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## Places

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Promises, Promises -- Of Earthly Power (first half)

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# PROMISES, PROMISES — of Earthly Power...

**America's Fourth Coast — The Mississippi River:  
An Expedition Report**

**Date: 29 June 1990**

**Location: Mississippi River Mile 1318.1 — Keokuk, Iowa.**

*Michael Mercil*

**K E O K U K!** So named during a Fourth of July celebration in 1829, the name belonging to the recognized leader of both the Sac and Fox tribes after the defeat of Black Hawk in the War of 1832. But we are not in Keokuk because of colorful Native American lore or a particular interest in ancient Iowa history. Our purpose is to seek out the urban visions that inspired this presumably ordinary and undistinguished landscape in the middle of the United States.

During the three sweltering weeks since our expedition began, almost no place has appeared familiar to us and none of them has been ordinary. In recent days, the dominant artifacts along our route have been the locks, dams, bridges, barges, tugboats, railroads and industrial sites that cause this section of the river corridor to seem like a mechanical chamber. The object of

# ...and Heavenly Glory



Sculptural ornamentation from Nauvoo Temple and detail of power house machinery at Keokuk Dam.

Photo by Mary DeLaittre.

our attention at Keokuk is the Great Dam and Power House of the Union Electric Company.

It was the first and remains the longest dam to cross the Father of the Waters. From the Illinois banks, the 119 arched spillway gates of Keokuk Dam stretch low and bridge-like for seven-eighths of a mile across the Mississippi. Nearly parallel with the Iowa shore sits the Power House. Rising up out of the water 177 feet high, 132 feet wide and 1718 feet long, it floats upon the River like a concrete Roman temple barge of electric civic glory.

Everything about this place is *bigness*. A still working relic from the machine age, it is an immense churning, whirring, rolling, turning, sucking, pumping dynamo! The floor of the power house is divided lengthwise in half. Below the interior wall on its Iowa side 110,000 transformer watts of crashing, gray water roar through an open intake channel. On the Illinois side are 15 black cylindrical generators, 11 feet tall and 31 feet wide, marching down the 113,388-square-foot expanse of the generator hall.

The well-maintained pride in this place is reflected everywhere, in shining white porcelain dials, gleaming knobs, and pulls and switches of brightly polished brass. Designed before the invention of planned obsolescence, the original turbines have been spinning ceaselessly at 57.7 revolutions

per minute for three-quarters of a century.

The Keokuk project was built from 1910 to 1913 next to a town with 16,000 inhabitants; construction required a labor force of 2,500. It was conceived of as a *modern wonder of the world*, and some claimed its masonry construction surpassed that of the great pyramid at Cheops.

The project marked a great leap of faith forward toward the future, in its novel use of concrete, its sheer dimension and the function of its power house as a hydroelectric generator. In contrast to the project's modern industrial mission, the allusions of the architecture reached backwards to the past. The strictly symmetrical elevation of the power house, the low, horizontal, pedimented roof line and the high-arched windows flanked by pilasters were conscious efforts by the Stone & Webster Engineering Company to present an image of classical respectability that would inspire civic pride and a local sense of confidence in the promised future of the development:

