

The St. Louis Museum of the 1850's and the Two Egyptian Mummies and Papyri

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The recent return of eleven Egyptian papyrus fragments to the Mormon Church received international news coverage. Since that time, interest has risen over the search of additional information about the once "lost" relics. The Church at Kirtland in 1835 purchased the collection which consisted of four mummies and two papyri rolls and additional fragments. They procured them from Michael H. Chandler who was the supposed nephew and heir to the deceased Antonio Lebolo. Mr. Lebolo was employed during 1818 to 1823 by the French Consul General to gather all types of Egyptian relics for museums and private collectors. While gathering these antiquities, he kept some for himself. At his sudden death, they were sent to the United States where Mr. Chandler displayed them for a period of time in the New York-Pennsylvania area before taking them to Joseph Smith for his opinion and interpretation.

In a startling claim the Prophet said the papyri contained writings of Abraham and Joseph. Interest was aroused to the point that the Church bought the collection. Whether more pressing Church matters or whatever prevented the Prophet from spending a lot of time on the documents, only a scant five chapters of the "Book of Abraham" were published before his untimely death ended his translating work.

When the Church left Nauvoo, Illinois, on its westward trek to the Salt Lake valley, many who were unable to leave

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remained behind. The Prophet's elderly mother, Lucy Mack Smith, was one of those, along with his widow, Emma. The mummies and papyri had been entrusted to Lucy's care, and there they securely remained until her death in 1856.

Through lack of communication, the church was unaware that the relics had been sold by members of the Smith family to Mr. A. Combs. Later information as to the whereabouts of the collection was muddled and incomplete, giving rise to speculation that the entire collection had been destroyed in the tragic Chicago fire of 1871.

The first real information on what had happened to some of the mummies and papyri was gathered by James R. Clark and published in 1955 in his book, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price*. Working backwards from the Chicago Museum, he found proof that there had been but two mummies and possibly some fragments of papyri in that museum, and that they had originally been in the St. Louis Museum.

The recent recovery of some papyri of the original collection found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has inspired further research into the history of the whereabouts of the total collection. New light has been cast on the time the relics rested in the St. Louis Museum. With this new information perhaps some lead as to the remaining lost papyri and mummies may surface.

In 1848, Mrs. Gidding and her son leased their property on Walnut Street, St. Louis, for a period of twenty years to Edward Wyman, a prominent educator, who constructed an impressive four-story hall on the site at a cost of \$28,000.¹ The two top stories originally accommodated his Classical High School, while the second story contained a concert hall, leaving the first floor partitioned into shops.² Jenny Lind, the famous singer, performed in the hall in 1851 giving Wyman's Hall a tremendous boost. Miss Lind's agent was P. T. Barnum, who also arranged an exhibition of General Tom Thumb, the famous midget.³

Catching "show fever" from Barnum, Wyman gave up teaching in 1853 to open a museum. Wyman had purchased the

¹Letter of Dr. Wm. G. Swekosky, Aug. 25, 1941, outlining the History of Wyman's Hall. Original is in the Missouri Historical Society.

²Taylor and Crooks, *Sketch Book of St. Louis*, George Knapp & Co., 1858, p. 46.

³Swekosky, *op. cit.*

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STRANGER— Have you visited the **SANT LOUIS MUSEUM?**

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A copy of the 1856 handbill of the St. Louis Museum from the Missouri Historical Society files.

bulk of his collection in 1851,⁴ which consisted of one of the finest collections of ornithology in the country. Unable to cope with the entire project, he entrusted managing the museum to a taxidermist of great ability, Mr. John P. Bates.⁵ Taking the additional responsibility, Mr. Bates added to the already large collection such items as local species and also some large accessions obtained during his trip to Europe.⁶ Under his direction the museum enlarged its collection with the acquisition of the great Zeuglodon (pre-historic skeleton 96 feet long), oil paintings, and the superb statues of Venus and Mercury.⁷

The museum was four years old when it advertized in the local paper the treasured collection of Egyptian mummies and papyri once belonging to the Mormon Church. In the month of August, 1856, after running months of ads, the museum changed the continuous ad to include the recent purchase of the Egyptian collection. Perhaps indicating the new owner's evaluation of the collection's importance, it was listed as third in list of five general collections. The daily listing read:

THIRD - TWO MUMMIES - from the catacombs of Egypt, which have been unrolled presenting a full view of the RECORD enclosed, and of the bodies which are in a remarkable state of preservation.⁸

A brief observation by the *Missouri Democrat* noted the recent procurement in these words:

Lastly, we observe a new attraction, consisting of a pair of MUMMIES from the catacombs of Egypt, which are a great novelty in these parts, and should be seen by all.⁹

The museum's first catalogue was printed in July 1856, a copy of which is preserved presently in the St. Louis Public Library. Its publication was promised in a news article in the *Missouri Democrat*:

Catalogues containing a full list of the beautiful collection of birds, reptiles, minerals curiosity &c., now on exhibition at the St. Louis Museum, recently opened to the people

⁴"Preface" to *Catalogue of Collections at St. Louis Museum 1856*. Copy is in St. Louis Public Library.

