

RESTORATION

WHI IMAGE ID 36932 (LEFT) & 36926 (RIGHT)

The Council House and Court House were in terrible condition when the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) assessed the buildings in 1906. 70 years had passed since the temporary structures were erected. Along with the WHS, the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Club (WFWC) helped to push for the restoration and commemoration of this historic spot. It was not until 1917 when the restoration of the Council House began. The Court House was left untouched until 1955. The restored buildings, which are the result of efforts of many Wisconsinites, exist today as one of the Wisconsin Historical Society's 12 historic sites. Decisions that were made in this spot shaped the state of Wisconsin and continue to influence the way the state operates today.



18904 County Hwy G | Belmont, WI
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First Capitol is one of twelve museums and historic sites owned and operated by the Wisconsin Historical Society.
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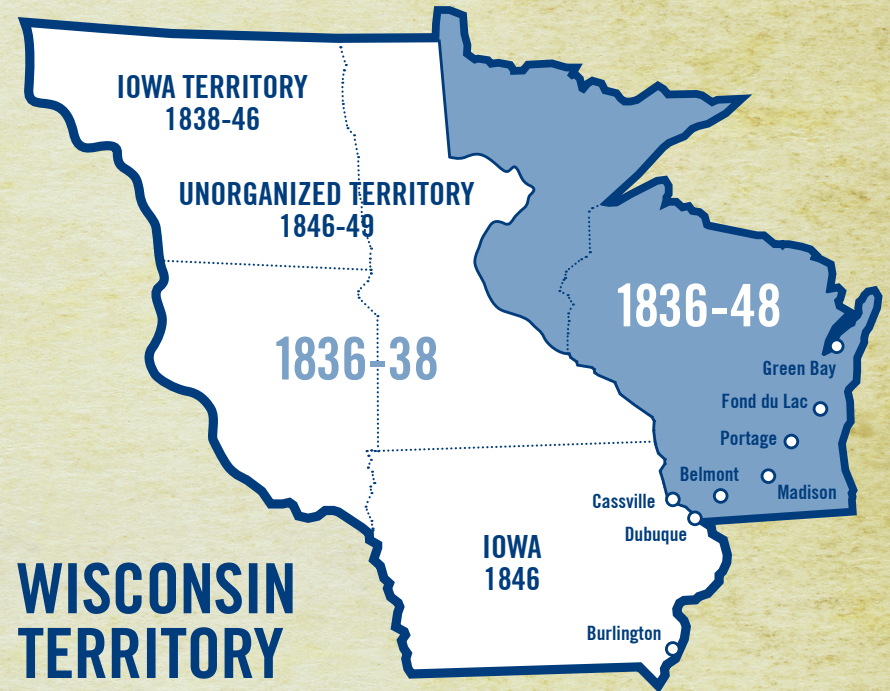
In the fall of 1836, the two buildings in front of you would have been filled with legislators and other officials who came to Belmont for the beginning of Wisconsin Territory's government. Belmont was a new town founded by John Atchison, and was chosen by Governor Dodge as the meeting place of the Legislative Assembly. In preparation for the legislators' arrival, Atchison built at least three buildings, including the Council House and the Court House. Though Belmont was the capital for only 46 days, the decisions made in that time had a tremendous impact on the structure of Wisconsin's government, including the present-day location of the capital in Madison. When the capital moved in 1837, these buildings were abandoned and fell into disrepair. In the early 1900s, restoration efforts began and First Capitol became a Wisconsin Historical Society site in 1994.

THE COUNCIL HOUSE

The Council House (pictured below) was built to host the legislative session, but was also used for the first supreme court session. This structure has a false front that makes it look larger and more impressive. Both buildings were used as homes and barns at different times after the session ended in December 1936. At one point, these buildings were even moved across the street.

THE COURT HOUSE

The Court House (building to the left of the Council House on the cover) was used as a lodging house in 1836. According to Legislator Henry Baird, 120 people stayed here at one point, making several lawmakers unhappy. The Court House at this time looked almost exactly like the Council House and probably had a false front, though it does not have one today. Chief Justice Charles “The Court” Dunn and his wife Mary Dunn bought the building after the session left Belmont and lived there with their family until 1872. This is possibly why it is called the Court House, since it was never used for the supreme court.



MADISON TRIUMPHS

The Legislative Assembly held session in Belmont from October 25 to December 9, 1836. Governor Dodge advised the 39 members of the Assembly on the issues he believed they should address, but he left the final agenda up to the Assembly. They passed 42 acts that shaped the government of the Wisconsin Territory, and later the state. The largest debate surrounded the permanent location for the territory's capital. 17 locations (some of which only existed on a map) were initially considered with several others added

later during the debate. Knowing that Iowa Territory was going to separate from Wisconsin Territory only two years later, the legislators decided to pick a capital that would still be in Wisconsin after 1838. Ultimately, land speculator James Doty succeeded in convincing both legislative houses to make Madison the new capital by giving lawmakers buffalo robes and land in the new city. Despite choosing Madison, the next Legislative Assembly sessions would be held in Burlington (Iowa) until the Iowa Territory was created.

