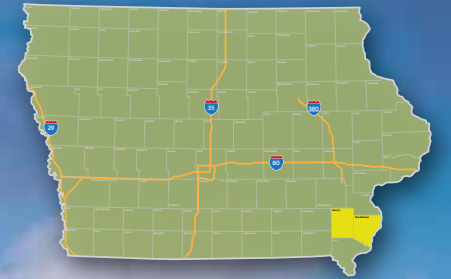


As Iowa's old territorial capital, Burlington is alive with history which flows steady like the river itself. While paddlewheelers and steamships are no longer, passengers still arrive on Viking River Cruise Lines.



Beautiful BURLINGTON

BRING YOUR BINOCULARS, BOBBERS, CAMERAS AND HIKING BOOTS.

It's a place that greens early, flowers first and welcomes warm air filled with migrant birdsong. Here, gaze up at some of Iowa's biggest trees, absorb deep history, hike, bike and camp. Burlington, Iowa's old territorial capitol, is nestled in the valley and bluffs along the Mississippi. The river brought early commerce, wealth and prestige still evident among elegant bluff-top historic mansions and splendid, ornate downtown architectures.

"Here in the southeast corner of Iowa, spring arrives before anywhere else," says Geode State Park manager Ulf Konig. "Sometimes late February, early March, we're starting to green already. Some years, the first week of March I'm starting to see wildflowers. I've found morels in March. It seems we're two to three weeks ahead sometimes."

Just 15 miles east of the park, the old river city of Burlington is taking advantage of its history. People are opening shops, eateries and restoring historic treasures. Non-campers can enjoy beautiful B&Bs. It's easy to image it becoming Iowa's next major destination. In fact, Viking River Cruises just made it a stop with their new, 400-passenger riverboat.

There's plenty to do—see stately buildings and explore its splendid museum to see how natural history here shaped life. Visit Aspen Grove, a grand historic cemetery established in 1843 territory days. It's also a certified arboretum with spectacular trees among the biggest in Iowa, including the second-largest bald cypress and champion flowering dogwood

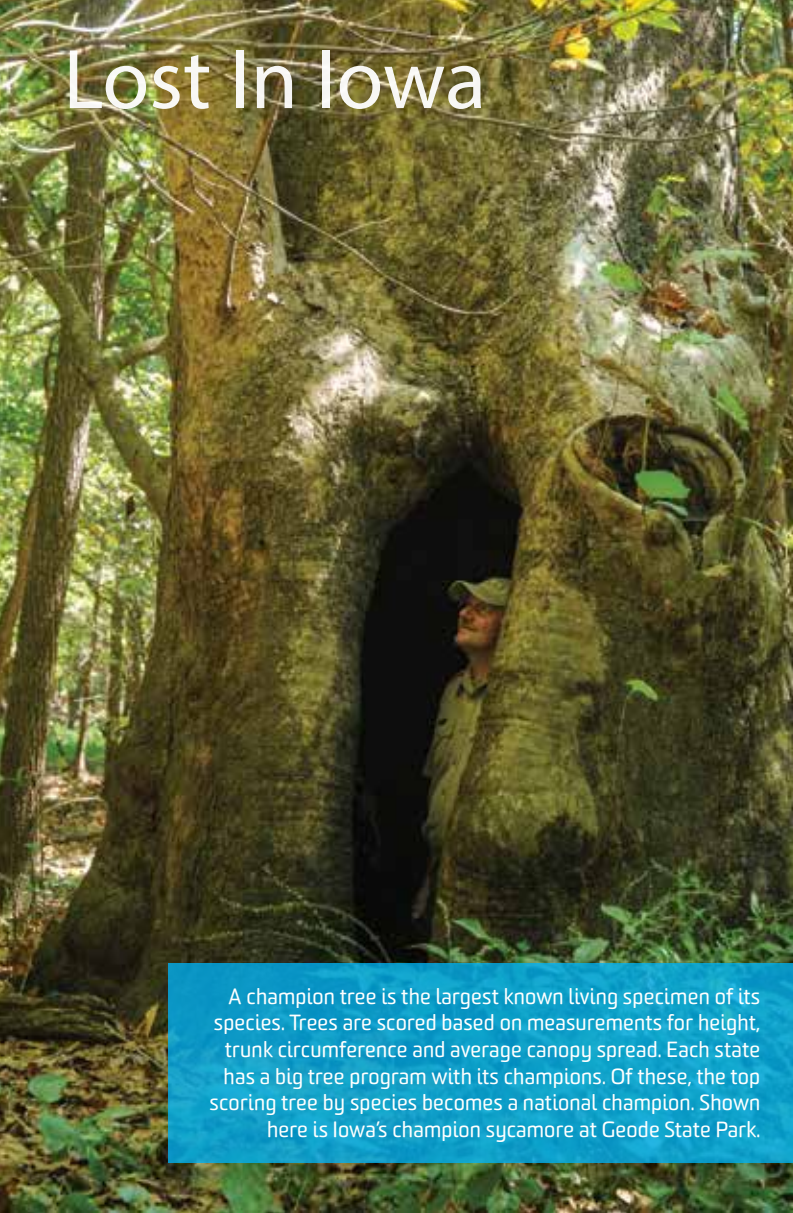
abloom in spring. City-run Crapo Park (pronounced cray-po) holds Iowa's second largest walnut and bur oak. Dankwardt Park holds Iowa's co-champion red oak, second-largest swamp white oak, tallest sycamore, third-largest European larch and 10th largest tulip tree. This city and county are big tree havens.

