

THE ART OF GEORGE SIMONS

Katie Gregory

George Simons was a "traveling man," although he spent fifty-six years in and around Council Bluffs, Iowa.¹ He was reared in Illinois, went to Iowa, traveled west to Oregon, Washington, Utah, and California, and returned home by way of Panama. Some biographers claim he was originally from Canada.² Belle L. Sanford, a historian late of Council Bluffs, says he was born 22 January 1834 in Streator, Illinois.³ George's daughter, Rossie Mae Simons Reynolds, says he was a native of Streator.⁴ Judy Bishop, George's great-niece, claims he was born 11 January 1834 in Earlville, Illinois, to Anson and Mary Ann Witt Simons.⁵ Then, we come to what was probably George's own view of where he was born. According to the *Roster of Iowa Volunteers*, "Simmons, [sic] George. Age 30. Residence Pottawattamie County, native of Canada."⁶ We can perhaps assume that this information came from George and that he knew where he was born.

During his early years in the Council Bluffs, Iowa, area, George made friends with various Indian tribes. On one occasion, this friendship caused him a real scare. Once, as he was walking with an Omaha brave, who was in the lead, George was careless with his gun. He carried it with the barrel facing forward. He tripped or stumbled, and the gun went off—wounding the Indian in the shoulder. The Indian immediately accused George of trying to kill him. George was tempted to finish the Indian off and dispose of the body in the river but overcame that temptation and returned the brave to his people. They were less than thrilled about the accident and worked themselves into a real frenzy. A more friendly member of the tribe approached George, warned him of great danger,

and helped him make his escape through the willows to the river. There, George found a canoe in which he made his way safely down river and home.⁷

George first came to the Council Bluffs area because of employment. The Simons family, as well as the Dodges, lived in the Streator area of Illinois. Grenville Mellon Dodge, the famous railway builder and Civil War general, hired George to be camp cook on Dodge's railroad surveying crew. George first arrived in Council Bluffs in 1853 as part of that party.⁸ A 26 November 1961 *Omaha World Herald* article claims: "It is known that he was in Council Bluffs when it was called by its previous name Kanesville, for he made a painting of the then Mormon settlement in 1849." However, it is *not* known that he was there then! As noted, he states he came to Council Bluffs four years later, in 1853; later in the year, the name of the town was changed from Kanesville to Council Bluffs: "Started on servaynig trip with Gen Dodge from Devenport, Iowa 1853 on Rock Island RR servan from Devenport to Council Bluff started from Devenport 1st of May got to C.B. in Sept., stopped at Councle Bliffs made that home for 56 years."⁹

As for drawings dated before 1853, it would be relatively simple to ask those who were living there which buildings were there in 1849 and which were built later. It would also be easy to add a building where one had disappeared. For instance, if as believed, the Kanesville Tabernacle stood for only about four years, it would not have been there when George arrived—and it is pictured in his 1849-51 drawing of Kanesville. It is also true that it *became* the Rock Island Railroad, but at the time the

KATIE GREGORY has been a reference librarian at the Council Bluffs Public Library, Council Bluffs, Iowa, since 1988. She has a master's degree in Library and Information Science from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, and a B.A. in Art from Bellevue College, Bellevue, Nebraska. She is a native of Wyoming born to Robert A. and Chattie Sweaney Miskimins. She is one of ten children, all of whom are living. She has six daughters and sixteen grandchildren. This article is the result of a request from William Hartley to present a paper to the Mormon History Association. Ordinarily, Mrs. Gregory is neither a writer nor a historian but rather is a librarian, mother, grandmother, and painter. (With special thanks to Doris Wanek, who was the driving force behind this project.)

survey was made, it was the Mississippi and Missouri River Railroad. George is writing some years after the fact. He did the same with his sketches and paintings.

George Simons married Emiline Cluff on 9 November 1858 in Earlville, Illinois,¹⁰ and had three sons and two daughters, although one article says he had eight children.¹¹ Emiline died 23 January 1885 and is buried in the Neola Township Cemetery, Pottawattamie County, Iowa. Sometime following her death, he married Mary N. Simons, whose obituary is in the *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil* of 9 December 1904. She was aged eighty-six years at her death. George and Emiline's son, Ivan, died 29 June 1885 and is also buried in the Neola Township Cemetery.

