

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.

March 30, 2016

THIS WEEK:

The History of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic

BACKGROUND:

Part two of Iowa's G.A.R. connection includes services rendered, a book, and a special room within the Iowa State Capitol.

The History of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic

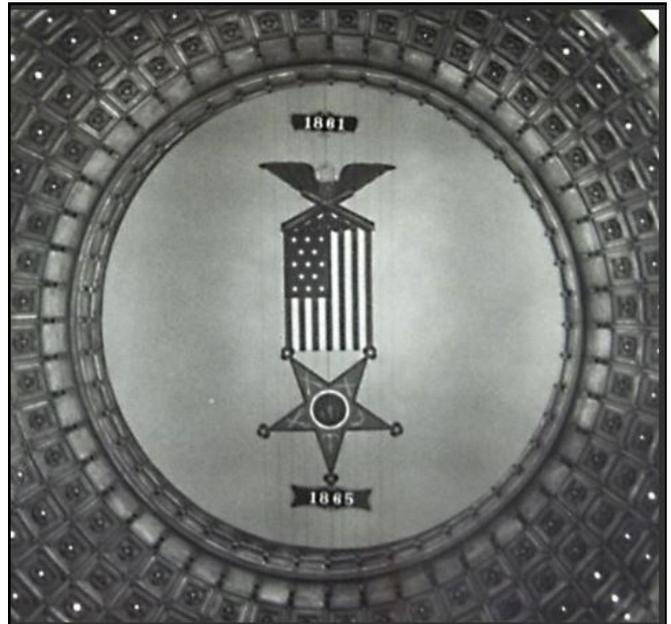
The Grand Army of the Republic is the only non-state agency to have occupied space in the Capitol. An Act approved by the 25th General Assembly in 1894 provided space on the ground floor for the G.A.R.

The 55th General Assembly in 1953 dismantled the G.A.R. room in the Capitol and stored the records with the History and Archives Department.



The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) Room in the Iowa State Capitol is highly decorated.





The original banner that is suspended in the dome of the Iowa State Capitol was originally made of horse hair and plaster. Originally dated "1922," it was later changed to read "1861-1865."



Another view of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) Room in the Iowa State Capitol.

CHAPTER 120.

AN ACT to provide for a room for the Grand Army of the Republic, S. F. 128, Department of Iowa, in the capitol building, and for an appropriation therefor.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa:

SECTION 1. That room Number 4, in the basement story of the Capitol building, be assigned for the use of the Grand Army of the Republic, Department of Iowa, and that janitor service therefor be provided by the State. Room No. 4 in capitol basement assigned to G. A. R.

SEC. 2. "That there is hereby appropriated from any funds in the state treasury the sum of fifteen hundred dollars, or so much thereof as may be necessary, for the purpose of repairing, fitting and furnishing said room, and that the same shall be expended under the order of the executive council." \$1,500 appropriated for repairing and furnishing room.

SEC. 3. This act being deemed of immediate importance shall take effect and be in force from and after its publication in the Iowa State Register and the Des Moines Leader, newspapers published at Des Moines, Iowa. Publication clause.

Approved March 30th, 1894.

I hereby certify that the foregoing act was published in the Iowa State Register and the Des Moines Leader, April 5, 1894.

W. M. McFARLAND, Secretary of State.

GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

1 SEC. 21. For the department of the grand army of the republic
2 there is hereby appropriated from the general fund of the state for the
3 year beginning July 1, 1953, and ending June 30, 1954, the sum of five
4 hundred dollars (\$500.00) or so much thereof as may be necessary to
5 be used in the following manner:

6 Notwithstanding the provisions of section 19.15, Code 1950, all
7 records, regalia and property of the Grand Army of the Republic, De-
8 partment of Iowa, Women's Relief Corps, Sons of Union Veterans and
9 all other auxiliary groups now in room four (4), basement of the
10 Capitol building shall be transferred to the History and Archives build-
11 ing, there to be placed in substantially the same arrangements, under
12 the direction of the curator, and the executive council is hereby au-
13 thorized and directed to make such transfer. The curator is hereby
14 directed to make adequate space available and to prepare a suitable and
15 proper display in the History and Archives Building depicting the part
16 of the State of Iowa in the War of the Rebellion, listing the engage-
17 ments in which Iowa troops participated, stating the Iowa communities
18 from which the various units were recruited, and, by pictures, maps,
19 trophies, mementoes and all visual aids possible, tell to the people of
20 Iowa the glorious history of our state in the Civil War.

