



RIVER panoramas  
often began at the  
Falls of St. Anthony

OIL BY HENRY LEWIS, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# *The STORY of* STOCKWELL'S PANORAMA

JOSEPH EARL ARRINGTON

THE PANORAMA movement in America reached its peak about the middle of the nineteenth century, when Samuel B. Stockwell and half a dozen other scenic artists painted their vast canvases of the Mississippi River. The successful exhibition of these spectacular paintings brought good financial returns to the artists and enjoyable entertainment to large numbers of people. Since these panoramas also spread geographic information and helped attract settlers to the West, they have historical as well as artistic interest.

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MR. ARRINGTON, *who resides in New York, became interested in the Mississippi panoramas while gathering material for a book on the Mormon city of Nauvoo, Illinois. He has published articles in the quarterlies of the Illinois and Missouri historical societies.*

Once well known as a scenic artist, Stockwell is today only a name. The outlines of his life story can be gleaned from old newspaper files and other early records. This native of New England was born in Boston in 1813. He came from a theatrical family. His father, a comic actor in the Bowery and Park theaters of New York, was popularly known as Master Stockwell, from the juvenile characters he played so well. His impersonation of Tom Thumb was a favorite act on any stage. The famous actress, Mrs. Giles L. Barrett, was the elder Stockwell's half sister. Her husband also was a popular actor of his time.<sup>1</sup> In such an environment, Samuel's

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<sup>1</sup> *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 9:102 (Boston, 1855); George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 1:373 (New York, 1927); *Morning News* (Savannah, Georgia), September 25, 1854.

childhood experiences and youthful training led naturally to his later professional interest in the arts. Eventually, he joined his family in their theatrical activities and made his own contributions.

Young Stockwell turned to the graphic arts and became a scenic painter for the Tremont Theater of old Boston, where many theatrical and other famed individuals, like Fanny Kemble and Charles Dickens, found friendly audiences. The Boston press described Stockwell as a "most gifted and accomplished artist" who "executed many fine scenic pieces in the palmy days of the 'old Tremont.'" Among the productions for which he provided scenery were "La Bayadere," an operatic ballet performed in 1837, "drop acts" of "Athens as it is" staged in 1840 and repeated in 1846, "Gustavus III," and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."<sup>2</sup>

The artist also did some scenic work in New York, and in 1841 he redecorated a theater at Charleston, South Carolina, and

painted scenery that was hailed for its originality and richness for the drama "Gustavus III." Two years later he was in Mobile and New Orleans, and there won the reputation of being "one of the cleverest scenic artists in the country." He was at the St. Charles Theater of New Orleans in 1846, painting new scenery for Mowatt's popular drama "Fashion."<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime Stockwell had married and settled with his family in St. Louis. There his first daughter was born in 1845 and named Missouri after the state. He doubtless decided to go to St. Louis because that city was fast becoming the Western center for the scenic arts, and especially for panorama painting. His decision may have been influenced also by the work of John Rowson Smith, a native Bostonian who had gone earlier to the interior and painted some scenes on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. On these he based a panorama which was first displayed in Boston in 1839.