George Simons is listed in the first Council Bluffs City Directory of 1865 and through 1868 as a painter/portrait painter. In the 1891-92 directory, he is listed as a gunsmith/locksmith.¹² In the Iowa Census of 1885, George is shown living on Front Street in Neola, Iowa. His occupation is painter. Living with him were Rosa Simons, Norman Simons, and Fae McCreary. His daughter, Mrs. Rossie Reynolds, was quoted as saying:

He would paint, of course, and then he was always fixing things for people. He was a very gentle and kind man. He often threatened my brother and myself with a "cuff on the ear" if we misbehaved—but the cuff never came. Mrs. Reynolds describes him as a quiet, mild mannered man with a bright red beard and blue eyes.¹³

Belle Sanford mentions that George was of medium size. In addition to his other vocations, he also ran a theater in Council Bluffs for a time in 1858:¹⁴

I started a theater their [Council Bluffs] was their 6 months, then broke up and started across the plains I painted the scenery and all—in 1861 I went with my uncle across the plains there was 40 wagons of us we traveled up the platt river on the north platt we stopped for the 4 of July they took the side boards from our wagon, our feast consisted of Roast Ox goose breasts and every thing one could amagain the address of the day was made by Dun Norton, Sr., we went on then with out any trouble on any kind until we got to Salt Lake then I meet a man who use to be with me in the theater he told old Brigham Young I

was a sean painter and he wanted me to stay their he offord me 6.00 a day but I wouldnt stay I felt suspicious.¹⁵

Apparently, George's wife, Emeline, was with him when he went west. He mentions in his diary that he worked at "Peteluma" all that winter. Then:

Mother wanted to go back so I got the money and she went back by the Ismus, the panama people took them through over the lakes and over land on burrous [S]taid at Healsburg that winte[r] had a painting school The next fall I went back but had a little better trip than mother did we crossed the Ismus and took the [missing text] finely getting back to C.B. was a month on the trip when I got to C.B. I joined the army in the 29 Volunteers.¹⁶

George Simons fought in the Civil War, serving from 1862 to 1864. He became a Christian while in the army:

In that little grove never will I forget the spot on the beach of the Gulf of Mexico, where I bowed down for the first time in earnestness to God, deturmaned to turn my back to this sinful world, and follow Gesus. I asked the Lord to tutch the heart of my wife that she might become a christian, She had bin raised up not knowing the reel need of religion or of serving the Lord. I prayed for her, my prayers were heard and answered and so were the prayers offered up at home for me as you may see by a letter written to my by my Brother.¹⁷

In the late eighties, George went to Washington state seeking jobs painting stage scenery. What success he had there is unknown. He returned to Iowa where he continued to live until 1909 when he moved to Long Beach, California. He was later granted a pension and belonged to the G.A.R. Post 181 at Long Beach, California.¹⁸

George Simons seems little known outside the immediate vicinity of Council Bluffs and eastern Nebraska. For the past fifty years, however, his work has garnered considerable interest in the area and among those interested in Mormon history. He seldom signed his paintings, making it difficult to discern just how

many works he actually made.¹⁹ One work held by the Council Bluffs Public Library is a collection of sketches that was for many years preserved by N. P. Dodge.²⁰ In 1946, one author wrote that "Only one copy of the book was ever made."²¹

Perhaps the most valuable and interesting collection of pictures of early Council Bluffs that exists today is in the possession of N. P. Dodge in the form of a book of sketches drawn for him in 1853 by George Simons, well remembered in Council Bluffs as a photographer and artist who died some years ago.²²

Since this unsigned article is from the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* of 4 September 1904, the writer is obviously mistaken about some things. George lived until 1917. He had just traveled on! Also, some of the sketches are of Council Bluffs in 1858; thus, it is not possible they were drawn in 1853—at least not all of them. In fact, according to an article from the *Nonpareil* of 7 July 1893:

A few weeks ago he [Simons] sketched a book for General Dodge of these old scenes in and around Council Bluffs and also of the important scenes connected with the general's routes through the west with his surveying parties. These were sent to the general and no money could buy them.²³

George may have sketched them, or he may only have delivered sketches that had been drawn over the years. It is most likely that George used both previous sketches and his memory to make the sketches. He was said to have an excellent—some went so far as to say photographic—memory. The article continues:

Some time ago Mr. N. P. Dodge, knowing the ability and taste of the Council Bluffs artist, Mr. Simons, sent him to his farm in Nebraska a short distance from Omaha to take sketches of it and also of the Dodge homestead and the farm of General Dodge. Mr. Simons did the work so well and so true to nature that Mr. Dodge can look upon them with almost the same satisfaction as he would were he looking at the originals.²⁴

An article copied and kept in the scrapbooks of the Council Bluffs Public Library reads:

To the *Mercury* office Mr. Dodge, Jr., of this city, son of N. P. Dodge, Sr. And nephew of General G. M. Dodge, brings a book which is worth its weight in gold many times over. It is handsomely bound and is made up of pencil sketches of early western scenes, with a few photographs of more recent date. Most of the pencil drawings were by George Simons [who else would they be by in his sketch book?], a cook employed by General Dodge's engineering party when at work on railroad surveys in Iowa, and west of the Missouri River, beginning in 1853. One of the earliest of these is a picture of a double log cabin, one story high, surrounded by a rickety rail fence, a covered wagon in the rear and a hay stack near the front of the building. Underneath is an inscription to the effect that the modest building was the residence, in 1853, of Elder Orsan [sic] Hyde, the famous Mormon, when he lived in Council Bluffs.²⁵

Also from the scrapbook is another unattributed article as follows:

The finest pictures in the book and those which undoubtedly cost the most labor, are a series showing Council Bluffs and Kaneshville as they appeared in the early days. The first one portrays the Kaneshville of 1849. The village at that time was a single street straggling up the valley along the present route of Broadway. Along the prairie road which forms the street in the picture, trains of emigrant wagons are moving while a couple of Indians occupy a conspicuous place in the foreground. The houses are all one story frame and log huts. Under the bluffs, at what is now the corner of Sixth and Mill streets, the old Dagggers saw mill, the first mill in Council Bluffs, is shown. From it Mill street took its name. The mill derived its power from Indian creek, which was evidently of some use in those days, and was harnessed much more successfully than it is now. The Methodist church, with a bell swung from a pole in front of it, nestles against the bluff near Park Avenue. Most of the cabins are surrounded by high fences serving as corrals for the stock. On top of the hill back of where George A. Keeline's residence now stands the old powder magazine is shown. This magazine, or its successor, stood until after the civil war and almost every brick

in its walls contained the name and address of a Council Bluffs soldier in the civil war, carved deeply into it.²⁶

Unfortunately, we do not know where or if this item was published, nor is it dated. George Simons is known to have painted two huge panoramic works. One he describes in his diary. In his own words, George says:

[T]hree of us went up on Mouseeri River to St. Louis in 1854 painted a panaroma of the trip after that I went to Denver their was two or three log cabins their then/doug for gold quit their, them and went to hunting in Pike Peak mountains left Denver back to Council B.²⁷

And from another newspaper article:

Historical Masterpiece is Missing Possibly lost to art and history is a painting of incalculable historical value, which was conceived and executed in Council Bluffs in the 1860's.

The work is by the prolific frontier artist,

George Simons, who conducted an art school in Council Bluffs when he tired of depicting scenes of his day.

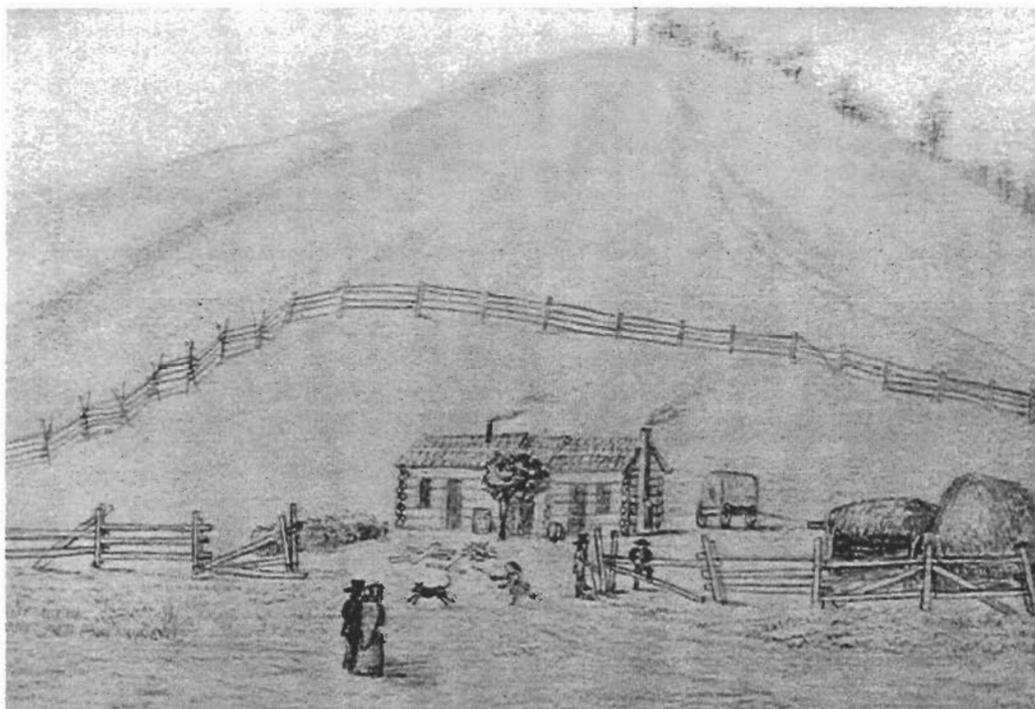
Reported in newspaper accounts of the day, the paintings are said to have been spread on 10,000 feet of canvas.