21 For the expenses of such transfer and for salaries,
22 support, maintenance and miscellaneous purposes of
23 said department\$ 500.00

24 Grand total of all appropriations for all purposes for
25 each year of the biennium for the department of the
26 grand army of the republic.....\$ 500.00

27 At the end of the ensuing biennium any unobligated amount from
28 said appropriation shall revert to the general fund of the state.

Three Iowans served as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic. The following information is copied from *The Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic*, published by the Iowa State Historical Society in 1936.

*The Iowa Department of the
Grand Army of the Republic.* Grand Army of
Iowa.

Compiled by
JACOB A. SWISHER



PUBLISHED AT IOWA CITY IOWA IN 1936 BY
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

EXPLANATION

IN 1935 the Forty-sixth General Assembly of Iowa made an appropriation to the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic to defray the expenses of publishing a book of history which should include portraits and biographical sketches of the men who have served as Commanders of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic along with a brief history of the Iowa Department.

Mr. Jacob A. Swisher, of the research staff of the State Historical Society of Iowa, was requested by the Iowa Department to compile the book. Following the completion and acceptance of Mr. Swisher's work, The State Historical Society of Iowa was asked to publish the book in accordance with stipulations agreed upon by the Department and the Society.

Throughout the compilation and publication of this book the following persons generously assisted

with helpful counsel and valuable information: JOHN P. RISLEY, at present Adjutant General of the Grand Army of the Republic and Assistant Adjutant General of the Iowa Department; JAMES W. WILLETT, Judge Advocate General and Past Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, and Past Commander of the Iowa Department; JONATHAN C. HANES, Commander of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic; and OLEY NELSON, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic and Past Commander of the Iowa Department.

The pictures in this book are for the most part reproductions of enlarged photographs now hanging in the rooms of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic in the State House at Des Moines.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT AND EDITOR
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA CITY IOWA



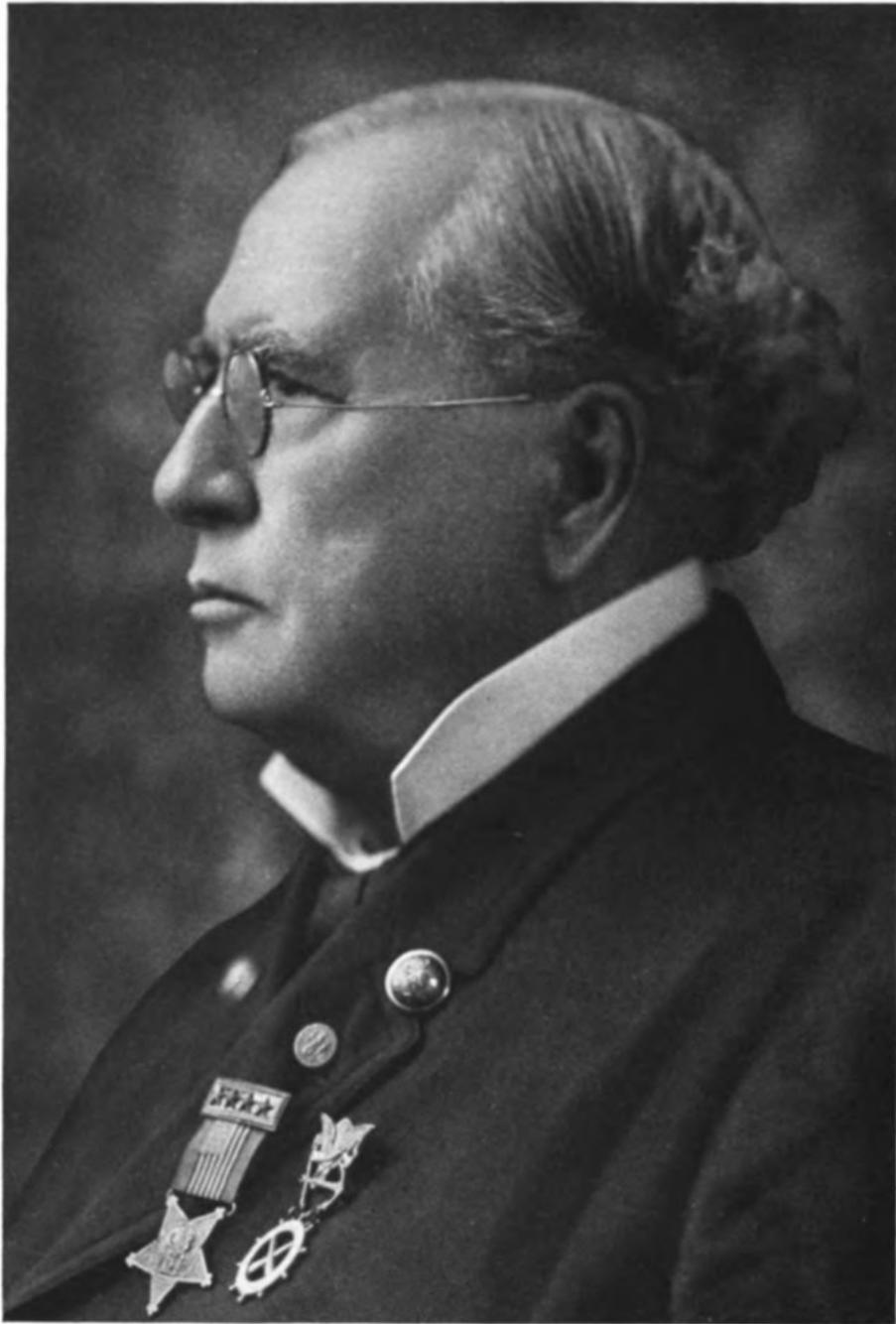
DAVID JAMES PALMER, COMMANDER OF THE IOWA DEPARTMENT
OF THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC, JUNE 1907 TO JUNE 1908

