

# Nampeyo: A Child Prodigy

By STEVE ELMORE

1. Nampeyo, 1903. Photograph by Homer Earle Sargent Jr. Library of Congress.
2. This Polacca-slipped Hopi jar with traditional Rain Bird designs around the bottom and abstract Shalako bird triangles on the neck is a good example of Nampeyo's early traditional work from 1875-1880. Photo: Elmore Indian Art.

**B**orn around 1856 or 1857, Nampeyo's childhood was wrapped in Hopi traditional life. Other than her assumed traditional village life, her early years as an artist have been considered essentially lost to us. "Nothing is known about Nampeyo's early pottery," Barbara Kramer bluntly stated in her book-length biography of Nampeyo as recently as 1998. Further research has increased our knowledge of Nampeyo's early life. I present several original sources that provide new insight.

## Edmund Nequatewa, Hopi Chief and Author

Edmund Nequatewa, (pronounced Ney-quat'-te-whaa) whose views are overlooked by some Nampeyo scholars, becomes our strongest link to Nampeyo's early life. In 1942, after Nampeyo's death, Matthew Stirling of the Bureau of American Ethnology prompted Harold Colton, director of the Museum of Northern Arizona and publisher of *Plateau* magazine, to find out more about Nampeyo's life while those who knew her were still living. Colton sent Hopi writer Edmund Nequatewa to First Mesa to interview older Hopi-Tewa potters who had personally known Nampeyo. The potters related many stories of her early abilities to mold and paint pottery as a child. Like Heinrich Schliemann trusting Homer's oral tradition to find the historical Troy, we find that the oral knowledge of the other potters is a useful guide to understanding Nampeyo's early life. Importantly, Nequatewa stresses that while Nampeyo was born of a Hopi-Tewa mother and a Hopi father, Nampeyo learned to pot and paint from her Hopi paternal grandmother.

Destined by his lineage to become a Hopi chief, Nequatewa wrote *Truth of a Hopi* and *Born a Chief*, two excellent books on Hopi and his own life, as well as several articles for *Plateau*.



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When I mentioned Nequatewa to Rachel Sahmie, she remembered that he had been a regular family visitor during her childhood, and that he knew the Nampeyo family and was well regarded by them. Her comments strengthened my confidence in his information, and I quote him at length to give a more complete picture of Nampeyo's early life, especially the development of her pottery making. As we shall see, Nequatewa's information on Nampeyo correlates with the modernware ceramics in the Keam Collection in a convincing way. Nequatewa wrote in *Plateau* magazine in 1942:

"Nampeyo's father, Qots-vema, was so proud of his baby girl, that he would often take her to his mother's house at Walpi. When the girl was old enough to go to see her grandmother by herself, she would watch her grandma making pottery. When she got a little older, she started to mold miniature ceramics of her own, and her kind grandma just let her go with pottery making, and as she grew her work improved and the grandmother was very much pleased. When she became a young maiden she was as good a potter as any in Walpi, and she did all the decorating for the old lady as she had become a good pottery designer. She was not only fair, but was considered to be one of the prettiest girls on First Mesa.

...When the stores were established on the reservation by the white traders, she was doing a good deal of pottery work, so that when the stores began to trade for pottery, her work was among the best, and she was getting good prices. With high hopes she decided to do her best and to improve her work. Of course at that time, she was still using the old Hopi or Walpi designs, which she had learned from her grandmother.

When the Tewa people first came to the Hopi country and settled there, they had their own art of pottery making, and they made only the cook ceramics, water carriers, and the wide mouthed roasting bowls.

...At that time Nampeyo was the only potter in Hano who made Hopi-

type pottery and this made the women very jealous, for they saw that she was making good money on her work. Then all the women in Hano starting making the Hopi-type of pottery and stopped making their own Hano wares which were still in demand by the other villages.

At first the work of the Hano women who were then making the Hopi-type pottery seemed very poor in the sight of the Walpi people, who criticized their efforts.

Lesou thought that if his wife used a different design on each jar that she made she might get more money for her pottery, so he used to go to Awatovi looking for more different kinds of designs, and he also made some trips to Taukivi, Payupki and to many other ruins on the reservation."

Although lacking specific dates, Nequatewa's impressionistic account of Nampeyo's early life is persuasive. There is no conflict between his views and other contemporary accounts. Starting in 1875 with W. H. Jackson, Alexander Stephen, Jesse Fewkes and Walter Hough, all described Nampeyo as an exceptionally talented and productive potter during this early period.

My own view of Nampeyo's early work and development is directly supported by Nequatewa's information. Nampeyo began by using the traditional geometric Walpi designs she learned from her Hopi grandmother in Walpi, along with katsina designs. Later she used the varied prehistoric designs of the Sikyatki Revival to expand Hopi pottery's appeal to the art market.

