

“A Natural Representation of Market-Street, in Philadelphia”: An Attribution, a Story, and Some Thoughts on Future Study



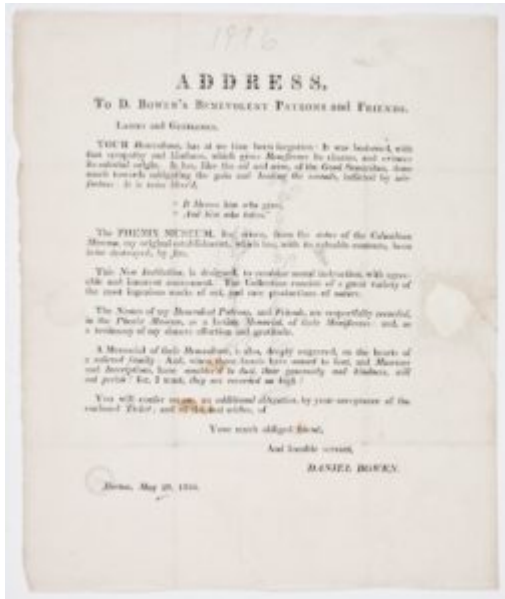
A massive painting of Philadelphia's Market Street hangs in the Second Bank of the United States Portrait Gallery. Here, for the first time, it is attributed to New England imagemaker James Kidder, who toured it through eastern U.S. cities in an exhibition mounted after the War of 1812.



1. Previous attributions identified John Woodside (1781-1852), a prominent sign painter in Philadelphia, as a possible maker of the view. "Old Court House," catalog number INDE14350. Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park.

"What is *that*?" I uttered aloud after turning a corner in the Second Bank of the United States Portrait Gallery in Philadelphia. After meandering through rooms filled with the faces of long-dead luminaries, I found myself in front of a massive street scene. Its subject and size seemed starkly out of place (fig. 1). Taller than I and broader than my arm span, the painted canvas arrested me with a vast, elevated view of Philadelphia's Market Street, mere blocks from where I stood. It depicted a central brick edifice, built for municipal business in 1707, as it stood in early national Philadelphia, forming the headhouse of a ramrod spine of market stalls. Pedestrians in the thoroughfare stood in service of this visual effect, their artificially straight rows pointing to the canvas's vanishing point. The minutely painted details of the scene worked with the view's receding lines to draw me closer. I approached wanting both to inspect the canvas's surface details and to move past their plane into the urban corridor seemingly opened before me. Curatorial foresight, in the form of velvet ropes, held me a foot or two at bay as I leaned in, squinted, and marveled at the fine rendering of the architectural centerpiece and commercial brick buildings on either side. This representational detail carried over to the diminutive figures that met under awnings, inspected goods outdoors, and moved along Market Street as laborers, vendors, and shoppers. I backed up to take in the whole scene again.

Turning to the wall label, I found a research intrigue: the canvas's painter was listed as "an unidentified artist." Already curious about why this painting hung in a portrait gallery, and why someone would have painted a view of Market Street in this size and from this perspective, I decided to start my inquiry by trying to figure out exactly who painted the view. Following my hunch that this painting would have cut a public profile in the early nineteenth century, I retreated to newspaper archives.



2. Daniel Bowen sent his thanks to patrons in the form of this broadside and an accompanying ticket to his new Phoenix Museum. He addressed this one to William Paine of Worcester, Massachusetts. Broadside, "Address, to D. Bowen's Benevolent Patrons and Friends" (Boston, 1816). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

There, in issues from 1816 and 1817, I found James Kidder and Daniel Bowen announcing their exhibition of four "large and elegant paintings" that included "a natural representation of Market-Street, in Philadelphia." Kidder's view made its debut, however, not in Philadelphia, but in Boston. The exhibition history of the Market Street view shows it to be not simply a depiction of an urban commercial corridor but also an artifact of one imagemaker's efforts to navigate the post-war market economy. At a moment when national policy and the spread of capitalism intensified American commerce, James Kidder sought to profit from a view that maintained the instructiveness of art for the cultivation of good citizenship. He did so, however, by promoting a vision of civic welfare that stemmed from discerning market behavior rather than political representation.

For Daniel Bowen (1760-1856), Kidder's paintings constituted yet another attempt to make a living as a museum proprietor. In the years after the Revolution, the Massachusetts native and Revolutionary war veteran had built a collection of wax figures, natural history curiosities, entertaining deceptions like speaking boxes, and artwork. Exhibited as the Columbian Museum from New England to Charleston, the collection went up in flames in 1803. Another fire destroyed Bowen's second collection in 1807. The erstwhile proprietor lost his third collection, too. Entirely broke by 1816, Bowen turned over his stake in the Columbian Museum to fellow Boston proprietor William Doyle.

