

Why Main Street Isn't in the Middle of Town

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If we were to plan Ames knowing what we know today, where would be put the downtown? If you said on a four block street enclosed on three sides by a power plant, a railroad track and an underpass located on the east side of town, you have accurately described our Main Street, but no sane planner would have selected that. Our Main Street was the center of Ames at its founding, but Ames was not founded with the University in mind. Rules governing where a land grant school could be located stipulated that the college had to be out of town. Therefore, ISU was originally established two miles from the original center of Ames. One can barely see ISU on the left side of the Ames map in Figure 1. One can barely see Ames in the view east from Iowa State University in Figure 2.

The Ames downtown did not serve students conveniently, and so a second commercial zone sprang up close to the campus. The Campustown area focused on student needs for shopping, supplies, and food. We can see an early version of Campustown in Figure 3. Some of the current buildings in Campustown date back to that time.

Over time, the areas of empty space between the campus and the city filled in. As it did so, the population of Ames rose from a few thousand to the 52,000 we have today. Campustown is in the middle of Ames and is the logical place for the commercial center of town. It is where the town and the university come together, a natural place for chic stores, quaint restaurants and nightclubs. What has kept our Campustown from becoming such a wonderful and vibrant commercial center of the sort many of us have admired in Iowa City or Madison or almost any other college town we visit?

Parking.

In the [Ames survey of residents](#), 80% express satisfaction with parking downtown and only 25% express satisfaction with parking in Campustown. The fraction expressing satisfaction with Campustown parking has stayed at 20-25% for many years. Limited parking prevents patrons from frequenting the businesses in Campustown, and that has limited the economic health and the variety of the businesses that locate there.

How is it that Iowa City can have a pedestrian mall across from the University? Iowa City has a parking garage so that people can park and then walk through the pedestrian mall.

When I have visited cities in Europe, I love the city centers with the areas closed off from cars; the outdoor cafes; the multitude of people walking about. Our Campustown could easily serve that purpose, the natural place for visitors to the town or

the campus to relax. However, visitors would have to be able to park their cars. Visitors can park in our current downtown, but they would only find our current Main Street by accident.

Where could we put a parking garage in Campustown? There are five churches in the Campustown area that have parking areas. Every Sunday, there is an interdenominational competition among the various religions to find parking. The rest of the week, these parking lots are underutilized. Perhaps one of the churches would volunteer their space for a parking garage in exchange for guaranteed parking on Sunday and a smaller allotment the rest of the week. The parking garage could more than replace any lost parking from closing off a four block area of Campustown to pedestrian traffic. With a ready availability of parking, the value of the business sites in Campustown would rise, and we would see an immediate increase in the quality and variety of businesses that would invest in the area.

Before the installation of the campus at Iowa State University, the downtown of Ames was in the logical place for a town 12 blocks long and 7 blocks wide. However, given we have a large university located where it is, it makes no sense for Ames to continue to ignore the natural center of town while trying to shore up a downtown that is far too small and inconveniently located to serve a town of this size. A comparable investment in Campustown would create the visitor's center that is sorely missing in Ames.

