





# Nebraska Builds and Outgrows Three Capitols in Less than Three-quarters of a Century--Far Step from First Crude Structure to Magnificent New Statehouse

BY ELEANOR HINMAN.

"Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul."

Oliver Wendell Holmes' famous line might well serve as one of the inscriptions on the capitol building. For the capitols of Nebraska form a chambered-nautilus series, progressing rapidly from humble and flimsy beginnings to the present inspiring project. Certainly to minds that are filled with the thought of it, the past appears very "low-vaulted" indeed. Incredible, that so much of grandeur and dignity could come in so short time from beginnings so sordid and inauspicious!

The story of the first short-lived capitols, as told in Mr. Albert Watkins' paper, "The How, Where and Why of the Nebraska Capitols and Capitols," filed this week in the governor's office, is not such as one would willing revive except for the purposes of contrast. To the citizens of today, inheritors of the enlargement of the civic conscience which came with the beginning of the twentieth century, the chambered-nautilus chronicles of the early days seem inexpressibly lugubrious.

But to the lusty fathers of the state it was not so. Their doings abounded with energy and the joy of life, their brawls were joyous, and their very graft was gay.

In the halcyon days of carpetbagging which marked the beginnings of this state, a group of sturdy adventurers and promoters came from Council Bluffs and laid out the city of Omaha on a sand-bar by the side of the Missouri. They included a "Capitol Square" in their plans, and began the erection of a brick building to house the first territorial legislature and a hotel to shelter its members.

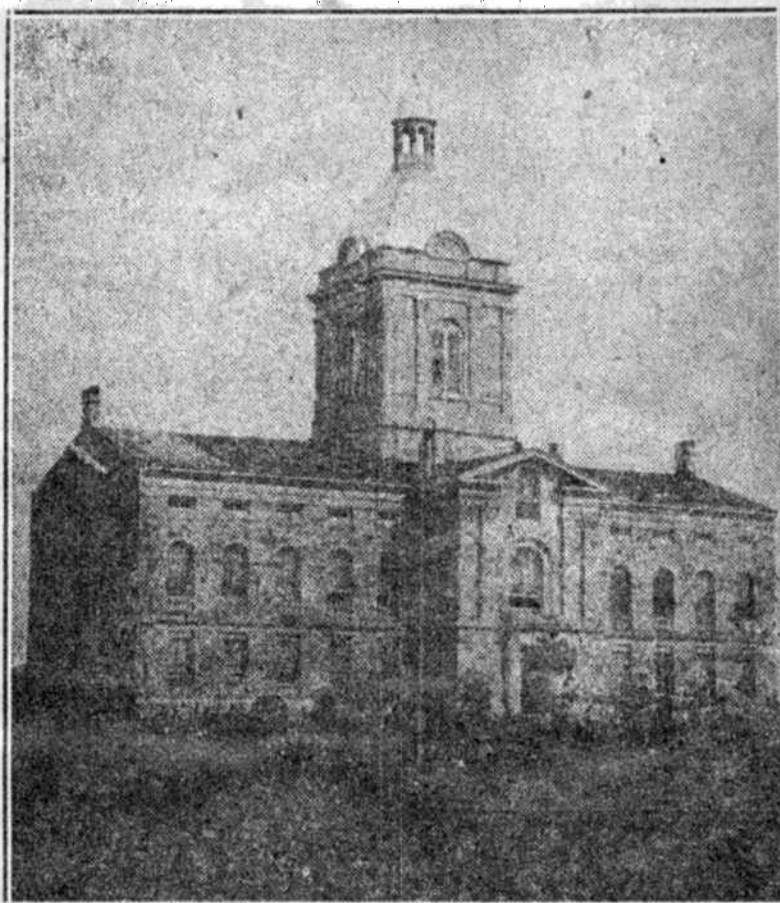
## Faith in Future

This touching faith in the future of Omaha was backed up by works, and works so potent that they not only got the territorial capital, but even secured that Bellevue, their greatest rival, should not be represented at all in the first session of the legislature.

On January 16, 1855, the first territorial legislature, consisting of thirteen councillors and twenty-four representatives, met at "the brick building at Omaha City," which, by the way, had been financed by the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry company. That morning the streets

of the town were filled with disappointed townspeople armed with hatchets and pistols wrapped in Indian blankets, who had come to Omaha with the idea of breaking up the legislature. However, Acting Governor Cuming got the session into full swing before the disturbers realized what was happening, and their nerve failed them, so that the demonstration did not take place.