At Geode State Park, bring the binoculars, camera and hiking boots—the area explodes with migrating birds, woodland wildflowers and flowering trees. You can see them while hiking or paddling. But if you come to collect geodes, you're out of luck. Established in 1937, people commonly took rocks from the park and they've been hunted out. Taking what's left is prohibited, but the park office has a nice display, including a gigantic 300-pounder.

For birding, late April to Mid-May is best. "We get a lot of warblers," says Konig. "The majority of the park is mature forest and where the creek enters the lake is a popular birding area," he says, "That area has some wetland." Diverse habitat draws lots of bird species.

Being so far southeast has benefits—species at the edge

PHOTO BY ISTOCK.COM



A champion tree is the largest known living specimen of its species. Trees are scored based on measurements for height, trunk circumference and average canopy spread. Each state has a big tree program with its champions. Of these, the top scoring tree by species becomes a national champion. Shown here is Iowa's champion sycamore at Geode State Park.



TOP LEFT: Geode State Park, just 20 minutes west of Burlington, has Iowa's champion sycamore tree. ABOVE: Lake Geode dam as completed in 1951. RIGHT: Find areas of open forest floor at Geode State Park, thanks to controlled burns and manual removal of invasive species. BELOW RIGHT: Beautiful Lake Geode was drained and renovated to remove 200,000 cubic yards of silt with heavy equipment in 2017. Today, silt-catching structures help maintain clear water. Fishing, paddling and hiking an 8-mile trail around the lake are popular. BELOW LEFT: Burlington is Iowa's Big Tree Capital, with more champion-sized trees than any other city and more champion trees in the county than any other county. Not all champs are super huge. At historic Aspen Grove Cemetery and arboretum (est. 1843), you can see many big trees, including Iowa's largest flowering dogwood.

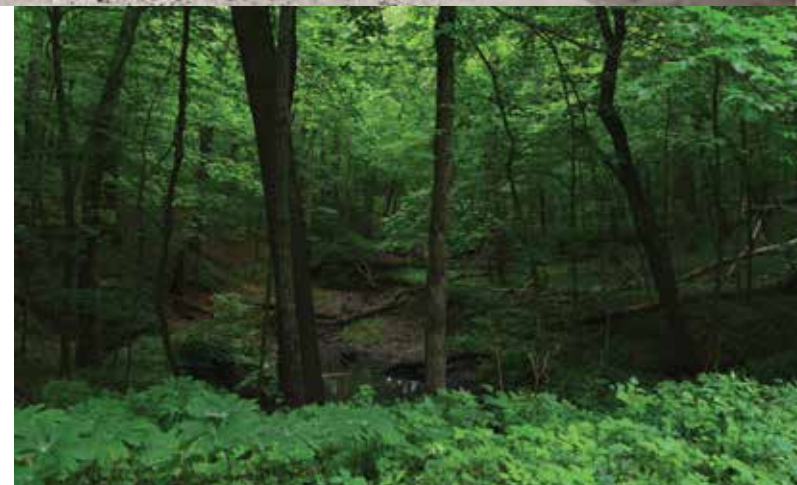
of their ranges. "We have red-shouldered hawks that nest, worm-eating warblers and summer tanagers," he says. The male summer tanager is the only completely red bird in North America (cardinals have a black mask) and females are yellow. Summer tanagers eat bees and wasps, catching them in flight to later hit them against a branch to remove the stinger. "We hear their 'picky-tucky-tuck' sound all summer. They are late arrivers," says Konig.

