presided over the Senate, and W.C. Edson was speaker of the House.



Governor
John Hammill



Lieutenant Governor
Clem C. Kimball



Speaker
W.C. Edson

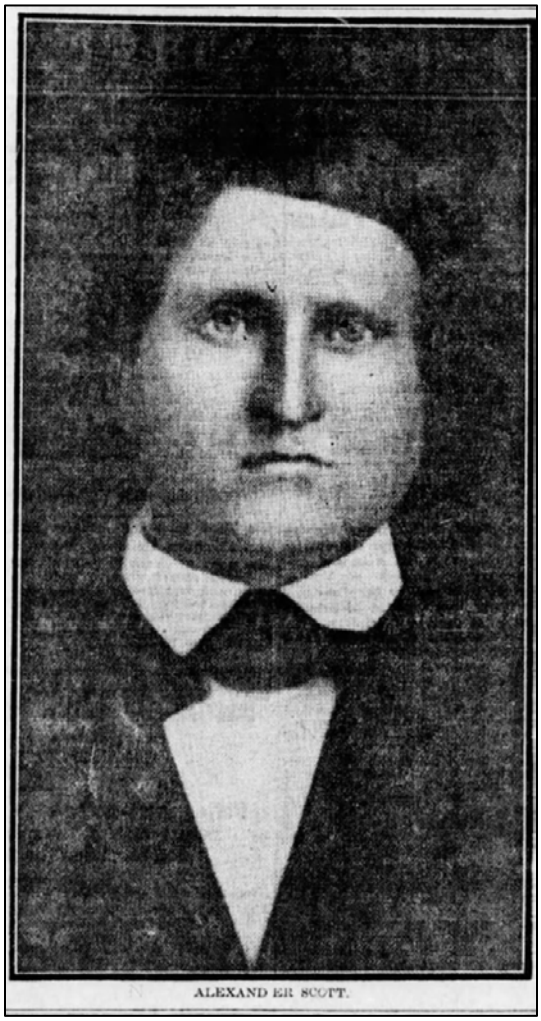
There were 45 Republicans, 4 Democrats, and 1 Independent in the Senate, and in the House, there were 101 Republicans and 7 Democrats. In total, 158 legislators served during the Forty-first General Assembly.

Scott's Grave

"When I die, I want to be buried here, where I stand..."

This is what Willson Alexander Scott, donor of the grounds on which the Iowa State Capitol stands, once told friends. Years later, Scott's wish was fulfilled when he died enroute to Colorado, seeking gold. His friends brought his body back to Des Moines and buried him according to his request on a bluff overlooking Des Moines.

Scott's gravesite is the only burial plot on the Capitol grounds.



