Forgotten Connections: Maine's Role in the Navajo Textile Trade, 1880-1930

Maine Perspective
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From 1880-1930, rugs, blankets, saddle blankets, throw pillows and wall hangings made their way to Maine as souvenirs of vacations and honeymoons to the Southwest. Others were brought back by railroad employees or purchased through catalogs sent to the Northeast by reservation traders. More importantly, Maine residents and a Maine business, W. Cushing and Co., influenced rug styles and designs. Through the textiles themselves, historic photographs and other artifacts, "Forgotten Connections" examines an indigenous cultural artform's evolution and seemingly improbable connections between Maine and the Southwest.

Photo courtesy of Maine Historic Preservation Commission

Fred E. Gignoux cottage, Delano Park, Cape Elizabeth, c. 1905.

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Hudson Museum hours: 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Tuesday-Friday; 9 a.m.-3 p.m., Saturday; 11 a.m.-3 p.m., Sunday
uring the past 10 years, I have seen over 2,000 Navajo textiles in Maine, the vast majority brought here between 1880-1930. The railroad opened the West to trade and the East Coast market welcomed Navajo textiles. Whether a piece was originally appreciated because it was colorful; exquisitely made; an exotic souvenir of an adventure-filled journey to the wild West, or as an artistically dramatic masterpiece, each textile has a different story about how and why it was brought here. Some of the textiles are well-loved and treasured pieces of a family’s history; others surface in dumps, auctions and yard sales with no clue as to how they arrived here. Navajo textiles brought here by the thousands a century or so ago now hide in doghouses and attic trunks, double as pick-up upholstery, couch throws, tractor covers and blankets for cooling down work horses as well as remain on display in family homes, camps and museums. Many are part of a valued collection painstakingly put together by individuals who appreciate the beauty and nuances of Navajo weaving and its history.

Each Navajo textile found in Maine was made by a weaver working in an isolated, some would say desolate, area in an effort to support her family. Each expresses the quintessential Navajo goal - that her work be done in harmony and beauty. So it was for the first Navajo weaver, so it is for every Navajo weaver. The connections between Navajo weavers and Maine seem unlikely, yet they existed. Perhaps there is another connection between the Navajo weaver and the Maine customer - an appreciation shared by those who live in rugged isolated natural majesty. Perhaps what the weaver has translated into her work was recognized by those who live in beauty.

Bobby Ann Packwood
Guest Curator, Hudson Museum

This Indian Room in Alvarado Hotel, Albuquerque, is typical of those Mary Halkyard and her family may have visited.

Maine resident Mary Halkyard vividly recalls a train trip she took with her aunt and mother from Bangor to California: “When we stopped in Albuquerque, the station platform was filled with Navajo women, rugs, blankets and men who were trying to sell these to all of us who emerged from the train. Women wearing colorful blouses, long full patterned skirts and heavy turquoise jewelry sat in front of large looms working on their wares. They seemed shy compared to the apparently Mexican men who were selling Navajo textiles. The men shouted prices, competing loudly with each other while unfolding rug after rug from huge stacks surrounding them. I noticed the partially finished works on the looms and was very curious about the odd way they wove, in segments that were not straight across. My mother and aunt purchased four rugs that day as mementos of our journey. We stayed in California two years and then returned to my grandfather’s home in Fairfield.”
A Navajo woman offers a rug for trade at the J. Lorenzo Hubbell trading post, c. 1895.

When the railroad crossed the Navajo reservation in 1881, it brought not only an influx of customers for textiles and supplies, but former employees. One of the young men who left the railroad to set up a trading post was Elias S. Clark from Portland. In 1882, he purchased the rights to trade in New Mexico. Setting up his operation in a surplus Civil War army tent, he stayed only a few years before leaving the area to become an attorney in Phoenix. Clark’s trading interests were eventually purchased by J.B. Moore who, in 1903, issued one of the first mail order catalogues featuring Navajo rugs that could be ordered and shipped East by rail. Moore encouraged certain types of designs in Navajo woven goods, and was fond of textiles in natural colors with the addition of some aniline red dye. Numerous J.B. Moore-type Navajo textiles dating from the era can be found in Maine today.

