

American Capitals: A Historical Geography

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Timothy R. "American Capitals: A Historical Geography." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 83-85.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12268>

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came a critical issue, and the fair finally allowed the artists themselves to vote on who would critique their work.

In 1932 Phil Stong's novel *State Fair* became a bestseller. It traced the experiences of the Frake family—father, mother, son, and daughter—as they spent a week at the Iowa State Fair. Ignoring the rural desperation of the Great Depression, the novel painted a bucolic vision of farm life even as the two grown children entered into romantic liaisons on the fairgrounds and in downtown Des Moines. The movie, starring Will Rogers and Janet Gaynor as parents, became a box office hit that, according to Rasmussen, “rescued Fox studio from bankruptcy.” Rasmussen omits mention of the 1962 *State Fair* remake starring Pat Boone and Ann-Margaret that moved the whole episode to Texas.

A viewpoint of the fair visitors themselves is one the book often fails to explore. The minutes of fair board meetings are available; first-hand accounts of the exhibits, food stands, or entertainments are not. What would the visitor to the 1880 fair see? What was behind the tent flaps the barkers were so vigorously extolling? Some of the most engaging sections of *Carnival* are its descriptions of the grandstand shows and 4-H demonstrations. For those, Rasmussen gives us front-row seats. Nevertheless, anyone who reads *Carnival in the Countryside* will never walk down the main concourse with the Varied Industries Building to the right and the raucous midway to the left and not begin to wonder again how it all came to be. Ours is indeed a great state fair. Don't miss it; don't even be late.

American Capitals: A Historical Geography, by Christian Montès. University of Chicago Geography Research Paper Number 247. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 394 pp. Map, tables, charts, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Timothy R. Mahoney is professor of history at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is the author of *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (1999); *River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820–1870* (1990); and the forthcoming *From Hometown to Battlefield in the Civil War Era: Middle Class Life in Midwest America*.

In this intriguing and demanding book, Christian Montès relentlessly employs social-scientific analysis and model building to try to understand the character of American state capitals. Among Americans cities, state capitals are some of the most familiar and well known but hard to define and understand. The book begins with an informed commentary on the usual explanations. The author questions the traditional explanation that the location and scale of state capitals reflect

the desire to decentralize power in American democracy and separate political power from economic power. Nor is he satisfied with noting that their character is shaped mostly by their symbolic power. As “temples of democracy” that symbolically present the state “ritual of governance,” and thus American federalism, state capitol buildings form the center of a public and monumental space that anchors state history, projects its future, and fosters state identity. Awareness of this symbolic role has affected their naming patterns, the architecture and physical locations of most capitol buildings—mostly classical-style buildings on hills or high ground—various efforts at city planning and beautification, and relations between state and municipal governments. As “places of condensation” where “individual and collective experiences take place” (57), they connect citizens to both state and American identity. Yet after a general overview of the unstable, often corrupt, and speculative history that involved the regular moving of state capitals, Montès notes that “selecting a capital was part of building a state and reflected . . . multiple factors at work” (82); any “simple model seems therefore out of reach” (83).

Undaunted, he aggressively launches an impressive effort—rooted in the methods of historical geography—to construct a “global explanatory model” for state capitals. He scientifically builds a database drawn from extensive research, most of it from secondary sources, from all 50 state capitals in the United States. The analysis for an “initial explanatory model” is supported by four impressive pages of charts that lay out the data, followed by three pages of pie charts that portray those data plotted according to eight factors—anti-large city, economy, religion, defense, entry point, centrality, politics, and provisional—accompanied by extensive short examples from the histories of various state capitals.

The evidence indicates that although state capitals began as entry point cities in the East, as more capitals were established to the west their histories were shaped more by economic forces, boosterism, and urban competition, though, as the urban system became more fixed by the late nineteenth century, relocation efforts declined and state capitals became more permanent. Montès argues that the scientific model suggests that politics, the spoils system, urban boosterism, and capitalist speculation prevailed, especially in the West. Morality and purity, republican ideals, or the “small-town ideal” (105) played much less of a role. Hence, the history and development of state capitals reflect a complex balance of powers and factors that results in a new model with “centrality, intertwined with compromise” at its “heart” surrounded by a variety of political and economic forces (157)—a state-

ment backed up by a flow chart. Noting that “case studies illustrate and modulate the model by applying it to specific times and places” (130), the author then takes readers on a wild ride through stories of border manipulations, “Neanderthal politics” (185), and the varying influences of the locational choices of railroads and industry that shaped their histories. The general result was a “developmental delay” (203) that relegated most state capitals to middling places in the urban hierarchy. They became quiet administrative towns and “forgotten cities” (205) and acquired a negative image in the mid-twentieth century.

Since the 1950s, revitalized and expanding state governments with increasing state employment, new constitutions, political systems that limited corruption, and more access to federal grants helped dispel that image. Service businesses and high-tech industries followed, giving the cities a more professional, white-collar look. Even so, tourism remains underdeveloped, and most state capitals today remain in the middle of the urban hierarchy. Montès groups them into three types: modern state capitals, “seemingly unchanged capitals” (247) (including Des Moines), and second-rank capitals. After all this model building, the author again “validates” the model with three brief, fairly general, case studies of Columbus, Ohio; Des Moines, Iowa; and Frankfort, Kentucky. The model shows that although each city is unique, their histories indicate that each was integrated into and thus compelled to navigate the shifting patterns of national political, economic, and social development. A quick review of the efforts of former state capitals to find a niche in heritage and “small-town” tourism or another source of economic growth near a metropolis, seems to confirm this view. Iowa City, for example, became the home of the state university and in the 1970s restored its old state capitol as a historic site. And yet, in spite of the importance of economics and politics in explaining state capitals, the fact that state capitals maintain such a special place in American life suggests to the author that the “cultural approach” still matters. Careful and diligent readers will come away with a new and enhanced understanding of state capitals.

Inspiration and Innovation: Religion in the American West, by Todd M. Kerstetter. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015. xi, 275 pp. Map, illustrations, suggested reading lists, index. \$81.95 hardcover, \$26.95 paperback.

Reviewer Douglas Firth Anderson is professor emeritus of history at Northwestern College (Iowa) and coauthor of *Orange City* (2014).

Religion and Iowa have been intertwined since before Iowa became a state. Being “west” was also a part of Iowa’s identity for a while, al-