History of Trees in Des Moines
1843-1909
presented by City of Des Moines
Department of Public Works
Forestry Division
RESEARCH CREDITS

The research for this series of historical themes relating to Des Moines and trees in the city is limited to surveying the hard work of other people. The following sources, found at the State Library of Iowa and the State Historical Society of Iowa Research Center, were used to find this sampling of history.

• Images of America: Des Moines 1845-1920 by Craig S. McCue, 2006
• Images of America: East Village by Sarah C. Oltrogge, 2010
• Dynamic Des Moines: A History in Pictures by Allen Gardiner
• Postcard History Series: Des Moines by Craig S. McCue, 2007
• Then & Now: Des Moines by Craig S. McCue, 2012

The general theme throughout this History of Trees in Des Moines, is to learn about the history of the city ‘and’ city trees. To that end, many photos have trees in them, or at least in the background.
Ownership of the land surrounding Des Moines passed from French to American control with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. However, Native American claims, plus several incursions culminating in the Black Hawk War of 1832, prompted the United States government to step in, negotiate several purchases, set up a neutral zone, and begin to explore the territory. To keep the peace, a temporary fort was built on the Des Moines River near the Raccoon Forks area in 1843.

In 1846, the fort was vacated, and a small group of settlers moved in. They formed a rudimentary government and proclaimed the settlement the county seat of the newly formed Polk County. Thus the city of Fort Des Moines was born.
You can see from our earliest days that trees were a natural part of the landscape. This is particularly true state-wide along riparian borders, that area where land meets water. Birds and animals come to drink, they deposit seeds, and trees are the result. The water’s edge also provides water for trees to survive and thrive. Some of the historical photos we will see today are included just to tell the history of the city, but I’ve tried to include trees in as many of them as possible. I’m also blending the past with the present where I’ve been able to insert modern photos of the same location.
Major Hoyt Sherman came to Des Moines in 1848 from Ohio. He was president of Equitable Life Insurance Co. of Iowa for 14 years. In 1877, Hoyt Sherman Place, the family home, was completed with the help of architect William Foster. Almost immediately, it is noted in writings to be, "a society showplace of the grandest scale."
Demoin House, 1855
First and Walnut Streets

The landscape trees provide character when leafless, but we can also imagine the shade these trees provided during the summer.

There is no typo on this photo. Originally the Pennsylvania House, the hotel was later rechristened after a popular spelling of the city’s name at the time.

The opening night of Demoine House on July 4, 1855, was marred by tragedy when a young man mistook a bottle of corrosive cleaning solution for whiskey. He died that evening during the festivities. (BTH)