Charles Morse was born in Bangor in 1859 and graduated from the University of Maine with a degree in civil engineering in 1879. Following his graduation, Morse sought out other UM alumni who assisted him in finding positions in the rapidly developing western railway system. January 1886-April 1913, he was employed by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, eventually becoming chief engineer. His Navajo textile collection dates from 1880-1910 and was used to decorate his log cabin in Quimby where the Morses came every summer, accompanied by servants and gardeners.
Boating in Northeast Harbor are, left to right, Mary Cabot Wheelwright, Clyde Beyale and Hosteen Klah

The only child of wealthy Bostonians, Mary Cabot Wheelwright revolted against her upperclass eastern background and used her inheritance to help preserve Navajo myths, prayers, songs and sandpaintings. In the early 1920s, during one of her visits to the Southwest, Wheelwright was introduced to Hosteen Klah, a Navajo medicine man and sandpainter. Klah, in turn, came to visit Wheelwright at her family's summer home in Northeast Harbor in 1928.

In addition to her efforts to preserve Navajo ceremonies, Wheelwright was an enthusiastic patron of Native American Art. Assisted by her niece, Lucy Cabot, a dye expert, she encouraged a return to vegetal dyes and simple striped patterns. It came at a time when the market for Navajo blankets was poor because the patterns of the 1920s had lost their Indian-quality in design and the use of commercial dyes made for unnatural colors. Not only did Wheelwright's suggestions boost the slumping textile trade by returning it to its beginnings, but even today, contemporary pieces continue to reflect her influence.

Founded in 1881, W. Cushing and Co., Dover-Foxcroft, was one of the major suppliers of synthetic dyes to the Navajos. Company tradition has it that Wainwright Cushing, the firm's founder, was introduced to the Navajo trade by another Mainer, perhaps Elias Clark. Cushing developed an easy-to-use line of dyes under "The Navajo Dyes" label that required no mordants or chemical setting agents with such colors as Turkey Red. Today, W. Cushing and Co., Kennebunkport, continues to produce dyes for the Navajos, marketing them through the same networks developed in the early 20th century.

Wainwright Cushing, a manufacturer of the Cushing Perfection Dyes, is a leading citizen of the town of Foxcroft. He was born in Belknap, Me., Aug. 17, 1850. He grew to manhood in Belknap and Call and was educated in the public schools and at Franklin Academy. He enlisted in April, 1861, and was mustered into service in Co. A of the 7th Regiment. He took part in the following battles: Yorktown, Williamsburg, White Oak Swamp, Gaines' Mill, the two battles of Bull Run, Antietam, the two battles of Fredericksburg, Opequon Creek, Cedar Creek, Fisher's Hill and Gettysburg. He was promoted to the rank of sergeant and at the close of the war was second lieutenant. Mr. Cushing was honorably discharged in July, 1865. In 1871 he went to Ulysses, Me., and entered the employ of the Brown Mfg. Co., with which he remained till Oct., 1894. He then became the manufacturer of the Cushing Perfection Dyes. The first year he conducted the business alone, but now employs from twenty-five to forty workmen and his dyes are sold in every state in the Union, in Alaska, and Mexico. Mr. Cushing was married in Oct., 1886, to Eliza A. McDonald, who was born in Camden, Me. They have two children. Mr. Cushing has a wide acquaintance in this State having served five years as Register of Probate for Penobscot Co., and having been Deputy at the U. S. R. for the State of Me. In 1896 he was a member of Gov. Chase's Executive Council. Mr. Cushing and family are Baptists. In politics he is a Republican.

"Souvenir of Dover and Foxcroft: The Busy, Thriving, Flourishing Up-to-Date Twin Towns" (1899)