This building was located on lot 7, block 124, in the plot of the town. Its site fronts east on Ninth street between Douglas and Farnam. The Bellevue "Palladium" gives a description of it, a little tinged with the green hue of sour grapes, but probably correct enough in the main.



—Photo loaned by State Historical Society.

## THE FIRST STATE CAPITOL.

This promising but ill-fated first capitol of Nebraska as a state, built at the present site in Lincoln and completed in 1870, led a precarious existence for a dozen years until it was replaced by the present less perishable structure.

"The building in which the session is to be held is a plain, substantial brick edifice, which we would judge was about thirty or forty-five feet building is on the east side, into a hall, from which the various state apartments above and below are reached.

## Building Too Small

"As you enter the hall from below the representatives' rooms will be found on the left, and the governor's apartments on the right. A winding staircase leads to the hall above, at the head of which on the left you enter the council chamber, and the committee rooms on the right. The building is neat and substantial, but altogether too small for the purpose designed.

"The desks for the representatives and councilmen are designed to accommodate two members, each having a small drawer to himself and a plain Windsor chair for a seat. The furniture, including the secretaries' and speakers' desks, is of the plainest, and yet well suited to the purpose for which it was designed.

"The size of the legislative rooms is so small that but few spectators can gain admittance at one time.

"We were struck by the singularity of the taste displayed in the curtain furniture of the different rooms, which consisted of two folds of plain calico, the one green and the other

red, which we took to be symbolic of jealousy and war; which monsters, we fear, will make their appearance before right is enthroned and peace established."

## The First Capitol

The first real capitol of the territory was located at Omaha on Capitol hill where the Omaha high school now stands. On March 3, 1855, the Congress of the United States appropriated \$50,000 for building it. A rather imposing plan was drawn for it, and on November 29, 1855, the contract was let to a Council Bluffs firm, Bovey and Armstrong. Of these, George C. Bovey was a practical builder; George Armstrong was latter mayor of Omaha.

In an evil hour, the Congress had entrusted the management of the fund to the Governor, M. W. Izard, a well-meaning and pleasant person, but incompetent. He kept no accounts, and he succeeded in disposing of the whole fund and running the state about \$8,000 into debt in building no more than a cellar and first story.

When this was discovered, in 1857, the territory buzzed with rage. The panic of that year had left nearly everyone penniless, and it was certain that the treasury could not make good the deficit. Finally the city of Omaha came to the rescue. It issued script to the amount of \$60,000, underwritten by various citizens and secured by certain real estate, including a lien on the capitol building

and square. But when it was discovered that the city of Omaha had acquired a legal right to turn the legislature out of house and home if it should choose, such a storm of protest arose that the citizens patriotically deeded the building to the state.

The plans had called for a stately colonnade to surround the building but the fund ran short and only a part of the columns were ever set in place. These were made of inferior material and the most of them were sent toppling by the first violent thunderstorm that came along. A member of the third legislature disconsolately pictures the new state house as "a magnificent cellar, surmounted by portions of brick walls and surrounded by numerous isolated, unfinished, dreary-looking columns." The latter, however, were soon removed as dangerous to life and limb, and sold for scrap iron.

Notwithstanding its flimsy construction, this building housed not only the territorial legislatures, but after the capital had been wrested away from Omaha to be set down in what was then the middle of nowhere, on Salt Creek basin where Lincoln now stands, it offered a somewhat rickety shelter to the first state legislature until their new home was ready for them, January 7, 1869. It was then donated to the city of Omaha for educational purposes.

But its life was destined to be short. In 1869, eleven years after its completion, G. P. Randall, a Chicago architect, pronounced it unsafe, and in June, 1870, its remains were removed.

## The Second Capitol

Omaha had no sooner secured the capitol than the populous South Platte district, moved by ambition and a thirst for revenge, determined to get it away again at all costs. It took them twelve years to do it, and was the cause of more than one fist fight in the legislative halls. It was the influence of Nebraska City that brought the capitol to Lancaster County. That enterprising town realized it stood no chance to secure the capital itself, and it hoped to profit by trade with the new city as Council Bluffs had hoped to profit by trade with Omaha, a piece of shortsightedness for which it also has suffered as Council Bluffs has suffered.

