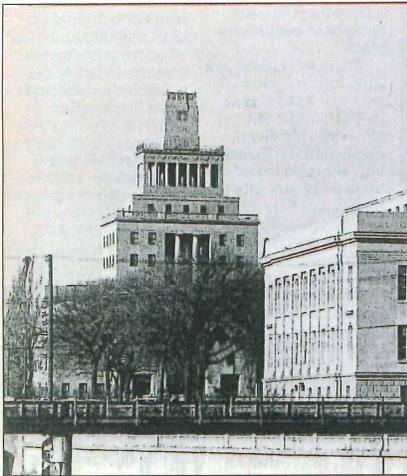


IOWA TODAY.

TIME MACHINE

A LOOK BACK AT PEOPLE, PLACES, EVENTS IN EASTERN IOWA



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The cenotaph lacked a flame in 1963.



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In 1996, a propane torch was used before the arrival of the Olympic torch.



Liz Martin/The Gazette

A close-up, seen Tuesday.

The flame that never was

By Diane Langton, The Gazette

Even as the million-dollar Veterans Memorial Building was rising from the municipal island in the middle of the Cedar River, its appearance still was not finalized.

Several ideas for the huge building's tower were under discussion and it wasn't until Jan. 25, 1927, that the Veterans Memorial Commission, established by the Iowa Legislature to oversee construction of the building, accepted the last plan of consulting architect Henry Hornbostel of Pittsburgh.

Hornbostel chose to design the top of the tower as a cenotaph, an empty coffin in previous plans, rising from the middle of the Cedar River, its appearance still was not finalized. He modeled it after the famous monument that stands in Whitehall, London, England.

The tower rose 19 feet higher than those in previous plans. The top of the tower is 165 feet above the ground and those who have ascended the circular stairs to the top say the view is spectacular.

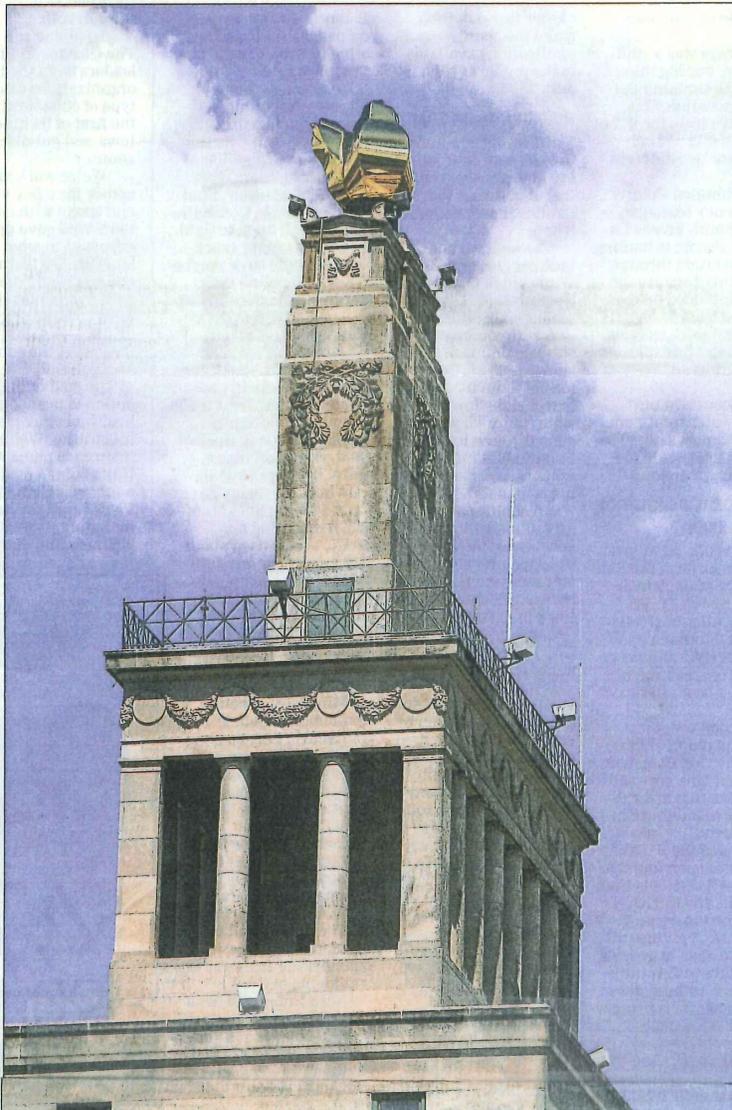
Local lore has it that in 1951, a gas line was extended up through an elevator to the cenotaph, and a live flame burned there for several years. That turns out to be not quite true. It wasn't a gas line — it was steam.

