

John Hubbell – A Brief History

DATELINE: HUBBELL TRADING POST, ARIZONA



John Lorenzo Hubbell (NPS Photo)

Today's Hubbell Trading Post was originally built by Charles Crary in 1871. That same year, and at the age of 17, John Lorenzo Hubbell began work as a trading post clerk in Fort Defiance, Arizona a days horse ride away. During his time at Fort Defiance, Hubbell learned the skills needed to manage the activities of a trading post and became fluent in the language of the Navajo people with whom he traded. In 1878, Hubbell purchased the Crary trading post and immediately began expanding its facilities.

Within five years, Hubbell became widely known among the Navajo for his fairness, generosity, hospitality and ability to speak their language. He also employed a large number of Navajo to work at the post, regularly hosted a Navajo version of a rodeo in which prizes were awarded, helped the Navajos find employment and keep them informed of current news.

As word about the trading post spread, Navajos began traveling long distances to trade their goods. In 1882 the Hubbell Trading Post purchased more than 1.3 million pounds of Navajo wool and 300,000 pelts of Navajo sheep. Hubbell sold many of those items inside the trading post to non-native visitors and also operated a large mail order business for native-made goods. He was also an active businessman and at one time, along with his two sons, operated more than 30 trading posts, ranches and businesses in the region.



Hubbell Family (NPS Photo)

Business at the trading post thrived for nearly 40 years and then, in 1930 and at the age of 77, John Hubbell died leaving the business to his wife and two sons, John Jr. and Roman. The three continued to operate the trading post until the late 1950's and the family eventually sold it to the National Park Service.

In 1965 Congress declared the Hubbell Trading Post a National Historic Site. Such sites are federally protected areas of land containing one or more historical features tied to a particular event or subject of national significance. Today there are 78 National Historic Sites within the United States and all are managed by the National Park Service.

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John Lorenzo Hubbell was many things over the course of his long life: businessman and farmer, politician and patron of the arts.

But he's primarily remembered as the model of a successful Indian trader.

Although Hubbell Trading Post has been a National Historic Site for nearly half a century, drawing visitors from around the globe, it's still a fully operating trading post, the oldest on the Navajo Reservation.

Hubbell was born in 1853 and raised in the village of Pajarito, just south of Albuquerque. His father was White, his mother Mexican.

As a young man, Hubbell worked as a clerk at a trading post in Kanab, Utah. In 1872 he was involved in some sort of fracas in Panguitch. Details are murky — it may have been a fight, or he may have been wounded while making a hasty exit through a married woman's bedroom window.

Either way, having decided that a change in scenery might be beneficial to his health, Hubbell made his way to Arizona, where he worked as an interpreter at Fort Defiance. Then, after a stint as a clerk at Fort Wingate, N.M., Hubbell arrived in Ganado, where he purchased a trading post — his second — in 1878.

A year later, he married Una Rubi, of Cebolleta, N.M. They had four children — Adela, Barbara, Lorenzo and Roman.

Although the trading post's original buildings have long since been razed, Hubbell's new post, completed in 1883, still bears his name.

Much of the post looks just as it did 100 years ago. It's easy to imagine Hubbell and his sons gathered around the stove in the main room, chatting and negotiating trades with Navajo artisans.

In fact, many of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who traded with Hubbell are among today's customers, still bringing blankets, rugs and jewelry to exchange for groceries, tools and clothes.

In addition to running the trading post, Hubbell was elected Apache County sheriff, served in the territorial Legislature and the State Senate, and ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate.

Over the years Hubbell and his sons amassed something of a real-estate empire. Along with more than two dozen trading posts, they owned several ranches and freight lines.

Because he was fluent in four languages — Spanish, English, Navajo and Hopi — Hubbell often was called upon to read, write and translate letters. He explained government policies to his clients and, during an outbreak of smallpox in 1886, transformed his home into a makeshift hospital.