Figure 1: Map of Ames circa 1875

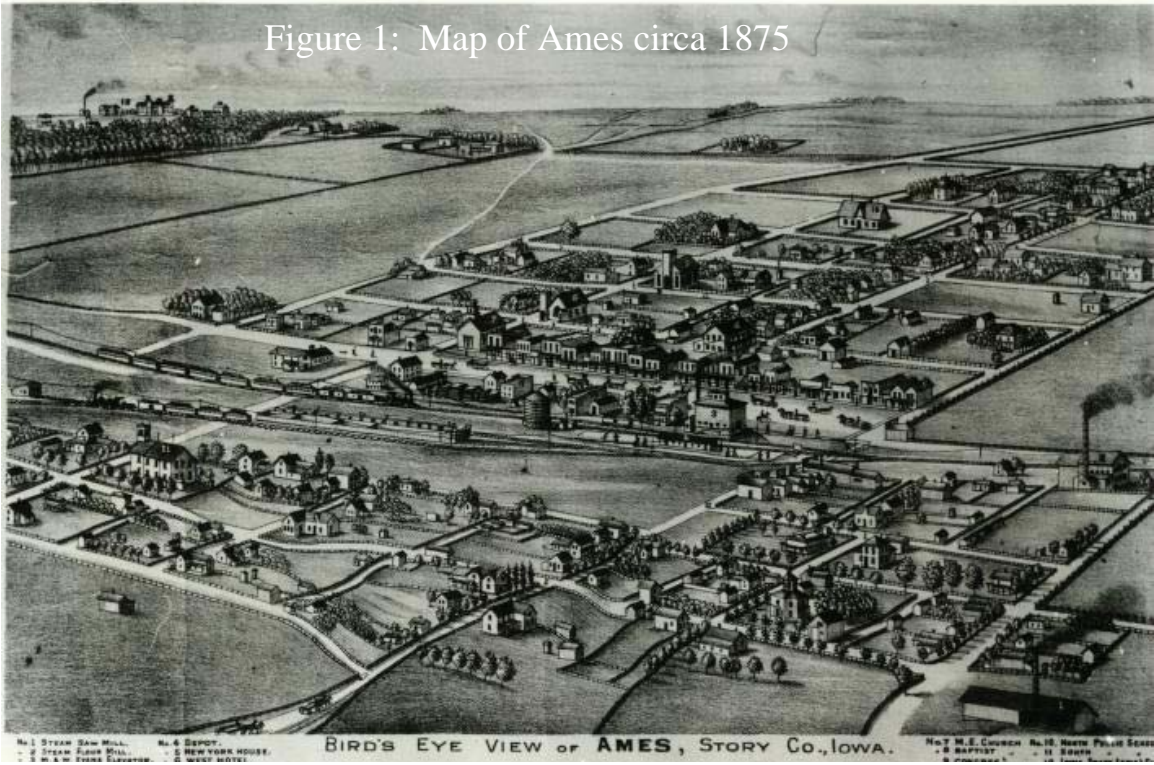


Figure 2: The view east from ISU toward Ames circa 1907

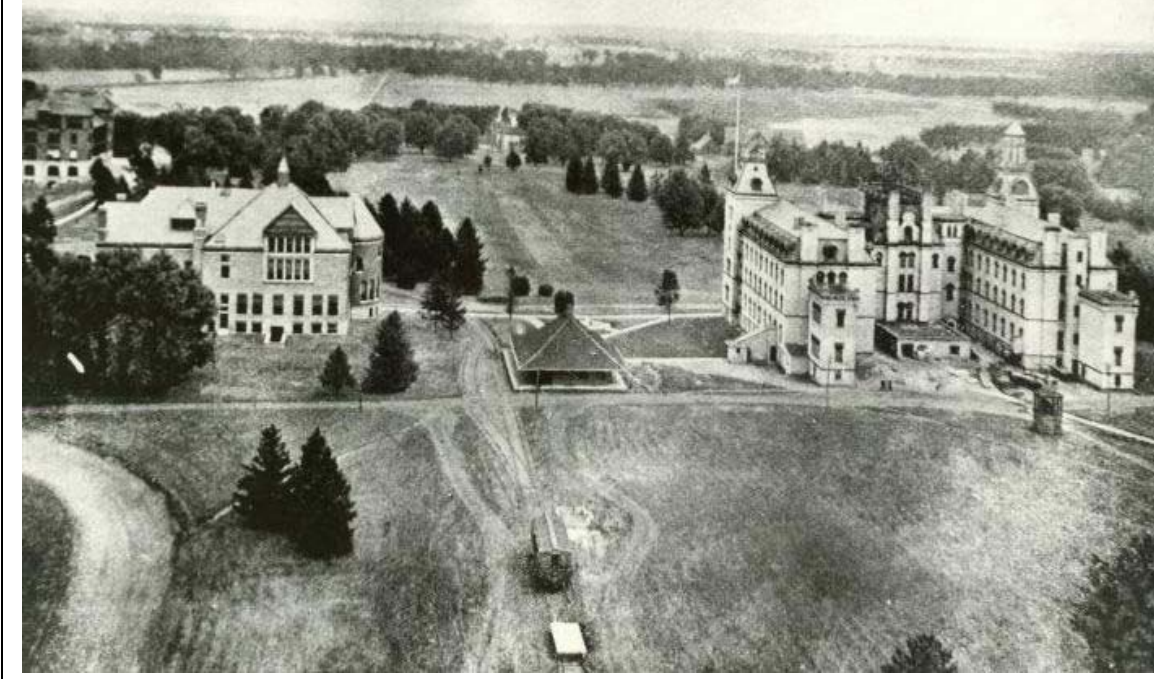
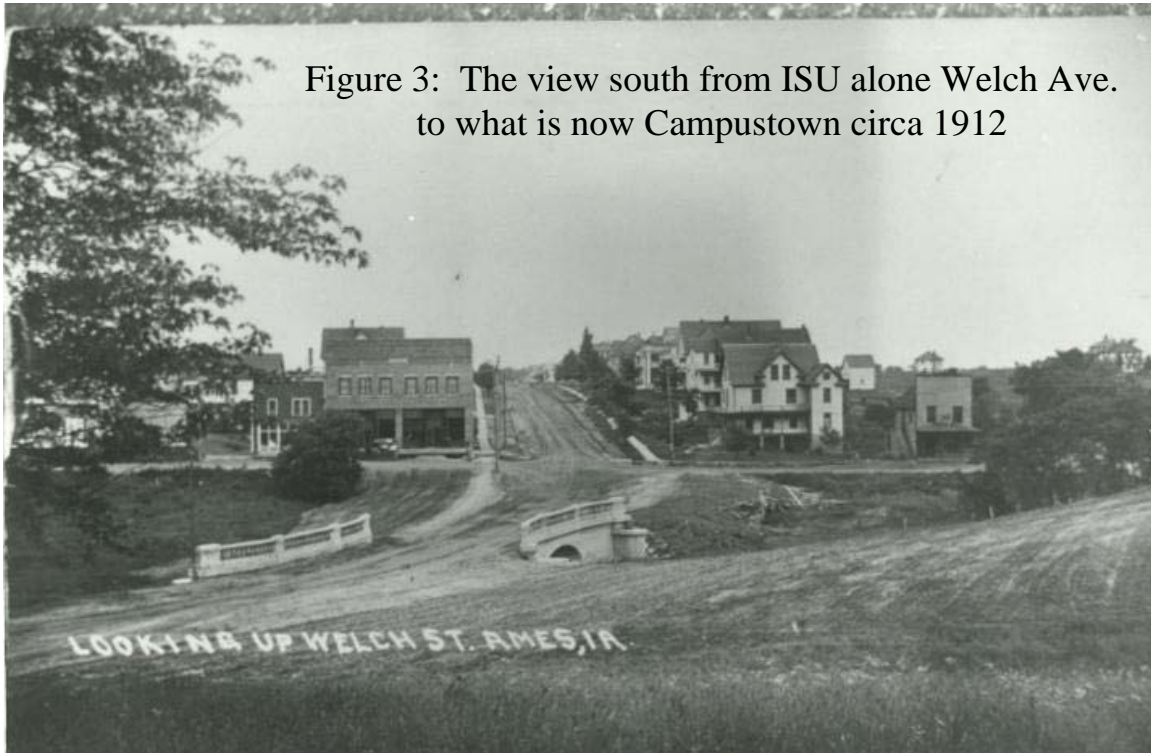


Figure 3: The view south from ISU along Welch Ave.
to what is now Campustown circa 1912



Sources:

Figure 1 <http://www.amespubliclibrary.org/farwell/publication/Pub6879.htm>

Figure 2 http://www.ameshistoricalsociety.org/exhibits/dinke/dinke_photos.htm

Figure 3 <http://www.ames.lib.ia.us/farwell/publication/Pub2116.htm>