

**“ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING SEENERIES THAT
CAN BE FOUND IN ZION”: PHILO DIBBLE’S
MUSEUM AND PANORAMA**

Noel A. Carmack

In 1786, when Charles Wilson Peale announced the opening of his cabinet of curiosities “to please and entertain the public,” he could not have forespoken better the mind and will of Philo Dibble who sought to establish a museum of Mormon art and relics as early as 1845. Dibble’s curatorial pursuits, like Peale’s, were driven in part by a fascination with a new sensation in American art—moving pictures.¹ For a time, these moving pictures, or panoramas, brought profit and popularity to an otherwise elitist field of scientific exhibition. By accessioning, collecting, and displaying relics enlivened by vivid canvases illustrating Latter-day Saint historic scenes, Dibble followed the rising tide of popular education.²

A wave of American interest in panoramas swelled early in the nineteenth century after reaching heights of popularity in Paris and London. As a form of “rational amusement,” moving panoramas were just as much an American phenomenon as they were European. They were newsreels of a sort, allowing eastern spectators a chance to view, in idealized form, the untamed frontier of the West.³

Philo Dibble, Mormon lecturer and panoramist, was born in Peru, Pittsfield County, Massachusetts, on 6 June 1806, the second son of Orator and Bulah Dibble. After the death of his father, he and his elder brother Philander were taken in by one Captain Apollos Phelps to Suffield, Connecticut, where they were to remain until they were twenty-one. Following Philo’s marriage to Celia Kent of Suffield, they moved to Chardon, located about five miles from Kirtland, Ohio. Dibble and his wife were received into Church membership by baptism on 16 October 1830, after meeting four proselyting Mormon

elders, Oliver Cowdery, Ziba Peterson, Peter Whitmer Jr., and Parley P. Pratt, in Kirtland, Ohio. Dibble was to have a close relationship with Joseph Smith as a friend and bodyguard. “Father Dibble” (so called by children and friends) was later remembered for surviving a mob attack in Jackson County, Missouri, in 1833 and remaining faithful in the Church through the Missouri and Illinois periods, migrating to Utah in 1851.⁴

Dibble probably caught panorama fever in 1841 while he was living in Nauvoo, Illinois, a growing Mormon community on the Mississippi. During the mid 1840s, St. Louis, some two hundred miles down river, was not only a port of entry for Mormon immigrants but also the major center for panorama production in America. As early as March 1841, John Banvard was promoting the first of the “largest pictures in the world” at the St. Louis Museum (then under the proprietorship of W. S. McPherson). The exhibitions included “*Miss Hayden, the accomplished American Sybil*” and the “Grand Moving Panoramas, of the cities of Jerusalem and Venice, covering an extent of canvass exceeding 100 [1,000?] square feet.”⁵

In April, Banvard announced a grand Panorama of St. Louis, which had been in preparation for some time. Between 1840 and 1850—in full view of a growing Mormon congregation—St. Louis had become the primary venue for nearly all the major panoramists. St. Louisans were presented with John Rowson Smith’s *Panorama of the Mississippi River*, Weedon’s *Panoramic View of the Hudson River*, a *Grand Historical Panorama of the Antediluvian World*, and *The Bombardment of Vera Cruz*, to name a few. And, late in 1849, Henry Lewis and Leon Pomarede presented con-

NOEL CARMACK is Preservation Librarian at Merrill Library, Utah State University. He holds an MFA and has published articles on Mormon art and culture. He wishes to thank Marilyn and Celia Smith (descendants of Philo Dibble) who graciously provided research materials and photographs for this article.

current exhibitions of their rival panoramas of the Mississippi.⁶

At the same time, St. Louis's Mormon immigrant population numbered between three and seven hundred.⁷ During a particularly severe winter in 1843, when a host of immigrants were debilitated from travel on the river, Mormon elder Parley P. Pratt reported "as many as one thousand emigrants at different points on this river."⁸ Dibble certainly heard of the magnificent panoramas and popular museums in St. Louis from newly arriving immigrants and the daily newspaper coverage, considering his proximity to such amusements.⁹ Perhaps he was even sitting in the audience when Banvard unveiled one of the first of many awe-inspiring panoramas that spring of 1841.