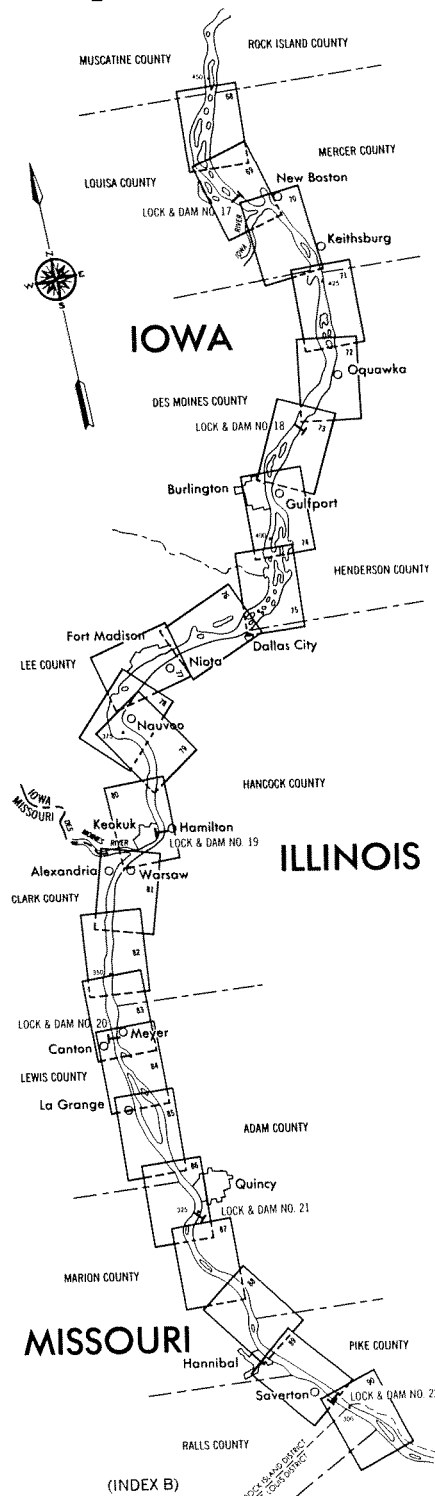
*[The] floor tiling is only one of many details . . . but it may illustrate the care used in even the finishing touches given this structure. The tiles are square and come from Ruabon, Wales, out of a claybed used by the Romans during their occupation of Great Britain over twenty centuries ago.<sup>1</sup>*

Ingredients:

**7,000 tons structural steel**

**650,000 cubic yards concrete**

**300,000 cubic yards sand**





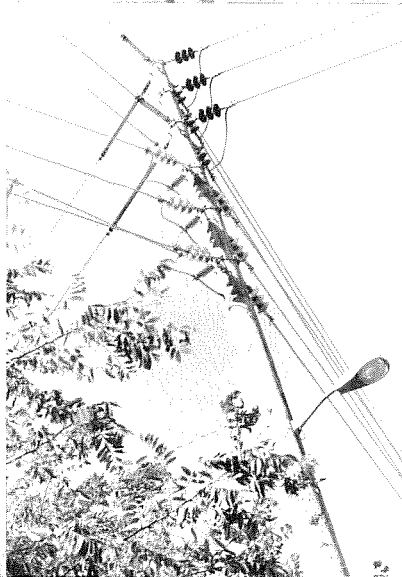
Map of Mississippi River valley,  
including Keokuk, courtesy U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers.

Photos by Mary DeLaittre.

10,000  
000

board feet lumber



50  
miles  
iron pipe

The spectacular urban scale of the Power House and its neo-classical architectural rendering referred less directly to a distant Roman heritage, however, than to contemporary American Beaux Arts planning schemes. Ever since construction of the “Great White Way” at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, neoclassicism of gargantuan proportions had become a hallmark of City Beautiful projects throughout the United States. Despite a vast civic scale that was hugely disproportionate to the actual size of most towns, the rational order of these Beaux Arts plans presented a compelling alternative to the seemingly chaotic urban landscapes so familiar to many for

whom the crudeness of frontier life remained a vivid memory.

Since the 1820’s, the town of Keokuk had served as the “Gate City” to Iowa settlement. Westbound immigrants and their wares had floated up the Mississippi as far as the Des Moines rapids at Keokuk while whole northern pine forests were floated downstream to supply nearby lumber mills. But by the mid-1880’s, pioneer settlement was virtually complete and virgin timber stands had been logged over.

As the frontier economy of the central Mississippi river valley went bust, dreams of damming the rapids at Keokuk reappeared as the practical solution to the region’s economic woes. By 1913, Stone & Webster

claimed, “thoughtful economists” had drawn “the inevitable conclusion” that “the maintenance of the present standard of civilized living depends in large measure upon the ability to produce water power in ever increasing quantity.”<sup>2</sup> Industrial development, economic prosperity and social progress now became the promise of the *hydroelectric future*.

