

William Foster—Early Iowa Architect

William Wagner

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Wagner, William. "William Foster—Early Iowa Architect." *The Annals of Iowa* 36 (1962), 345-353.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7754>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

William Foster—Early Iowa Architect

By WILLIAM WAGNER

William Foster was born in Long Island, New York, on July 21, 1842. After completing his education, he entered the employ of Richard Upjohn, a New York architect who was famous for Gothic revival, to learn the profession of architecture. After spending a great deal of time with Upjohn, Foster came west with the idea of finding a place to locate and open his own office.

In 1867 he arrived in Des Moines on one of Colonel Hooker's stage coaches and landed at old Savery House (now Kirkwood site). When he approached the desk to register, Fred Macartney who was running the house at the time asked Foster what his business was.

"Architect," said Foster.

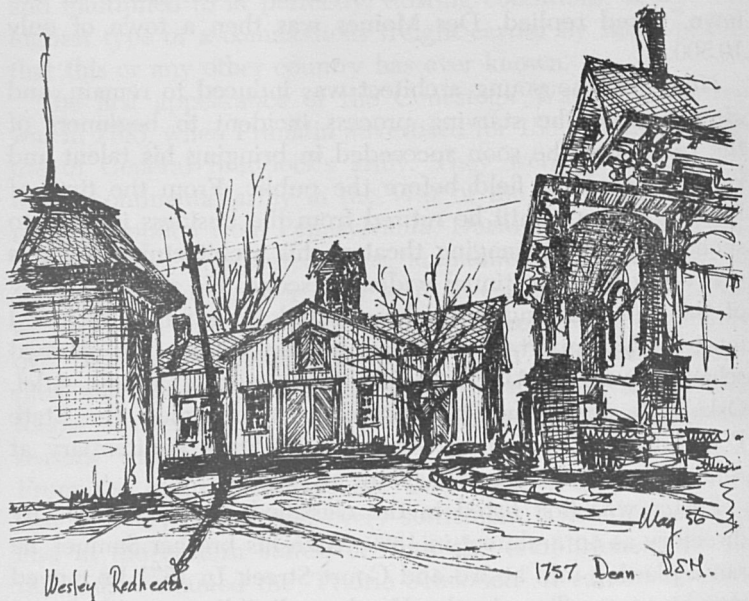
"Well, you had better go back East; you'll starve in this town," Fred replied. Des Moines was then a town of only 10,500.

However, the young architect was induced to remain, and after passing the starving process incident to beginners of the profession, he soon succeeded in bringing his talent and knowledge of his field before the public. From the time of his first step up until he retired from the business in 1896 to spend full time managing theaters, his architectural business was one of the continual widening scope. He planned many of the best buildings in Nebraska and Iowa which included most of the important buildings in Des Moines. He planned school houses in Albia, Carroll, Montezuma, Dunlap, Adel, Oskaloosa, and other towns, and also designed the State Penitentiary at Lincoln, Nebraska, the State Penitentiary at Anamosa, and the insane asylum at Lincoln.

Foster was first listed in the classified section of the city directory as an architect in 1869. With his brother Samuel, he ran a planing mill at 3rd and Court Street. In 1871 he moved into his new offices in the Hawkeye Building on 4th Street (across the street east from the Randolph Hotel), and in 1876 he moved to the old Savery House. Finally, in 1880, he was located in the Foster's Academy of Music Building.

In 1884 he formed a partnership with Henry F. Liebbe. During this partnership, they designed West High (old Tech High) for the architect fee of \$3,000. This was in 1888. They also planned the four-story building for a wholesale grocer, Charles Hewitt, at 2nd and Walnut. This started the building boom which, in a brief time, made Walnut Des Moines' principal business street. Prior to that, this street was irreverently referred to by the leading daily of the city as "Rum Row" and "Rat Row" because of its long strings of tumble down frame shanties owned by town lot misers.

The Liebbe-Foster partnership also designed old Franklin School at 12th and Crocker, parts of Grant and Crocker schools, and the First Christian Church at 9th and Pleasant. The partnership was dissolved in 1896, but Liebbe continued to practice and the firm became known as Liebbe, Nourse & Rassmusan.



