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# THE DURABLE BUILDINGS

by Steven  
Brower

*This article is based on a report titled "The Cultural Landscape of Burlington," prepared for the Iowa State Historical Department, Division of Historic Preservation.*

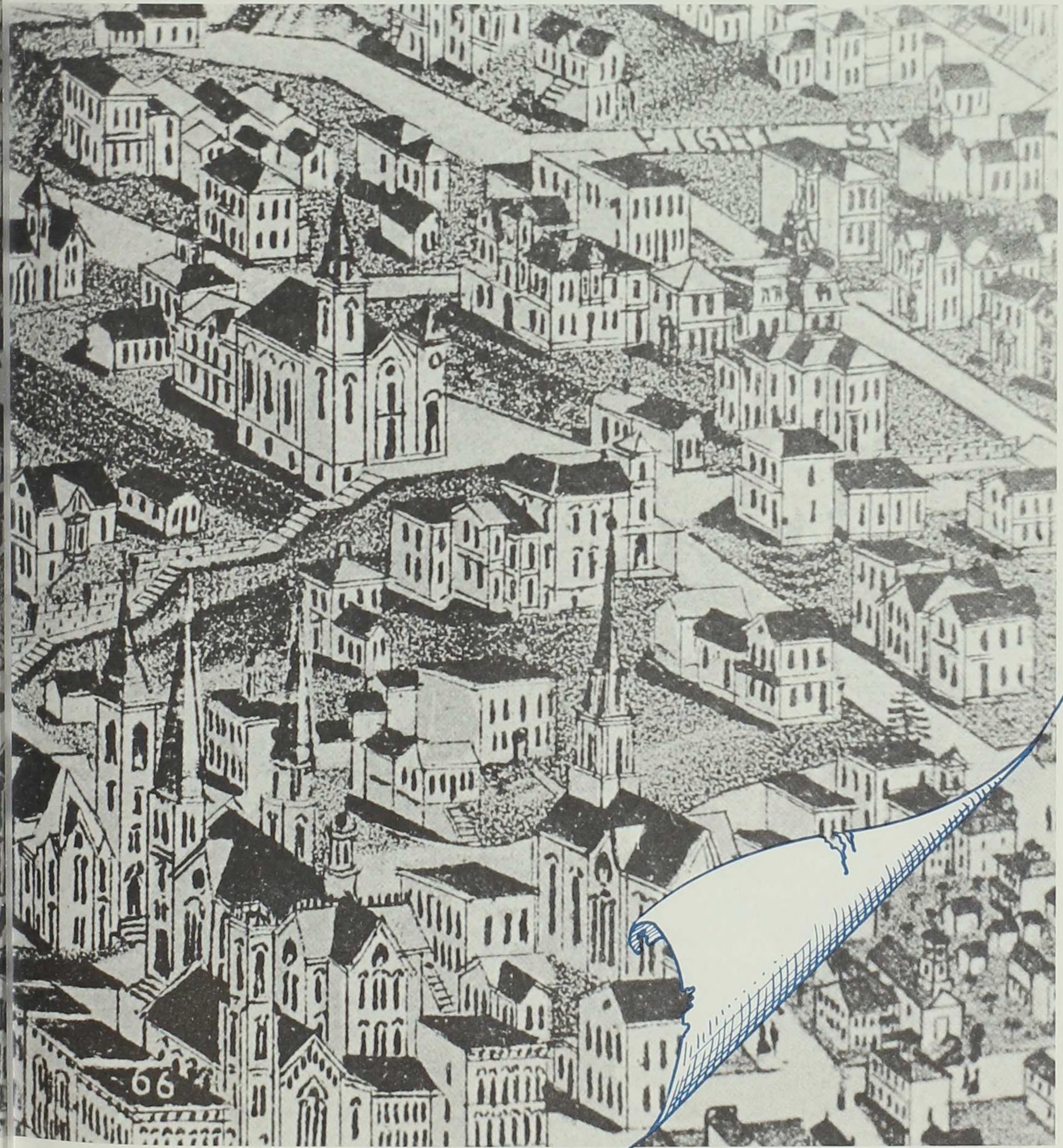
The Victorian character of many Iowa communities is still evident as we enter the final decades of the twentieth century. Burlington, for example, exhibits many of the physical features of a town from the 1880s. Particularly noteworthy in this respect are the Victorian churches that grace the hillsides of Iowa's former territorial capitol. In the late nineteenth century, when the railroad was the major mode of transportation, people coming into the city were treated to an impressive view of these buildings as they travelled the length of the downtown basin. They could see a townscape marked by "church buildings [that] would be a credit to any modern city." As described in a promotional booklet of the era, "a majority of the churches are located in the central portion of the city, and from the hills around one sees a cluster of spires emerging from the leafy bowers which surround and beautify them."

