

**FOR A FEW YEARS IN THE MID-1800S**, a peculiar but popular form of entertainment in the United States and Europe was something known as the Mississippi River panorama. At the time, folks everywhere were fascinated by the American West and the Mississippi River. Capitalizing on this fascination, several competing, skilled artists-showmen painted long scrolls of scenes along the Mississippi. These panoramas were carried by wagon and riverboat from city to city, where for a modest admission the local citizenry could enjoy the show. The scrolls were unrolled and displayed with appropriate commentary (and sometimes musical accompaniment as well), creating the illusion of being on a steamboat voyage on the river. Audiences in local opera houses and auditoriums were enthralled.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably the best of these exhibitors—and certainly the one who painted the largest panorama—was English-born Henry Lewis who, with the help of assistants, created a 12-foot-high painting some 1,250 yards long. (The exact length of this and other panoramas is not known, as none have survived.) Lewis's work was divided into two parts—the upper and lower

# Artist Henry Lewis

## THE CASE OF THE FALSIFIED RÉSUMÉ

JOHN GRAHAM COOK

Mississippi—thus requiring admission to two performances to view the entire length of the river.<sup>2</sup>

When he began his panorama project, Lewis was a promising young artist in St. Louis. In 1846 and 1847 he had made a number of preliminary sketches along the river. Then, in the summer of 1848, he traveled by steamboat to Minneapolis, where he and his associates built a raftlike vessel atop two 50-foot canoes, which he dubbed the *Menehaha*. In July and August Lewis and his small company floated down the river from the Falls of St. Anthony to St. Louis, sketching rural scenery and towns along the way. (An associate did sketches of the lower river.) Shortly thereafter, Lewis repaired to Cincinnati where he and his crew painted the panoramas and began exhibitions in the spring of 1849. Lewis continued these displays in the U.S. and Canada until late 1851, when he took the panoramas to Europe. His displays there continued until 1853 or 1854 when Lewis settled in Düsseldorf, Prussia (Germany), the seat of a prominent international art colony. There he

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married Englishwoman Maria Jones in 1859 and remained until his death in 1904, returning to the U.S. for a brief visit only once in 1881.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis was an artist of notable skill, and his work is enjoyed today in numerous private collections as well as in museums and historical societies, particularly in midwestern cities like St. Paul, Davenport, and St. Louis. The Minnesota Historical Society owns some 50 Lewis works, including oil paintings and color lithographs made from his paintings. His 1846 oil of the city of St. Louis, now in the St. Louis Art Museum, was featured in a 1996 exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., that commemorated the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the Smithsonian Insti-

tution. A small section of the Mark Twain Museum in Hannibal, Missouri, devoted to Lewis's sketches of that town, comments on what is surely the most significant aspect of his work today: his sketches, lithographs, and paintings of the American Midwest provide, in many cases, the only surviving visual evidence of how these places looked before 1850.

**OVER THE YEARS**, Henry Lewis has been the subject of a number of articles in midwestern historical journals. And in 1967 the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) published a beautiful, limited-edition, English-language version of Lewis's *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*, originally published in German as *Das Illustrirte*

**Henry Lewis (far left) and St. Louis, 1840s**, a lithograph based on the artist's painting of his home when he began planning his Mississippi River panorama







*Mississippi* in 1854–57. In the 1967 volume's introduction, editor Bertha L. Heilbron, former editor of *Minnesota History* and a research fellow with the MHS, presented a thorough biography of Lewis. Like others before and since, she reported that Lewis had emigrated to the U.S. from Shropshire, England, in 1829.<sup>4</sup> She did this for good reason: Lewis said so.

