

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

January 15, 2014

THIS WEEK: FOUR CAPITAL CITIES AND SEVEN CAPITOLS

BACKGROUND:

IOWA TERRITORY

Iowa was a part of the Louisiana Territory, renamed the Missouri Territory in 1812. Iowa was subsequently a part of the Michigan Territory and the Wisconsin Territory. In 1838 the Iowa Territory was formed, made up of the area that would become the state of Iowa and most of Minnesota and portions of North and South Dakota.

Four Capital Cities and Seven Capitols

Belmont, Wisconsin, was the first capital of the Wisconsin Territory. Major Jerry Smith, a member of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature representing Des Moines County, offered to build a "suitable" building for the Legislature to meet if they agreed to move the territorial capital to Burlington. In 1837 Maj. Smith built a two-story frame building, 40x70 feet. The House of Representatives occupied one floor, and the Council occupied the other. The building was described as having an inside staircase with a railing separating the "chambers" from the lobby.

Smith's structure burned down on December 12, 1837. Temporary quarters for the Legislature were secured in existing structures until the end of the

session. Burlington remained the capital when the Iowa Territory was formed in 1838. The first Iowa Territorial Legislature met in the Old Zion Church in Burlington. The 26 members of the House occupied the first floor and the 13 members of the Council occupied the basement. The Council moved out of the basement for the next legislative session and used space in the Catholic Church. This move was necessitated because of the damp conditions in the basement of the Old Zion Church.

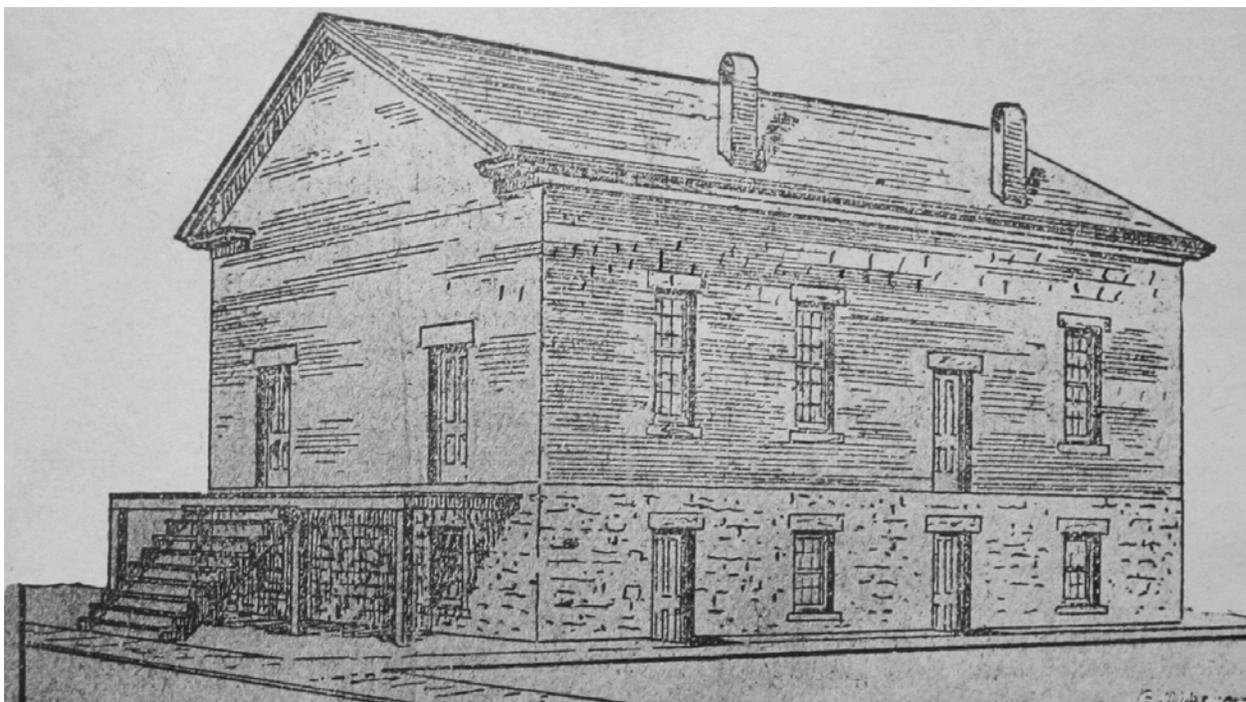
A joint resolution was passed in the first session of the Iowa Territorial Legislature to locate a permanent seat of government. The town of Iowa City was created, surveyed, and laid out as the permanent territorial capital of Iowa. Work began on the stone Capitol but did not conclude quickly. The Territorial Legislature was anxious to move to Iowa City. An act was passed in 1841 officially moving the seat of government if a building was furnished without cost to the Territory. Walter Butler provided just such a building. It was a two-story frame building about 30x60 feet. The legislature used this structure for one year before moving into a yet unfinished stone Capitol.