In many cases, these Victorian edifices were built to replace older Greek Revival structures that had fallen out of fashion. Before the turn of the century, in fact, Burlington's churches enlisted in a citywide effort to erect more impres-

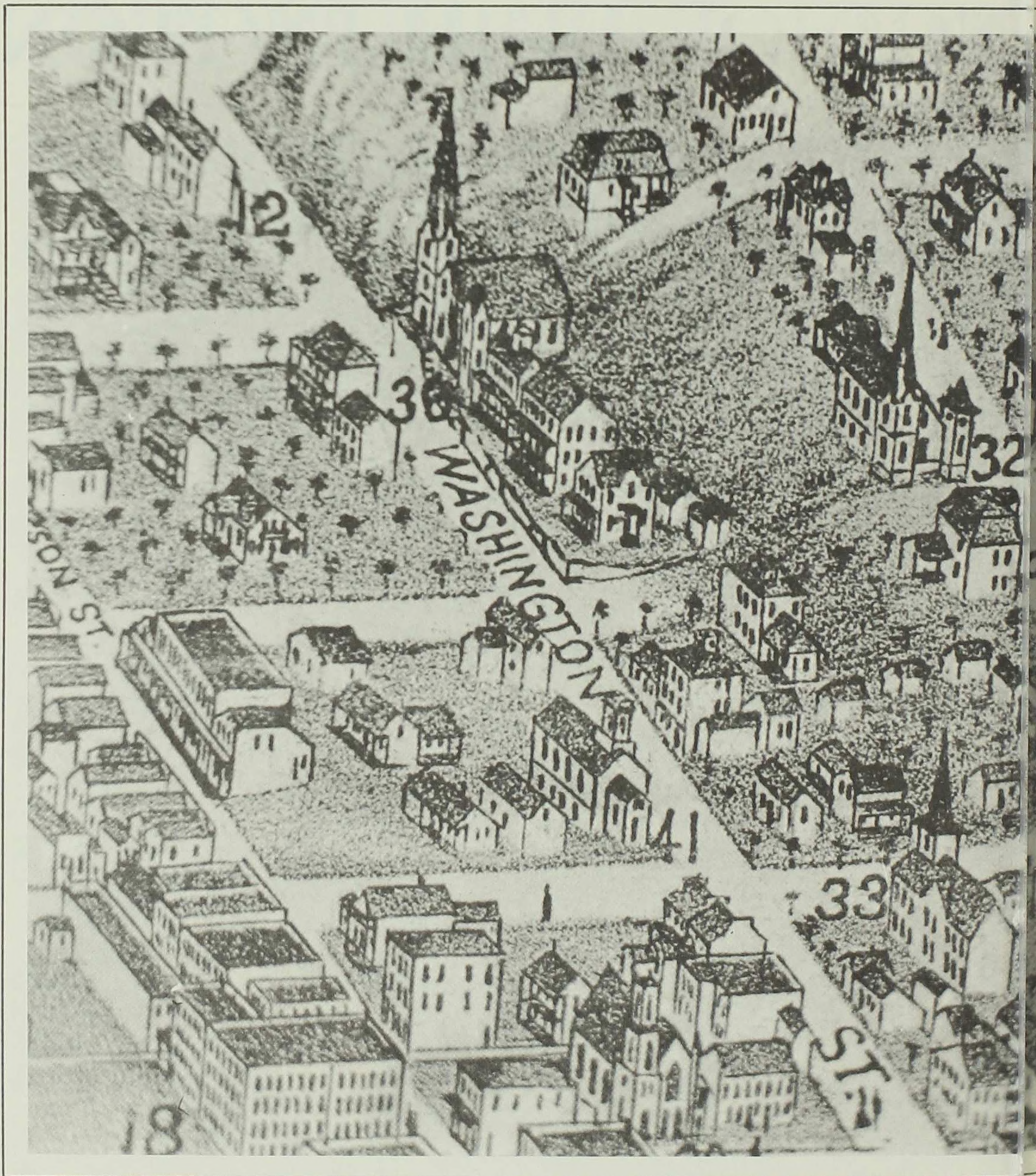




# INGS OF BURLINGTON







*Two views of Burlington: above, a bird's-eye view by August Koch, ca. 1879; preceding page, a perspective map probably by N. Wellege, 1889 (both courtesy Des Moines County Historical Society). The numbers on the two views refer to an identification key that originally accompanied each of them.*





sive buildings in light of current architectural taste. Because of the tremendous competition at this time between the growing cities of the Middle West—all of them eager to become the Gateway City of the West, the western terminal of the Chicago railroads, and the rival of St. Louis—Burlington's citizens felt it necessary to present their city in the most prosperous image possible. The community's appearance was of course a key to such an image. Writing in the 1878 annual report of the Burlington Board of Trade, a local publicist insisted somewhat defensively that his town's "church edifices are not as costly and attractive as they are in some large cities, but they are large and commodious." A year later, the Board's report struck a happier note, announcing that "several of the church organizations are looking forward to the erection of new and elegant buildings in the near future." The same writer predicted that "with the numerous wealthy congregations we now have in the city, it is probable that all church improvements hereafter made will be of a very superior order."

Pictorial representations of Burlington's changing skyline in the nineteenth century show the results of the improvement effort. A bird's-eye view of Burlington from around 1879 (this page) shows the hillside landscape between Washington and Columbia streets just above the city's central business district. The view includes the First Congregational Church (1867) on Fourth Street and St. Paul's German Methodist Church (1868) on Seventh Street. The next decade brought dramatic changes to the area, as shown in the perspective sketch dated 1889 reproduced on the preceding pages. Readily evident is the dense development of the hilltop neighborhood and a large increase in the number of substantial brick buildings on the streets of the business district (lower left corner in both drawings). In between, on the hillside, the perspective sketch of 1889 depicts a cluster of new Victorian churches on Washington Street. The new





