

Historical Background of Illinois Capitol Prayer Room

Illinois State Archives

“In Illinois, it took a 15-year effort to have a nondenominational chapel, or prayer room as it is known, dedicated in the capitol. In 1982, the four legislative leaders sent a letter to the Legislative Space Needs Commission calling for a room to be set aside as a prayer room. Little was done until 1985, when the Illinois House passed a resolution, HR 408, designating a room on the first floor as a prayer room. Almost immediately, a Wisconsin-based organization, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, brought suit against the state, claiming the establishment of the room violated the separation of church and state. A federal district court judge agreed with the foundation. On December 4, 1986, Judge Marvin Aspen held that HR 408 violated the first and fourteenth amendments of the U.S. constitution and Article 1, Section 3 of the Illinois Constitution.

The next day, House Minority Leader Lee Daniels (R-Elmhurst) and Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) sponsored and passed a resolution calling for an appeal of the federal ruling. The case went before the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, where it was argued on September 21, 1987. On January 29, 1988, the Appellate Court reversed the lower court’s decision. The court found that the establishment of a prayer room did not equal an attempt by the government to establish a state religion. The court noted that the United States Capitol has a prayer room and that religious references can be found in numerous government documents and activities. The Freedom From Religion Foundation did not pursue the issue, opening the way for the full establishment of the prayer room.”