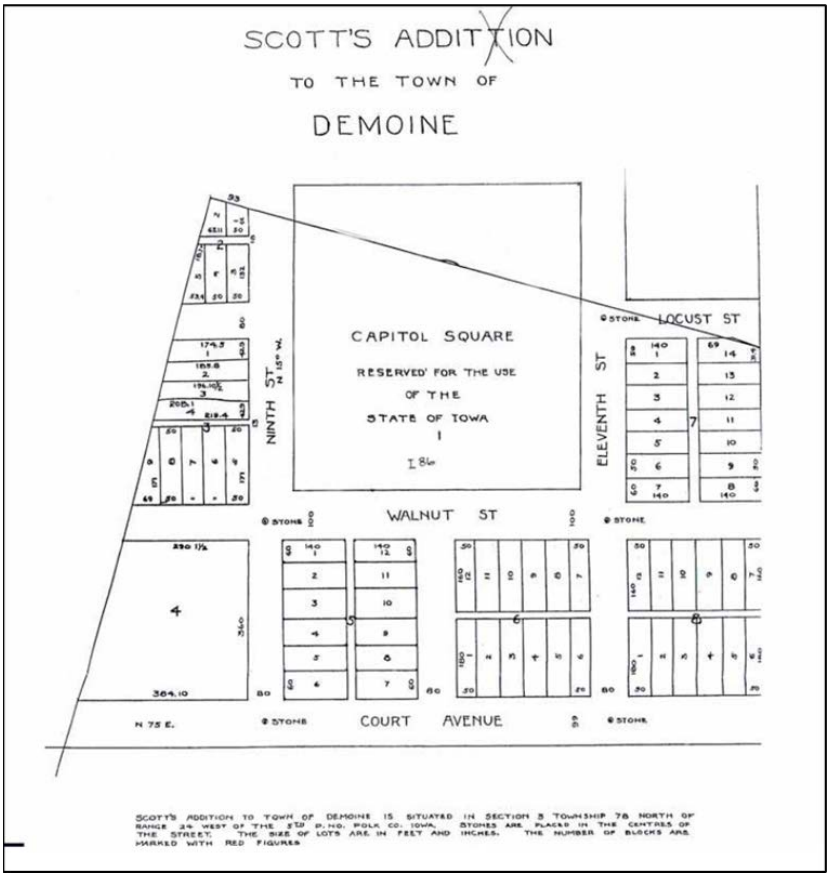
Willson Alexander Scott

Scott arrived in Iowa in 1843. Along with his cousin, John B. Scott, the two provided farm products to the Dragoons occupying the "new" Fort Des Moines.

The fort was situated between the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. The farmers and settlers were adjacent to the fort on the east side of the Des Moines River. The Scott cousins also traded with area Native Americans. The cousins built a log trading post on the east side of the river. Willson Alexander Scott went with the Native Americans when they were removed to Kansas.

When the land in Iowa was opened for purchase in 1846, Scott returned to what would be Des Moines and bought 500 acres on the east side of the Des Moines River. Here, Scott built a double log cabin. Scott was a pioneer, farmer, trader, ferryman, traveler, builder, and businessman.

Scott was a member of a private organization in 1855, and the purpose of this organization was to build the new Capitol. On January 30, 1856, Scott platted and filed "Scott's Addition" all of which was on the east side of the river extending from the river on the west, East 12th Street on the east, Court Avenue on the north, and the river on the south. Scott offered ten acres of land and promised to build a temporary Capitol if the state chose the east side of the Des Moines River for the new state Capitol site.

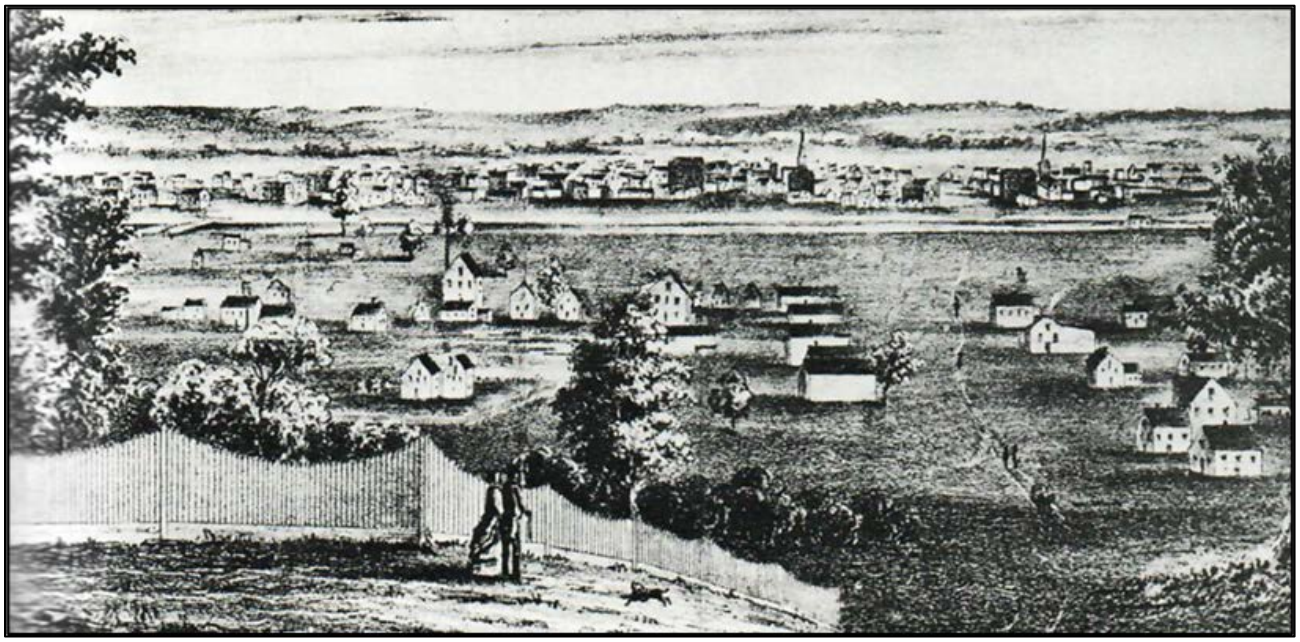


Plat map of "Scott's Addition," which included the present-day site of the Capitol.

