



Legislative Services Agency

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Legislative Information Office

Pieces of Iowa's Past

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa Legislative Information Office 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: The Eighty-first General Assembly

October 2026

As the Ninety-first Iowa General Assembly comes to an end, 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 governor of Iowa in 2005 was Thomas Vilsack. John P. "Jack" Kibbie presided over the Senate, and Christopher C. Rants was Speaker of the House.



Governor Thomas Vilsack



President John P.
"Jack" Kibbie



Speaker Christopher C. Rants

The first session of the Eighty-first General Assembly convened January 10, 2005, and adjourned May 20, 2005, a 131-day session. The second session lasted 115 days, from January 9, 2006, until May 3, 2006. There was also a 1-day special session on July 14, 2006.

There were 25 Republicans and 25 Democrats in the Senate; in the House, there were 51 Republicans and 49 Democrats.

The Eighty-first General Assembly was historically significant for its partisan tie in the Iowa Senate, which resulted in a unique power-sharing arrangement between Democrats and Republicans. Despite predictions of legislative gridlock, the two parties worked together to pass significant legislation. The General Assembly also made history in 2006 by overriding a governor's veto for the first time in more than four decades.

It was a historic session, the longest in a quarter-century. A Democratic governor, a Republican-controlled House and a Senate divided evenly between political parties left little room for anything but compromise.

Capitol Improvements

On June 16, 2005, Governor Vilsack signed [House File 875](#), an infrastructure budget bill that included \$4.5 million for another phase of restoration for the 119-year-old statehouse. The amount included \$700,000 to cover the cost of water damage resulting from a broken pipe on Christmas Eve 2004. A break in the building's sprinkler system sent 2,000 gallons of water running through ceilings and walls on the Capitol's north side. The project also included a \$1.4 million painting project in the rotunda, removal of mezzanine offices and relocation of the cafeteria.

In 2006, the General Assembly also agreed to spend \$2.3 million on the first phase of the West Capitol Terrace Project. Parking lots west of the State Capitol would be removed to make way for a terrace with pedestrian paths, gathering spaces, benches, and native trees and flowers leading down the hillside from the Capitol to Pennsylvania Avenue.

Phase one of the project began on July 17, 2006, cost \$1.6 million and was completed June 2007 to serve as a high-profile venue and finish line for the 2007 Hy-Vee International Triathlon Union World Cup event and Des Moines Symphony's Yankee Doodle Pops.

The project was the realization of years of dreaming and planning. Connecting the Capitol Complex to downtown Des Moines, the West Capitol Terrace provides a grand entrance to the Capitol and a beautiful green space for people to enjoy.

Today, the State continues to enhance the West Capitol Terrace as per the Iowa State Capitol Complex [Master Plan](#). This year, the Vehicle Dispatch Building was demolished to complete the intended design of the West Capitol Terrace grounds.



*West Capitol Terrace Perspective Sketch,
March 2006, Brian Clark + Associates*

Des Moines-based design firm Brian Clark and Associates included some uniquely Iowa details:

- **75 hardy trees.** Hundreds of children from school districts across the state gathered at the West Capitol Terrace on Arbor Day to plant 75 red oak, redbud, crab apple and serviceberry trees.

The April planting ceremony was too rainy to plant more than a handful of the saplings, but a team of state workers finished the job. They will eventually mark each tree with a plaque designating the participating districts.

As the trees grow, they'll replace the shady rows of ash trees that are expected to be wiped out by the hungry plague of ash borer beetles that are munching their way across the Midwest.

- **Prairie plants and grasses.** Native plants fill about 80 percent of the gardens, which cover some 10,000 square feet. Landscape architects selected hardy plants and grasses that thrive even in hot, dry summers like this one.

"For as young as those plants are, they look fantastic. I wish the plants in my garden at home looked that good," said Matt Carlile, a landscape architect who helps manage the project for Brian Clark and Associates.

The mix of about 4,000 low-maintenance perennials includes moonshine yarrow, lavender hyssop, feathered reed grass, catmint, purple coneflower, black- and brown-eyed Susan, sedum and various lilies.

Because the plants are resistant to drought, they require only about 30 minutes of watering per week and none in the fall, according to Jeremy Boka, a land-



BRIAN CLARK AND ASSOCIATES

This is a drawing of the garden. Landscape architect Matt Carlile of Brian Clark and Associates says no one misses the old parking lot.

scape manager for Perficut Lawn Care, the company in charge of maintaining the new project during its first year.

"I really think it's going to be a very sustainable landscape," he said.

In addition to the perennials, eight ornate planters overflow with petunias, celosia, purple fountain grass and variegated potato vines.

- **Giant map of Iowa.** The map comprises 99 granite slabs to mark the state's 99 counties. It anchors the West Capitol Terrace at the bottom of the hill and links the Capitol grounds with the stonework in the sidewalks of the East Village.

- **Forty-two benches.** One for each of Iowa's 41 governors, plus an extra for Gov. Chet Culver's successor — line walkways throughout the garden. No one yet knows which plaques will go where, and Carlile said he's happy to leave those decisions to the politicians.

- **Large fountain.** Plans are in the works

to build a large fountain halfway down the slope as soon as leaders can raise \$1 million from private donations.

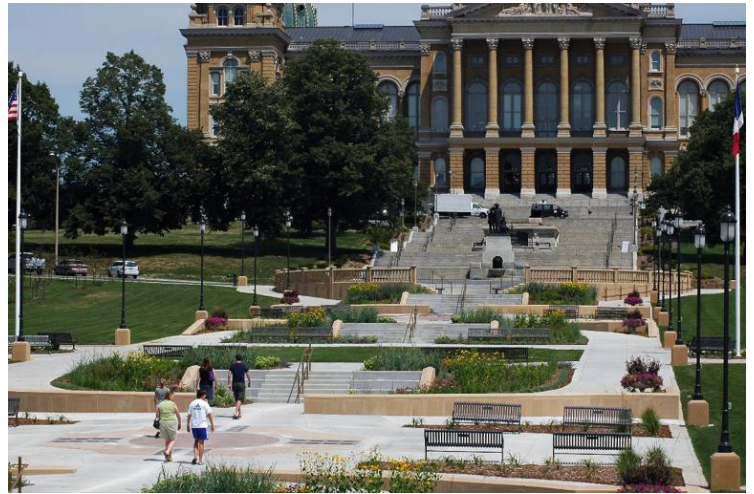
- **Small amphitheaters.** The planning team designed several concrete balustrades to match the stone details from the statehouse facade. The railings adorn curved staircases designed to serve as small amphitheaters for tour groups, classes and press conferences.

Although the new park required the removal of two parking lots that were built in the 1970s, nobody seems to mind, according to Carlile. New lots are under construction on the Capitol's east side, and more state employees are parking in a previously underused ramp near the State Historical Building.

"I don't think there's been anybody who's said, 'Where's the parking lot?' The responses we've had are fantastic," he said.

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Details of the West Capitol Terrace outlined in The Des Moines Register, July 28, 2007



A 410-stall parking lot was demolished to make way for 10 acres of terraces and plazas leading down the hillside from the Iowa State Capitol to Pennsylvania Avenue, where slabs of granite form a map of Iowa's 99 counties.