The commissioners who picked the present site were Thomas P. Kennard, John Gillespie and James Sweet, with the assistance of Governor Butler. When the lots surrounding the square were offered at auction, a two-days rain was dampening the spirits of the gathering, and so little confidence was felt in the enterprise that no bids were made for the lots until the commissioners themselves, after a conversation together, set the ball rolling by bidding up the lots. A fairly well supported tradition has always claimed that they had made a pact not to be held by their bids unless the enterprise caught fire. However, with this assistance the bidding began, and the new capitol was assured.

## Native Rock Used

Great plans were made for the capitol building. The absence of a railroad as well as the necessities of the promoters made it desirable to use native rock, and the reports of the day was enthusiastic about the stone quarries of the neighborhood. A contemporary account describes the structure, whose outer walls were built of "a kind of magnesian lime-



stone, very beautiful, easily wrought, and excellent building material, brought from Beatrice, a distance of forty miles. The inner walls are of brown sandstone. Of this there are immense quarries within three miles of Lincoln. The builder, Mr. Ward, is enthusiastic in his appreciation of the stone. He says it is the same rock that is in such high favor in New York city, where brownstone fronts are the synonym of aristocratic grandeur."

But alas for the best-laid schemes of mice and men! It proved that the "beautiful magnesian limestone" had the uncomfortable property of crumbling under the influence of frost, while the "New York brownstone," which was nothing more than Dakota sandstone, rotted into sand on contact with moist air.

In 1873 the Nebraska City press, beginning to regret the action of their representatives in raising up a rival in the new capital city, argues for removal on the ground that it will cost the state no financial loss since "the university will fall down next

year anyhow; the capitol should be donated to Lincoln—the lower part for a livery stable, the upper part for a block house—the upper windows would make good portholes. The penitentiary after Boss Stout takes out the windows, will make a first class ruin."

In 1875, six years after the building was completed in January, 1869, it was necessary to warn the honorable senators and representatives not to applaud one another's speeches, as to do so might cause the building to fall down.

Yet, fragile as the structure was, it endured until 1881, when, the west wing of the present building having been completed, a start was made upon the remainder of the building.

#### The Present Building

With the existing structure, our

rest were once more upon terra firma, —firm, at least by comparison with what had gone before.

In 1879 the legislature, moved by the obvious fear of having the house of the government collapse about their ears, appropriated \$75,000 to construct the west wing of the present building, "said wing not to exceed in cost \$75,000, and to be built in conjunction with and so built that it can be used in connection with the present capitol building, and so constructed that it may eventually form

a part of what may eventually be a symmetrical capitol building for the State of Nebraska." In 1881 the legislature made another appropriation of \$100,000 for the east wing.

The west wing was ready for the senate to occupy on May 10, 1882, and the east wing by December 1, 1882. The total cost of the capitol including the central section with the dome, was \$691,428.80; and of the paving, walk and drives was \$68,083.

Even this building, however, was not finished without some scandal. People thought it strange that while

the bid of Robert D. Silver for the east wing of the capitol was \$36,400, and the bid of W. H. B. Stout was \$96,800, the contract was awarded with very little discussion to the highest bidder, although Silver was known to be a capable builder. Silver sued the state for a forced award, but lost his case.

#### New Building Dignified

However, the building was graceful in shape and dignified in proportions, and vastly better built than anything that had gone before it. For forty years it has housed the government, a life more than three times as long as any of its predecessors enjoyed, and it is finally being superseded because the state has outgrown it.

In 1911, to be sure, the old cry, that the "capitol was unsafe" was sounded as an excuse for a determined effort to get the seat of government away from Lincoln. The movement was started by the ambitious towns along the Platte, warmly upheld by Omaha, and supported by the wet element in the state by way of punishing Lincoln for its adventure with prohibition. This was the last of the capitol removal agitations which had stirred up the state at frequent intervals ever since its founding.

When the recent capitol appropriation bill was passed, nothing was more astonishing to those who followed the history of such legislation in this state that the utter peace and harmony with which it was passed. There was no effort to remove the capitol from Lincoln, and the members from Douglas county, representing Omaha, formerly Lincoln's deadliest enemy, were among the most active in the effort to pass the bill. Apparently the day of the sectional strife and jealousies which once disfigured our annals is over, and the time has come when all parts of the state can work together for its honor.