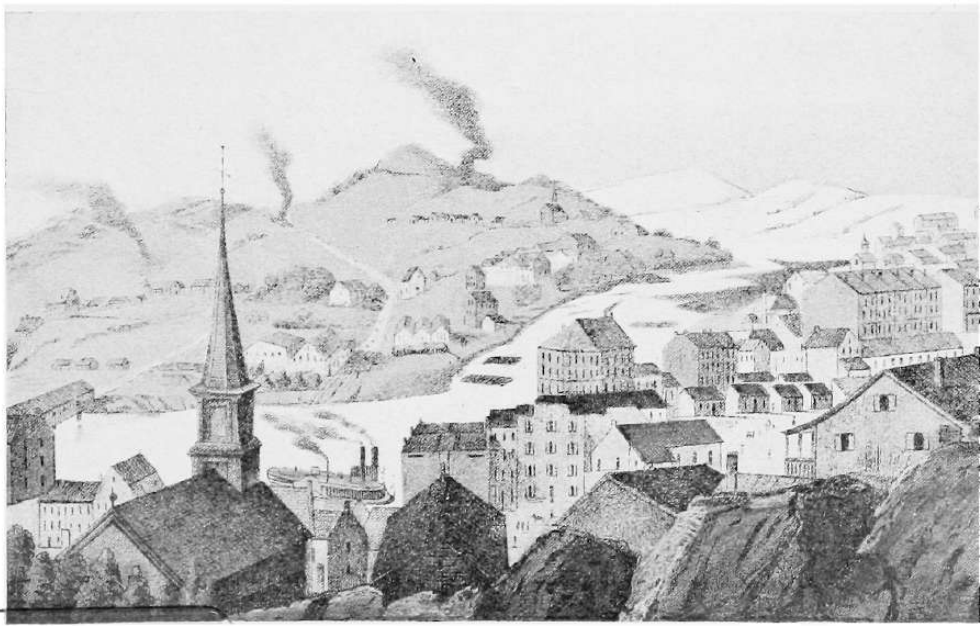
In St. Louis Stockwell met several artists from the East who were actively interested in painting the Father of Waters. Among them was Henry Lewis, a newcomer five years Stockwell's junior, who shared his Boston background. They soon developed a friendship, and agreed to work together on a river panorama. It was not long, however, before the interests of the two artists conflicted, and they dissolved their working agreements. Each man eventually painted and displayed his own version of a Mississippi panorama.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston), December 31, 1832; May 8, 1833; August 27, October 3, 1849; William W. Clapp, Jr., *A Record of the Boston Stage*, 352, 375, 387-389 (Boston, 1853); *New England Register*, 37:414 (1883). Stockwell's name appears in *Stimpson's Boston Directory* for 1833, 1835, 1839, 1842, 1847-48, and 1848-49.

<sup>3</sup> *Charleston Courier*, March 19, 22, 1841; *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), December 16, 1843; March 24, 1846.

<sup>4</sup> *Descriptive Pamphlet of Smith's Liviathan Panorama of the Mississippi River*, 4 (Philadelphia, 1848); *Courier*, May 12, 1849; Bertha L. Heilbron, *Making a Motion Picture in 1848*, 3, 7 (St. Paul, 1936).

GALENA, Illinois,  
as pictured  
by Henry Lewis



Before the end of 1848 Stockwell finished sketching the river scenes on which he based his Mississippi painting. They were produced as he floated downstream in a small boat. The completion of his project was announced in the St. Louis *Reveille* of October 29. It was "under many discouraging circumstances" that Stockwell "undertook this extraordinary work alone, and alone has he carried his labor to a most triumphant conclusion," reads the press report. "During its progress," the account continues, "many of the oldest captains and pilots, men who have lived upon the river for the best part of their lives, have visited the artist, and given high and enthusiastic opinions of the merit of his work."

The completed painting covered a canvas 625 yards long and 12 feet high. It about matched the size of the Mississippi panorama painted during the same period by Leon D. Pomarede, and it was somewhat longer than those of two other contemporaries, Smith and John Banvard. Stockwell's picture, however, was less than half the length of the huge one painted by Lewis.<sup>5</sup> The enormous rolls of canvas on which panoramas were painted were wound on wide cylinders partly for convenience in transporting them from place to place. By rolling a canvas from one cylinder onto another, a single panorama view at a time could be displayed before an audience, as its members enjoyed at least an effect of motion.

When it was ready for its public showing, Stockwell's painting was described by those who saw previews "as a correct and faithful illustration of the extensive and beautiful 'valley of the Mississippi,' to the very head of navigation, exhibiting a view of country in the 'Great West,' over 3500 miles in extent," or about fifteen degrees of latitude. Included were views in "ten States of the Union, that border on the 'Mighty Father of Waters,'" which was revealed in all its beauty and grandeur.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to natural scenery, Stockwell showed "every city, town, village and landing, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Falls

of St. Anthony." The artist depicted these cities so realistically that they were easily recognized by all who had seen them.