Over the years he and his family hosted explorers, politicians, writers, anthropologists, photographers and other visitors. Among the famous guests were former president Theodore Roosevelt, Civil War general turned novelist Lew Wallace and painter Maynard Dixon. He also met every U.S. president from Grover Cleveland to Theodore Roosevelt.

The Hubbells entertained so many visitors that their sons often claimed that guests slept in their rooms more than they did. To feed his household and guests, Hubbell employed a full-time cook and a couple of assistants, as well as a baker, who on occasion made up to 400 loaves of bread a week in a large oven behind the house.

As Hubbell's reputation grew, people throughout the region took to calling him "Don" Lorenzo, using the Spanish honorific as a sign of respect for his fair dealing, compassion and hospitality.

Hubbell died in 1930 and was buried on the hill behind his home. Following Navajo custom, his grave is unmarked.

Members of the Hubbell family lived in the house until 1967. Today their home, full of fascinating antiques and works of art, is open for tours.



This is a beautiful vintage 1940's Brass metal bezel set turquoise Hubbel art glass cabochon link bracelet. Oval cabochons of Hubbel glass, a very collectible Czech art glass brought in to the US around the turn of the century by **Lorenzo Hubbel**.





J.L. Hubbell: Silver Tongue, Golden Heart and Wool Rugs

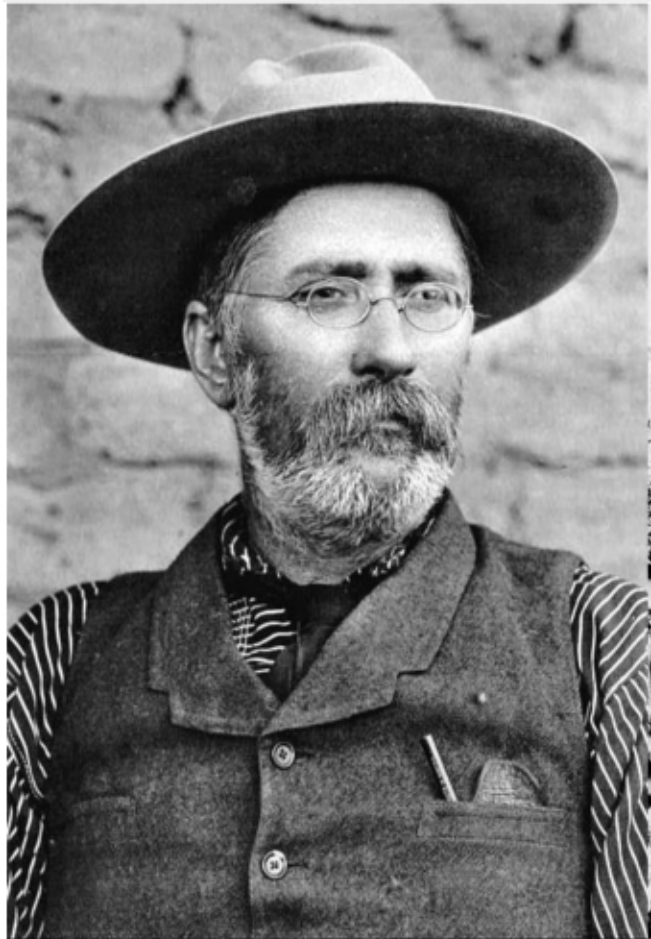
Thursday, 11 July 2019



Rug, c. 1910
Navajo; probably Ganado, Arizona
Dyed wool; 65 x 105 in.
2019.5.1
Gift of Dennis J. Aigner

White Hat

There is good cause for the romanticizing of the American West: it is a breathtaking part of this nation. Mesas rise from the red earth like monolithic and silent guardians; the skies are distilled blue, endless and not cloudy all day. More than just painfully beautiful vistas, the American West was—until the turn of the 20th Century—symbolic of freedom and the idea that people were bound only by the ideologies that they brought with them. All too often this vision was a warped one, but J.L. Hubbell's realization of the Western dream has been kindly remembered for the humanitarian principles he brought with him when he set up shop as a trader of Navajo textiles. This blog post looks at both Hubbell and three Navajo rugs that passed through his Arizona trading post, focusing especially on how Hubbell affected the aesthetic of these textiles.