The Territorial Legislature continued to meet in the stone Capitol, and this structure remained the Capitol for more than a decade after Iowa became a state. From 1846 to 1857, Iowa City remained the seat of government for the state of Iowa. In 1857, as populations moved west, so did Iowa's capital. In 1858, the Legislature moved into another temporary structure in the new capital of Iowa—Des Moines. The brick Capitol repeated the process for a third time. It was built by citizens and given to the state as a means of locating the seat of government long before a permanent structure could be provided.

The present day Capitol was a mere dream in 1858, but Iowa's citizens never stopped moving and improving. The cornerstone was laid in 1871, and on January 17, 1884, the present Capitol was dedicated. The Legislature occupied this building while construction continued, and in 1886, the Capitol Commissioners submitted their final report to the Governor. This building was designed to last 1,000 years. One can only imagine what might take place in 2871!



Building that in 1836 served as the first meeting place of the Legislature of the Wisconsin Territory, a region that included the future state of Iowa. Belmont, Wisconsin



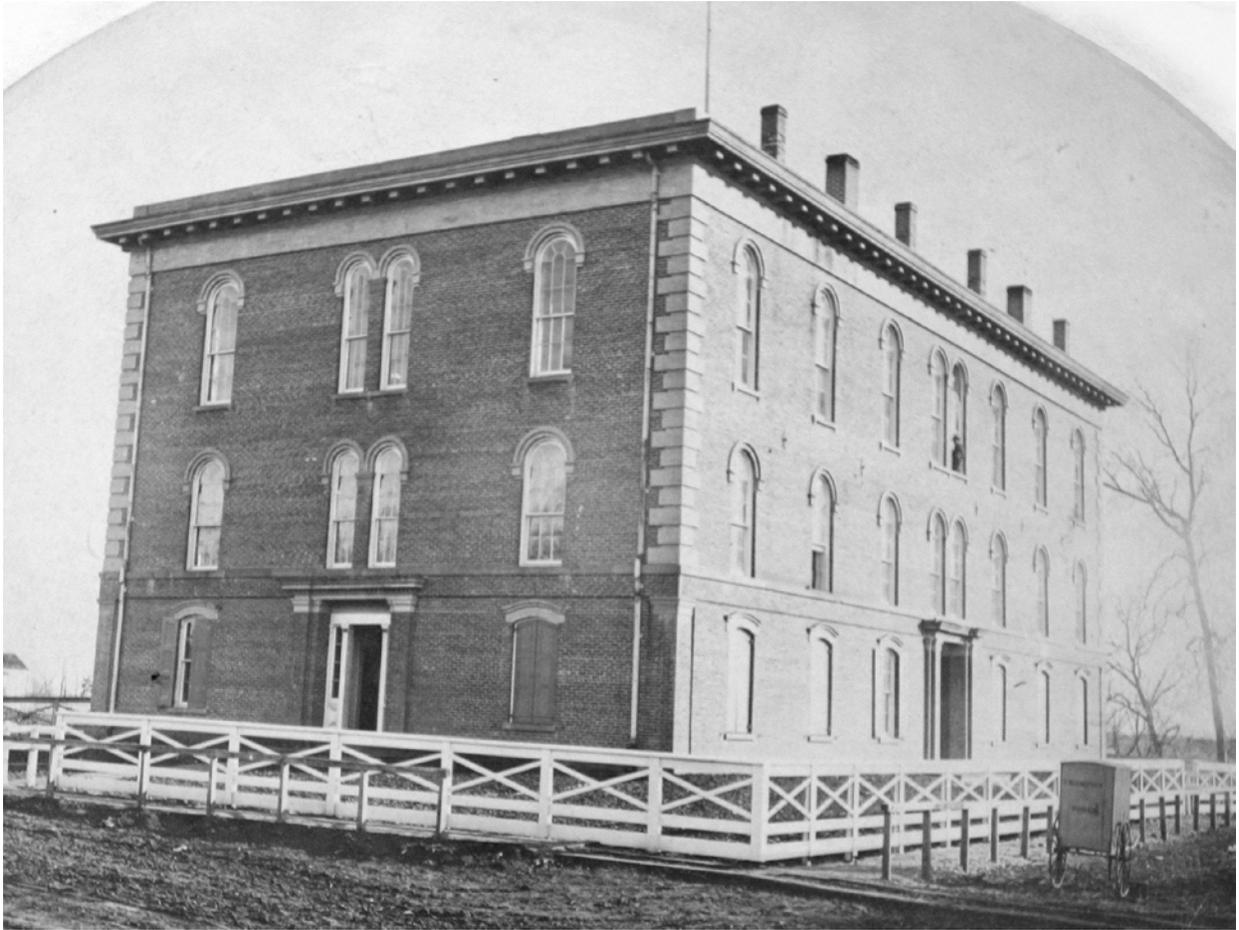
Sketch of the Old Zion Church (Burlington, Iowa), which housed the Legislature in 1938.



