



## Legislative Services Agency

Ground Floor, State Capitol, Des Moines, Iowa 50319, 515.281.5129

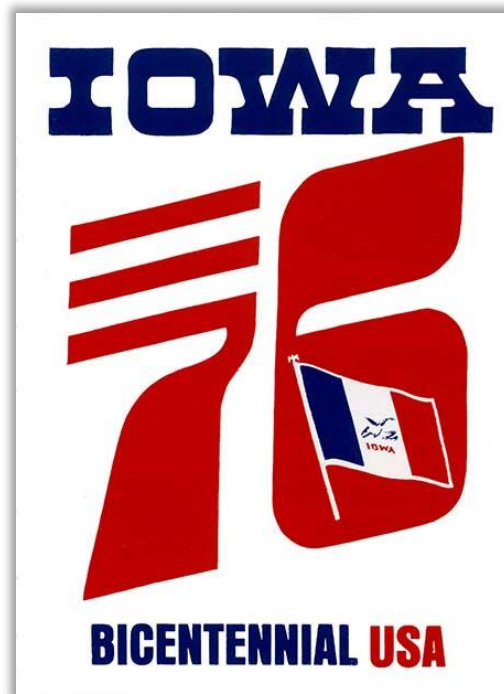
### Legislative Information Office

## Pieces of Iowa's Past

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.

## Remembering 1976 as America Turns 250

June 2026



On November 6, 2025, Governor Kim Reynolds signed an [executive order](#) launching the Governor's Task Force to plan, encourage, develop, and coordinate the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States.

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of America's bicentennial. And Iowa took similar steps to mark America's 200th year.

The work began in 1970 when the General Assembly passed [House File 1339](#) and the first official Iowa American Revolution Bicentennial Commission meeting was held in January 1971. The main charge of the commission, which was comprised of 21 members, was to develop state goals, encourage community projects, and prepare programs for commemorating the American Revolution throughout the state.

## MEMBERS OF THE IOWA AMERICAN REVOLUTION BICENTENNIAL COMMISSION

### Appointed by the Governor

Robert W. Dillon, Chairman  
General Manager KRNT, Radio & TV (Retired)  
Des Moines  
Mrs. Edwin W. Bruere  
National Vice-Chairman  
Daughters of the American Revolution  
Cedar Rapids  
Don N. Kersten  
Attorney at Law  
Fort Dodge  
William G. Murray  
Agricultural Consultant  
Ames  
Don C. Muhm  
Farm Editor  
Des Moines Register and Tribune  
Des Moines  
Robert M. Stone  
Golden Rod Farms  
Chariton  
Mrs. Evelyn Birkby  
Radio Broadcaster & Newspaper Columnist  
Sidney

### Appointed by the Lt. Governor

Norman G. Rogers  
State Senator (Adel)  
Forrest V. Schwengels  
State Senator (Fairfield)

### Established by the Law

Melvin Synhorst  
Secretary of State  
C. Joseph Coleman  
State Senator (Clare)  
Peter Harstad  
Director, State Historical Society  
Jack W. Musgrove  
Curator, Iowa Department of History & Archives  
Fred Prierwert  
Director, State Conservation Commission  
Willard Boyd  
President, University of Iowa  
W. Robert Parks  
President, Iowa State University  
John J. Kamerick  
President, University of Northern Iowa  
Del Van Horn, Director,  
Iowa Development Commission  
Kenneth R. Fulk, Secretary, Iowa  
State Fair & Secretary, Iowa American  
Revolution Bicentennial Commission

### Appointed by the Speaker of the House

Richard L. Byerly  
State Representative (Ankeny)  
Lillian McElroy  
State Representative (Percival)

## THEIR DUTIES . . .

The Iowa American Revolution Bicentennial Commission was established by the Sixty-third General Assembly to develop projects, programs and activities commemorating the American Revolution's 200th anniversary, and to encourage, and coordinate activities across the state. In addition it was to help provide state and federal funds on a matching grant basis generally to help finance appropriate, endorsed and approved projects, programs and activities in honor of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution.

In general the main mission was to remind all citizens of the heritage of the United States and to encourage them to use their talents or gifts in helping observe an important milestone in our history, and to review the precious freedoms our country represents in a world where freedom is truly something to be protected and preserved.

Living History Farms, which opened in 1970, and the World Food Conference of 1976, held at Iowa State University, were Iowa's two nationally recognized U.S. bicentennial projects, but Iowans marked the nation's 200th anniversary with hundreds of undertakings—from the restoration of Old Capitol in Iowa City and Terrace Hill in Des Moines to the 811 towns and cities recognized as Bicentennial Communities, the 1,500 "Iowa Heritage in the American Revolution" study kits distributed to fifth-grade teachers, and the 5,000 farms that qualified for Century Farm designation. Iowa led the nation with 2,800 recorded projects and events, 50 percent more than any other state.