—Photo from Morton History of Nebraska.

#### WHERE THE FIRST LEGISLATURE MET.

"The brick building at Omaha City," erected by the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company, housed the first two legislatures, in 1855 and 1856.

## Fourth Nebraska Capitol is Emblematic of Statewide Amity While its Predecessors Were Born of Bitter Strife

BY ALBERT WATKINS.

As historian of the Nebraska State Historical Society, I contributed a comprehensive history of the making and unmaking of Nebraska capitols and capitols in the ceremony of board of sessions which resigned. The breaking ground for the new statehouse on April 15, 1922. I here undertake the difficult task of condensing the story within the practical limits of a newspaper article with the least impairment.

Thought and action have never before been so independent of the past as now, yet interest in the past is now more general and keen than ever before. This beginning of the most pretentious of all of the commonwealth's capitols increases greatly our interest in other similar experiments, and the hope that holding the lamp up to them may in some sort guide and restrain our feet from their many mistakes and misfortunes, still further justifies my task.

#### Nebraska's Stressful Beginning.

That the fierce sectional strife over the spread or restriction of the southern slavery should have been the midwife of far frontier Nebraska's territorial birth, seems a truth stranger than fiction. It was due to the fact that Missouri, naturally half slave and half free, was admitted to the union as a slave state, in 1820, but on the notorious compromise concession that slavery should be restricted from the Louisiana territory north of latitude 36 degrees and 30 minutes—the westward extension of the southern boundary of Missouri. The not wholly, nor mainly selfish sop, which Stephen A. Douglas, chairman of the senate committee on territories and the most powerful parliamentary leader of that time, threw to the slavery in the repeal of the compromise, to preclude its opposition to his prodigious policy of redeeming that vast empire from its condemnation by the northeast and southwest as a perpetual dumping ground for their Indians, precipitated secession and the civil war. The opening for anti-slavery organization caused by the repeal lured Lincoln

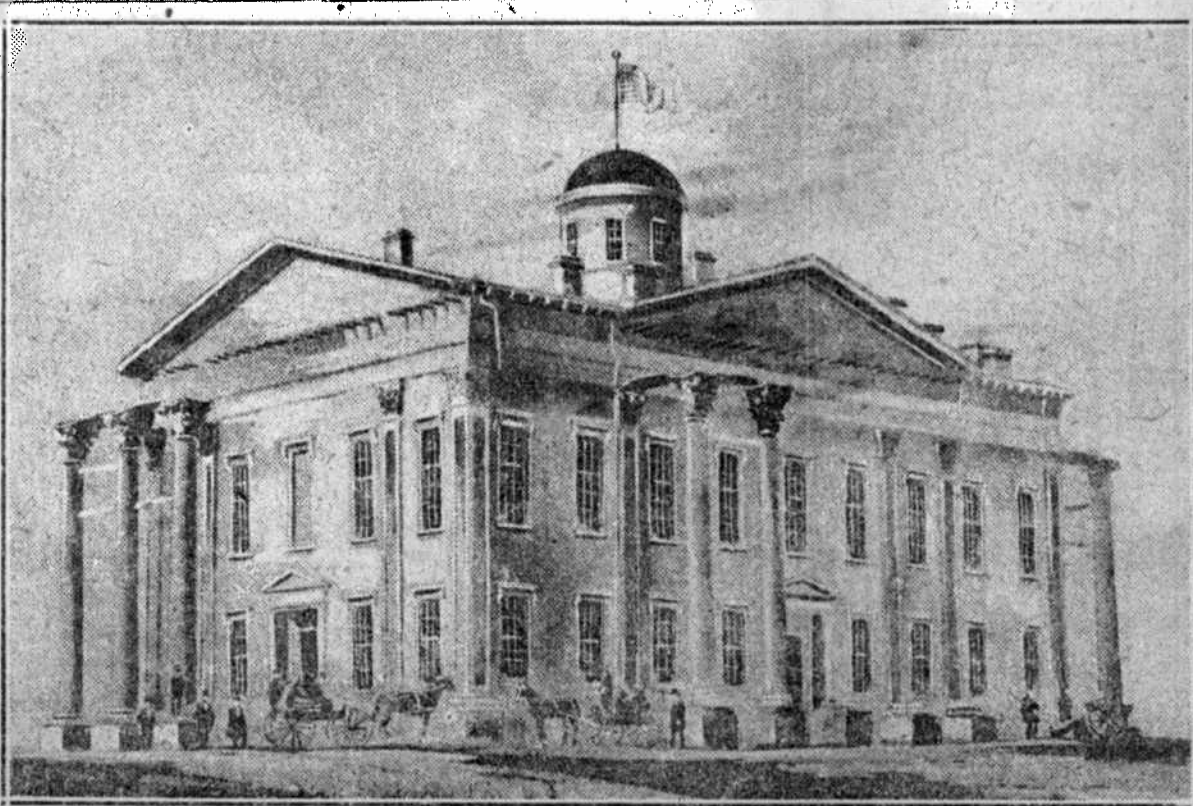
from his hiding, but these two greatest leaders of that particular time heroically "clasped hands across the bloody chasm" to save the union from the disruption which they, principally perhaps, though unwittingly, had caused.