Bowen tried yet again to assemble a successful museum exhibition. This time, he partnered with James Kidder (1793-1837?) to build a new collection showcasing the young imagemaker's work. Bowen spun his previous misfortunes into a public appeal for support. Highlighting natural disaster, not financial ruin, as the

source of Bowen's prior failures, Bowen and Kidder christened their new collection the Phoenix Museum and solicited benefactors in the greater Boston area (fig. 2). When the Phoenix opened in June of 1816, at Franklin Hall in Boston's south end, Bowen offered his contributors passes to the galleries. Adults could buy single admission for fifty cents, and later a quarter, while children gained entry for half price.

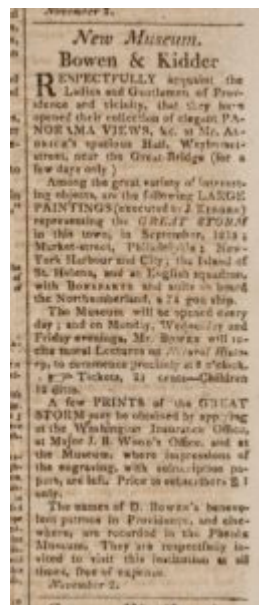


3. The announcement of the opening of Bowen and Kidder's exhibit appeared front and center under the masthead of Boston's *Columbian Centinel*. "Bowen's Phoenix Museum," *Columbian Centinel*, June 21, 1816. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Well aware of the challenges of proprietorship and the need for competitive appeals, Bowen and Kidder pinned their hopes for success on Kidder's paintings. When they announced their exhibition opening on June 21, 1816, directly under the masthead eagle of Boston's *Columbian Centinel*, they drew singular attention to Kidder's work (fig. 3). They enumerated the subjects of the "large and elegant paintings" showcased amidst other paintings and prints: New York City and its harbor—an "emblem of peace and commerce"; a scene of Providence during the great storm of 1815; St. Helena at the time of Napoleon's arrival that same year; and Philadelphia's Market Street. The composition of these images substantiated their appeal: they were views rendered from "correct drawings taken from Nature," composed by an artist trained by "celebrated Painter and Drawing Master" John Rubens Smith in New York City. To their minds, the representational quality of environmental views—canvas size, detail, and perspective, composed by a trained hand—not just their subject matter, would sell tickets.

Bowen and Kidder exhibited in Franklin Hall for a month. When they failed to relocate to Boston's commercial center, the men took their show on the road and doubled down on their genre-based advertising strategy. In Providence, beginning on Nov. 1, 1816, the proprietors advertised Kidder's paintings as "panorama views," hoping to entice visitors to Aldrich's Hall by promising them large-scale works that used compositional perspective and immersive installation to heighten the effect of standing at the depicted site (fig. 4). It's hard to know if the paintings fulfilled or disappointed visitors'

expectations. Kidder and Bowen may have constructed a viewing platform to elevate gallery visitors before the painting, enhancing the simulation of a rooftop view. The Market Street painting itself, and perhaps its sister views, approached its claims to the panoramic with elevated viewpoint and large canvas size rather than with an encompassing field of vision created by radial sight lines or circular installation. Its scenic foreground also resisted typical panoramic conventions. Kidder and Bowen, however, were willing to risk visitor letdown with increasingly prominent pronouncements of the panoramic and natural qualities of their paintings.



4. When they advertised their exhibition in Providence, Bowen and Kidder described their large paintings as “panorama views.” Advertisement, “New Museum. Bowen and Kidder,” *Providence Gazette*, November 2, 1816. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

After two weeks in Providence, the pair took their paintings to Philadelphia, opening a gallery in the Shakespeare Building at Sixth and Chestnut on New Year’s Day of 1817. They played to local interests when they announced their “Panoramic Views, &c. (*Drawn from Nature*),” giving top billing in the *Aurora* to “A correct representation of *Market street*, Philadelphia from the Old Court House to Centre Square” (fig. 5). Even for spectators long familiar with Market Street, Kidder’s canvas lofted their views into a perspective that many likely had never taken for themselves.

The Market Street panorama remained on display at the Shakespeare for two months. And then it disappeared from advertisements for Bowen and Kidder’s subsequent exhibitions in Philadelphia and nearby Reading. In the summer of 1817, the men relegated their four original showpieces to anonymous collections when they advertised Kidder’s newest work: a semi-circular panorama of New Haven, depicting the town’s buildings, green places, improved cemetery, and mountainous surroundings over a stretch of canvas forty feet long and nearly

nine feet tall. They hoped this larger format and rounded installation of a town view, later invoked as the "grand panorama," would draw visitors to their new gallery on 11th Street near Market.