WESLEY REDHEAD BARN

Foster's first job in 1867-68 was probably that of designing a barn and later a house for Wesley Redhead, a well-known early Polk County epoch-maker. The barn, which had much

charm, was a combination dairy and carriage house and had designed into it a two-room apartment where Mr. and Mrs. Redhead lived while their house was being built.

The hay loft in this unusual barn had a use out of the ordinary. Redhead was a religious man and started holding a Sunday School class in the loft. From this beginning grew the Asbury Methodist Church of East Des Moines.

The exterior of the barn was virgin white pine floated down the Mississippi and then brought overland from Davenport; the interior consisted of beams of native oak and walnut. When the barn was torn down in 1958, all of the wood in this



WESLEY REDHEAD HOUSE

well-remembered building was still in sound condition. Only the cupalo was awry.

The famous Redhead house, which started Foster on his road to success, stood at 1757 Dean. Into this building, which was torn down not long after the barn, Foster detailed innovations that were considered contemporary 80 years later. To combat the hot Iowa summers, the basement of the house was designed for living. The first floor was held up high enough so as to have fairly good-sized windows for the base-

ment rooms. The exterior walls were of cavity construction; that is, an eight-inch brick wall, an air space, and a four-inch brick wall. This type of construction provided a wall which afforded both dryness and insulation from heat and cold. The windows were double glazed in the same sash; this was thermopane of 1867. As a result, this cool, dry basement must have then been the nearest thing to air conditioning known to the 11,000 citizens of Des Moines.

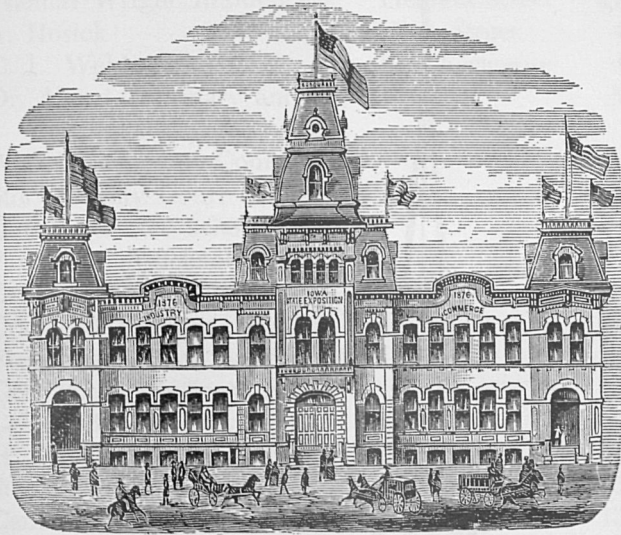
An idea Foster used which didn't work was perimeter baseboard heat. He had a rather large hot air furnace located nearly in the center of the basement area. Most of the ducts, which went from a hot air chamber to the exterior of the walls, were within joist space, and connected with the baseboard which had designed into it a continuous grill to allow the hot air to filter out into the room. This baseboard was continuous along all exterior walls. Although the idea was right, the system didn't work because of poor equipment. Had William Foster had access to electric motors and blowers, the idea would have revolutionized the heating of homes.

Foster's abilities as an architect grew rapidly. In many newspapers he was referred to as "colonel" or "major," and at one time a newspaper called him "Honorable William Foster."

In 1883, Foster designed another barn, this one for Milton Hollingsworth, at the edge of Stuart. Farmer Hollingsworth wanted to be able to drive his carriages into his barn and not have posts or columns get in his way, so Foster devised a method of hanging the hay loft floor by iron rods from the roof trusses above the hay loft. The roof trusses were in turn supported on posts which were within the exterior wall construction. The barn cost the then unheard of amount of \$2,500. It was called a beauty, and as late as the turn of the century the Rock Island Railroad still called to the attention of its passengers the house, barn and grounds of this showplace.