Commercial traffic on the river also was pictured by Stockwell. Along the meandering stream, reads one newspaper report, "innumerable steamboats, each one a correct likeness of the original, are represented as underway, wooding, at the landings, burning, snagged, in collision, &c, &c, and countless numbers of other kinds of water craft will be seen on the river," such as steamers, rafts, flatboats, and canoes. The wreck of the steamer "Clarksville" was pictured at one point. The various types of vessels held the interest of the viewers and thus relieved the monotony of the long, continuous river banks. To add further interest, according to another account, "The river is seen under various aspects, by moon light, at sunrise, sunset, during storms and in fogs, and with the most picturesque effects."<sup>7</sup>

Of special interest to many of his audiences was Stockwell's portrayal of the Indians living along the river's banks. In picturing the upper Mississippi Valley, especially, the artist worked into his panorama views of a "great number of Indian villages and encampments, with their 'lodges,' wigwams, &c, and groups of Indians in full costume, dancing, playing ball, fishing, and equipped for battle." He pictured some of the difficulties involved in moving the Winnebago from Iowa to a Minnesota reservation. A treaty of 1849 which was intended to open to settlement a half-breed tract on Lake Pepin gave timely interest to one newspaper's assurance that "Stockwell's panorama . . . gives an excellent view of [that] . . . country, which embraces some magnificent scenery."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Western Journal* (St. Louis), 3:70 (October, 1849); *Transcript*, November 6, 1848; January 3, 1849; *Emancipator Free Soil Press* (Boston), October 11, 1848.

<sup>6</sup> *Transcript*, August 21, September 24, 1849.

<sup>7</sup> *Reveille* (St. Louis), October 29, 1848; *Picayune*, December 7, 12, 1848; *Courier*, May 5, 1849.

<sup>8</sup> *Reveille*, October 29, 1848; *Minnesota Chronicle*, quoted in *Boston Transcript*, November 2, 1849.

The panorama was divided into four sections, according to the *Boston Transcript* of August 27, 1849. It reports that the first, covering upwards of a thousand miles of the lower river, "commences with a view of the Gulf of Mexico, and, after representing many objects of interest, passes by Gen. Jackson's battle ground to the City of New Orleans, then by Lafayette, Natchez, Gen. Taylor's plantation, Vicksburg, Memphis, to Cairo and Ohio City. The second section shows the west bank of the upper Mississippi, the mouth of the Missouri, a view at sunset of Rock Island, Davenport, and Rock Island Town, &c. The third and fourth sections contain views of Fort Snelling, Lake Pepin, the Falls of St. Anthony, Galena at sunset, the Mormon City of Nauvoo, and fifty other picturesque and memorable points" along the upper river.

At least four artists had completed panoramas of the Mississippi by 1848. Banvard, Samuel A. Hudson, and George W. Cassidy painted only the lower river, while Smith covered the scenery of both the upper and lower valley. Stockwell wanted to paint those parts of the river not fully exploited earlier and he hoped to overshadow the work of other artists, both in merit and extent. It probably was for these reasons that he crowded the lower river into one section and expanded the stream's more northern scenery into three. Some of his critics thought that "as a geographical painting, it would be very valuable, if the artist had lingered a little longer on the route from New Orleans to the mouth of the Ohio River."<sup>9</sup>

Most observers, however, called attention to Stockwell's fine "portraiture of the upper river." One declared he had "rarely seen anything more beautiful and interesting than it

is from the mouth of the Ohio to the Falls of St. Anthony." This pictorial record embraced "representations of the great valley of the upper Mississippi, with the mineral regions, bluffs, and military stations, of the new Territory of Minnesota." Some viewers believed they could learn more about "the region of the northern Mississippi, its picturesque peculiarities, and the progress of civilization on the borders of the river, from Mr. Stockwell's picture than from a close study of whole volumes of travel and geographical description."<sup>10</sup>