Separated from the town by the Mississippi, the colossal new project at Keokuk was planned as a visionary urban landscape around which a new industrial empire would inevitably arise. With an anticipated 30 generators each delivering 10,000 horsepower capacity, the

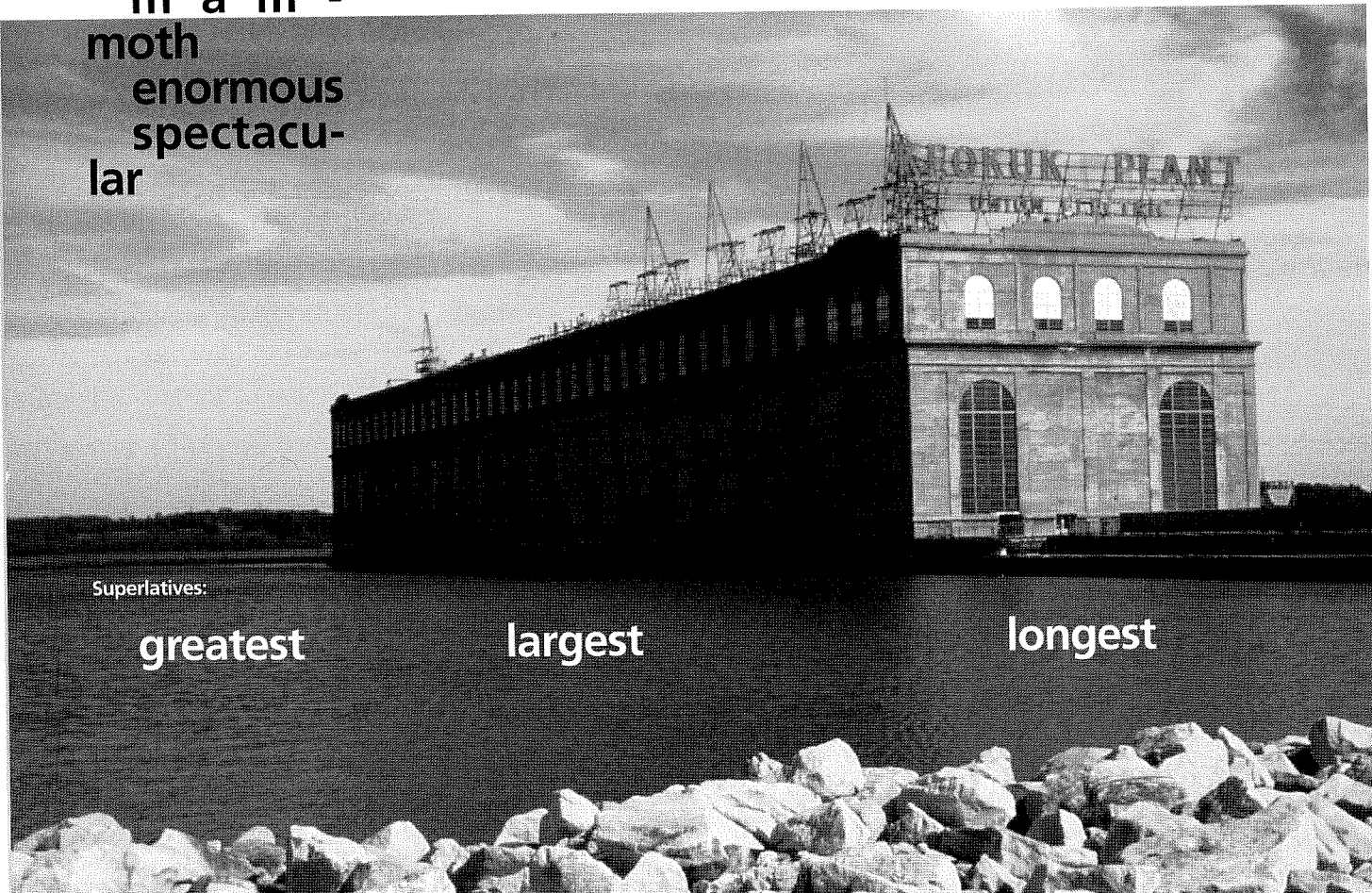
**The power house.**

**Photo by Michael Mercil.**

**Adjectives:**

**massive  
colossal  
mammoth**

**enormous  
spectacular**



**Superlatives:**

**greatest**

**largest**

**longest**

“Gate City” was rechristened America’s *Power City* and its location deemed “the very heart of the nation and center of things commercial”<sup>3</sup> — a newly discovered hydroelectric El Dorado destined to become a national Kingdom of Earthly Power.

Riverboat excursions to the construction project became popular weekend tourist events. For those who made the pilgrimage, the rising Power House appeared as a mighty temple at the hub of the shining *Power Zone*.

*The 15 generators now installed in this power house are sufficient to light . . . a road extending twice around the world through Keokuk. When the other half of this power house is completed, it will generate enough current to illuminate a pathway 200,000 miles long, or nearly the distance to the Moon.*<sup>4</sup>

The first electric current was delivered from the Keokuk plant to St. Louis in July, 1913. A crowd of 50,000 participated in a “the special day of dedication of the work to the use of mankind”<sup>5</sup> on August 25th.

All of the machinery worked, yet the anticipated development of industrial manufacturing proved elusive and the promised land of material prosperity never arrived. By the end of 1914, only two small factories had opened in the *Power City* and not one factory of significance was opened in nearby Burlington, Hannibal, Quincy, or Fort Madison. Despite assurances from Stone & Webster that hydroelectric power would be sold more cheaply than steam power, electric rates were manipulated to eliminate competitiveness and maximize profits. Previous songs of praise now swelled into an angry chorus.

*Was it not the general opinion . . . that when the dam was completed we would have our light bills cut in two?*<sup>6</sup>