Operating until 1877, the Demoine House proved to be the first residence of many settlers in the early years of the city and was a popular nightspot, featuring dances and other entertainment.
The first streetcar services began to appear in 1866, built and managed by Dr. M.P. Turner, who owned a city charter for all horse-drawn trolleys. To get around Turner’s monopoly, H.E. Teachout formed a new company and began using steam trolleys and eventually switched over to electric trolleys. They travelled the lengths of Ingersoll Ave, and Sycamore Ave. (now called Grand Ave). As trolley lines kept extending out from the city center, development followed them. By the 1880’s there were eight ‘trolley suburbs’ surrounding Des Moines.
In this view along Walnut Street, looking east from Fifth Street, is another sign of a changing Des Moines: the first street railway lines, almost covered in the muddy dirt roads of the early 1870’s using horse-drawn trolleys, the first line was simple loop running down Court Avenue to the courthouse, across Fifth Street to Walnut Street and then back up to East Seventh Street near the capitol. To complete the loop, an alleyway was traversed behind East Seventh Street.
Drake University
Est. 1881 by George Carpenter
Largely funded by General Drake
The campus continues to enjoy a rich tree canopy
In 1899 the Victoria Hotel was built in a European style at a cost of $50,000. Notice an ample supply of trees surrounding the hotel.
Today the Victoria Hotel is long gone. In its place is the American Republic Insurance Company. They have developed a beautiful outdoor art park with lots of trees and sculptures.
In the early settlement days of our city, when sidewalks were non-existent or made out of wood, and streets were either dusty or muddy, some of the pioneering men and women looked to trees to provide shade, to create a sense of order and peace, and to give enjoyment in their sheer beauty.
WHITE LINE TRANSFER AND STORAGE. At the corner of Fifth and Market Streets (now the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway extension), White Line featured fireproof storage and relocation services. The warehouse has recently been converted to luxury condominium lofts.
Employees of the Waldron Bros. Foundry and Machine Works posing for a photo with assorted implements.
Ca. 1900
Locust Street in 1909, facing east from Seventh Street. Chamberlain Hotel far left. The Nickelodeon Moving Picture Theatre on the right was the fifth nickelodeon built in America.
1300 block of E. Walnut
Capitol Dome appears in background
Mesquakie Indians from the reservation in Tama County. At dedication of Union Park
Prospective Boulevard from New Library Building to Union Park
Date unknown. With a shift to trolleys and paved sidewalks, this period in city history is punctuated with a lack of street trees.
Laying the cornerstone of City Hall in 1909
Ca. 1910
View of residential area from State Historical Building or Capitol.
E. 11th & Capitol Ave.
The forerunner to the popular Downtown DM Farmer’s Market was the City Market, located at the corner of Second Ave and Locust Street. It was built in 1911 on land formerly occupied by the old city hall and fire station. This site is now used by the Civic Center of Greater Des Moines.
Today’s Farmer’s Market is one of the state’s premier destinations on summer Saturdays.
The Chicago and Northwestern Station was built on East 4th between Walnut and Locust streets. This gave the east side of Des Moines a convenient access to railway service.
Look Building. Look magazine was published in Des Moines from 1937 to 1971 and was similar to Life in content and emphasis in pictorials. Its two- to three-month delay in releasing issues sometimes lead to embarrassing results, such as the 1964 election poll that was released three weeks after Pres. John F. Kennedy’s assassination. The building was recently converted into residential lofts.
Today the Look Building has been converted to modern loft-style living space. You can see where that redevelopment triggered the planting of street trees to benefit the neighborhood.
As of June 1, 2017, more than ½ of these companies were doing business. Do you know which ones?

**TWENTY OF THE OLDEST COMPANIES IN THE DES MOINES AREA**

1. Iowa Star/Des Moines Register .................................................. 1849
2. Weitz Co. ................................................................. 1855
3. Gilchrist Jewett Lumber ..................................................... 1856
4. Hubbell Realty .......................................................... 1856
5. LaMair Mulock Condon Co. ........................................... 1865
6. Equitable of Iowa/ING .................................................. 1867
7. Amend Packing Co. ...................................................... 1869
8. Josephs Jewelers ......................................................... 1871
9. Hammer Pharmacy ....................................................... 1872
10. Tone's Spices ............................................................ 1873
11. Century Link .............................................................. 1874
12. Drake Roofing ............................................................ 1875
13. Keefer Overton Architects ........................................... 1876
14. Des Moines Marble and Mantel ....................................... 1877
15. Des Moines Winterset Monuments .................................. 1878
16. Banker's Life/Principal Financial Group ......................... 1879
17. Des Moines Stamp Mfg. Co. ........................................ 1880
18. Merchants Distribution .................................................. 1880
19. Rowat Cut Stone & Marble Co. ..................................... 1882
20. IMT Insurance ........................................................... 1884

Source: Des Moines Register
What do we learn from this short history (1843-1909)?

• Early inhabitants of Des Moines inherited trees as part of the natural areas along river banks
• Early development soon included trees. Some early American cities included laws against hitching horses to street trees, so they wouldn’t chew the bark
• Appreciation for trees had both high and low points, depending on transportation and development needs at the time