Hike the 8-mile trail around the lake for birding and wildflowers amongst boulders and hills. It's rugged enough that mountain bikers like it, too.

Driving the park, view open understory forest areas thanks to restoration efforts using low-intensity fire to keep woody shrubs and invasive species at bay. It's how Iowa woods should look versus the oft-seen impenetrable thicket. Restoration is hard work. Konig, staff and volunteers use controlled burns and lots of elbow grease with hand removal. "Invasive species control is pretty much continuous work," he says.

Forests here have impressive trees—blooming tulip magnolias and Iowa's fourth largest chinkapin oak. The grand dame however, is Iowa's champion sycamore. Its massive trunk is more than 23 feet around. Hollow inside, its interior caught fire a year ago in February. A hiker notified Konig of the blaze, which burned 20 feet high inside the trunk. Konig carried buckets of water from a nearby creek. "I managed to save it as much as I could," he says. Its cause unsolved, a cold night froze the steam and extinguished it for good. Fortunately, the tree survived.

LAKE PHOTO BY DAVID SMITH, BIG TREE BY CLAY SMITH, B/W IMAGE DNR ARCHIVES, ALL OTHERS BY BRIAN BUTTON



Geode State Park



RESTORED LAKE GEODE BETTER THAN EVER

Nature lovers anchor their stay at Geode State Park, about 20 minutes west of Burlington. Here, a recently renovated lake offers serenity in its clear, no-wake waters, sandy sun-lit beach and improved angling amenities. Popular for fishing and kayaking, an 8-mile, rugged, hilly trail encircles its 200-acre waters. After exploring the park's 1,640 acres, picnic at a shelter or rest up at the updated campground with its a new showerhouse and amended sites that offer more full-hookups and pull-through sites.

The main draw here is Lake Geode, better than ever, thanks to work that began in 2011 to build silt retention ponds and gully structures to catch soil and silt. Many are small, others are an acre in size, says Goede State Park Manager Ulf Konig. That was step one.

Lake drawdown began late 2017. With water gone, 200,000 cubic yards of silt was hauled by dump trucks to an oversized, unused parking area where it was strategically placed and shaped. Seeded with prairie plants, today it blends in and "looks like it's always been there," says Konig. "Get on top for a nice lake view," he says.

Fish habitat structures were built, such as underwater rock jetties and reef-like shelves for better fishing. Park volunteers and fishing clubs worked with DNR staff to add hundreds of fish attractors using 5-gallon weighted buckets and salvaged tubing. Placed at 10 to 12-foot depths, they mimic underwater plants.

New fishing jetties were added and the shore rocked to prevent bank erosion. Angling today is tip-top for bass, crappies, bluegill and channel catfish. With structure, habitat, good water and all things fish need, the population is self-sustaining.

When the lake was empty, a few oddities appeared. "Somebody found an old tacklebox that fell out of a boat in the 1970s. Inside was a wallet. They found the owner and returned it." A soggy Iowa Nice story.

With a chuckle, Konig says, "We were afraid there'd be a car or something on the lakebed. You never know. We did have an incident where somebody found some bones and thought they might be human. They were deer bones. I guess people watch too many episodes of CSI. But someone did find an 1888 silver dollar sitting on the lakebed near the dam."

Also reappearing were hundreds of big oak stumps cut in 1950 when the dam and road were built. Sitting under 45 feet of water, they were perfectly preserved, saw marks still visible.