DAVID JAMES PALMER

David James Palmer was born in Pennsylvania, on November 15, 1839, but spent most of his years in Iowa. As a youth of twenty-one and a resident of Washington, Iowa, he enlisted in Company C, Eighth Iowa Infantry, on July 10, 1861. He was seriously wounded at Shiloh and was sent home to recuperate. Later he organized Company A, Twenty-fifth Iowa Infantry, and became its captain. He rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel and commanded his regiment at Vicksburg and on Sherman's March to the Sea. At the close of the war, General Sherman led the troops in the Grand Review up Pennsylvania Avenue, in Washington, D. C. When Sherman took his place on the reviewing stand with the President, he left Lieutenant Colonel Palmer to lead the Union troops in the great parade.

Returning home after the war Colonel Palmer engaged in agriculture. Later he served as county auditor, State Senator, and Railroad Commissioner. At the Annual Encampment at Dubuque in 1907 he was elected Department Commander. In 1914 Colonel Palmer was named Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic. In this high office it was his privilege to review the veteran troops as they again marched up Pennsylvania Avenue at the National Grand Army Encampment held in Washington, D. C., in 1915, fifty years after the close of the war.

Colonel Palmer lived until November 20, 1928, having attained the age of eighty-nine years.



JAMES WILLIAM WILLETT, COMMANDER OF THE IOWA DEPARTMENT
OF THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC, JUNE 1913 TO JUNE 1914