Funds used to help pay for the various activities, projects, and events during the celebration came from federal grants, state appropriated funds, and local donations. One source of funds, in particular, was the sale of Iowa bicentennial medallions.



*The design for this medallion was chosen via a statewide contest. The winning design showed a modernistic plow, symbolizing the state's agriculture, and the clover-leaf emblem used by the State of Iowa in its "Iowa - A Place To Grow" campaign.*

The medallion's design was chosen via a statewide contest, and University of Iowa student Virginia KreyeJanowski of Solon received \$5,000 for her modernistic plow, symbolizing the state's agriculture, and the clover-leaf emblem used by the State of Iowa in its "Iowa - A Place To Grow" campaign. The official Iowa U.S. bicentennial medallions made of bronze sold for \$2 each, while silver medallions were priced at \$20.

Members of the Iowa American Revolution Bicentennial Commission heard ideas Thursday for ways Iowans can participate in the 200-year celebration in 1976 of the American Revolution.

**Dr. Herbert Kersten of Fort Dodge suggested the state create a "prairie park" where native wildlife and vegetation would be restored. A group of Spencer citizens suggested holding an international food fair in the Spencer area.**

Commission Chairman Bob Dillon of Des Moines urged that Iowans submit ideas for the celebration to the commission.

The commission, which was created by the Iowa Legislature last year, is asking for ideas for a statewide celebration and is suggesting that individual communities plan celebrations.

Persons with ideas may write to the commission at the Statehouse or go to its next meeting Mar. 25 in Des Moines at a location which is to be announced.

*Des Moines Register, March 5, 1971*



*The time capsule was donated by the Reynolds Aluminum Co., which donated a time capsule to each of the governors of the 50 states.*

*Photo: Iowa and The U.S. Bicentennial, Final Report; December 1976.*

Projects at the Capitol commemorated the nation's 200th birthday as well: the Bicentennial Time Capsule and the Iowa First Ladies' Inaugural Gown Collection.

The Bicentennial Time Capsule was sealed July 1977 during a ceremony held in the Capitol rotunda. There were 59 items in the capsule that were selected for their historical significance, including an ear of open pollinated corn, an Iowa road map, a booklet on Iowa noxious weeds, several varieties of seeds, Governor Robert Ray's 1976 Christmas card and a copy of the 1976 state fair program. Other items in the capsule include reports from several state agencies, artifacts from Living History Farms, bicentennial medallions and stamps, a copy of a TV Guide, and microfilm of the bicentennial issues of daily newspapers across the state.

The 100-pound time capsule was a 2-foot aluminum alloy cylinder and held approximately 2 cubic feet of materials. Once filled, the air from the inside of the capsule was sucked out and replaced with argon gas to preserve its contents.



*The bicentennial time capsule is currently located on the south side grounds of the Capitol.*

Iowa's First Lady, Mrs. Robert D. Ray, is credited with the idea for the Iowa First Ladies' Inaugural Gown Collection, recreating on miniature dolls the inaugural gowns worn by the First Ladies of the state.



*Des Moines Register, December 28, 1976*

At the time, the display of 40 18-inch dolls, including those representing the wives of Iowa's three territorial governors, was a study in fashion and design because it reflected the change in women's apparel over the years, not to mention hair styles.



*Today, Iowa First Ladies and Gentlemen continue to be added to the display case. The collection is displayed near the Governor's Office on the east side of the south corridor of the Capitol.*

Iowa's Bicentennial Festival was held April 6, 1976, at the Capitol. A 6-foot tall bicentennial birthday cake was the feature of the festival and on display in the Capitol rotunda during the daylong festival.

The Iowa Bicentennial Festival featured addresses by John W. Warner, federal administrator of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, Washington, D.C., and Iowa Governor Robert D. Ray at a joint session of the Iowa Legislature, which was followed by a special reception.



TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY DAVID FINCH

## **HAPPY BIRTHDAY, USA**

A 6-foot-tall birthday cake in celebration of the country's bicentennial is given the final touches by Gayla and Gale Russell of 4308 Sixty-Ninth St. in Urbandale. The cake is one of many displays open to the public at the Capitol rotunda Tuesday and Wednesday. Mrs. Russell, who was hired by the Iowa Bicentennial Commission, began frosting the cake — depicting scenes from Iowa's

history and state symbols — last weekend. The bicentennial celebration was to begin at 2 p.m. Tuesday after Gov. Robert Ray addressed a joint session of the Legislature. A bicentennial wagon train headed for Valley Forge, Pa., also was on hand Tuesday as part of the ceremonies. The wagon train, camping in Des Moines Tuesday night, heads for northeast Iowa Wednesday.

*Des Moines Tribune, April 6, 1976*

To learn more about Iowa's America 250 events visit the [America 250 Iowa](http://America250Iowa.com) website.