In 1951, the Cedar Rapids Jaycees Young Men's Bureau began to work on a plan to have a "perpetual flame" appear from the top of the cenotaph. Milton Kapp and Bill DuVall came up with an unusual idea, and plans for a Freedom Flame were approved by the Memorial Commission. A pipe carrying steam was run up through the inside of the cenotaph from the seventh floor. The pipe discharged steam under pressure through a series of small holes at the bottom of a three-foot-diameter urn into the glow of a bank of red neon lights.

By day, a steam cloud was visible for several miles; by night, the plume would glow red. The cost of installing the apparatus was about \$400.

Many of downtown Cedar Rapids' buildings were heated by steam generated by Iowa Electric Light & Power Co.'s Sixth Street generating plant, including the Memorial Building. The cost of the Freedom Flame's operation was covered by IE, with company officials estimating that nearly \$2,000 worth of steam would be used in a year's time via the urn's outlets.

"Lighting" the flame was scheduled for July 1, 1951, and was the highlight of the "Freedom Flame Week" proclaimed by Iowa Gov. William



Liz Martin/The Gazette

A gold-plated stainless steel eternal flame sits atop the cenotaph of the Veterans Memorial Building in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Beardsley for July 1 through July 7. McKinley High student George Nimmer, governor of the 1951 Hawkeye Boys State, and Cedar Rapids Chamber Young Men's Bureau President Ned Ruffin jointly handled the "lighting" of the Freedom Flame. Their task was to signal the lighting during the intermission of a Municipal Band concert on the island.

The Freedom Flame idea spread to state and national Junior Chamber of Commerce organizations and a year later,

the "flame" was used to light a National Freedom Flame in Independence Square in Philadelphia. Kapp and DuVall, representing the Cedar Rapids YMB, carried a symbolic torch out of the coliseum during intermission of the Municipal Band concert at the start of a trip to Philadelphia. The flame in Philadelphia was temporary, however, since the square recently had been restored to Colonial days and the Freedom Flame was seen as too modern.

The Freedom Flame and its accompanying ceremony occurred every year on July 1 until 1956.

The steam pipe sprung a leak in February 1954 and was repaired in time for the ceremony, but in 1956, another leak in the steam pipe caused the "flame" to go out. Efforts were made to repair it, but by March, the Memorial Commission had asked the Junior Chamber to remove the equipment because it was no longer

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being used. In December, Commission Chairman Abe Pilicer formally requested that the Junior Chamber remove the lights and steam apparatus from the cenotaph. "That project has died because of technical troubles and a lack of interest," Pilicer said. The removal restored the cenotaph to its original appearance.

The cenotaph was lit again by electricity when Cedar Rapids joined 300 other cities and towns for National Downtown Week in October 1961. The Memorial Coliseum and the courthouse were floodlit in white and colored lights arranged in the island's plaza and on the cenotaph.

The only true flame on the Veterans Memorial Building occurred in 1996 when some enterprising volunteers, thinking that the original flame had been the product of a natural gas line and also was a true flame, tried to find a way to relight it for the arrival of the Olympic Torch in Cedar Rapids. With a short window of time to prepare, they settled on a propane torch. Ralph Welch of Welch Fertilizer in Waukon was asked to apply his expertise and he came up with a flame that projected nearly 5 feet tall and about 3 feet wide. It was lit in front of the pillars that surround the cenotaph, rather than at the top.

It burned for a few hours May 30. Efforts to make the real flame permanent were unsuccessful, but the idea of a flame returning to the cenotaph was far from over.

Veterans Memorial Commission members unveiled plans for a gold-plated, stainless steel eternal flame designed by Larry Garman of Nesper Sign Advertising. On July 19, 2000, the 1,300-pound gold flame was lifted to the top of the cenotaph. Crafted by metal fabricator Larry Loney, it measures 8 feet high and 9 feet in diameter, and it is lit from the base. The \$31,000 cost of the piece was covered by private donations.

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