



[James Boyd](#)
[Hubbell Papers.](#)

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▲ Hubbell (James Boyd) Papers, 1834; 1865-1906

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A picture of the organization and activities of the little-known North-western Fur Company which operated on the upper Missouri from 1865 to 1870, emerges from the papers of James Boyd Hubbell, presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by his daughter, Mrs. Vincent W. Dawson of St. Paul. The collection consists of sixty-five items, including Hubbell's correspondence with his family and business associates, his diaries for 1880 and 1891 (type-written and microfilm copies), business account, articles of agreement, depositions, a diary kept in 1834 (microfilm) by William Tew, Hubbell's father-in-law, and miscellaneous papers.

Hubbell, one of the best known traders on the upper Missouri after the Civil War, came to Minnesota from Winsted, Connecticut, in 1857. He settled in Mankato, where he entered the mercantile business and helped organize the First National Bank. With his fellow-townsmen, Alpheus F. Hawley, he formed a partnership to trade in the Far West. By the 1860s, he was engaged in freighting, filling government contracts, and trading with the Indians at several posts on the Missouri River. He was the initiator and moving spirit in the organization of the North West Fur Company in 1865. His interests later expanded into railroads in Minnesota and Montana, mines in Montana and Dakota, and townsites in Montana. He moved to St. Paul in 1881, and died there in 1905, at the age of sixty-nine.

Before Hubbell's papers came to light, scholars had little information about the man and his company. From the writings of Hiram M. Chittenden, searchers could glean a few facts and a number of guesses. It was known that the North-western Fur Company was organized in 1864-65 by Hubbell and his partner Alpheus

F. Hawley, who bought out the upper Missouri posts of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company; that the firm sold its posts below Fort Union in 1869 to Durfee and Peck; and that it retired from the trade above Fort Union in 1870. General Regis de Trobriand, commandant at Fort Stevenson from 1867 to 1869, added more information when he recounted in his diary stories about some of the company's traders. St. Paul newspapers in the 1860s carried brief stories about Hubbell's trading activities, and later, in the 1890s, published a series of his reminiscences on this active period in his life. In addition, the papers of Alexander Ramsey and John P. Williamson in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society contain a little material about Hubbell. To these scattered sources, the Society's newly acquired papers contribute significant information on a man who has until now remained a question mark to the historian of the West.

The story of the company unfolded in the Hubbell Papers is fairly detailed. The events leading to its formation began in the spring of 1865 when Hubbell was in Washington, D. C., obtaining licenses to trade with the Indians. There he met Charles P. Chouteau, Jr., who suggested that Hubbell buy the forts and goods of the Chouteau company on the Missouri River. Hubbell made the purchase, and then gave Hawley, his partner, a half interest. James A. Smith, prime mover in J. A. Smith and Company of Chicago, heard about the sale from Chouteau's agent in New York. He went to Washington to see Hubbell, who records that "we then decided to organize the N. W. Fur Co., including C. Francis Bates, J. A. Smith, Alpheus F. Hubbell, and Jas. B. Hubbell."

The agreement creating the Northwestern Fur Company, signed in New York on March 23, 1865, gives information in the arrangements made by the partners. Hubbell, who already held government licenses to trade with the Indians at

Forts Sully, Rice, and Berthold, on the Missouri River, and at points yet unnamed in the Crow Indian country, as well as a sutlership at Fort Sully, agreed to proceed to the posts named in his licences. At the post he agreed to carry with the Chouteau Company "the terms of sale proposed by Messrs Chouteau & Co taking due and formal possession of the forts, trading posts, good and accessories."

The duties and rewards of each partner are clearly defined in the agreement which was to run for four years. Hawley and Hubbell as managing partners contributed to the new company's capital ten thousand dollars in cash and the goods already at their posts in Dakota Territory; in return they were to receive one-half of the net profits. Bates and Smith agreed "to pay debts owed to" the Chouteau organization and to furnish goods and cash to an aggregate value of fifty thousand dollars. In return, each was to receive one-fourth of the net profits. An adjustment in the distribution of profits was made at the end of the first year, when Bates increased his contribution to the company's capital. Under the terms of the new arrangement, Bates received two-fifths of the net profits; Hubbell and Hawley, two-fifths; and J. A. Smith and Company, one-fifth.

On March 9, 1869, at the end of the four-year period, the partners made an agreement intended eventually to liquidate the active business of the company. The second agreement provided, however, for the extension of some phases of the company's operations for another year. This document contains information on the disposing of the forts along the Missouri at and below Fort Buford, and on Devils Lake; and on the continuation of business at Forts Browning, Benton, and Sherman in 1869-70 with goods transferred from the lower posts.

Other manuscripts bearing on the company include its accounts with the Choteau organization, and with Hawley and Hubbell, giving details on the financial arrangements among the three groups and containing lists of furs gathered by the company at the Upper Missouri posts. Bearing on the business of the company, too, is a letter written by Hubbell on May 24, 1866 to his wife in Mankato while aboard a steamboat going up the Missouri. In it he reviews the arrangements made with his partners and gives a report on the progress of the business: "Hawley remains at Ft. Sully. he is making a good trade there will probably get from four to five thousand [buffalo] Robes there besides his small Fur. Our collection of Robes will probably be about 25 000 & small Fur enough to swell the collection up to Equal to 30 000. This will pay for every thing which has been invested and whatever Good & property are left on hand with the Forts & Buildings at the Post will be clear profit."

