by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

So why all the talk about changing the state constitution and moving the capital to Las Vegas? Going back to 1861, Nevada's territorial and state capital has always been Carson City. Surprisingly, only ten states including the Silver State can claim having just one capital during their colonial, territorial and/or statehood periods.

Las Vegas and Clark County's population have grown so fast and so large in the last 20 years, almost two million residents in the metro area, that some people expect Las Vegas legislators to move the capital to southern Nevada. In January 2001, a Las Vegas newspaper columnist made a statement proposing the move to provoke a reaction. The assumption is when any city gets big enough it may take the state capital by political force similar to a county seat battle. But is that really how the scenario has played out in American history?

It has been 100 years since a state capital has been relocated in the United States. In 1910, Oklahoma's capital was moved from Guthrie to Oklahoma City. The effort to remove Juneau as Alaska's capital shortly after statehood in 1959 proved abortive. When capitals have been moved, it occurred not long after statehood, and almost always to a city considered more centrally located in the state.

For example, Alabama, admitted to the Union in 1819, had three capitals before finally settling on Montgomery in 1847 near the center of the state. Columbus in the heart of Ohio became the third capital 13 years after statehood in 1803. Other examples of moving the state capital to a more central location include Pennsylvania (Philadelphia to Harrisburg), South Carolina (Charleston to Columbia), Michigan (Detroit to Lansing), Illinois (Vandalia to Springfield), Iowa (Iowa City to Des Moines), and California (Benicia to Sacramento). Most importantly, all these moves were made so early in the states' histories there was practically no capital infrastructure--principally buildings--to abandon.

Nevada's Constitution prohibited an appropriation for a state capitol until 1869 in case the capital was moved to a more central location after statehood was conferred in 1864. The capitol building was completed in 1871. However, some legislators still held out for moving the capital. With the completion of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad to Reno in 1872, The *Daily Nevada Tribune* of January 2, 1875 editorialized, "It is now a foregone conclusion that Carson City will for all time to come be the seat of government of the State of Nevada. The location is by far the best in the state," the *Tribune* continued, "and as easy of access as any place, now that the railroad runs direct to it." The 1875 legislature approved monies for a fence and landscaping around the capitol after the *Tribune* complained that it was "a disgrace to the state to let the grounds remain longer in their present condition."

When the last significant efforts were made to move the capital to Winnemucca or Goldfield in the first two decades of the 20th century, the capitol complex in Carson City included only the capitol, printing building, orphan's home, and prison. Today the capital infrastructure in Carson City is composed of scores of buildings, including separate edifices for the supreme court (1937 and 1992) and the legislature (1971 and 1996-7) which were once housed in the capitol. Moreover, thousands of state employees live in and around Carson City.

State capitals just are not moved anymore, whether or not new metro areas emerge, or the existing capital is not central to the state's citizens. Florida's capital located in the state's panhandle, for example, has not moved from Tallahassee, the territorial and state capital since 1823, either to Miami (although much of the state's population is in south Florida over 400 miles away), or, more recently, to booming Orlando in the middle of the state. Texas has not relocated its capital from Austin, the state capital since 1845 and the Republic's capital before statehood, to Dallas or Houston. And our neighbor to the west, California, has kept the capital in Sacramento since 1854 despite the tremendous growth in southern California over the last 100

years.

In major cities like New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami that do not serve as capitals, and are not centrally-located like long-standing capitals Denver, Phoenix, and Indianapolis, there are sizeable satellite office complexes. Las Vegas has the Grant Sawyer and Lewis Bradley buildings, and many other structures to meet the state governmental needs of southern Nevadans. Surely, more buildings will be constructed in the 21st century in and around Las Vegas without having to move the capital for the first time in Nevada's history.

Photo: Nevada State Library and Archives

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