The year 1857 found Scott at the height of his prosperity. The Capitol had been relocated to Des Moines, and Scott had helped pay for the move. Scott was elected to the city council's seventh ward. He also ran for state representative in the first legislature held in Des Moines in the "Old Brick Capitol" that he and other businessmen had paid for and built on land he had donated for that purpose. A relatively small number of votes defeated him.

Due to the economic decline in the late 1850s, Scott left for California hoping to improve his finances once he had reached Pike's Peak. But on June 23, 1859, Willson Alexander Scott, 41, died of cholera in Kearney City, Nebraska. He was buried there that day.

Friends recalled Scott's wish to be buried near the spot where his double log cabin had been built, at the summit of the hill looking across the river valleys southward and westward. They moved his remains from the grave near Fort Kearney to Des Moines on November 1, 1859.



This 1857 sketch of Des Moines looking west from Capitol Hill, taken from an April 1922 edition of the Annals of Iowa, shows the view from near where Scott's original log cabin stood

In 1913, the state spent $1.2 million for land purchases and leases for improvements to the Capitol grounds. In 1913, when the Capitol grounds were being expanded, a commission was organized to ask the legislature to include improvements to Scott's burial ground within the overall Capitol grounds improvement.

Up to that point, nothing had been done to improve the plot of ground where Willson Alexander Scott lay. In fact, the exact spot of Scott's grave was not even known, except to be located on the highest point of the land south of the Capitol.

In 1913, the burial spot was located by city engineers on the south side of Vine Street, between 11th and 12th streets. The State Historical Society placed a boulder to mark the grave.



Stone in foreground marks spot where the body of Alexander Scott, pioneer benefactor of Iowa, lies. Scott gave a portion of the ground, on which the capitol building stands, to the state. For many years his grave was in an obscure and unmarked spot on the capitol grounds. Some years ago it was marked by the huge boulder. Now the state executive committee has authorized a suitable marking for the grave of the man who donated valuable land to the state as a site for Iowa's magnificent capitol building.

The boulder that marked Scott's grave from 1913 to 1925 can be seen in the foreground of the Capitol building's south side. Des Moines Tribune; July 18, 1925

In February 1923, the Fortieth General Assembly appropriated funds to provide for a marker and fence at the grave of Willson Alexander Scott.

Senate File No. 517

Appropriations.
February 22, 1923.

Senate File No. 517.
BY MANTZ.

A BILL FOR

An act to provide for a marker and fence at the grave of Willson Alexander Scott and providing an appropriation therefor.

Whereas, the capital of Iowa was located at Des Moines, Iowa, by the commissioners selected for that purpose, and

Whereas, in the locating of the site therefor there was donated to the State of Iowa, by Willson Alexander Scott the greater part of a tract of land of ten acres in extent as capitol grounds, and

Whereas, said tract was accepted by the State of Iowa, and the present capitol is located thereon, and

Whereas, said Willson Alexander Scott died in Nebraska Territory during the year of 1857, and

Whereas, the said Willson Alexander Scott expressed a desire that he be buried upon his homestead, a town lot now a part of the capitol grounds of the State of Iowa, and

Whereas, in the year 1859, the remains of the said Willson Alexander Scott were brought to Des Moines, Iowa, and interred on said lot southeast of the capitol on grounds overlooking the Des Moines Valley, and