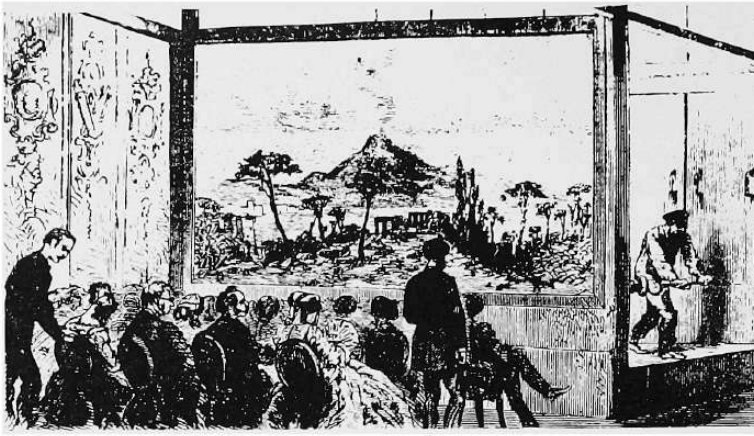
STOCKWELL'S picture was given its first public exhibition in St. Louis on October 28, 1848, opening in the spacious and comfortable saloon of the Planter's House. On the next day Stockwell announced in the *Reveille* "that his great painting of the Mississippi River, is at length completed, and, at the desire of numerous citizens of St. Louis, will be exhibited for a short time only, previous to his [*the artist's*] departure for Europe." J. M. Weston was chosen to "give historical and geographical explanations of the numerous places, as the picture passed before the audience." The panorama was to "commence moving at 7 o'clock each evening," with special performances in the afternoon. The admission charges were set at fifty cents for adults and half that sum for children.

The panorama was well received by the people of St. Louis, for the hall was crowded daily. Women and children filled the reserved seats at the front of the hall, while the men occupied the rear. "A most gratified and gratifying assemblage of spectators" from all over the city watched the picture as it moved. "The painting at every point was hailed with warm applause, by river men — crowds of whom gathered to test the eye, the skill and perseverance of the artist." Some local editors and citizens expressed the belief that "the merits of this brilliant, and really original effort of art" might well mark "an era in the fortunes of one of the best artists, and most amiable men" they had known. "As to

<sup>9</sup> *Transcript*, October 27, 1849; *Press and Post* (Boston), August 24, 1849; *Description of Banvard's Panorama of the Mississippi River* (Boston, 1847); *Hudson's Great National Painting of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers* (New Haven, 1848); George W. Cassidy, *Cyclorama des Mississippi und Ohioflusses* (Leipzig, 1850).

<sup>10</sup> *Picayune*, February 16, 1849; *Transcript*, August 27, October 3, 1849.





ONE of the  
earliest panoramas  
was shown by  
Daguerre about 1822

FROM G. TISSANDIER, *LA PHOTOGRAPHIE*, P. 21

the painting itself," they discovered that it was "not only elaborate in design, but faithfully carried out in execution, and will give a striking and correct view of the entire river from one end to the other." Some viewers seemed to believe that in Stockwell's panorama they were seeing "the greatest painting in the world."

But despite this enthusiastic reception, the panorama remained on display in the inland metropolis for only two weeks. The closing date was announced for November 11. Stockwell wanted to take his scenic painting abroad at an early date. He felt sure that Europe would "soon endorse the judgment of our 'far west town of St. Louis.'" He expected his work to be approved by the elite of the Old World, and patronized by the masses.

Instead of going abroad, however, Stockwell took his painting down river to New Orleans for its second showing. There, after opening in the spacious Panorama Hall of the Commercial Exchange Building on Charles Street, it ran for two months, continuing the same management used in St. Louis with the usual schedule of performances. It required several hours to unwind the rolls of painted canvas, while Weston entertained the audience with his supplementary descriptions of the many scenes. "Comfortably seated in a cane bottomed chair," the viewer enjoyed a vicarious journey "up the Mississippi River,

from the Balise to the Falls of St. Anthony" without incurring the expenses and risking the dangers of the actual trip. The exhibition hall was darkened and "the painting lighted with gas, as at night," thus producing dramatic pictorial effects.<sup>11</sup>