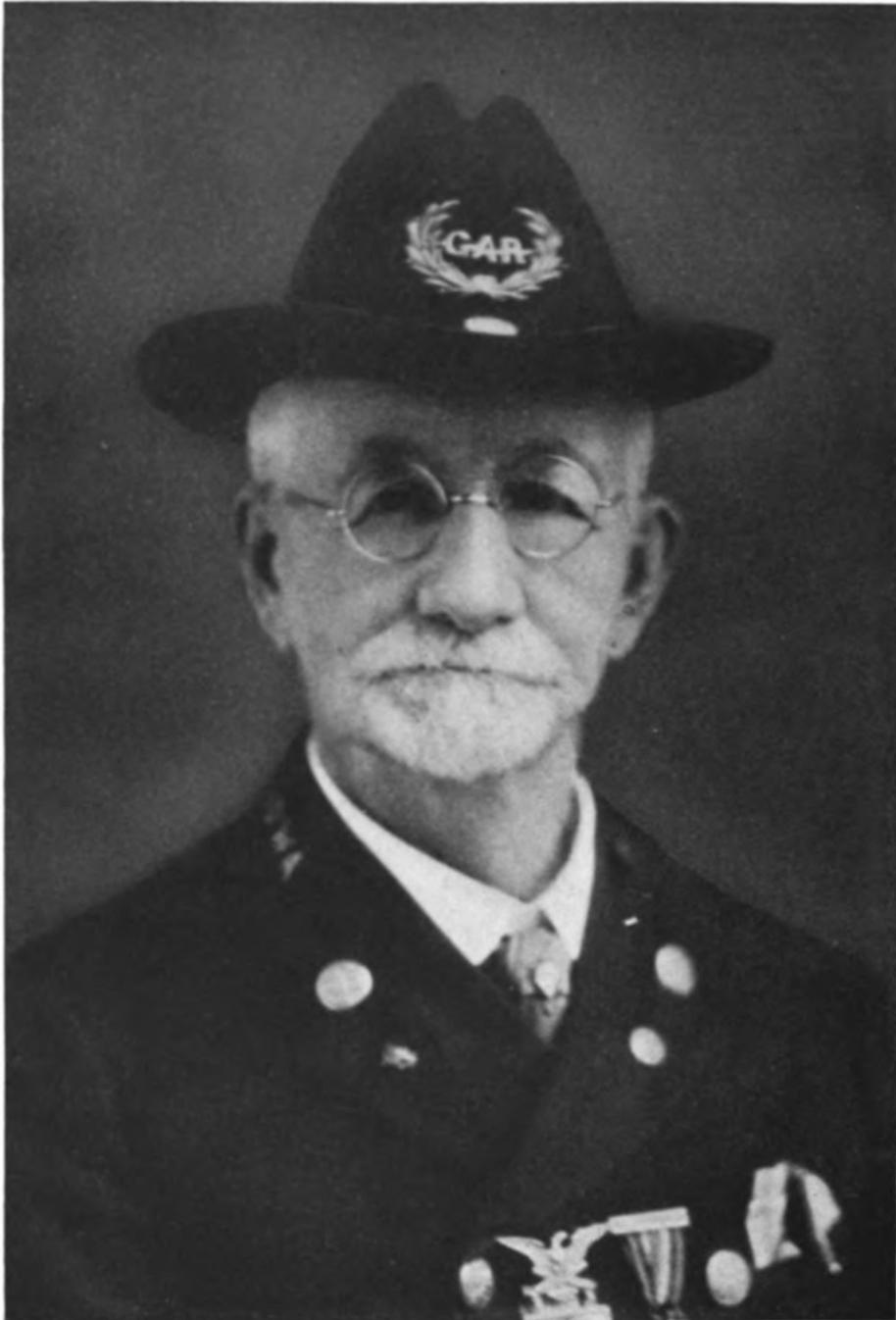
JAMES WILLIAM WILLETT

James William Willett was born in Mercer County, Illinois, on March 8, 1846. As a youth he lived at Keithsburg, Illinois, on the banks of the Mississippi River.

When the Civil War began, young Willett attempted to enlist in the Union Army, but failed because of his youth and size. In the spring of 1863, however, he obtained employment on a transport vessel as an "ordinary seaman". In the fall of that year by passing the examinations, he was enabled to enlist in the United States Navy as "an able seaman", and was assigned to the United States Gunboat *Springfield* of the Mississippi Squadron, where he served as boatswain's mate.

At the close of the war, Comrade Willett continued his work on rivers and lakes until 1871, when he gave up the seafaring life, came to Iowa, and began the study of law. Having been admitted to the bar, he opened offices at Toledo and Tama. He has practiced law in Tama County for many years, and for more than twelve years he was Judge of the District Court.

Comrade Willett was a charter member of Thomas F. Bradford Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, organized at Tama in 1883, and after more than fifty years he is still a member of that Post. At the Annual Encampment at Burlington in 1913, he was elected Department Commander. He has also held the office of Judge Advocate General, and in 1922 he had the high distinction of being unanimously elected Commander-in-Chief.



OLEY NELSON, COMMANDER OF THE IOWA DEPARTMENT OF
THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC, JUNE 1927 TO JUNE 1928

OLEY NELSON

Oley Nelson, a veteran and son of a veteran, was born in Rock County, Wisconsin, on August 10, 1844. On June 17, 1864, he enlisted in Company D, Fortieth Wisconsin Infantry (known as the University Regiment), which was assigned to General Sturgis's Brigade, Fifteenth Army Corps, with headquarters at Memphis, Tennessee. He was discharged on September 16, 1864, because of sickness and returned to his widowed mother in Primrose County, Wisconsin, his father having died in service prior to Oley's enlistment. In 1867 Comrade Nelson moved in a covered wagon to Story County, Iowa.