⁵Walter Barlow Stevens, *St. Louis, The Fourth City, 1764-1909*, Vol. 1, p. 930.

⁶Catalogue, *op. cit.*

⁷Sketches, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁸*Daily Missouri Democrat*, St. Louis, Aug. 14, 1856, p. 3; also *The Saint Louis Daily Evening News*, Aug. 27, 1856, p. 3.

⁹*Ibid.*

by the munificence and public spirit of Mr. Edward Wyman, will be ready in a few days for delivery to the public. The catalogue we understand will be full and complete, and add much to the gratification of an inspection of the several articles by visitors. In the meanwhile Mr. Bates, the manager, asks the indulgence of the public, and will give as usual such information as may be desired.¹⁰

Since no mention is made of the mummies in this first "complete" catalogue but was included in the daily ads in the local papers, it is safe to assume that the museum bought the collection in late July or early August 1856, just two months after Mr. A. Combs purchased them from the Smith family. Two subsequent catalogues dated 1856 and 1859 are preserved in the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, and these both mention the mummies and papyri, and were given great attention by Dr. James R. Clark in his study.¹¹

The "Introduction" to the 1859 catalogue signed by J. P. Bates states that the proprietor ". . . now finds his investment in the enterprise approaches the large sum of *fifty thousand dollars*." Every attempt was made to improve the museum. However, at 25 cents admission it must not have been the most successful venture. Before the mummies were purchased in August, 1856, it is felt that "times got bad and on March 8, 1856, he put a mortgage on the contents of the Wyman's Museum for \$10,000.00."¹² The mortgage holder was a newspaper publisher, George Knapp. In 1857, a professor at the St. Louis Medical College and leader in the Academy of Science, Dr. Charles A. Pope, wrote in a personal letter to Dr. J. F. Snyder that, "Nothing but want of funds prevents the purchase of Wyman's collection, which I hope yet to see the property of the Academy. He asks \$10,000 for it."¹³ The remainder of the letter mentions activities of their own taxidermist, which supports the theory that only part of the museum collection was offered for sale, mainly the display of beasts, birds, and reptiles.

The sale of the collection perhaps didn't become a pressing necessity because in that same year Wyman borrowed \$20,000 against the hall from Sanford B. Kellog and Robert Renick.

¹⁰*Daily Missouri Democrat, St. Louis, July 18, 1856.*

¹¹James R. Clark, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price*.

¹²Swekosky, *op. cit.*

¹³Charles A. Pope letter to Dr. J. F. Snyder, May 30, 1857. Original is in the Archives of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis.

But foreclosure soon forced its sale to the highest bidder on July 15, 1858, to a Mr. Henry Whitmore for \$12,000.¹⁴ When the building passed out of Wyman's hands, the concert room became known as William Koser's Metropolitan Theater.¹⁵

The museum, although heavily mortgaged, continued in the building still under the direction of John P. Bates. For some reason (yet unknown to this writer), Silas M. Brooks was listed as the manager for the museum in late 1858 or early 1859.¹⁶ Notwithstanding, Bates remained in the museum as a taxidermist,¹⁷ and then in a few months resumed the managing of the museum until its removal to Chicago in 1863.

On June 1, 1863, Henry Whitmore sold Wyman's Hall to General Thomas Lawson Price for a low price of \$1,400. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons for relocating the museum's collection. A notice was placed in the various local newspapers of the impending closing of the museum.¹⁸ One announcement read, "The St. Louis Museum will positively close on Saturday, the 11th inst. and it is being removed to CHICAGO. J. P. Bates, Manager."¹⁹ At the same time a Chicago paper announced:

We make the announcement with pleasure that, through the liberality of two of our worthy and public spirited citizens, the St. Louis Museum has been purchased, and will soon be removed to, and permanently located in this city. This Museum is much the largest in the West, and in several of its features the choicest in the United States.²⁰

August 17, 1863, that museum opened on Randolph Street with John O'Mellen as general manager, and J. P. Bates, curator.²¹ In January, 1864, the museum was sold to Colonel John H. Wood,²² and named Wood's Museum. It is assumed that it was at this time that Mr. Bates returned to St. Louis to live.²³ It has long been believed by most people that the Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed this museum with its entire collection, thus

¹⁴Swekosky, *op. cit.*

¹⁵*St. Louis Post Dispatch*, August 23, 1941.