Dibble's interest in panoramas may have intensified during an increased focus on science and culture among the Mormon intellectual community in 1843. On 15 May of that year, an unnamed author, undoubtedly John Taylor, made the following appeal in *The Times and Seasons*:

According to a Revelation, received not long since, it appears to be the duty of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, to bring to Nauvoo, their precious things, such as antiquities, and we may say, curiosities, whether animal, vegetable or metallic: yea, petrifications as well as inscriptions and hieroglyphics, for the purpose of establishing a *museum* of the great things of God, and the inventions of men, at Nauvoo. We have just received the first donation at the office of President Joseph Smith. Who will come and do likewise?¹⁰

"We would recommend to the Elders that are travelling, either on this continent or any other, to pay special attention to this subject," Taylor suggested. "It only requires a little exertion on our part, to make a museum or repository of this kind, to exceed anything on the western continent, and the world."¹¹

A few days later, on 24 May 1843, "Elder Addison Pratt presented the tooth of a whale, coral, bones of an Albatross' wing and skin of a foot, jaw bone of a porpoise, and tooth of a South Sea seal as the beginning for a museum in Nauvoo."¹² Wilford Woodruff, while on his mission to England in 1845, examined the last effects of

Elder Lorenzo D. Barnes, which had been deposited in a trunk. The contents included a number of ancient coins, weights of measure, a "splended Buffalo robe with Indian Beads," and various articles of clothing, which were carefully packaged and sealed to be sent to the Nauvoo Museum.¹³ This pursuit of intellectual, educational resources continued even after the Latter-day Saints reached Salt Lake Valley in 1847. The *General Epistle* to the Saints in 1848 made such an appeal. In addition to the best examples of literature, science, and philosophy, the Church leaders asked for "natural curiosities and works of art" from which the young people could receive valuable instruction. "And if the Saints will be diligent in these matters," they wrote, "we will soon have the best, the most useful and attractive museum on the earth."¹⁴

It was this rise in intellectual awareness, coupled with an entrepreneurial spirit, that probably motivated Dibble to begin his panoramic work. Soon after the deaths at Carthage, Dibble had a dream that prompted him to begin his work. "I dreamed I was standing under a large tree in company with others," Dibble wrote later. "I looked and saw Brother Joseph coming with a sheet of paper in his hand. The paper was rolled up. Joseph threw the roll into the top of the tree. The roll came tumbling down through the limbs, and all under the tree watched the roll to catch it, and I caught it. This was the end of my dream."¹⁵ In addition to this, he wrote that he saw the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Carthage. Dibble pondered the dream and interpreted it as a vision that should be exhibited in pictorial form. His panorama would include all the major historical events experienced by the Saints. "Brigham [Young] said, 'go ahead and I will assist you,'" Dibble wrote. "He put his hand into his pocket and gave me two dollars. I then went and bought the canvass."¹⁶

The earliest reference to Dibble's panorama appears to be 7 March 1845 when Hosea Stout, Nauvoo chief of police, went "to see Br Major who was painting the scenery of the murder of Joseph & Hyrum at Carthage."¹⁷ Stout, apparently an avid patron of the arts, made reference to a number of occasions when he visited the studios of several Nauvoo artists. His journal provides a remarkably detailed record of Dibble's panorama project during its conception in 1845.

Robert Campbell, frequently mentioned by Stout in

connection with the panorama, was busy through the summer months obtaining portraits for reference. Unfortunately, little is known regarding Campbell and his work because of long-held confusion over his name and one Robert Lang Campbell who later became superintendent of the territorial schools in Utah. It is known, however, that Campbell was born in Marsh, Cambridge, England, on 31 March 1810, the son of John and Susannah Staples Campbell. He was baptized on 21 June 1838 by Charles W. Wandall. He worked as an artist and engraver in Nauvoo until the exodus in 1847. Campbell migrated to Utah about 1849.¹⁸

Although he was not directly named in connection with the panorama project, British portrait artist Sutcliff Maudsley probably had a part in the production of reference work as well. Stout recorded a number of visits to Campbell's and Maudsley's studios for portrait taking during the summer and early fall, when Campbell was clearly making preliminary sketches for one of the canvases. On 7 July 1845, Stout "went to see Br. Campbell and engraver & Br Maudsley Portrait Painter, to have the likeness of myself & wife taken and engraved on stone, or in other words have a Stone cut of our likeness taken to be lithographed."¹⁹ Stout returned during the following week to finish the likenesses.²⁰ On 5 August 1845, the following ad appeared in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*:

WILL BE EXHIBITED

On Wednesday next, August 6th, at the Masonic Hall, the splendid painting representing the MAS-SACRE of JOSEPH & HYRUM SMITH, in Carthage Jail, June 27th 1844.