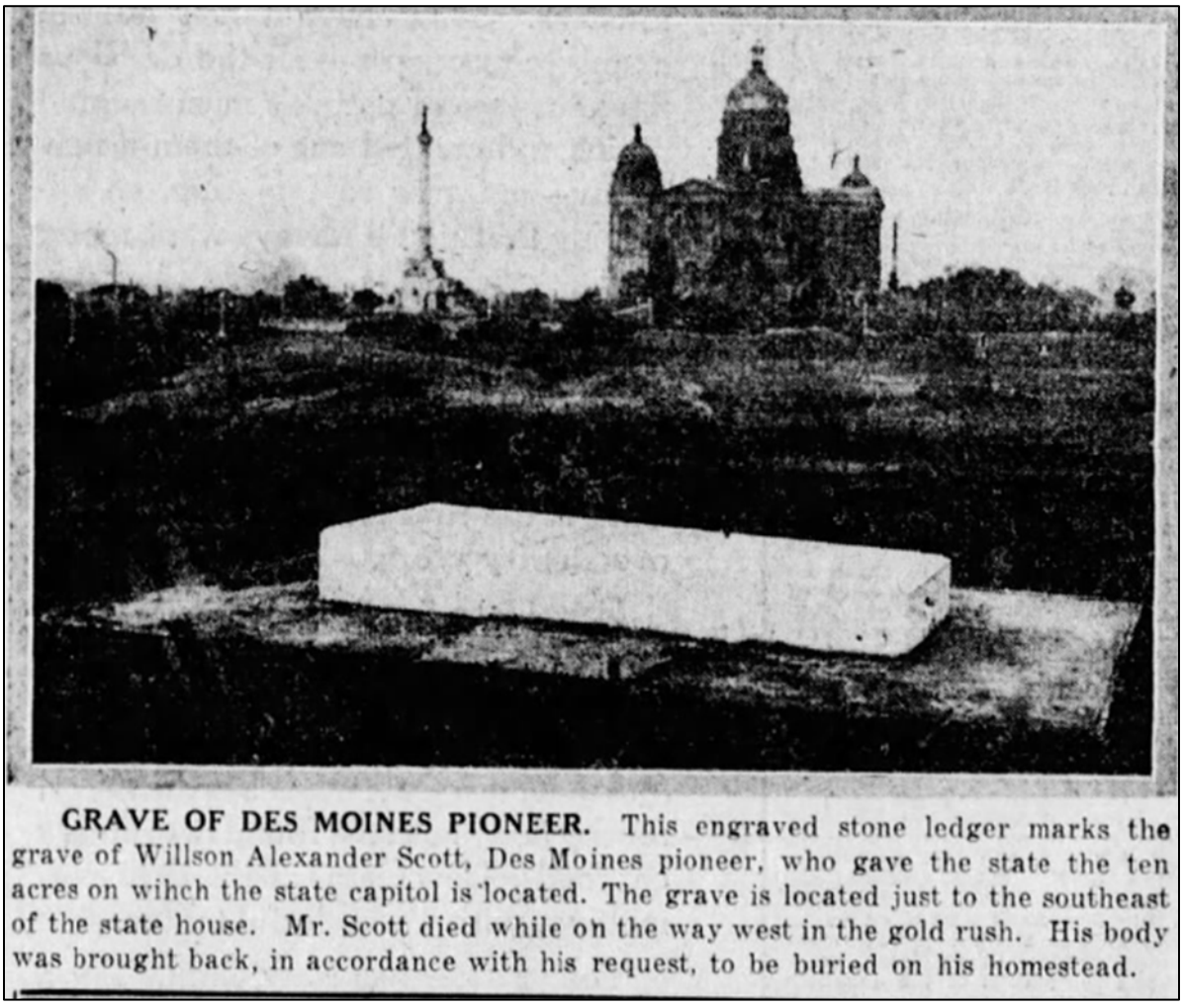
Whereas, the grave of said Willson Alexander Scott after remaining in a state of neglect for half a century and is unmarked save by a large boulder the Historical Department placed there in 1913 now resting thereon, and

Whereas, there is no inscription upon said boulder nor at the grave, and there is nothing at that place to indicate the burial place of the said Willson Alexander Scott, although the place is recorded in the Historical Department by the surveyor's notes showing courses and distances,

Whereas, it is deemed fitting and proper that the State of Iowa should show its respect and appreciation to the memory of the said Willson Alexander Scott by erecting or placing a suitable tablet or marker at his grave, therefore

The Act states:

SECTION 1. That there is hereby appropriated out of the funds of the state not otherwise appropriated, the sum of $500.00, said sum to be expended by the historical department of Iowa, under the direction of its board of trustees and with the approval of the executive council in preparing and placing a suitable memorial monument at the grave of the said Willson Alexander Scott, and in erecting some suitable barrier or other structure about said grave, provided that any gift or bequest the historical department may receive for the purpose of aiding in this expression of the state's regard shall be applied entirely toward carrying out the purposes of this act.



GRAVE OF DES MOINES PIONEER. This engraved stone ledger marks the grave of Willson Alexander Scott, Des Moines pioneer, who gave the state the ten acres on wihch the state capitol is located. The grave is located just to the southeast of the state house. Mr. Scott died while on the way west in the gold rush. His body was brought back, in accordance with his request, to be buried on his homestead.