Keokuk had already paid a steep social price for the boom surrounding construction of the project. If its citizens had adjusted to foundation-shaking dynamite blasts, they openly anguished over the “daily riot of vice” and a spreading “epidemic of crime.” A severe housing shortage created slums reportedly worse than the tenements of Philadelphia. Schools grew overcrowded. Sewage and garbage dis-

posal were inadequate. In 1912, the tuberculosis mortality rate in Keokuk reached higher than that of Chicago. City officials, who spent \$18,000 promoting the city, were meanwhile unable to agree upon funds requested for needed sewer construction.

Building the Keokuk lock, dam and power plant was intended to propel the collapsed frontier economy of Iowa’s “Gate City” forward into the prosperous industrial realm of the metropolitan twentieth century. But, like many commercial investment schemes, the singular urban vision of the *Power City* was blind to the limiting realities of its geographic, economic and social circumstances.

Keokuk in 1910 was, after all, a modestly sized Iowa town near the middle of the Mississippi River in the middle of the midwestern United States. The “great, teeming, producing, consuming population” of the *Power Zone* was dispersed through the vast agricultural regions of the central Mississippi river valley.

The mammoth scale of the Keokuk development ultimately proved too large even for the mighty

Mississippi River. Because of inadequate water flow during most months of the year, only 15 of the originally planned 30 generators were ever installed and one half of the Power House was never finished.

Crossing the foundations of its unfinished extension, we exit the Power House still marveling at the huge dimensions of this place, its dramatic siting in the middle of the River and the almost overwhelming presence of its mechanical power. But just as nothing could increase the flow of the Mississippi, neither could inflated promotional rhetoric nor redrawing the maps transform the actual location of the *Power City* from a middle to a center. Keokuk, Iowa, today remains a river town with fewer than 13,000 residents. The colossal *Power City* now shines only as a dimmed reminder of early twentieth century industrial/commercial utopianism that none of us had heard of before today.

highest

boldest