#### The Nebraska Country.

It was at first intended to include

only the territory opposite Missouri and Iowa (extending westward to the Rocky mountains, the western boundary of the Purchase) in the Territory of Nebraska. This section came to be called The Nebraska Country in the early forties, after the original American name of the river which bisected it. Notwithstanding that the

Arkansas is much longer, the Nebraska came to be considered the most important tributary of the Missouri because its valley afforded the most important highway in the country—at first, to the great fur fields and afterward for the colonization of Oregon and to the gold fields of California. It was because this contact and grip had become continental in the meantime that all the rest of the Purchase northward, was finally included in the original bill for organizing The Nebraska Country.



—Photo loaned by Mrs. C. S. Paine.

#### THE TERRITORIAL CAPITOL.

This building, on Capitol Hill in Omaha, housed the first territorial and state governments from 1850-1869, when the Lincoln capitol was completed.

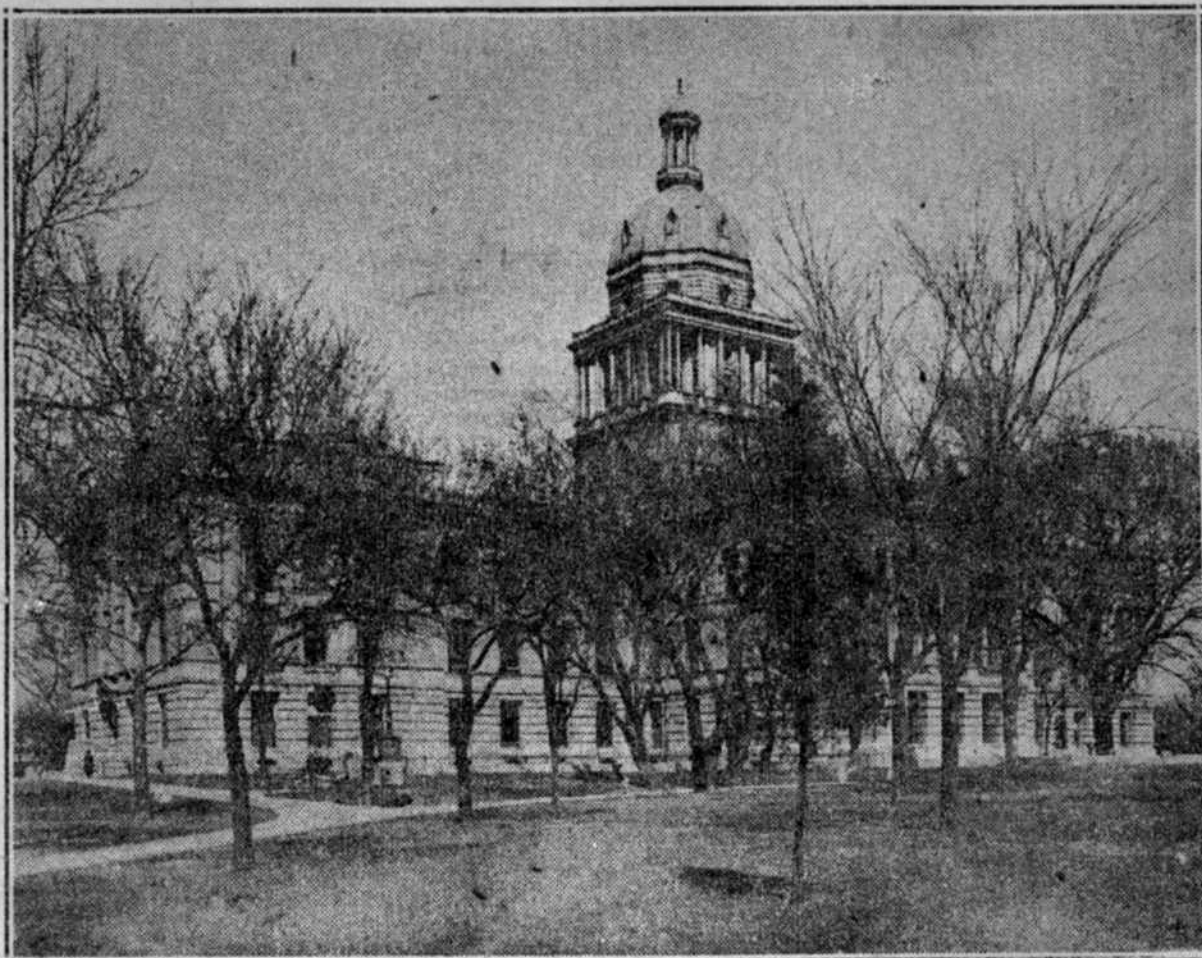


The main motive for slipping a wafer between Kansas and Nebraska, as Douglas put it, was the desire of Illinois and Iowa interests to control the territory opposite them free from Missouri meddling. In accordance with this policy, our trunk railroads to the Missouri river were already projected, some of them under construction. Incidentally this division fitted into Missouri's desire to extend slavery into Kansas. Though natural conditions precluded this project through fear on one hand and hope on the other, Kansas chose to bleed about it throughout her territorial period of six years and a half. But though there was no slavery issue in Nebraska, the natural division of the nearly impassable Platte kept up sectional strife for twenty-five years. This chronic disorder was most manifest in the fight for the sectional location of the capital.

Francis Burt, the first governor, an amiable and virtuous South Carolina carpetbagger, intended to call the first session of the territorial assembly to meet in the spacious home of the Presbyterian mission at Bellevue, but his sudden death two days after his arrival, caused by the hardships of his long journey, turned the capital question into a horse of another color. Thomas B. Cuming, of Keokuk, Ia., succeeded Burt, as acting governor. He was predisposed toward the interest of Omaha and had the complete courage of his conviction. Consequently