

The Death of Old Fed

Joan Muyskens

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Muyskens, Joan. "The Death of Old Fed." *The Annals of Iowa* 39 (1968), 397-400.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7892>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

been there before them. The cabin had been re-chinked and there was a mound of prairie hay for the stock. Pa remarked he would see about measuring the cabin for a slab floor tomorrow.

The last short entry was dated, Thursday, June 12. It was a busy day. The cabin had been cleaned. Mother Ann said the boys would bed down in the loft. Before long Pa would build a lean-to for Mary Alice who was growing up and almost a young lady. The men talked about going to Oxenford's mill for the slab flooring in a few days.

Alice took up the diary for the last time. She needed to set down how many miles they had traveled from Marsailles to the farm on the 'Coon. Pa Hiram had been busy too. There had been no time to check the contraption on the surrey and make a final accounting. "Just say over eight hundred miles and thirty six days," he suggested. (We) "will figure it out later."

"Eight hundred miles and thirty six days," she wrote, . . . "to Ioway. Bye for good. The end. Alice."

THE DEATH OF OLD FED

By Joan Muyskens, Editor

Monday, Aug. 5, 1968, the City Council of Des Moines, Iowa, awarded a contract to the B & R Wrecking Company for the demolition of the Old Federal Building, Fifth Avenue and Court Street, Des Moines. The 100-year old building is being razed to make room for a modernistic parking ramp to be located north and south between Walnut and Court Streets, bounded on the west by Fifth Avenue.

This action by the Des Moines City Council¹ followed a long fight by a group of Des Moines citizens interested in saving the Old Federal Building. According to LeRoy Pratt, President of the Iowa Society for the Preservation of Historic Landmarks and spokesman for the aforementioned citizens' group, the building is of great historic interest and is one of the few remaining buildings of its style of architecture.

¹ Council members include Mayor Thomas Urban, Leo Gross, Jens Grothe, Richard Olson, Robert L. Scott, jr., Charles VanderLinden, and Jack P. Woods.

The Old Federal Building was originally known as the United States Courthouse and Post Office. John A. Kasson was instrumental in the selection of the site which was purchased for \$15,000, one lot having been purchased from Charles H. Rawson and his wife Mary E. Rawson on Oct. 16, 1866, for \$5,000, and two lots having been purchased for a total of \$10,000 from Albert G. Layman and his wife Jane E. Layman, on Jan. 7, 1867. The laying of the cornerstone was celebrated on June 3, 1868; the Grand Lodge of Iowa Masons officiated. John A. Kasson delivered an oration, followed by remarks from E. A. Guilbert of the Masonic body. The building was completed and occupied in 1871. The cost of construction was \$217,023.52. The original size of the building was 80 by 120 feet; it was two-stories high. It was designed by A. B. Mullet and M. E. Bell. The architectural style is a variation of the General Grant style used in most public buildings erected during the first 10 years following the Civil War; the inspiration for this style came from the Second Empire Style of mid-19th Century Paris.

Between 1883 and 1889, the Old Federal Building was enlarged to its present size, the north portion and additional floor having been added. The cost of this additional construction was \$333,000. The materials used were the same as in the original structure, the limestone for the foundation having come from Keokuk, Iowa, and that of the greater portion of the exterior from Joliet, Ill.

The Old Federal Building, the largest of the federal buildings in Iowa, was the oldest public building in downtown Des Moines. It contained the first clock tower in this city. The first floor of the building was originally used exclusively by the post office. The other 41 rooms occupied were used for additional postal space, customs, United States courts, the pension agency, land office, weather bureau and internal revenue services. The building contained an enclosed light court the full height of the building surrounded by balconies and roofed in glass. Forty fireplaces originally heated the building; there were 12 chimneys on the outside walls.

Old Fed, as the building is currently called, was acquired

by the city through a land swap in which part of the City Parking Lot at East Second and Walnut Street was traded for the Old Federal Building property. At the Dec. 27, 1967, Des Moines City Council meeting when the exchange agreement was approved, several persons spoke at length for the preservation of Old Fed. They were Mrs. Kenneth Robb (Paula) Brown, Robert Matier, Wesley Shank, assistant Professor at Iowa State University and a registered architect, and LeRoy Pratt.²

Suddenly, on June 24, 1968, the Des Moines City Council voted unanimously to tear down Old Fed and replace it with a 600-car, city owned parking garage. The Council expressed their regret at the necessity for demolishing the building but said that parking ramp at that location was vital to the economic health of downtown Des Moines. The City Council members hoped that the construction of a parking ramp at this location would induce J. C. Penney Co. to locate a new downtown store across the street from the ramp. However, as late as the Aug. 5 meeting when the demolition contract was awarded, no one had any assurance that J. C. Penney Co. would relocate in the downtown Des Moines area.³

Public opposition to the demolition of Old Fed continued and LeRoy Pratt and other interested persons organized a meeting for July 15 in an attempt to develop a plan to present to the City Council for the preservation of the building. About 100 persons attended the meeting and under the chairmanship of LeRoy Pratt, a committee was appointed to draw up an alternate plan for providing space for a city parking garage. It was also agreed that petitions would be circulated to support the preservation of the historic building.⁴

On July 16, 1968, the Polk County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a resolution asking the City

² *Newsletter*, Polk County Historical Society.

³ At the Aug. 5 Council meeting, "Mayor Urban was asked whether he had official knowledge that the new Penny store would be located in the downtown area. 'I'm not privy to that information,' replied Urban." *Des Moines Tribune*, Aug. 5, 1968. It was then asked if anyone at the Council meeting knew for sure that Penney's would relocate in the downtown area; there were no replies. Ed.

⁴ *Des Moines Register*, July 16, 1968.

Council to postpone demolition of Old Fed so that they could look into the possibilities of purchasing the building as a Courthouse annex. On Aug. 1, the Board of Supervisors met with the Des Moines City Council at a special meeting to formally request postponement of demolition so that the supervisors could ask the voters in the November general election to authorize a special property tax to enable the County to acquire Old Fed and to rehabilitate and restore the building for County use. Meanwhile, the citizens committee presented their petition containing almost 5,000 names to the City Council; letters-to-the-editor appeared in the *Des Moines Register & Tribune* urging the preservation of the building, City Council members toured the building, alternate proposals for a parking ramp were made and interested persons wrote letters to the Mayor. Thus far there had been little public support for the City Council's action.

Then on Aug. 2, the *Des Moines Tribune* announced "C. of C. Backing for Building Demolition." The article by Jack Coffman stated, "Petitions supporting the demolition of the Old Federal Building in downtown Des Moines are being passed around by members of the Greater Des Moines Chamber of Commerce, it was learned Friday." The petitions had been in circulation since Thursday morning. The petition was presented at the Aug. 5 City Council meeting; it contained 365 signatures.⁵

The fate of the Old Federal Building was discussed at the Aug. 5 City Council meeting for approximately two hours. Councilman Woods urged approval of a motion to allow the county to hold a referendum on the Old Federal Building question at the November general election; the motion lost, having only Woods' and Scott's support. Then Councilman VanderLinden made a motion for a 30-day delay to allow the Polk County Board of Supervisors to conduct a referendum Sept. 3 on a county plan for the building. This motion lost 4 to 3, support coming from Woods, Scott and VanderLinden. Thus, the Council unanimously awarded a demolition contract to the B. & R. Wrecking Co. of Des Moines for \$39,000. The building is to be razed within 95-working days.

⁵ Official count released by the City Clerk's Office.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.