Hubbell, circa 1910 (NPS, Hubbell Trading Post NHS; HUTR 4709)

Ganado Mucho Navajo Leader, late 19th Century

Many Ganado (Cattle)

John Lorenzo Hubbell was born in the New Mexico territory in 1853 as a son to a Connecticut Yankee rancher and the Spanish heiress to one of the territory's large land grants. Seeking some excitement, in his early career Hubbell travelled the Southwest taking odd jobs and eventually working at the Navajo Agency in Fort Defiance, Arizona. It was there that he learned to speak Navajo, a language which would shape his career as a merchant. In 1876 Hubbell moved to Pueblo Colorado, Arizona and two years later he purchased a trading post. To avoid confusion with a similarly named locale, he renamed the trading post Ganado after Ganado Mucho, a friend and Navajo leader he had met while working at Fort Defiance. Hubbell's new post stocked supplies for the local Navajo population and bought and sold the textiles they made.





Rug, c. 1910
Navajo; Ganado, Arizona
Dyed wool; 73 x 49 in.
2019.5.2
Gift of Dennis J. Aigner

Woven from Watercolor

Though not the first trader into the region, Hubbell was the first to take an involved role in the creation of the textiles. His unique approach was to find excellent examples of Navajo textiles from East Coast collections and to get painters to create small watercolor paintings of their designs. He used these paintings both as templates for the weavers and to show potential buyers options they could commission. This system was problematic though: its “plates” deviated slightly from traditional Navajo weavings, it removed much of the creative aspect of the weavings, perpetuated the commodification of indigenous arts, created dependency where Hubbell provided weavers with dyed wool for rugs, and made him the sole curator of Navajo designs and color patterns. But Hubbell was unique in that he lived the lifestyle he sold in curios to East Coast tourists. In exchange for asking for the highest quality outputs from Navajo weavers, he advocated for them and insisted that they were paid fair wages. While almost all regional traders abused the cheap labor, Hubbell has instead been remembered for his honest and fair treatment of the Navajo which at the end of his life earned him the endearing title *Naakaii Saani*, Old Mexican.



Rug, 1905-1920
Navajo; Ganado, Arizona
Dyed wool; 88 × 67 in.
2016.12.2
Gift of Dennis J. Aigner

The Hubbell Cross

Aside from just pulling from older Navajo designs, Hubbell also added new motifs to the repertoire of the weavers he worked with and set more general aesthetic standards. While the lack of catalogues for his early textiles makes their identification difficult, certain identifiers can be seen in all three of the textiles featured in this post. The swastika motif, an ancient symbol of good fortune and a reference to the Navajo night chant, was extremely prevalent design which increasingly appeared in Hubbell's rugs circa 1900, especially after positive feedback from buyers like the Fred Harvey Company. Other identifiers are the distinct, bold borders; the gray, white black and especially red color palettes; and the usage of the Bishop Cross, which can be seen at the corners of the largest textile's central diamond and in the zig-zagging red border. The interlocking patterns on two of this post's textiles were less common, but still characteristic of Ganado-area textiles.



Hubbell buying a rug on the north wall of the post, probably from the Navajo weaver, circa 1897 (NPS, Hubbell Trading Post NHS; HUTR 2165)

Don Lorenzo the Magnificent

Hubbell was an incredibly successful businessman, once owning up to 24 trading posts throughout California, New Mexico, and Arizona. He was well-respected by the local Navajo he served and purchased textiles from, and by the travelers he entreated with warm hospitality and tall tales from his life. After his passing in 1930, his children continued his legacy of operating his most famous location, the Hubbell Trading Post in Ganado, Arizona. The trading post is still in operation today as a National Historic Site operated by the National Park Service and maintains close ties with the new generation of weavers whose art Hubbell's trading helped keep alive.

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