he called the first session of the assembly to meet in that hamlet, in the only brick building, which had been constructed on a good guess by the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry company. A secondary cause of the chronic sectional disorder in Nebraska arose from the fact that until the time of its political organization it had been set apart as Indian country from which white settlers were precluded. So they came in with a rush and largely bent on mere land speculation. In contrast to this disorder breeding condition, each of the neighboring territories started with a considerable number of fairly stable settlers, who therefore proceeded with less disorder than Nebraska. The process of establishing the government therefore was mainly managed by the two opposite and contiguous counties of Iowa—Pottawottamie and Mills—with headquarters, respectively, at Council Bluffs and Glenwood. All of the fourteen men who professed to represent the claims of Plattsmouth for the capital, resided at Glenwood, but they were easily persuaded to desert to the banner of Omaha, which was constituted the permanent capital by that first assembly. The session of the first two assemblies were held in this privately owned building; the third in Root and Henri's block, commonly called "Pioneer Block," situated on the north side of Farham street between Eleventh and Twelfth.

#### Capitol I.

On the 3rd of March, 1855, fifty thousand dollars was appropriated by the federal congress for the erection of public buildings in the territory. The expenditure of the appropriation was confided to the second governor, Mark W. Izard, who miscalculated so lavishly that it was all spent on the basement of the first story. Omaha being alike exhausted—in part owing to the business convulsions of 1857—felt bound to continue the construction by the issue of "scrip" to the amount of \$60,000. When it was found that the city had pledged the "Capitol Square and the building thereon" to secure the scrip, public opinion, expressed in a roar, persuaded the city to give a deed of trust of the property, "for the use and purposes of the capitol of the territory, and the state of Nebraska when it may become such." But the day after this amende honorable, a majority of each house voted to withdraw from the seat of government and go on with the session at Lorence, where a bill recasting the capitol was passed. The commissioners named in the bill chose a site for the new capital city, which they named Neapolis, over-



—Photo by MacDonald.