Depicting the trail from Council Bluffs to "Denver City," Simons created a historical masterpiece which would be of value today, in the opinion of members of the Iowa State Historical Society.

Simons made no secret of his gigantic effort. Records show that he exhibited every foot of the canvas in Council Bluffs and Omaha and even toured with it to river towns, charging so much for admission to the boat on the interior walls of which the work was hung

But the lengthy picture-story of the freighter trail from Council Bluffs to Denver cannot be found It must not be confused with the "Panorama of the Missouri River" another canvas of historical value. That panorama also has been lost.²⁸

In her article, "George Simons: Frontier Artist,"



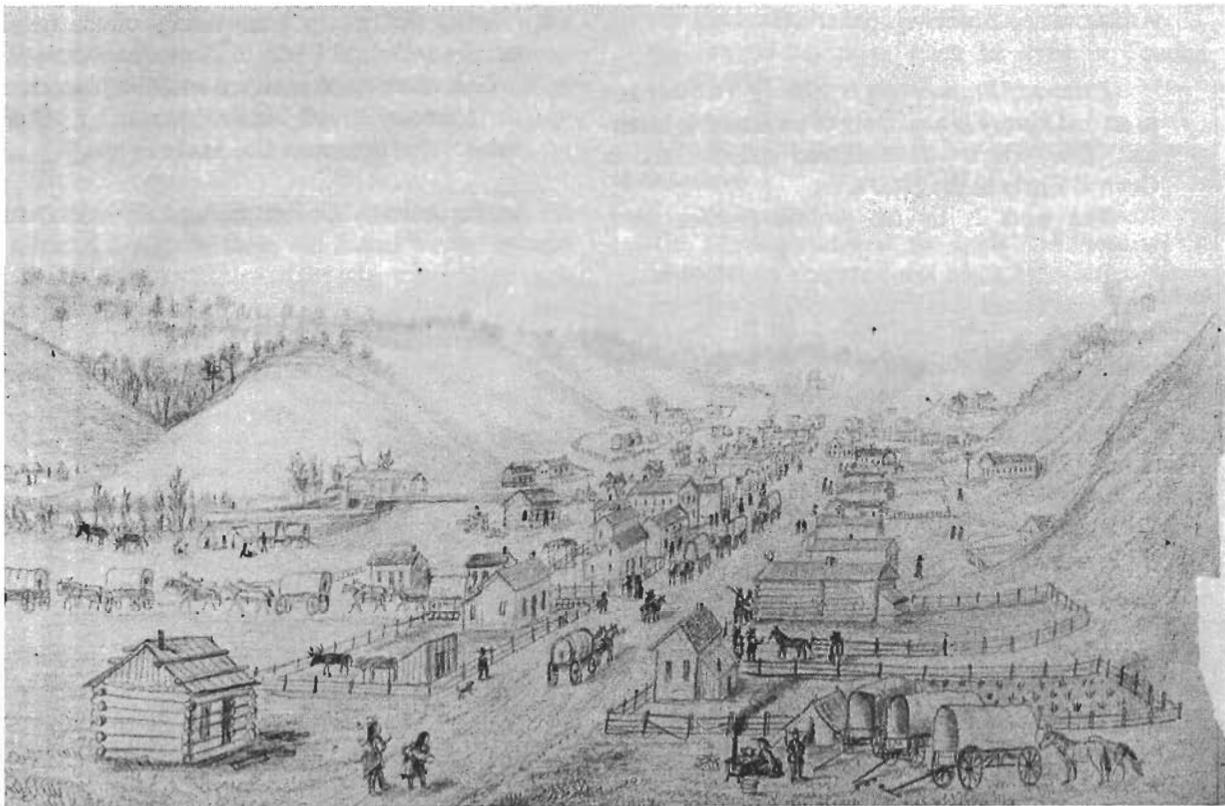
*Orson Hyde home near Kanessville and Harrison Street, 1853
Council Bluffs Public Library*