The Des Moines Register; October 15, 1925

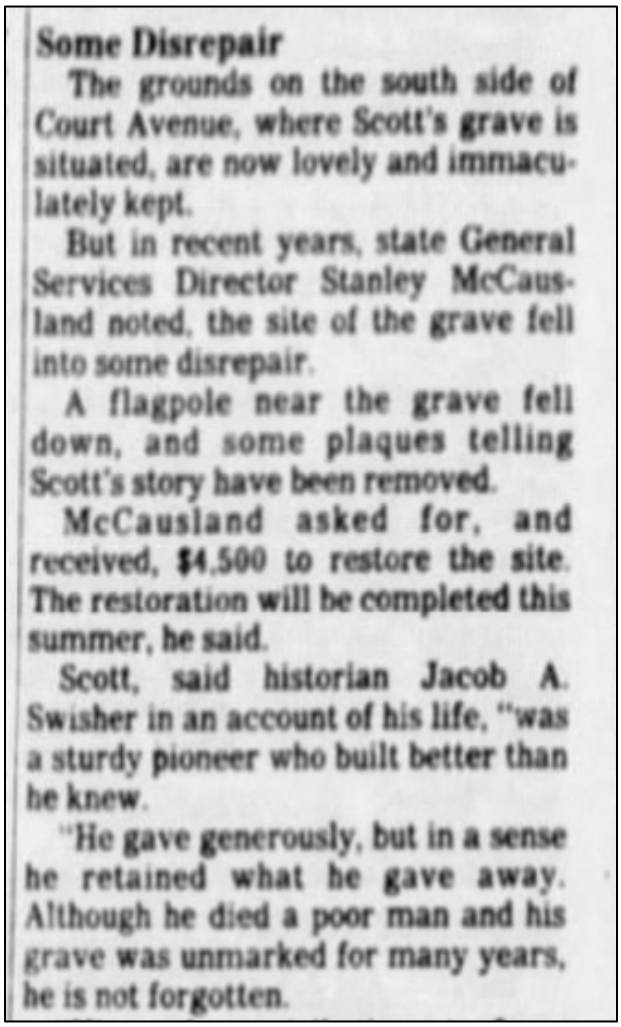
In September 1925, the Des Moines Register reported that the contract for laying the foundation had been awarded and stone cutters were finishing the carving of the ledger. In October, the paper reported that the foundation was complete and would be laid by November 1.



The current marker for Willson Alexander Scott's grave was laid in 1925.

The current marker laid by the Historical Department in 1925 is located south of the Capitol, west of the Iowa Judicial Branch building. It can be reached from East Court Avenue, on the right when traveling east.

The inscription upon the slab reads as follows:
"Sacred to the memory of Wilson Alexander SCOTT who gave to the State of Iowa the greater part of the land where stands the Capitol. Born in Crawford County, Indiana, Nov. 20, 1818. He acquired some 500 acres of land hereabouts and settled on the site in 1846. Overwhelmed by the financial crash of 1857, he died near Fort Kearney, Nebraska Territory, enroute to Pike's Peak, June 23, 1859. By his expressed wish his body was returned and on Nov. 1, 1859, interred in earth, which as his homestead, had been exempted from seizure for his debts. Erected in 1925 by the State of Iowa."



Some Disrepair

The grounds on the south side of Court Avenue, where Scott's grave is situated, are now lovely and immaculately kept.

But in recent years, state General Services Director Stanley McCausland noted, the site of the grave fell into some disrepair.

A flagpole near the grave fell down, and some plaques telling Scott's story have been removed.

McCausland asked for, and received, $4,500 to restore the site. The restoration will be completed this summer, he said.

Scott, said historian Jacob A. Swisher in an account of his life, "was a sturdy pioneer who built better than he knew.

"He gave generously, but in a sense he retained what he gave away. Although he died a poor man and his grave was unmarked for many years, he is not forgotten.

The Des Moines Register; June 9, 1977

The Des Moines Register reports restoration to the gravesite occuring in 1977 by the state General Services Department, now the Department of Administrative Services (DAS).

DAS records also report restoration in 2020 when the Capitol Planning Commission drove the initiative to raise funds for the restoration of several unendowed monuments and memorials.





Before and after photos of 2020 restoration courtesy of DAS.