Remnants of the first (or maybe second road) built in Iowa Territory also appeared. Authorized by Congress in 1839, it led 76 miles from Burlington to Agency in Indian Country for trade purposes. More trail than road, this rugged path cut through true wilderness. Portions of the road and stones used for a bridge to cross the feeder creek to the lake were evident.

In early 2020, the dam was shut. The lake filled quickly. The pandemic hit and restored Lake Geode was a huge draw for stir-crazy people craving nature. "The number of kayakers was unbelievable," says Konig, who installed three kayak launches, one ADA accessible, to make getting in and out easy. It remains a great paddling spot.



Lost In Iowa



In 1876, 20,000 tons of ice were harvested on the Mississippi River in Burlington to supply former meat packers and others.



Alive With History

“This town doesn’t throw out its history easily,” says the young, affable Colton Overton, executive director of the ornate Heritage Museum in downtown Burlington. Originally from Ankeny, and at the helm here for under three years, he is putting his museum and history degree to good work.

The gorgeous interior alone makes this museum a must-see Iowa treasure. Once you get past the ornate grandeur of this 1898 former public library, your mind can focus on its natural history collections.

A steamship wheel, rare due to its 8-foot size, sits inside. It belonged on the Clyde, an iron-hulled 90-foot sidewheeler built in Dubuque in 1870. It plied the big river for 71 years. Some of it may still be in use—a “ghost ship.” Rumors swirl that the hull was repurposed as a barge.

“There were maybe some sightings. I guess it says “Clyde” on the hull and some markings where it’s apparent it was once a sidewheeler,” says Overton. The Port of Burlington is keeping their eyes open for it on passing barges. “It might have been sighted in the 1990s near Prairie Du Chien,” he says.

Steamboats faced perils from fires, collisions and explosions. Early boilers, made of weak iron, exploded under too much steam pressure. Nationally, over a 40-year span, there were 209 explosions and 4,000 fatalities. From 1849 to 1942, Burlington also hosted showboats—floating palaces with theaters, ballrooms and saloons.

From big boats to small, see a dugout canoe, circa 1800, and learn how they were cleverly made. Standing tree trunks were coated in mud for fireproofing, the base left uncoated where a lit fire would fell the tree. After removing mud and bark, small fires were built atop the log to burn it out. Hand tools shaped bow and stern and flattened the bottom for stability. A coat of bear grease aided waterproofing and prevented wood from drying out and cracking.

You can also see a hand-built skiff from master boat builder James Jordan (1847-1939). The museum has the last of his 150 skiffs in its original condition.

Take in an impressive collection of Native American arrowheads and points, pottery and tools. “I think we’ve counted over 1,000 points, 200 axe heads and three grinding stones,” says Overton. There are stone hoes and clay water containers and seed pots 800 to 1,200 years old.

Most arrowheads and points are made of Burlington chert.

One is a Clovis point, some 11,000 to 20,000 years old. Only 23 out of tens of thousands of points found in the county are Clovis points. Less than 10 of those were made of quartz. This specific quartz is only found near Hixton, Wisc., some 305 miles away.

“A lot of this stuff was not from area farmland where they were tilling up soil and all of a sudden an axe head pops up. This was all from town,” says Overton of the area’s long history and efforts to better catalog decades worth of vast donations made to the museum. “We are going through our clothing and textile collection. We have 6,000 pieces of Victorian clothing. In the process we’re finding Native American stuff mixed in—vests, headdresses, full arrows.”

They recently discovered a box of childhood letters written in cursive by Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). “The letters really shocked the entire town,” he says. “We don’t even know where they came from.” They also found a dress in pristine condition from 1780 that belonged to the Leopold family.

Leopold, of course, is a legend of American conservation, considered a father of wildlife management and author of the 1949 classic, *Sand County Almanac*. If you haven’t read it, get a copy. His boyhood home sits atop a bluff overlooking the river.

In 1852, Burlington began its storied railroad history with plans to build a line to the Missouri River. By 1884, it started carrying U.S. Mail from Chicago to Council Bluffs for 83 years. In 1886, the first freight car air brakes were tested on a hill in West Burlington. In 1934, as autos and trucks began competing, the railroad built a fast, futuristic looking lightweight locomotive of gleaming stainless steel. The sleek, streamlined Burlington Zephyr sped across Iowa in 3 hours and 32 minutes and set a speed record from Denver to Chicago, 13 hours and five minutes, earning the nickname “The Silver Streak.”