The Phoenix, however, did not last long. In the fall of 1817, Kidder departed the partnership and returned to New England to continue his work as a painter and engraver. He either retrieved or replicated his painting of the great storm at Providence and exhibited it again in that city in 1818. In Philadelphia that same fall, Bowen continued to exhibit the Phoenix's other panoramas alongside a massive new painting: a 9-by-19-foot canvas of a sea serpent, executed by Boston painter John Ritto Penniman soon after the monster was supposedly spotted off the Massachusetts coast that August. Though Bowen promoted his display in Paxton's *Annual Advertiser* for 1818, his latest effort as a panorama entrepreneur did not last long. In February 1818, he sold the monster canvas to the Peale family for their museum and wrapped up his exhibition of the New Haven panorama by the end of the month. Bowen remained in the Philadelphia area, struggling to support himself for the rest of his long life.

This new attribution of the Market Street painting to James Kidder does more than attach a name to the canvas. It opens up new avenues for discussion in longstanding conversations about visual culture and commerce in the early United States. Linking Kidder's painting with its label as a panorama painting makes it fresh food for thought in studies of a genre whose extant examples are rare survivals. Kidder created his view to compete in a marketplace of instructive entertainment like music lessons, lectures, theatrical shows, and other museums and art exhibitions. For instance, Bowen and Kidder's advertisement in the Jan. 3, 1817, issue of Philadelphia's *Aurora* appeared alongside notices for John Vanderlyn's itinerant gallery of paintings and a circus. The reconnection of the Market Street painting with its documentary record enables us to assess its visual and material characteristics in the context of these competitive appeals. It also puts the view into instructive comparison with contemporaneous survivals, perhaps most notably Vanderlyn's semi-circular panorama of Versailles, painted in 1818 and 1819 and now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The contrasting subjects, compositions, installations, and artist biographies of both pieces encourage a reappraisal of the perceived promise and adjudged failure of American panorama displays in the postwar era.



5. “A correct representation of *Market street*, Philadelphia from the Old Court House to Centre Square” received top billing when the exhibit of panoramic views debuted in Philadelphia. “Phoenix Museum,” *Philadelphia Aurora*, January 3, 1817. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The Kidder attribution also places the Market Street view in the broader context of Kidder’s body of work and gives scholars a richer view of the career of one work-a-day imagemaker. Kidder’s foray into museum proprietorship was one of many strategies by which he sought to monetize his production of images. In addition to selling tickets for gallery viewing, Kidder offered engravings of his Providence storm painting for one dollar (fig. 6). Late in 1818, he tried to sell the panoramic painting itself to that city’s town council. More widely, though, Kidder made his career by producing commissioned drawings and engravings for prints, trade cards, and books, selling his own prints by subscription, and painting trompe-l’oeil pictures (fig. 7). Nearly all of his ventures rendered the urban built environment into views marketed to a popular audience. Many pictures, like his Market Street canvas, enticed consumers with views of historic landmark buildings at the center of urban commercial scenes (fig. 8). These images appealed to consumers by simultaneously fixing and making mobile views of urban change intended to circulate in the market of goods that they depicted.

In his Philadelphia painting, James Kidder deployed the political implications of perspectival conventions to make the case for the instructive value—and market worth—of his broader oeuvre. On the canvas, he merged a scenographic depiction of the market building with a panoramic perspective of Market Street to create a view of civic virtuosity in the post-war United States. The conventions of scenographic viewmaking, as Wendy Bellion has explained, prized detailed representation to draw viewers into close looking. The panoramic, by contrast, encouraged comprehensive viewing of the landscape that was only attainable with elevation. In 1788, she has argued, Charles Willson Peale used

these conventions to weigh in on debates over state and society during the Constitutional debates. In two views of, and from, the Maryland statehouse, he visualized the seemingly contradictory skills of critical observation of the state and immersive political participation demanded by the republican ideal of citizenship.



6. Bowen and Kidder sold these prints for a dollar. Captions credited Kidder as the painter, engraver, and co-publisher of the image. "A Representation of the Great Storm at Providence, Sept. 23rd, 1815," by James Kidder (Boston, 1816). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1816, Kidder used these conventions to different effect as U.S. citizens considered the trajectory of a national economy and society emerging from a second war with Britain. When Kidder married the scenographic and panoramic perspective modes in a single depiction of the Philadelphia marketplace, he recast the political implications of immersive participation and detached observation in the realm of market behavior. From the rooftop vantage created by the canvas, spectators appraised the headhouse market scene from an air of critical remove. Its minutely painted architectural and figural details encouraged them to inspect the discrete goods, people, and elements of the commercial environment depicted in front of them. This critical looking, Kidder implied, was a necessary skill for successfully navigating economic and social transactions in the marketplace.