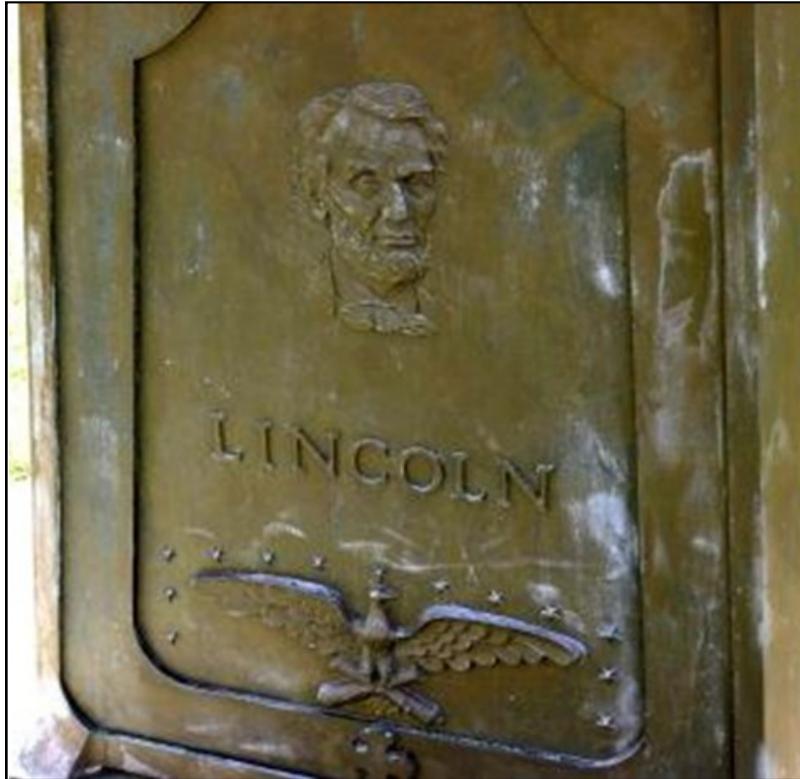
He was an active member of Ellsworth Post No. 30, at Ames, Iowa, for forty years, and has been a member of Grenville M. Dodge Camp No. 75, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War for twenty-five years. He was a member of the Twenty-first and Twenty-second General Assemblies of Iowa, and for twelve years has served as Sergeant at Arms of the Iowa House of Representatives. He was one of the foremost and most persistent advocates of a State Soldiers' Home and during his legislative career voted for the Home. He served as Department Patriotic Instructor, and in 1927 was elected Department Commander. He served as National Chief of Staff in 1931, was elected Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief in September, 1931, and on September 12, 1935, was elected Commander-in-Chief, the third comrade from Iowa to be chosen to this high office.

Several monuments and memorials on the Capitol grounds celebrate the Grand Army of the Republic.



This bronze sundial was dedicated to Union veterans of the Civil War during their 1938 Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) encampment in Des Moines. Of the nearly 3 million Union soldiers who fought during the Civil War, only an estimated 5,000 were still living in 1938, and more than 100 of these veterans attended this 72nd encampment. Most were over 90 years old.

Dr. D. W. Morehouse, then president of Drake University and astronomy professor, installed and adjusted the timepiece.



The 65-foot flagpole was dedicated to the memory of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) and was donated to the state by the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic during the 1931 65th National Encampment of the G.A.R. On one side of the base is a bronze engraving of Abraham Lincoln; on the other side an eagle, the Union Army symbol, is pictured.



The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) Memorial Bench, made of granite, is located near the G.A.R. flagpole. The bench was donated by the Ladies of the G.A.R. and presented by Alma C. J. Speckner of Madison, Wisconsin, Patriotic Instructor of the Ladies of the G.A.R.

The presentation took place at the 1938 convention in Des Moines.



The Iowa Sons of Union Veterans, at the June encampment in 1936, donated the Oley Nelson Memorial Tree. The tree is located on the northeast Capitol grounds.

Nelson was the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) from 1935 to 1936 and served as an Iowa Representative during the 21st and 22nd General Assemblies. He also served as a Sergeant-at-Arms in the House of Representatives from 1923 to 1937.

A photograph of Oley Nelson was in the House Chamber for many years.



The National Women's Relief Corps, an auxiliary of the G.A.R., planted this tree in honor of the Civil War veterans during a national encampment in Des Moines. The tree is located directly west of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument.



The largest and one of the oldest monuments on the Capitol grounds honors the men who made up the Grand Army of the Republic. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument is dedicated to the Iowa men who fought in the Civil War.