

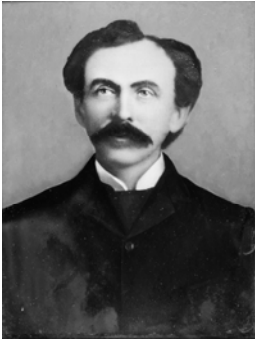
Mammoth Moving Pictures

By Leslie M. Kesler *

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In the theater, the music swelled. Special effects dazzled. Scenes of hideous monsters, bloody battles, and miraculous escapes held the audience spellbound. A “work of genius,” newspapers gushed, “worth double the price of admission.”

Think we’re talking about the latest blockbuster at your local movie theater? Better think again. This was a special show called a *panorama*, created by Charlotte resident Arthur L. Butt more than one hundred years ago.



Arthur L. Butt, of
Charlotte. *Image
courtesy of the
North Carolina
Museum of History.*

Popular in the 1800s, panoramas were literally moving pictures. Dozens of huge fabric painting made up each show. The paintings were sewed together at the edges to make a long row, and then wrapped around a big wooden spindle until they looked like a giant roll of paper towels. During a show the spindle turned, moving the scenes across the stage, before a second spindle wound them up again. Each scene measured roughly ten by twelve feet. If you stretched out all the scenes from one show, they would be the length of a football field or more.

Some panoramas retold famous stories from literature or portrayed journeys to faraway lands. Butt—the son of a Methodist minister—decided to base his on the Bible. One show told stories from the Old Testament. Another depicted the book of Revelation. According to newspaper accounts, Butt spent three years painting the scenes. He designed some himself and copied some from the work of other artists. Each scene was vividly painted. Some had glued-on foil or glitter that made them sparkle under the special stage lights. A few even had effects like real smoke that billowed up when fire from heaven burned Elijah’s sacrifice at Mt. Carmel.



Arthur Butt's portrayal of the Bible passage Revelation 12:1-3. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Whether you live in Goldsboro or Gastonia, Asheville or Edenton, Butt's panorama played in your town in the 1880s. He traveled all over the state showing his panorama in opera houses, theaters, courthouses, and churches. Often his father and wife traveled with him. His father narrated and lectured on the different scenes. His wife played the organ and sometimes sang as part of the show.

The show was so successful in North Carolina that the family took it on the road around the country. They played in places as far away as New Orleans and Kansas City. In late 1881 they spent a whole month playing in St. Louis.

Eventually, though, Butt retired the panorama. He rolled up the scenes on their wooden spindles and put them away. After the family donated them to the North Carolina Museum of History in 2003, the museum staff unrolled some scenes for the first time in more than one hundred years. Long hidden, this old-fashioned picture show still had the power to entertain and amaze a new generation of North Carolinians.



North Carolina Museum of History staff members unroll and examine a panorama scene showing the judgment of Solomon. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

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Want to learn more about panoramas? Visit the Web sites listed below.

To see a digital re-creation of a panorama about the Civil War:

http://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/discover_travis.html

To see an animation of a panorama about the life of Italian hero Guiseppe Garibaldi:

<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/garibaldi/panorama.php>

To view scenes from a panorama of the book *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

<http://www.sacomuseum.org/panorama/index.shtml>