In her article, "George Simons: Frontier Artist," Mildred Goosman describes Simons' technique:

As an artist, Simons belongs to the type of folk artist whose chief aim was to represent visual reality of a specific scene with exactness of detail, leaving to others a more imaginative rendering of design and abstract pattern. In none of his paintings did he attempt to interpret nature or emphasize a particular mood. Even his oil painting of a raging forest fire near Mount Rainier seems to be a reporting of the event, rather than an expression of the fury and terror. His thirty-odd known paintings can be divided as documentary landscapes, portraits, and studio

works. His later pictures show a greater use of modeling

His few portraits lack academic polish, but suggest an insight into the individuality of his sitters. The landscapes have pleasing compositions within the framework of rigid adherence to the actual contours. While he sometimes misses the correct date by a year in his reminiscences, his visual memory for details is always accurate according to early newspaper articles which quote the comments of old settlers. It is this characteristic trait that makes Simons so important as a source, especially for the 1850's before exterior photographs were available.²⁹

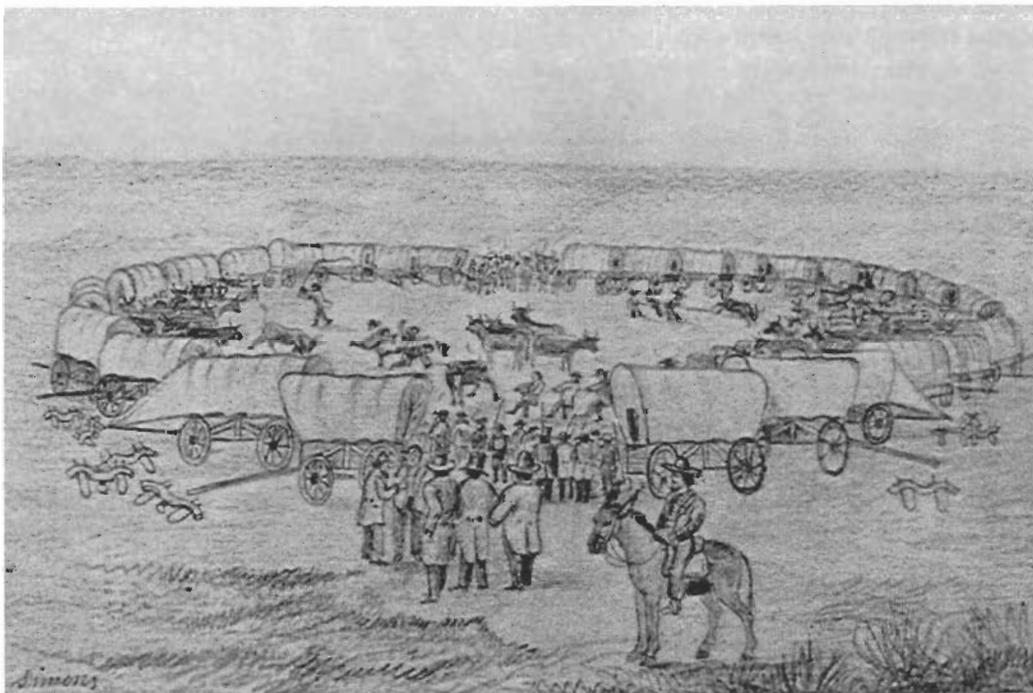


*Kanesville (now Council Bluffs) 1849-1851
Looking North from the corner of Main Street and First Avenue*

*All of the images and sketches of George Simons included in this article
and on the cover of the magazine
are provided courtesy of the Council Bluffs Public Library, Council Bluffs, Iowa*