While Hubbell was engaged in the fur trade on the upper Missouri, he was caught in a sporadic war between the whites and the Sioux. In transporting goods from Minnesota and from one post to another, his men lost some of the trade goods and furs. Indian hostilities touched his interests too, when he furnished supplies to the troops during the seige of Fort Buford in the winter of 1866-67. From 1868 until 1904, Hubbell tried to recover losses by presenting claims on behalf of the Northwestern Fur Company against the United State government. In preparing his claims, he wrote letters and secured depositions -- all of which contain information on his activities in the Indian trade of the West. The documents have considerable data on the attacks made by the Sioux on Fort Buford, near the junction of the Missouri and the Yellowstone rivers, Hubbell's relations with the Indians who tried to block the passages of his wagon trains carrying supplies to the trading posts, the effect of Indian warfare on the trade, the hostilities of Indian bands led by Sittingg

Bull, and the destruction of Hubbell's trading post on the Niobrara River. Although Senators Knute Nelson and Moses Clapp urged that Hubbell's claims be allowed, the government never granted the funds requested.

The papers relating to the claims also give information on a shadowy subject in Minnesota-Dakota history -- the removal of Sioux bands from Minnesota to the Crow Creek Reservation at Fort Thompson on the Missouri River. A deposition by Byron E. Pay dated November 20, 1902 tells how he was engaged by Hubbell in October, 1864, to transport the remaining Santee Indians from the Sioux reservation about Fort Ridgely on the Minnesota River to Fort Thompson. At Pipestone, Pay's party met Hubbell's train for fifty wagons loaded with supplies for the Indians at Fort Thompson. After the two groups reached Fort Thompson, twenty wagons loaded with goods for the Indian trade set out for Fort Berthold. The train proceeded up the Missouri past Fort Sully, before it met with serious opposition. Stopped by a band of hostile Blackfoot Sioux, the men of the train gave up some of their goods to get passage through the country. Pushing on to Fort Rice, the train encountered further trouble when officers at the fort ordered the traders off the premises. At length, after giving up still more goods to hostile Indians, the party reached Fort Berthold more than two months after setting out.

Hubbell's experience as a trader was only part of a varied business career. Operating from his homes in Mankato and St. Paul, he traveled extensively in the United States acquiring and developing interests in railroads in Minnesota and Dakota, mines in Montana and Dakota, townsites in Montana and gypsum mills in Michigan. Railroads seem to have absorbed his attention in the 1870s and 1880s and the papers contain some information on the Minnesota and Northwestern Railroad Company, the Southern Minnesota Railroad Company, the Central

Railroad Company of Minnesota, and the Rocky Fork and Cooke City Railway Company of Montana. The latter road published a Prospectus in 1887 giving data on gold, silver, and copper mining in Montana; and on the various companies formed by Minnesota and Montana men to mine in Montana. A copy in the Hubbell Papers is not the only indication found there that Hubbell was broadly interested in mining. Also included is a 1903 stock certificate in the Cook Gold Mining and Milling Company of South Dakota, illustrated with mining scenes. Other references to mining appear in his diary for 1880 which gives an account of a trip from Fort Keogh to St. Paul and tells of his visits to the Homestake, Father de Smet, and Florence mines.

One item in the Hubbell Papers that has little relationship to the other manuscripts is the diary of William Tew. Kept in 1834 on a trip from Canton, Connecticut, to Ohio, and back again, the diary comments on travel by steamboat, canal boat, and "a two-wheeled hack drawn by two Steers"; on the docks and other sights in New York City; on the salt works at Syracuse and Lake Onondaga in New York; on Montesuma, New Yor, where "Every Building [is] Either a Grocer[y] or a Tavern"; the flour mills and locks at Clyde, New York; the locks and canal at Lockport, New York; Dutch people at Buffalo moving from East to West; a shipwreck close to Buffalo, described as "A Distressing Time. Men Women & Children Lying on the Deck in Every Direction"; and visits to friends and relatives in New Lisbon, Canton, Worcester, Mt. Vernon, and Delaware in Ohio.

He kept in touch with his relatives in Connecticut, where he lived until 1857, through correspondence with his uncle, James Boyd. On September 6, 1868, Boyd wrote a long letter to Hubbell about the family history. The nephew who was trying for fortune in the "wild Regions" of the West had an eager audience in his uncle, who asked ever for more news of his "goings and

movements." The stay-at-home seemed wistful about the nephew who ranged in his travels from Michigan to New Orleans, from New York to Montana, as he wrote: "To me the rapid growth of the West has an engrossing interest, and my admiration of the energetic men, who are accomplishing such wonders there, is unbounded. I hope I may not only live to see the rails all laid to San Francisco & Pugets Sound, but that I may yet travel over them and see the wonders of the Pacific region." Other than this 1868 letter, there is very little personal information about the Hubbell family in the papers. Hubbell's many references to his home in Mankato and to St. Paul, where he lived after 1881 and where his business interests were closely allied with those of Amherst H. Wilder, bespeak his affection for the state in which he made his home.

These papers are not substantial enough to permit an interpretation of the extent of Hubbell's influence in the economic life of the Northwest. The papers reveal Hubbell as a chameleon-like entrepreneur who shifted businesses whenever opportunities unfolded. In a new country, he turned from banking to follow the natural lines of economic development on the frontier -- furs, mining, trading, wagon transportation, railroads and townsites. James Boyd Hubbell typifies well the businessman in the nineteenth century who grew up with the country.

- I. Hubbell, James Boyd, 1836-1905. II. Boyd, James, .
 III. Wilder, Amherst Holcomb, 1828-1894. IV. Wilkinson, Morton Smith, 1819-
 1894. V. Chouteau, (Pierre, Jr.) and Company. 1. Wilkinson, Mahlon H .
 2. Fur Trade - Missouri River. 3. American Fur Company. 4. North West
 Fur Company. 5. Northwest Fur Company. 6. Northwestern Fur Company.
 7. Missouri River - Fur Trade. 8. Mankato, Minnesota. 9. Baker, Isaac G .