The history continues. The “B” in today’s BNSF Railway is for Burlington—along with Northern and Santa Fe, a merger of several lines. Burlington still sees passenger rail, with Amtrak trains every six hours and freight trains every 20 minutes.

“This town doesn’t give up its history very easily,” says Overton. “Some things haven’t changed much since the 1800s with riverboats and the railroad,” he says, referencing the 5-deck Viking River Cruise Line. “It’s interesting. There’s a fine line between the old paddle wheelers and the new boats. That one era ended and a new one started and I don’t think anybody here really noticed.” Burlington’s river of history just keeps flowing. 🌊



Elaborately engraved gourd birdhouses.



GOURD

Grinding Stone of Burlington, Iowa. The top is made of Burlington chert. The bottom is made of limestone.

As Iowa’s territorial capital, Burlington has a long history. But people have lived here along the river for thousands of years, too. The intertwined history is well represented at the Heritage Museum—a must-stop. Housed in a beautifully restored, ornate former 1898 public library, the museum holds ancient local pottery, one of the world’s largest crinoid fossil collections and much more.

RIGHT: This former steamship wheel is rare due to its 8-foot size. It belonged on the Clyde, an iron-hulled 90-foot sidewheeler built in Dubuque in 1870. It plied the big river for 71 years, but rumors run that its repurposed hull may still be in service.



An early 1800s dugout and later wood canoe.



CRINOID CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Several of the world's leading crinoid experts have Burlington ties for good reason. Of Earth's 600 known crinoid species, 200 are fossilized here in area rocks. These 300-million-year-old marine animals put Burlington on the map when German-born lawyer Charles Wachsmuth (1829-1896) settled here and became fascinated by exposed fossils on his walks around town. Giving them their first serious academic study, he influenced another local, Frank Springer (1848-1927). Together, they amassed the core of the world's premier crinoid collection. In 1911, 269 crates weighing more than 12 tons were rail shipped from Burlington to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. Next to the Smithsonian and Harvard University, the world's

next largest crinoid collection is at the Heritage Museum in Burlington. A temporary display shows several crinoids, blastoids and sea stars. To show more of their 3,000 specimens, museum executive director Colton Overton and crew have grand ideas—a future "Hall of Crinoids" display with interactive cameras for people to zoom in and examine. It may be housed in a walk-through cave-like experience, or perhaps a relocated small building once owned by Wachsmuth. It's all funding dependent. Helping identify all these specimens is a modern leading authority, Burlington native Forest Gahn, professor of geology at Brigham Young University-Idaho. "It's a humdinger of a collection," says Overton.



Crinoids, blastoids and sea stars are all marine invertebrate animals in the phylum Echinodermata, which also includes brittle stars, urchins and sea cucumbers. BELOW: The ornate Heritage Museum in Burlington is a must see.



Drive scenic blufftop neighborhoods to see wonderful old mansions, varied architecture and spring flowers, including the boyhood home of "the father of wildlife management" and author of *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). Downtown, be sure to visit the ornate interior of the county's Historical Heritage Museum and its natural history displays.

TRAVEL NOTES

GEODE STATE PARK

3333 Racine Ave, Danville
319-392-4601; geode@dnr.iowa.gov or iowadnr.gov/Geode

GREATER BURLINGTON VISITORS BUREAU

PORT OF BURLINGTON, 400 N Front St., Burlington
319-752-8731; welcomecenter@greaterburlington.com or greaterburlington.com.
 Mon.-Sun. 10 a.m.- 4 p.m.

DES MOINES COUNTY HISTORICAL HERITAGE MUSEUM

501 N 4th St, Burlington, **319-752-7449**;
dmchs@dmchs.org or dmchs.org.
 Wed.-Fri. 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sat. 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

FRIENDS OF GEODE STATE PARK learn more, buy souvenirs, volunteer, see park photos and donate at friendsofgeode.org.