Yet the image still situated viewers firmly in the urban market itself, which included not only the market buildings but also its streets, sidewalks, and rows of storefronts on which Kidder perched. From an elevated point within this district, viewers could better see—and critically assess—the vastness and variety of the market in which they stood. With a panoramic painting that simultaneously removed and immersed spectators in the market, Kidder sought to affirm and cultivate a moral eye: one that demanded of viewers the dual modes of looking that would prompt exclusive economic discernment and inclusive civic empathy. This balanced thinking, he implied, would lead citizens to act in ways that responded to the interests of fellow citizens as well as themselves.



7. James Kidder engraved a view of the First Church in Boston for a Boston periodical in 1813. The print says that his old drawing master, John Rubens Smith, drew the original view. Perhaps one of these men painted a similar view of the meetinghouse now in the collections of the Bostonian Society. "View of the Old Brick Meeting House in Boston 1808," Frontispiece for *The Polyanthos*, Vol. 2 (Boston, July 1813). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In this way, Kidder commented on the issues of public and private that bubbled up around conversations of postwar urban economy and society. His marriage of perspective and panoramic views conveyed a narrative of the historical development of Philadelphia's commercial corridor. The detailed rendering of the antiquated architectural features of the centerpiece municipal building—first described in Philadelphia advertisements as "the Old Court House"—encouraged viewers to reflect on its century-long history as a civic meeting place. First a hub for diverse court, municipal, political, and public gatherings, it had transformed into a more concentrated, if varied, market district. At the same time, Kidder cast its façade into exaggerated shadow and illuminated the westward stretch of Market Street with bright afternoon sun. This lighting effect, enhanced by the recessional pull of Kidder's vanishing lines, drew viewers' eyes down Market Street to the horizon. Here, their gaze landed on Center Square, a tree-lined gem of municipal improvement that housed the first mechanism in the United States to deliver clean water to city dwellers, and by 1816, formed a popular civic gathering place. With this linear progression from old municipal building to newer public amenity, Kidder made manifest a version of the city's historical development that implied that market development ushered in urban improvement.

Kidder himself, of course, hoped to profit from this view of commercial activity serving the common good. His proprietorship of the Phoenix Museum and his work making images were business pursuits. Yet he pitched his products as morally instructive. Admission to the Phoenix panorama gallery was money well spent, he implied, because it was remuneration to Kidder for the laudable public service he provided by displaying his paintings. It was a lofty goal. But if Kidder could convince some patrons of these designs, he might earn social capital as well as financial profit.



8. In the early 1820s, James Kidder drew a view of a late-seventeenth-century building standing in Boston's urban core. William Hoogland engraved it on a trade card for John K. Simpson, who kept shop under its roof and celebrated its antiquity. By the late 1830s, reproductions of this view earned the building notoriety as "the old feather store." Trade card, "John K. Simpson, Importer of Upholstery Goods, No. 1 Ann Street, Boston," by James Kidder and William Hoogland (Boston, ca. 1820). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

So perhaps the Market Street painting isn't so out of place in the Second Bank building after all. Chartered the same year that Kidder first displayed his canvas, the Bank itself emerged from some of the same broad questions about public and private market values as did Kidder's painting. The institution's founders were as optimistic as Kidder that the U.S. economy could increase domestic production and consumption for the benefit of the common good. By 1819, both the credit economy that it fueled and the Phoenix Museum had gone bust. Yet the bank itself survived for the rest of its chartered term. Its building, completed in 1824, seemed to some a symbol of the collective wealth of the United States and to others a temple to moral bankruptcy and individual ruin. So, too, did James Kidder's painting survive after the close of the Phoenix Museum. After passing perhaps through the collections of Charles Willson Peale and then through the hands of a book dealer, it became the municipal property of Philadelphia in 1874. Today, it hangs in a museum administered by Independence National Historical Park, just reopened after renovation, and open to the public free of charge. In this setting, the history of James Kidder's Market Street painting offers rich fodder for a meditation on the complex histories of private profit and public good in the cultural realm. In this bicentennial year of the bank's charter and the public debut of Kidder's painting, I look forward to making a return visit to the Second Bank galleries and viewing the Market Street painting in a new light.

Acknowledgments

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Further Reading

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Wendy Bellion, " 'Extend the Sphere': Charles Willson Peale's Panorama of Annapolis," *The Art Bulletin* 86:3 (Sept. 2004): 529-549.

Peter Benes, " 'A few monstrous great Snakes': Daniel Bowen and the Columbian Museum, 1789-1816," in *New England Collectors and Collections*, ed. Peter Benes (Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 2004): 22-39.

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