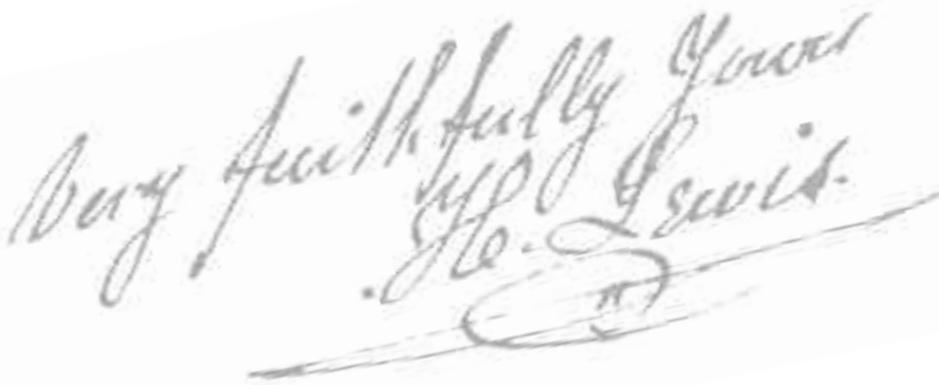
In 1902 Lewis wrote from Düsseldorf to Warren Upham, secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society. Wanting to correct an account Upham had published in which “many of the Statements . . . are not quite accurate,” Lewis stated: “1st I am not a German but an American Citizen. My father *was* an Englishman and emigrated to the States in 1829 when I was some 10 years of Age. He at once took the necessary papers and became a Citizen of the U. States. I being at the time under age shar’d the benefit also and became a Citizen.”<sup>5</sup>

But did Lewis and his family move to the United States in 1829? And did the artist become a citizen by virtue of his father’s citizenship—or by any manner? The answer to both these questions is a resounding “NO.” Lewis was born in 1819, and his age in 1829 is the only accurate statement in his story.

The facts are that Lewis’s youngest half-brother (Henry’s mother had died and his father remarried), John Lewis, was born in England in June 1831. John, later an elected clerk of the circuit court in St. Louis for almost 50 years and thus well accustomed to dealing carefully with facts, reported this birth date and an immigration year of 1834 to the U.S. census taker in 1900.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, we know that Henry’s father, Thomas, was in Shropshire in April 1831 and July 1832, where he signed his son George’s three-year apprentice agreement. Furthermore, notes made from a family Bible indicate that the Lewises immigrated to Boston in 1833. Once in Boston, Henry himself began an apprentice program, and on February 3, 1836, he wrote to his brothers in St. Louis that he would be apprenticed “2 years come the twelfth,” telling us that his Boston apprenticeship began in February 1834.<sup>7</sup> We can conclude from these facts that the family left

*Artist’s Encampment*, a lithograph from *Lewis’s History of the Mississippi Illustrated*, showing the artist, his crew, and the craft that carried them on their 1848 voyage



Lewis's signature from a March 1902 letter, one in a series between the aging artist and Warren Upham, secretary and librarian at the Minnesota Historical Society

England not in 1829 as Henry told Upham for the official record, but in late 1833 or very early 1834.

The law at that time required a five-year residency before one could be naturalized. We know from family accounts, all of which seem to agree, that Thomas Lewis died in 1839. If, as seems assured, he had arrived in the U.S. in late 1833 or early 1834, he would have had precious little time to become a citizen before his death. Moreover, neither the National Archives' New England records nor a variety of indexes and material available for that period in St. Louis show any trace of Thomas Lewis filing an initial application of intent, much less becoming a citizen. We conclude that Henry Lewis invented the 1829 immigration date to make the story of his father's citizenship sound believable.

Moreover, we know that the youngest Lewis child, John, was naturalized in St. Louis on July 30, 1852, only a few weeks after his twenty-first birthday.<sup>8</sup> If his father had been naturalized as a U.S. citizen, John, as a minor, would already have been a citizen, and his naturalization would have been unnecessary.

**SO WHY DID HENRY LEWIS** make up the story that his family immigrated to the U.S. in 1829 and that his father "at once took the necessary papers and became a Citizen of the U. States?" The likely motivation was economic necessity. Lewis went to Europe initially to show his panorama, but the income generated from this performance, from the very beginning in the U.S. in 1849, was marginal, and by 1853 he was struggling to make a living as an artist in Düsseldorf. It was also his intent to sell his panorama, a matter with which he

labored for a number of years until finally selling it to a Dutch East Indian planter named Hermens in 1857. After a long saga of unfulfilled promises, Lewis got less than half of the agreed-upon price, and Hermens eventually shipped the panorama off to the Far East. And Lewis's many letters to his brother George in the U.S. tell a sad story of continued disappointment in the sale of his paintings. In most years his income from art sales was little or nothing. There was also the matter of *Das Illustrirte Mississippithal*. In the end, the book



Probably Maria Jones Lewis, from an unidentified, undated photograph in which she is paired with Henry Lewis

was not very well done by publisher Arnz and Company of Düsseldorf. What's more, before it was fully printed and distributed, the company failed, so Lewis got only a fraction of his expected remuneration.<sup>9</sup>