Advertisements in the New Orleans press combined with favorable weather to attract large audiences for the picture, with women often outnumbering men. For what the *Picayune* described as "one of the most attractive exhibitions in the city," Panorama Hall was "well filled every evening." After two months of daily performances, the public was still "anxious to view Mr. Stockwell's admirable panorama," and it was witnessed by "full and fashionable audiences nightly" until the closing date of the attraction in February.<sup>12</sup>

While in New Orleans the artist "was actively at work with his brush, improving many points" in his vast picture. It was evident that his efforts were appreciated. On one occasion, for example, when the burning of the steamer "Clarksville" was on view, a survivor of the disaster "rose quite unexpectedly and testified to the accuracy of the scene."<sup>13</sup> It was unfortunate that it became

<sup>11</sup> *Picayune*, December 7, 13, 16, 21, 1848.

<sup>12</sup> *Picayune*, December 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 23, 26, 27, 28, 1848; January 3, 4, 12, 18, 24, 26, February 5, 6, 8, 1849.

<sup>13</sup> *Picayune*, December 10, 12, 24, 1848; January 2, 10, 26, 28, February 16, 1849.

necessary to abruptly close the exhibition in the delta city in mid-February as the result of an epidemic of cholera, which "broke out in New Orleans in the very height of Stockwell's success there, and induced him with thousands of others to leave the city." There was much regret for the loss of the picture by those who wanted "to have so magnificent a work of art remain permanently" so that every man, woman, and child in the city could see it.<sup>14</sup>

From New Orleans, Stockwell took his panorama to Mobile, Alabama, where it was well received, according to the *Press Register*. By way of Macon and Savannah, Georgia, he next went to Charleston, South Carolina. That city welcomed the "talented, amiable and industrious young artist," who had decorated a local playhouse eight years earlier. Stockwell's panorama was shown in Hibernian Hall for three weeks, drawing large and enthusiastic audiences. They were particularly impressed with Weston's explanatory lectures because he had become "acquainted with the depicted scenes by

<sup>14</sup> *Transcript*, November 1, 1849; *Picayune*, January 29, 1849.

<sup>15</sup> *Courier*, May 5, 12, 1849; Anna W. Rutledge, "Artists in the Life of Charleston," in *American Philosophical Society, Transactions*, 39:220 (Philadelphia, 1949); *Mobile Press Register*, February 21–March 7, 1849; *Baltimore Sun*, June 14–July 14, 1849.

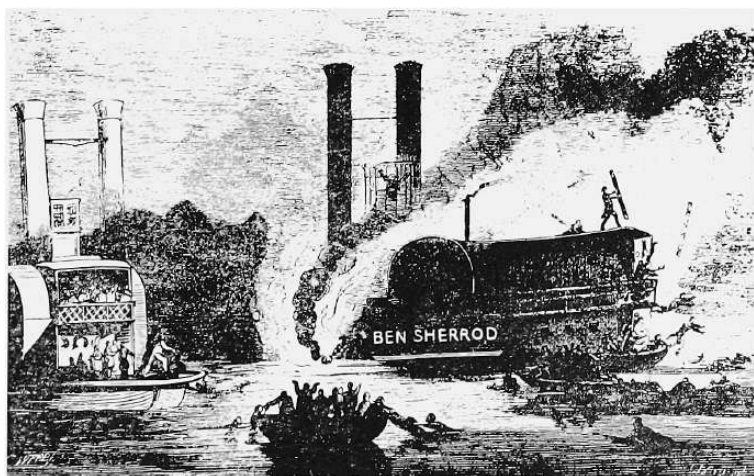
<sup>16</sup> *Transcript*, October 3, December 10, 1849.

actual observation, having spent several months in visiting the most prominent places noted on the canvas." The picture left Charleston on May 26 to be taken North, and it was again said that it would be "shipped to Europe for exhibition."<sup>15</sup> A run of several weeks in Baltimore followed. An epidemic changed plans for a showing in New York City.

THE PAINTING was next advertised on August 21, 1849, in the *Boston Transcript*, which announced that it would appear in Armory Hall on the twenty-seventh. The editor expressed his conviction that the great painting "should be liberally patronized by Bostonians" because "it is a work of superior merit." Since "the artist is a Boston boy," the editor commented, "this crowning work of his skill . . . should meet here with a liberal reward."<sup>16</sup> A long and profitable run in Stockwell's home town followed. The panorama remained there until December 12, bringing large financial returns to the artist.