Doors open from 4 till 9 P.M.

Good music will be in attendance.

Admittance 12 1/2 cents.

N.B. Those having "the cash" are particularly invited to attend. PHILO DIBBLE Manager.²¹

On 31 August, Stout's wife, Louisa, "went to Maudsley's to have her likeness drawn." Three days later, Stout reported that he went "to Br Campbell's & had my likeness taken to be put in Scenery representing Joseph Smith addressing the Narvoo Legion on the 18th of June 1844. It is to be taken in military uniform."²² The work must have been moving rapidly on this second canvas. The artists were probably laying out preliminary drawings and visually arranging the figures and structures to be included in the picture. Evidently, Dibble

brought the design before the Legion officers for their approval. However, a few of them took issue with some elements of the design, including Hosea Stout. Stout's journal of 18 September provides an account of a meeting at the home of Sergeant Major Joseph W. Coolidge, where several officers gathered

to see about the painting of the scenery of Joseph the Prophet addressing the Nauvoo Legion on the 18th day of June 1844. The officers were dissatisfied with the plan for Br. Dibble was about to put in the likeness of officers who were not present & also some men who were to be put in conspicuous places on the scenery who were not officers and moreover betrayed the prophet & patriarch to death & also other men who had disgraced their calling as officers to all of these things I made objections and declared I would not be seen portrayed in a group of such men for it would be a disgrace to my children and roughly handled the characters of certain characters in our midst after which the matter was laid over for future consideration.²³

Two days later, the officers met again to discuss the concerns raised about the painting. Dibble, who was present at the meeting, "stated his reasons for the course he had taken," perhaps arguing for a more didactic, idealized image than a historically accurate depiction of the event. Stout then spoke "at length" on the position he had taken two days earlier and was followed by others who stated their views. In the end, "the thing was agreed to be left to the officers concerned to say what was right about it."²⁴

By mid November, concerns over the painting were apparently ironed out. On 14 November, the canvases were exhibited again in the Masonic Hall, where Stout was in attendance in company with Willard Richards and Jesse D. Hunter. "It was an entertaining time," Stout wrote, "and we staid till about 9 o'clock."²⁵ Stout continued his interest in the project, paying at least four more visits to Campbell's studio for portrait work.²⁶

It wasn't until the spring of 1848 that Dibble received official approval of his work. Wilford Woodruff, who apparently made efforts to support the project, recorded on 25 March that he "spent A part of the day in council with the Presidency & others upon the subject of the Paintings got up by Philo Dibble. The

work was finally sanctioned by the Presidency & Twelve who signed their names to it."²⁷

The panorama received a large audience during the April conference held in the Kanesville Tabernacle. Wilford Woodruff, who was present, gave a detailed account of what took place:

Philo Dibble exhibited his Paintings during the evening. At the close of the exhibition W. Woodruff Addressed the assembly upon the subject And said that his sermon was short. His text was in two divisions one on the right & the other on the left.

The right hand was A view of the marterdom of Joseph And Hiram Smith in Carthage Jail And the left hand was the canvass representing Joseph Smiths last address to the Nauvoo legion.

Before us is presented A synopsis or minature or commencement of one of the most interesting sceneries ever presented to man. I have visited the national gallery in London which is considered the best collections of painting in Europe And there is nothing in that gallery that will begin to compare with this work when Carried out. And as brother Dibble has been moved upon to set up these paintings I feel to bid him God speed & if he will get up the sceneries of this Church commencing at the beginning and go through it until now & onward And fit up a gallery in Zion It will be the continuation of the rise and Progress of the Church & kingdom of God in this last dispensation And will form one of the most interesting Seeneries that can be found in Zion.