In 1868 Des Moines' old Fifth Street Methodist Church became too small for its congregation and something needed to be done, so William Foster was called upon to design a new edifice. As a consequence, the Centenary Church on Seventh Street was erected at a total cost of \$7,000, and part of the congregation moved here. This church also became un-

satisfactory in 1888 since it stood next to a brewery and the congregation couldn't take the odor, so the church was sold. The congregation reunited and moved to the site where the First Methodist Church now stands at 10th and Pleasant. Foster designed this one, too.

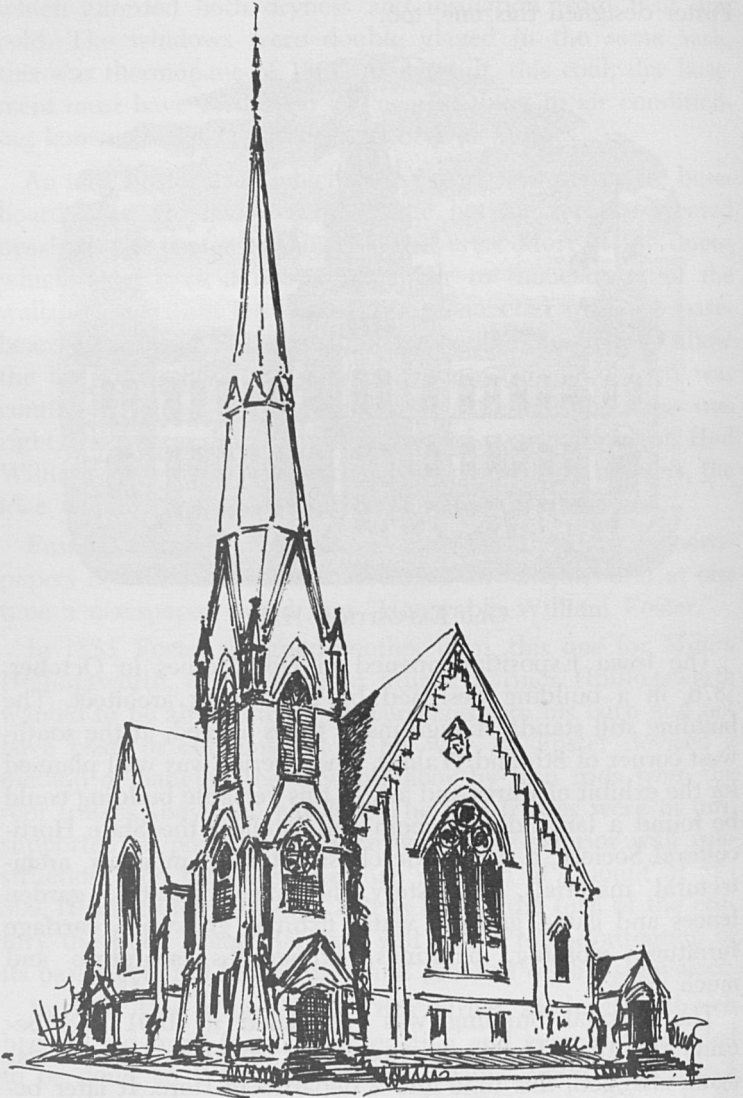


OLD EXPOSITION HALL

The Iowa Exposition opened in Des Moines in October, 1876, in a building designed by this young architect. The building still stands, though many times altered, at the southwest corner of 8th and Walnut. The interior was well planned for the exhibit of wares and art. In this versatile building could be found a large dining room and kitchen, the State Horticultural Society, a systematic classification of minerals, architectural materials, upholstery, heating apparatus, garden fences and gates, gas and water fixtures, glassware, carriage furniture, clothing, paintings, lithographs, sculpture and much more.

The original building was remodeled in 1891 and became the Iliad Hotel. Approximately 20 years later it was again changed, this time into a department store. It later became an office building (Shops Building) and so remains today.