In Boston, the picture began moving at eight each evening and at three on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. The admission price was reduced to twenty-five cents for adults, with liberal arrangements for ladies, families, school children, and groups or parties. Weston still presented his interesting "historical, geographical, geological and sta-

A steamboat afire  
as pictured in  
Smith's panorama



tistical explanations of the picture, as it passed before the audience.”<sup>17</sup>

When Stockwell’s panorama opened in August, it promptly attracted large audiences, and during September the hall was well filled not only by local people, but by crowds of children from the surrounding towns. Several thousand people saw the picture each week in October, and it was expected “to attract large crowds for a long time.” By the end of November, some two weeks before the closing date, “over 120 successive exhibitions” had been given in Boston before “the most fashionable and delighted audiences.” The people of New England “continued to crowd the hall each day and night” until the picture closed in December.<sup>18</sup>

Stockwell’s painting was far more successful than other panoramas showing in Boston at the same time. These included at least two rival works – William Burr’s “Panorama of the St. Lawrence and Niagara Falls” and a painting depicting John Fremont’s “Overland Journey to California.” Local editors thought the success of Stockwell’s panorama might well “equal that of Banvard’s,” which had been popular throughout New England. “As a work of art, it is decidedly superior,” the editors believed.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that Stockwell made as much as ten or fifteen thousand dollars while in Boston.

From Stockwell’s picture, large numbers of people gained a new impression of the vastness of their country and the beauty of its western scenery. The picture’s interest for the Emigrant, the Speculator, the Tourist, &c,” was constantly stressed, as was the fact that it would appeal to all travelers “who have navigated the valley of the Mississippi” because it would carry them back, “in imagination, to the sublime scenery” there.<sup>20</sup> For all who had lived only in the East, the painting was recommended as a Western travelogue more valuable than whole volumes of literature. New Englanders were fascinated by it.

After it closed in Boston, no definite information about Stockwell’s panorama of

the Mississippi is available. The *Transcript* of December 11 announced that it would “be taken immediately to Paris,” but no evidence that the journey actually was made has been found.

There is a possibility that the painting passed into other hands after showing in Boston. On July 11, 1850, the *New York Herald* carried a notice signed by “C.C.P.” offering for sale “his one-half interest in a panorama of the Mississippi River, as he is unable to accompany it to Europe. This work,” the advertiser explained, “has been on successful exhibition for some months in this country, and will prove a good investment to a capitalist who would wish to visit all the principal cities in Europe.” It is not certain, however, that the notice referred to the Stockwell painting.

The artist lived only a few years after his panorama closed in Boston. In 1852 and 1853 he was back in St. Louis painting scenery for the theater there. Stockwell was next reported in Savannah, Georgia, where he contracted yellow fever and died on September 23, 1854. He was buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery in that city.<sup>21</sup>

No examples of Stockwell’s work have been found and reported. There is still a possibility that some of his sketches or paintings of frontier scenes as well as original records relating to his career, may be discovered, making it possible to complete the story of this little-known artist of the frontier West.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Transcript*, August 21, 1849.

<sup>18</sup> *Transcript*, August 28, September 18, 24, October 2, 23, 27, November 26, 1849.

<sup>19</sup> *Transcript*, September 14, 21, October 26, 1849.

<sup>20</sup> *Transcript*, August 21, September 24, October 27, November 14, 1849.

<sup>21</sup> *Morning News*, September 25, 1854; *New England Register*, 9:102 (1855); *Missouri Republican*, September 20, 1852; June 12, 1853.

<sup>22</sup> Weston’s lectures on the panorama might well have been published and may still come to light. They are mentioned in such papers as the *Reveille* for November 5, 1848, the *Picayune* for January 10, 1849, and the *Transcript* for August 21, 1849. It is known that Stockwell’s daughter Missouri married Dudley R. Childs of Boston, who died in California in 1883. They had two children.



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