#### THE THIRD STATE CAPITOL.

Second of the state capitol, third of the Nebraska capitol, this familiar and graceful building will soon follow its predecessors into the limbo of history to be replaced by a far grander structure. Completed in 1883, it has already stood more than three times as long as any of its forerunners. The old cry of "unsafe" has been raised against it once or twice; but after all, the reason it must go is because the state has outgrown it.

looking the Platte river, three miles northeast of the present town of Cedar Bluffs. But this scheme, after it was fairly started, was called off by the conservative influence of Governor William A. Richardson.

In a protest against expending any more public money on the building, the third legislative assembly described its condition; "... the whole of the appropriation was speedily expended in the construction of a magnificent cellar, surmounted by portions of brick walls and surrounded by numerous isolated, unfinished, dreary looking columns..." This not fully finished capitol housed the government until its successor at Lincoln, was ready for occupancy in December, 1863.

#### Capitol II.

The act of July 14, 1867, for the removal of the capital to Lincoln, was carried out as a land grab. Though the act authorized the commissioners

to take over public land for the site of the town, they traded with interested owners of contiguous land, and other speculators, for eight hundred acres of the site, and added 160 acres of saline lands. In final desperation the original advertising name, "Capitol City," was trod off for "Lincoln," by the Omaha floor leader of the senate, in the hope that the copperhead members from Otoe county would not swallow that disgusting dish of crow; but they avidly took the dose and then consistently financed the unique enterprise. The second capitol was badly built with stone for the outer course brought on wagons from a quarry near Beatrice. The inner course was the utterly unfit brown sandstone from the quarries near Cardwell's Branch, about three miles southwest of the city. The only plausible reason for using this stone is that the private owners of the quarries had the private ear of the capitol commissioners. It was disastrously used

for the foundation of the university building against the protest of the builder, Robert D. Silver, that it was unfit.

The tumble-down condition of capitol II was one of the reasons for the nearly successful attempts by the legislature of 1873 and 1875 to remove the capital from Lincoln. They failed through the incapacity of the principal proposed beneficiaries to unite upon a location. Columbus and Kearney, the chief competitors, killed each other; but Lincoln adroitly lunched the killing by indirect and direct bribery.

The practical quietus was put upon removal in the appropriation of \$75,000 by the legislature of 1879, to construct the first-west-wing of the present capitol. The legislature of 1881 extended the time for the construction of the west wing to September 1, 1882, and appropriated \$100,000 for building the east wing. The west wing was ready for occupancy by the senate at the special session beginning May 10, 1882. The east wing was occupied for the first time by the house of representatives at the session which convened January 2, 1883. This legislature authorized the board of public lands and buildings to demolish the old capitol and the construction in its place of the central part at a cost not exceeding \$450,000. The total cost of the present capitol was \$691,423.80. This building was not bungled as badly as its predecessors, though it was badly built of second class stone from quarries not far from the mouth of the Platte river.

#### Capitol IV.

In his inaugural message, January 9, 1919, Governor McKelvie sounded the traditional note, "... the building of a new capitol is a matter that cannot be much deferred, not only is the present capitol a discredit to the state but it is inadequate to house the state government and is

actually unsafe for occupancy." House roll 3, introduced January 13, provided a tax of one mill for the construction of the proposed capitol and its equipment. As the bill finally passed the house by a vote of 93 to 2 it provided for the levy of a mill and a half for six years and that not exceeding five million dollars be expended on the building alone. The senate passed the bill without change with only two negative votes. A motion in the house to submit the question of the place where the proposed capitol should be located was lost 18 to 75. A motion in the senate that none of the provisions of the act should be enforced until submitted to a vote of the people was lost 12 to 21. The bill was signed by the governor on the 20th of February.

The bill provided for a capitol commission of five members; two of them of New York, two of Philadelphia, one of San Francisco, two of Omaha and one of Lincoln submitted competitive plans for the capitol. A jury comprising three other architects, namely, Waddy B. Wood of Washington, James Bamble Rogers of New York, and Willis Polk of San Francisco, selected the plans presented by Bertram G. Goodhue, of New York on the 26th of June, 1920. The first contract for the construction of the capitol was made April 12, 1922 and accordingly work on the foundation is now going on.