Things were so bad for Lewis that he seriously considered returning to the U.S., which he did not really want to do. The advent of the Civil War put those plans on hold. Henry and Maria were able to hang on financially, generating a meager income by operating a boardinghouse, exhibiting artwork for others, and now and then selling a painting. Then they had a wonderful stroke of good fortune: he was hired by the U.S. Department of State, first working as a consular agent at Düsseldorf from June 1, 1867, to July 9, 1881, and from the latter date to February 2, 1884, as vice and deputy commercial agent. By this time, when he was almost age 65, Lewis's finances were much improved, and he lived out his remaining 20 years in Düsseldorf comfortably, continuing to paint until his death.<sup>10</sup>

To secure the State Department work, Lewis told his potential employers that he was a U.S. citizen—falsified his résumé, as it were. Until the early 1900s, citizenship was granted by a hodgepodge of federal, state, and county courts, and there was virtually no way for his employers to verify his father's naturalization, even if they had wanted to. Lewis's uncle William, for example, was granted citizenship in 1812 in Portland, Maine, by the Court of Common Pleas, and his half-

brother John's citizenship was granted in St. Louis by the County Court of Criminal Corrections!

Researching Lewis's life for her introduction to *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*, Heilbron may have suspected that something was amiss. Investigating the artist's background, she learned from Robert H. Bahmer, deputy archivist of the United States, that "In recommending the appointment of Henry Lewis as Consular Agent at Düsseldorf, W. H. Vesey, the Consul at Aix-la-Chapelle, in his dispatch of May 13, 1867, indicated that Mr. Lewis was an American citizen, 'residing permanently with his Family at Düsseldorf.'" Bahmer also quoted William D. Wamer, commercial agent at Düsseldorf, writing in 1881 to request Lewis's appointment as vice and deputy commercial agent: "Mr. Lewis was born in England, is an American Citizen." Finally (and interestingly), Bahmer wrote that Lewis himself signed an 1885 request for an appointment that he did not get, "A Citizen of St. Louis, Mo."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps he was less than comfortable continuing his falsehood, so he chose this ambiguous "citizenship."

Lewis's work with the State Department in Düsseldorf served his country well. And his early Mississippi River valley art endures. So we can readily forgive his modest fabrication, driven purely by economic necessity. But as a genealogist who has struggled with dates and facts that could not be reconciled, this writer wishes to set straight the record for posterity. □

## NOTES

1. The most complete account of these panoramas and their painters is John Francis McDermott, *The Lost Panoramas of the Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

2. McDermott, *Lost Panoramas*, 167.

3. McDermott, *Lost Panoramas*, 85–94, 98–144; Henry Lewis, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*, ed. Bertha L. Heilbron, trans. Hermina A. Poatgieter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1967), 25, 30, 32.

4. Lewis, *Valley of the Mississippi*, 3

5. Lewis to Upham, "Letter press enclosure," Aug. 21, 1902, typed copy in Henry Lewis and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

6. United States, *Census*, 1900, St. Louis, ward 28, enumeration district 428, sheet 11, National Archives microfilm roll 901.

7. George F. Lewis apprentice agreement, Apr. 30, 1831, in family possession; Henry Lewis to Dear Brothers, Feb. 3,

1836, typed copy in Henry Lewis papers, MHS, original in Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. Thomas's younger brother Henry also emigrated from England to Boston at about the same time.

8. Naturalization records, County Court of Criminal Corrections, St. Louis County, MO, vol. 2, p. 207, Family History Library microfilm 1503018.

9. See Henry Lewis to George Lewis, 1855–60, copies in Lewis papers, MHS, originals in William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Lewis, *Valley of the Mississippi*, 7, 9.

10. Henry Lewis to George Lewis, Dec. 17, 1861 [1860?], Dec. 13, 1861, Jan. 20, 1863, July 30, 1863, Clements Library; Robert H. Bahmer, deputy archivist of the United States, to Bertha Heilbron, Feb. 24, 1961, Lewis papers, MHS.

11. Bahmer to Heilbron, Feb. 24, 1961.

*The portraits of Henry and Maria Lewis are courtesy Dorothy R. Lochrie, Moline, Illinois. All other images are from the MHS collections.*



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