*Mormon Camp Meeting near Parks Mill
Council Bluffs Public Library*



*Mormon Train in Camp Lassoing Steers Preparatory to Yoking up for a Start
Council Bluffs Public Library*

Sketches at the Council Bluffs Public Library

1. Hunting antelope in Wyoming Territory, August 1865
2. Arkansas traveler
3. Bellevue, Nebraska, 1856
4. Captain Carlisle's train nooning in the Platte Valley, 1859
5. First claim cabin built in Nebraska by Daniel Norton in 1853
6. Congregational Church, Council Bluffs, erected fall/winter, 1869-71
7. Congregational Church, erected 1854-55 on Pearl Street
8. Home of Reverend G. G. Rice, 1852-55, Congregational Church
9. Council Bluffs 1858 view southwest from hill where hospital is
10. Council Bluffs 1858 looking south from hill where hospital is
11. Council Bluffs 1858 looking north
12. Dagger's Saw Mill near corner of Mill and Sixth Streets, Council Bluffs, 1854
13. Dodge's engineer camp in Missouri, river bottom crescent, 1853
14. Dodge Land Agency/Council Bluffs Savings Bank
15. Dwelling on Pierce Street, N. P. Dodge, winter 1864-65
16. Home of N. P. Dodge from April 1865-88
17. N. P. Dodge Office, 1860-62, 122 Broadway
18. N. P. Dodge Office, 1862-63, other 1863-69—two offices
19. Looking south over Dodge claims to Elkhorn Ferry, 1854-58
20. S. Dodge cabin and improvements, 1858 to 1856
21. Log cabin where Dodge family lived in Omaha after Elkhorn Indian scare
22. West part of N. P. Dodge farm, Elkhorn River, northwest Omaha
23. S. Dodge home, his widow Julia F., and N. P. Dodge, 1858-64
24. Elkhorn River Ferry
25. Emigrant ferry, Elkhorn River, northwest Omaha, 1854-55
26. Utah and California emigrants crossing Elkhorn River
27. Ferry across Elkhorn River, 1854
28. First temporary bridge between Council Bluffs and Omaha with first train
29. Fourth Iowa Infantry Camp Kirkwood at Council Bluffs, 1861
30. Orson Hyde home near Kaneshville and Harrison Street, 1853
31. Indians skinning a buffalo on the plains
32. Jack hunting the cows
33. Kaneshville, 1849-51, looking north from Main Street and First Avenue
34. Mormon Camp meeting near Parks Mill
35. Mormon train camp lassoing steers preparatory to yoking up
36. Mormons crossing the plains in handcars from Florence, 1856
37. Omaha Indian village on Papillion Creek near Bellevue, 1854
38. Pawnee Indian village south of Platte River near Fremont, 1856
39. Sioux City, Iowa, 1856
40. Steamer *Omaha* landing Mormons at Florence, spring 1854
41. Twenty-Ninth Infantry winter quarters, Little Rock, Arkansas, winter 1864-65
42. First grist mill, S. E. Wick on Mosquito Creek, later Parks Mill

Paintings Intact as Listed by Belle L. Sanford (1931)

The following two paintings were donated to the RLDS Church in Council Bluffs. They are at this time, 1997, "lost."