*Burlington in the late 1860s (SHSI)*

buildings reflect current taste and likely also the influence of Burlington's foreign-born residents (more than half the city's adult population in the Civil War era). Immigrants no doubt welcomed the stone spires of the Gothic style so familiar to them in their European homelands; these same spires became a central element of the Victorian look in the United States. Because of the accuracy and the amount of detail included in this perspective sketch, the artist—thought to be N. Wellege—has left a vivid testimony to the intensity of the Victorian style throughout the city.

In retrospect, Burlington's desire to replace the Greek Revival churches dating from the early years of settlement poses an interesting concept of progress. The older churches would be much prized if they were still here today. But early residents felt these small structures did not contribute to the progressive image needed for an industrious town. Today Burlington faces a similar situation as other nineteenth-century buildings are steadily

being replaced with more modern structures. Since the Victorian buildings have endured, however, and since their styles support the overall character of the community, maintenance would seem more appropriate than replacement. Communities across the nation are discovering that such durable old buildings provide a unique town identity that is an important resource for future commercial growth. □

#### Note on Sources

Sources for this study include panoramic views of Burlington by August Koch, *Bird's-eye View of the City of Burlington* (Chicago: Charles Sholer and Company, ca. 1879), and by N. Wellege (?), *Perspective Map of the City of Burlington* (Milwaukee: American Publishing Company, 1889). Both are reproduced by courtesy of the Des Moines County Historical Society.

Other sources used: *Burlington Illustrated* (Burlington: H.R. Page and Company, 1889); George Boeck, "An Early Iowa Community: Aspects of Economic, Social, and Political Development in Burlington, Iowa, 1833-1866," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1961); and David Carey, "Republican Factionalism in Burlington, Iowa, 1906-1908," (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1960).