In 1876, a reporter visited Mr. Foster in his office and found him "rushed with business." He saw this list of plans which the architect had made that season. Part of it read:



PLYMOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
NOW SITE OF CHAMBERLAIN HOTEL

G. and L. Harback	3rd Street	\$18,000
Redhead and Wellslager	Court Avenue	9,000
Congregational Church	Locust Street	25,000
German St. Mary's Church	First Street	20,000
Conrad Youngerman	4th Street	8,000
Thomas Wright Residence	Pleasant Street	11,000
A. Hosick	High Street	4,000
C. L. Webb	East Sycamore	4,000
Dr. Aborn, Infirmary and Dispensary		8,000
Woodbury County Court House		80,000
Story County Court House		40,000
Guthrie Center School House		6,000
Panora High School		15,000
Colfax School House		5,000
Crawford Business House	Winterset	4,000
Frankel and Bach Bank	Oskaloosa	6,000
Geo. Parker Business House	Oskaloosa	5,000
George Bently	Oskaloosa	3,000
H. Dutton Residence	Oskaloosa	6,000
Stoner Opera House	Marengo	15,000
Catholic Church	Boone	15,000
George Hazen Residence	Newton	5,000
G. S. Robinson Residence	Storm Lake	3,000
I. R. Mershon Hotel	Newton	30,000
R. A. Sankey Business Home	Newton	15,000
C. E. Hedges Residence	Sioux City	20,000
Filmore County Courthouse	Nebraska	32,000

In 1888 Foster was selected as supervising architect for the asylum for the insane at Clarinda. The general plan of the building was in the shape of a "T" with the stem of the "T" extending backwards. The building consists of a large number of units so arranged that the sun shines into the windows of all rooms of interest, and contains six miles of corridors.

In 1868, Foster married Miss Louisa Corbin of England. She died, and in 1886 he married Miss Louise Harris, a Des Moines girl. They had three daughters: Mary, Mrs. Charles F. Dau; Helen, Mrs. Duane Simpson; and Fannie, Mrs. Max B. Ruffcorn.

The family moved into their ideal home in 1894. This house

is on Grand Avenue south of Brown's Park (old Fair Grounds). It is beautifully appointed and finished in hard woods with jaunty nooks and corners, many closets, and every modern convenience that the modern metropolis afforded. The windows were all beveled French plate with chipped and stained glass trimmings, and the carpets, draperies and curtains were all bright moquette. This nine- or ten-room house represented the cost of about \$6,000, which didn't include the stable which contained three or four luxurious drags, a handsome pair of glossy blacks and a pardonably proud coachman.

Foster's home was the scene of many parties. On Friday, August 8, 1896, Foster had an Elks party which 123 couples attended. The architect was one of the first three Elks in Des Moines. Following are the names of those frequently mentioned as having attended these fetes: Olmstead, Denman, Fink-



FOSTER'S HOME ON GRAND AVENUE

bine, Chase, Dickey, Hippee, Youngerman, Hubbell, Cummins, Priestly, Fullerton, and Liebe.

This successful architect had a lifetime ambition to own a theater. Around 1875 he made a small start by operating what was the Academy of Music, a second floor hall with movable seats. This was shared with the city's ultra exclusive social organization, the Lotus Club, for dancing. In 1876, Foster remodeled this building and moved the theater to the ground floor. When the building for the Academy of Music was built, it was thought that a theater this far west of the



OLD FOSTER OPERA HOUSE

business district and in the center of the residential area was foolhardy, but the Academy was a great success until the spring of 1887 when it burned down. By fall, the new Foster Play House was up and operating. In 1884, Foster purchased the Grand which burned in 1906.

Foster's Opera House opened on August 23, 1876. On September 2, 1911, the curtain rang down on the last act of "Country Boy." At the closing of the Foster, someone estimated that about two million people had sat in the playhouse seats in its 33 years of existence and had seen such greats as John Drew, Maude Adams, Ethel Barrymore and Bruce McRae.

On the night of his death, December 30, 1909, one of the last things Foster talked about before leaving the Opera House was the gas heater which he had installed in his room to give better heat. He was explaining to a friend how nicely it heated his room. On that same evening, William Foster and a family friend, Louis Bemis, age 16, slept in the room. Through an unfortunate mixup, the gas in this remarkable heater was turned off at the burner, but not at another valve which allowed the gas to escape. Both died of asphyxiation.

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.