¹⁶Kennedy's *St. Louis City Directory*, 1859, pp. 73, 405.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁸*The Missouri Republican*, St. Louis, July 3, 1863.

¹⁹*Daily Missouri Democrat*, St. Louis, July 9, 1863.

²⁰*Chicago Tribune*, July 6, 1863.

²¹A. T. Andreas, *History of Chicago*, Vol. II, p. 607.

²²Felix Mendelsoln, *Chicago and Its Makers*, 1929, p. 147.

²³J. P. Bates is listed in the *St. Louis City Directories* 1857 to 1880 except 1864, which was probably compiled during the months he was in Chicago.

putting an end to nearly half of the Egyptian relics once owned by the Mormons.

While on a recent trip to St. Louis, I searched the public and private libraries in the city and also examined the private papers of Professor Gustav Seyffarth, a noted Egyptologist of his day who taught at the Concordia College. He wrote that

The Museum contains . . . Egyptian mummies, statuettes,²⁴ papyrus scroll. . . . Visitors will find also some large fragments of the Egyptian papyrus scrolls, with hieratic (priestly) inscriptions, and drawings representing judgment of the dead, many Egyptian gods and sacred animals with certain chapters from the old Egyptian sacred books.²⁵

At one of Professor Seyffarth's lectures held in the St. Louis Merchantile Library, "He presented to the inspection of the audience some fragments of papyrus, with numerous writings and figures executed with indestructible ink, which were taken from a sarcophagus of an Egyptian mummy, and are now the property of our fellow citizen, Hon. Edward Bates."²⁶ According to Professor Seyffarth the papyrus fragment was part of "an invocation to the Deity Osirus" with drawings of the attendant spirits presenting the dead person by the name of "Horus" to be judged.²⁷

He also examined the two mummies reposed in the museum and stated, "The body of one is that of a female, about forty—the other, that of a boy about fourteen."²⁸ A Dr. J. R. Riggs had examined all four mummies when they were still together and had designated them as being "a King, a Queen, a Princess,

²⁴Although "statuettes" are mentioned here by the observer, it does not mean that they were a part of the once LDS collection. "Statuettes" are nowhere mentioned in the *Documentary History of the Church*. News articles on the museum before its acquisition of the mummies mention "Egyptian Antiquities" in *The Sunday Republican*, St. Louis, July 13, 1856, and also "Relics from Egypt, Greece, Rome . . ." *The Missouri Republican*, St. Louis, Aug. 8, 1856.

²⁵*Daily Missouri Democrat*, St. Louis, Sept. 10, 1856, copied from the *Pilot*, St. Louis, Sept. 8, 1856.

²⁶*The Evening News*, St. Louis, Nov. 29, 1856. Note: The "Hon. Edward Bates" was a prominent political figure in St. Louis and was the U.S. Attorney General in Lincoln's first administration. It is likely that in the reporting of Seyffarth's lecture the "Hon. Edward Bates" was confused with J. P. Bates, manager of the St. Louis Museum.

²⁷Catalogue, 1859, *op. cit.*, p. 45. It is interesting to note that some have noted the name of "HOR" on three of the papyrus fragments recently given to the Church. This name corresponds with Seyffarth's "HORUS" and proves which fragments were sold to the St. Louis Museum. Possibly the fragment containing Facsimile No. 3 or other hieratic writings from the same roll were what Seyffarth was describing.

²⁸Catalogue of the St. Louis Museum, 1859, p. 45.



A *St. Louis Dispatch* file photo of Wyman's Hall prior to its destruction in 1941.

and a slave.”²⁹ Now, if it can be assumed that the two mummies sold to the St. Louis Museum and later possibly burned in the Chicago fire were the “Queen” and the “slave,” that would narrow any further searches to the “King” and the “Princess.” Systematic inquiries of public museums and most private collections have revealed no further evidence as to the whereabouts of any of the mummies. So far, most of the startling information about the collection has come more by accident than by intent, which leaves one the feeling that if the Lord be willing we shall discover more.

²⁹*The Academic Review* (B.Y. Academy), I, No. 6 (March 1885) p. 46.