Christ blessing little children (probably at Children's Square)
The vacant chair

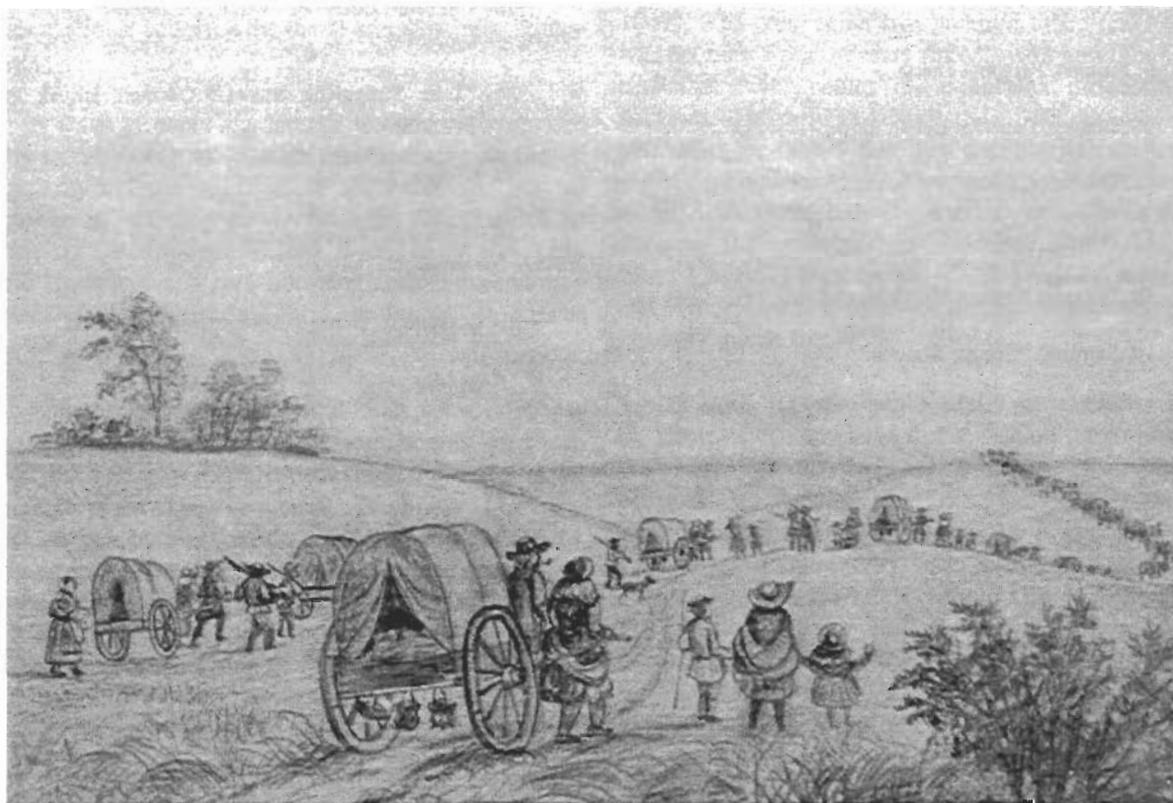
The following paintings were extant in 1931 and were exhibited in the public library at that time:

Portrait of Mrs. Simons
A flock of quail
Forest fire near Mount Rainier, Washington
A deer scene in winter
Cows standing in stream of water

Portrait of Harry Simons on horseback
Head and bust of Harry at seventeen
Trysting scene
Christ
Two mountain scenes
Head of Logan Fontenelle
Head of Alexander Campbell
Negro
Burial on the plains
Council Bluffs from the Nebraska side of the river
Herd of buffalo
View of Bellevue, Nebraska

Other Paintings

Dodge House—View of Council Bluffs (Civil War painting?)
Crowl Company—View of Council Bluffs



Mormons Crossing the Plains with Handcarts from Florence, 1856
Council Bluffs Public Library

Notes

1. George Simons, Personal Diary.
2. Mildred Goosman, "George Simons: Frontier Artist," *Iowan* (Summer 1962): 19-32.
3. Belle L. Sanford, "George Simons," *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, 22 March 1931.
4. "George Simons, City's First Artist, Had Bright Red Beard—Mrs. Reynolds," *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, 4 January 1952.
5. Judy Bishop, Personal Letter to Irene Dawson, 118 Fleming, Council Bluffs, Iowa, 28 February 1997.
6. *Roster of Iowa Soldiers: War of Rebellion*, vol. 3, 17th-31st Regiments, Iowa General Assembly, 1442.
7. Sanford, "George Simons."
8. "George Simons, City's First Artist." See also Simons, Personal Diary.
9. Simons, Personal Diary.
10. Bishop, Personal Letter.
11. Goosman, "George Simons: Frontier Artist."
12. Ibid.
13. "George Simons, City's First Artist."
14. Sanford, "George Simons."
15. Simons, Personal Diary.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Sanford, "George Simons."
19. Goosman, "George Simons: Frontier Artist."
20. Sanford, "George Simons."
21. Gene Telpner, "Pioneer Days Preserved in Photostat," *Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, 26 May 1946.
22. "Sketches of Early Days in Western Iowa," *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, 4 September 1904.
23. "Some Rare Pictures," *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, 7 July 1893.
24. Ibid.
25. "Sketch Book of Value," *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, 25 May 1901.
26. "One Straggling Street," Council Bluffs Public Library Scrapbook.
27. Simons, Personal Diary.
28. "Historical Masterpiece Is Missing," *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, 27 July 1932.
29. Goosman, "George Simons: Frontier Artist."