It is true we are passing through these seenes personally but our children, future generations, & those who come to visit Zion will feel deeply inter-

ested in this matter And would present to the view at one glance All the seenes that this Church has passed through.²⁸

On 11 January 1849, a letter from Dibble to Orson



Philo Dibble
courtesy of Marilyn and Celia Smith

Pratt and Orson Spencer of the English Mission presidency was published in the *Millennial Star*. It provides a thorough description of the project and can be considered Dibble's charter to a Mormon panorama and museum. It read, in part:

try from where Prests. Young, Kimball, Richards & T.B. stood, last Spring."⁴⁶ Such excursions must have been a common occurrence. Although no other diaries mention Major taking sketches of scenery, many who traveled with Brigham Young's division in 1848 remembered enjoying the scenery and climbing prominent landmarks along the way. Louisa Pratt remembered her time at the Sweetwater having "many rambles on the steep hills where we could overlook the surrounding country."⁴⁷ It may have been during one of these excursions near the Sweetwater that Major took "a Sketch of a Kanyon West of our Camp."⁴⁸ Later, on 23 August, near Willow Creek, Bullock recorded that "on clearing out of this place & ascending the hill we had a fine view of Upper California, Old Mexico, New Mexico, Indian country, Missouri Territory & Oregon which W.W. Major took a drawing of."⁴⁹

In the spring of 1857, Dibble's panorama of Church history was exhibited in Spanish Fork, Utah. Scottish immigrant Henry Hamilton, a Spanish Fork settler, wrote that the artist "and others" gave descriptions of the scenes.⁵⁰ Charles Twelves of Springville remembered attending the panorama show at Cluff's Hall saying that Dibble "would come every winter and take all kinds of produce for tickets."⁵¹ These exhibitions became popular in the Springville area, and Dibble was seen frequently at meeting houses and social halls.⁵²

In addition to showing the busts, Dibble often held his panoramic lecture by candlelight. The candlelight panorama and pioneer relics were seen in Washington, Iron County, Utah, when John D. Lee recorded on 28 February 1860 that

This Eveing Bro. Dible Exhibited his Painting (in My Family Hall) containing the Martyrdom of the Prophet Jos. [Joseph] & his Bro. Hyrum, also the assemblage of the Nauvoo Legion & Jos. last address to them. The scene in connection with spirit was quite interesting. By request of Bro. Dible I assisted in giving a historica[l] account of the whole Tragedy.

The following evening, Dibble exhibited his panorama to another full house. Again, Lee was in assistance:

About 9 m. by Request of Bro. Dible, I accompanied him to Fort Clara, also Bro. Barney & Winslow Farr.

Reached the settlement about 3 P.M. dis. 12 ms. Obtained refreshments at Sister Crousby's. At candle light Exhibitd the scenery in Pres. J. Hamblin's Hall; the spirit of god rested upon Bro. Dible & myself to overflowing. A lasting impression was made on the assembled Multitude. At 10 the scenery closed. The young folks then had a Dance. Elder Dible's term was 50 cts. each over 12 years & 25 cts. under.⁵³

On 22 January 1864, Dibble took his traveling panorama to North Ogden where Henry Holmes reported witnessing "an exhibition in the evening by Bro. Dibble showing on canvass the early mobbings of the Saints."⁵⁴

Music was also a feature of Dibble's panorama and lecture. For some time, Dibble lived in Centerville and used the talents of the Wood String Orchestra for accompaniment. The small orchestra, consisting of four to five musicians, was organized in 1864 and was directed by Daniel Cotten Wood, who played trombone.⁵⁵

Transporting and setting up the large canvases must have been a strain on Dibble in his later years. By 1878, the scenes were scarcely mentioned in connection with his historic lecture and relics when the engagements were far distant. A few descriptions of Dibble's show suggest that he began using lantern slides instead of the canvases. According to Mary Finley of Springville, Dibble projected the images on a suspended backdrop, while he described the scene to spectators:

During the winter our fellow townsman, Philo Dibble, gave a number of illustrated lectures with his magic lantern. These were held in the White Meeting House which was dimly lighted with kerosene lamps. A heavy curtain was hung across the stage on which he showed slides of painted canvases depicting church history. Among these was an illustration of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Carthage jail. The most unique attraction was pictures of the trip of the Mormon Battalion to Mexico, among which was one showing the stampeding of buffalo when they attacked the long train of wagons. The spectators were held breathless as he showed the narrow escape of Levi Hancock as he was attacked by a bull but came off none the worse except for the loss of his cap which the buffalo clev-

