



Legislative Services Agency

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

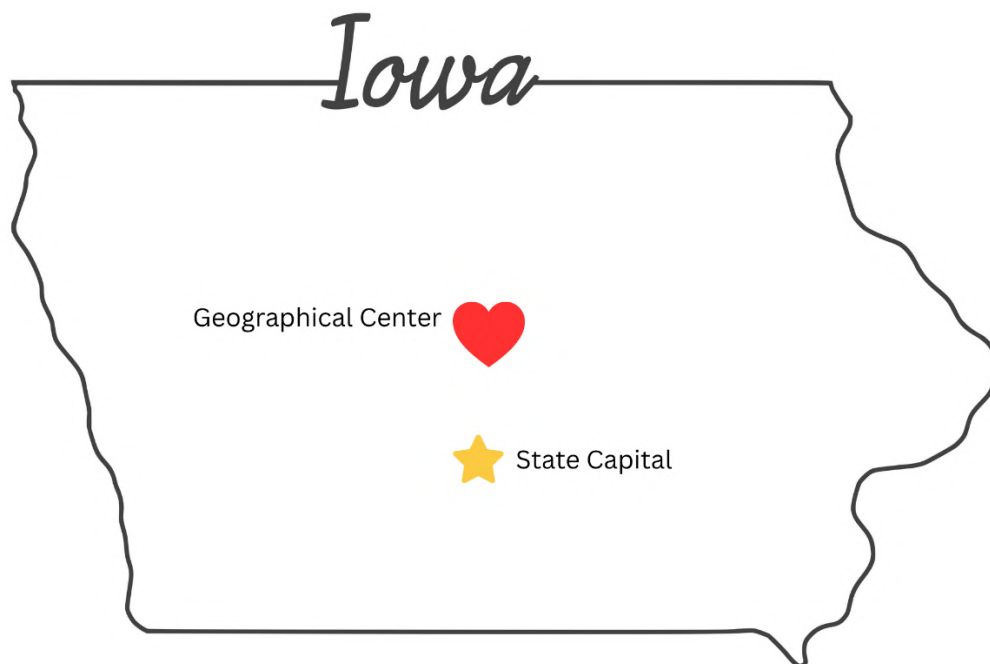
Legislative Information Office

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.

The Heart of Iowa

August 2026



When Iowa became a state in 1846, Iowa City was the state capital. Once the state boundaries were decided, talk began about a more central location for the capital. Cities and towns competed to be the chosen place, and three commissioners went in search of a location.

They were told to choose a site "as near the geographical center" of the state as could be found. The commissioners journeyed up the Des Moines River Valley, and in 1855, the decision was made to locate the capital within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers in Polk County.

Des Moines did offer a “more” central location than Iowa City, and with proximity to the rivers, which were major transportation routes, Des Moines was an ideal city. But if commissioners were to have chosen a site “near the geographical center,” the Capitol should be in the soybean field of the Book family farm, 40 miles north of Des Moines in Nevada.

The geographic center of any area, whether it’s a state, a county, or even a country, is essentially the point that is determined by balancing the shape. Imagine the area as a flat, irregularly shaped object. The geographic center is the spot where, if you could perfectly balance that object on a pin, it would not tip over.



The Des Moines Register, December 2, 1979

The primary method used to determine this point involves complex calculations that consider the state’s irregular boundaries, which is often the job of governmental or surveying organizations. But up to 1979, the Iowa Geological Society had never officially determined a geographical center point, according to the Des Moines Register.

In 1979, before computers were commonplace, a group of Grinnell College students set out to find the geographical center of Iowa. These students built the dataset and algorithm and calculations from scratch. The project captain, Grinnell College senior Scott Porter, said the team invested 750 hours into the work. With the college’s permission, the students brought the data to the Grinnell College computer, and after 17 hours, 35 minutes and 17 seconds of computing, the Digital Equipment Corporation model PDP11/70 computer located the center of Iowa to within 1/100th of a degree of accuracy.

“On the entire land mass of Iowa, that is accuracy within a half-mile,” Porter said.

Verified by the Iowa Geological Society, the exact center of Iowa is located about 200 feet off 190th Street/County Road E-29 in a private farm field at 42 degrees, 4 minutes, 37 seconds north latitude and 93 degrees, 29 minutes, 31 seconds west longitude.



A 1979 Des Moines Register photo shows Scott Porter in the field of the Book family farm.



A sign placed for RAGBRAI 2026 identifies the soybean field where Grinnell College students marked the geographic center of Iowa in 1979. Ames Tribune