

## National Historic Sites

### Iowa Old Capitol Building

The [Iowa Old Capitol Building](#) is located in Iowa City, Iowa. It was once the main government building for the state of Iowa, and it now stands as the most prominent landmark at the center of the University of Iowa's campus. John F. Rague is credited with designing the Territorial Capitol Building, although it is thought that missionary priest Father Samuel Mazzuchelli also helped with the design. Rague quit the Iowa project after five months, claiming his design was not followed. The cornerstone of the Old Capitol Building was laid in Iowa City on July 4, 1840. Iowa City served as the third and last territorial capital of Iowa, and the last four territorial legislatures met at the Old Capitol Building until December 28, 1846, when Iowa was admitted into the United States as the 29th state of the union. Iowa City was declared the state capital of Iowa, and the government convened in the Old Capitol Building. The Iowa constitution was crafted in the Old Capitol Building. The first governor of the state of Iowa was inaugurated there, and the first six Iowa general assemblies met in the building. After 10 years of housing the government in Iowa City, the state decided to move the seat of state and build the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines. When the state government moved to Des Moines in 1857, the Old Capitol Building became the first permanent building owned by the University of Iowa. The state of Iowa authorized a major renovations of the building in the 1920s and in 1970, it was restored back to its original condition as a government building in the 1850s, and for use as a state historical museum. It was declared a National Historic Landmark on January 7, 1976. On November 20, 2001, contractors using open flame torches and heat guns on the cupola supporting the building's gold dome accidentally set the cupola on fire. The bell at the top of the Old Capitol was irreparably damaged, the dome was destroyed, and the tens of thousands of gallons of water used to douse the blaze caused major damage. On May 6, 2006, the Old Capitol Building was reopened to the public. The ground floor of the building is now a museum, with exhibits about the history of the building, the university, and the state of Iowa.



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In 1870, the Iowa Legislature passed an Act creating a Board of Commissioners. The purpose of the board was to select a plan for a new [Iowa State Capitol](#), authorize construction and keep the cost under \$1.5 million. The commissioners ultimately chose an architectural plan submitted by John Cochran and Alfred Piquenard. In 1869, Cochran and Piquenard worked with two assistants Mifflin Bell and William Hackney, on the project. Hackney was the only architect to continue to work on the project until the Iowa Capitol was completed in 1886. A Capitol Commission was appointed to oversee the construction, and the commission chose the stone for the foundation, which was constructed in 1871. During the following winter, the foundation stone crumbled and had to be replaced. It was determined that the stone had been waterlogged. A smaller four-member Capitol Commission subsequently replaced the first Capitol Commission. By 1873, a second foundation was completed, and the cornerstone was placed on the southwest corner of the foundation. The inscription on the cornerstone reads: IOWA. A.D. 1873. As work progressed on the Capitol, changes were made in the original design — most notably the design of the dome. Piquenard had envisioned a tall, slender dome, but Bell modified that design to create the shorter, larger dome now sitting atop the Capitol. Due to the additional cost of the larger dome, there initially was opposition to gilding it. The final cost of the Capitol was \$2,873,294.59, significantly exceeding the original estimate, but the building was still not completely finished in 1886. Funding was insufficient to decorate the public hallways. Space had been planned for beautiful works of art but lack of funds made it impossible to hire the artists. Additionally, the outside steps to the west and south had not yet been completed. In 1902, a third Capitol Commission was appointed to complete the building and to make necessary repairs. This Capitol Improvement Commission completed its work around 1908. During the early part of the century, gaslights in the Capitol were converted to electric lights. The dome was also gilded for the second time. The original slate roof was replaced with a copper roof and a few windows were replaced. On January 4, 1904, during the process of conversion to electric lights, a worker left a candle burning, igniting a massive fire in the Capitol. More than 200 volunteers assisted the fire department in bringing the blaze under control. Water damaged the lower floors in the north wing, including the Supreme Court Chambers, and the ceiling in the Chamber of the House of Representatives had to be replaced. The total cost of repairs after the fire and the money spent by the Capitol Improvement Commission added an additional \$500,000 to the cost of the Capitol. The building's interior features 29 types of marble, as well as many varieties of wood. For more than a century, the golden dome of the Capitol has been a symbol of Iowa government and politics. The 23-karat gold-covered dome rises 275 feet above the Capitol grounds. The gold leaf covering the dome is so thin that 250,000 sheets pressed together would measure only one inch thick. The most recent re-gilding was completed in 1999. It is the only five-domed capitol in the country. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