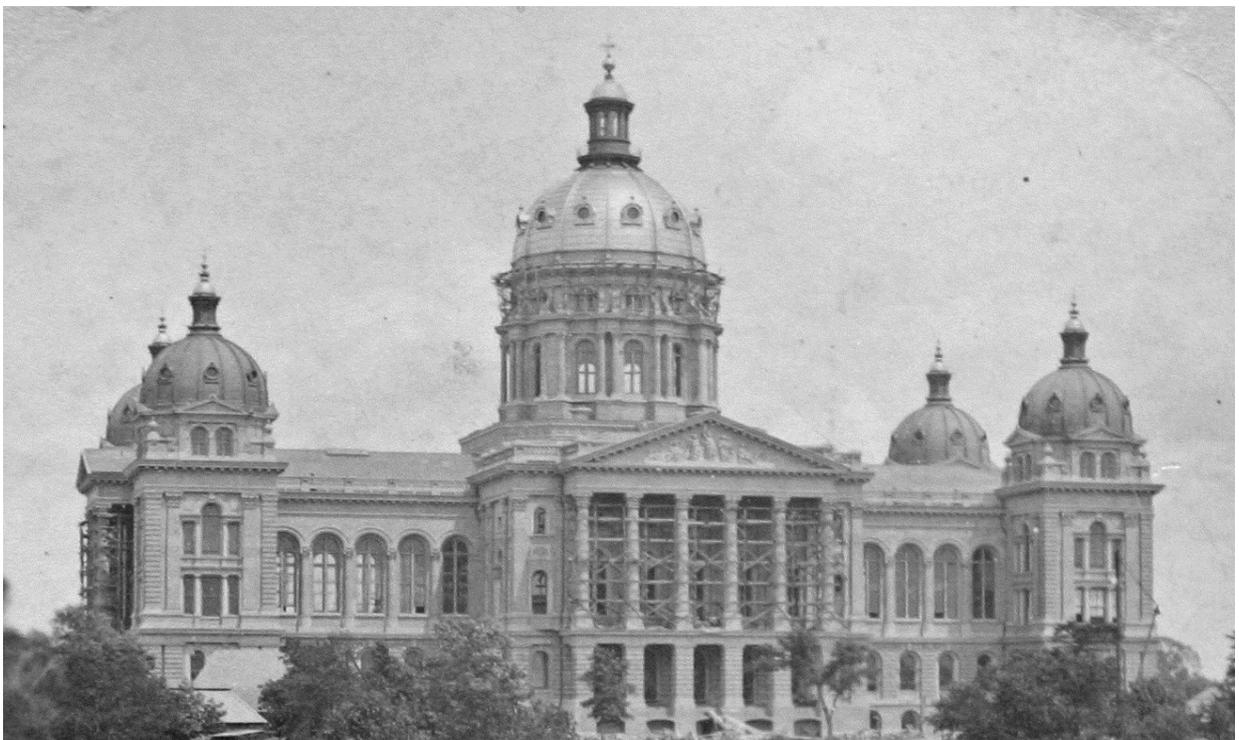
Following an 1841 proclamation that moved the territorial capital from Burlington to Iowa City, this building—the old Butler Hotel—was used as temporary headquarters of the Iowa Territorial Legislature while a new capitol was constructed. Iowa City, Iowa



Iowa's first capitol building--"Old Capitol"--the center of government during the last sessions of the Iowa territorial legislature and through the early years of statehood, 1846-1857. Iowa City, Iowa



After the center of state government moved from Iowa City to Des Moines in 1857, this building was used as the State Capitol from 1858-1884.



Current Capitol nearing construction completion. Circa 1885



Iowa State Capitol