The ceremony of breaking ground for the capitol, on April 15, 1922, was witnessed by an enthusiastic multitude of citizens from all over the state. It was distinguished by the

participation of Marshal Jeffre, the great French general. Governor McKelvie made a brief introductory address and then held the plow for the opening of the ground. This history of the capitals and capitols of Nebraska was presented as feature of the program.

#### "Happy Harmony."

The steady expedition progress of the capitol bill through its successive stages is, it seems to me, the most felicitous feature of the very important enterprise. The traditional sectional lion and lamb had many times lain down together, but almost always the lamb of the hour inside the lion of the hour. The "happy harmony" (General Grant's deathbed felicitation over the reunion of the separated sections of the country) of the capitol incident is so clear as to need no interpretative comment. The old lion and lamb lie down dead together. Most significantly, perhaps, Omaha and Lincoln have at last learned the most important lesson of civic as well as individual experience—to live and let live, perceiving that their interests are so bent as to be largely, if not mainly mutual. In the removal struggle of 1867, Doctor George L. Miller's Omaha Herald urged this attitude substantially.

The members from Douglas county pushed the capitol project with pleasurable pride and anticipation, and such was the general spirit of the legislature. There was little log-rolling for the measure, and the Lancaster members had merely to play the part of adjusters of various and divergent interests to promote their principal design. In his address at the formal opening of the state university, J. Sterling Morton, with keen prophetic insight, emphasized the declaration—his main conception—"This is the people's school." So almost all hands now rise to the sentiment. "This is the state's capital city." It is, in particular now seen that the seat of government and the most truly state school run well together and are perhaps the principal factors of the ideal capital city. And notwithstanding the peculiarly factitious start of Lincoln, it is now seen that capitals are not made but mainly grow, and that the present capital's relatively long life has firmly fixed its foundations and so raised its superstructure that a convenient season for considering its abandonment for an alternative crude beginning is very far, if not infinitely distant. In the meantime, the prospective improvement of travel will decrease or minimize the distance from the center. Lincoln is situated forty-six miles from the southern boundary of the state and fifty-six miles from the eastern boundary. The capital of Wisconsin is only forty-one miles from the southern state boundary, though it is approximately central east and west. Just like Nebraska, capital removal was always with the Badger state, until the opening of the state house in 1904 forced the final issue, and settled it by an appropriation for the magnificent new one. But while the chronic quarrel in Nebraska died out in less than sixty years, after some seventy years it was revived fiercely by the fire in Wisconsin.

In an enthusiastic appreciation of the selection of the plans for capitol IV, I said:

"The plan on the merits of which a jury of eminent architects selected the man who conceived and created it as the architect of the capitol, is a distinct new departure, and if it is adopted Nebraska will certainly have the most distinguished statehouse in the country, for some time at least, and I think also the most beautiful. But Nebraska has peculiarly lacked the depriming-do spirit which gains distinction. Seemingly she has left to her naturally close congener, Kansas, to do her bleeding for causes as well as her own pro rata share. But I am willing to trust the unquestioned great capability of the architect with the benefit of any doubt that his departure is too daring—to play Ruth to Mr. Goodhue's Nagml."

So I did not fear, as some not sur-

prisingly timid citizens did, that it might prove a disappointment. Since the adoption of the plans I have critically inspected the capitols of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. The site of the beautiful capitol of Minnesota and also that of the much older building at Des Moines, are so distinctively elevated that their comparatively low domes are satisfying to the eye. The outlook of the new domed capitol of Missouri is still more commanding and very beautiful withal. The Wisconsin capitol is, in my opinion, the most beautiful building of its class, but like our own, its site is flat and low. In both of two recent inspections of the building I received the painful im-

pression that it was trying to break out of its circumscribed bounds, comprising fourteen acres and a half. The cost of extending these grounds is now almost prohibitive. A somewhat similar condition confronts our case, but in contrast to the Wisconsin plan, I feel joyous at the prospect that our magnificent tower will rise completely superior to its allike low and closely confined grounds.

I adapt, with as light paraphrase, Sewall's famous epilogue to Cato as my apostrophe to Capitol IV:

"No pent-up Utica contracts your power.

But the whole boundless continent is yours."