This progression is readily visible in the Keam Collection. There are many bowls, dippers and some fine jars with early Walpi designs. Few pieces show ethnographic wear from use in the village—they were made fresh for the trader. There are so many similar ceramics that Edward Wade stated in *Historic Hopi Ceramics* that "bowls, ladles, cups and tiles—show signs of mass production," a clear reference to the repetition I have described.

Nequatewa singles Nampeyo out as the first and only Tewa potting commercially in the beginning. He stated that "she was doing a good deal of pottery



3. First photograph of Nampeyo with her brother, Tom Polacca, on her right, at Hano on First Mesa, August 1875. William Henry Jackson. Smithsonian.
4. This Polacca-slipped open bowl by Nampeyo features early Jeditto designs of four parrots circling a kiva. Made around 1890, it shows Nampeyo using many different ancient sources for her inspiration. Photo: Elmore Indian Art.
5. William Henry Jackson, 1873. Library of Congress.

work,” even before the trading post opened in 1875. He reported that at first the other Tewa potters ridiculed Nampeyo for painting Hopi designs, while the traditional Hopi potters criticized her as a Tewa copying Hopi designs.

But “with high hopes” Nampeyo decided to persevere in her work as a potter. Through her brother Tom Polacca’s charm and abilities as an interpreter, Nampeyo and her brother grew accustomed to dealing with the outside Anglo world. “The fame of these two is due almost completely to their popularization by American friends,” wrote Edward Dozier in 1966.

At their home in Tewa Village, the northern village on First Mesa, they rented out rooms and fed travelers. Hopi tradition dictated that as uncle to Nampeyo’s children, Polacca had special responsibilities to her household. Undoubtedly, he promoted her ceramics to Keam and visitors alike.

Significantly, Nampeyo had multiple outlets for her pottery early in her career. She traded to Keam, who sold her work out of his post and to Hubbell. According to Frank McNitt’s *Indian Traders*, Hubbell, in turn, was the major supplier to other traders, especially in New Mexico and Colorado, so that a chain of demand was

created for Nampeyo’s work, which led eventually to every Fred Harvey store along the railroads of the West and all the way back to Chicago. I have seen old labels on her pieces from Indian trading posts from New York City to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, Nampeyo sold directly to visiting tourists at Hopi; government workers, local ranchers and cowboys, soldiers, teachers, and other visitors to First Mesa also acquired her pieces. Demand was respectable. “Nearly everyone bought something to take home” (Lewis Deitch, 1989).

Time moves more slowly on the Hopi Mesas than in our modern world. Nampeyo took a decade or more to begin producing the ceramics of the Sikyatki Revival, which would make her world famous and would keep her work in demand for the rest of her life.

I suspect Nampeyo had to figure out for herself how to make a real career of potting, and to make the changes in her life to do the hard work to succeed. Rachel says the clay itself teaches you when you want to get better. For Rachel, like most artists, creativity is its own reward. Nampeyo obviously loved the clay, and perhaps she didn’t need anything except her own determination and more experience potting



to improve. And of course, she needed a market, which Keam—and others—provided. Fortunately, the small local market of 1875 for her work was about to explode with opportunity.

### William Henry Jackson, Photographer of the West

The earliest contemporary information about Nampeyo dates back to August 1875, when she was about 17 or 18. The photographer William H. Jackson visited Hopi on assignment for the U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, and made the first two portraits of Nampeyo while camping near her house. His journal indicates he was also busily buying souvenirs of Hopi, including Nampeyo's pottery:

"Buying modern pottery and baskets as well as fetishes and small idols [katsinas] from Tom [Polacca] and his family [Nampeyo and her mother White Corn], we spent all our cash and also bartered away nearly everything else we had to trade. When we finally gathered up all our purchases, we wondered how we were going to carry them. My photographic work was concluded by making another negative of Num-pa-ya." (W. H. Jackson, *The Pioneer Photographer* ed. Bob Blair, NMNP 2005)

It's clear from this passage that "Num-pa-ya" was selling her pottery in 1875 and that the national treasure hunt for Hopi material culture had started. Nequatewa also indicates Nampeyo began trading her pottery at the white man's stores when they opened in 1875. Thus, two separate historical sources confirm Nampeyo was trading/selling her pottery as early as 1875.

At first, it seems mere coincidence that the photographer Jackson chose her as a model for a documentary photograph, a maiden with her distinctive butterfly hairdo, but Jackson was accompanied by a correspondent to the *New York Times*, James Barbour, who wrote the earliest account of the young Nampeyo, published in October 1, 1875, and it is impressive:

"The pretty Moqui princess who had waited upon us sat down in another part of the room and resumed her occupation of shelling corn from the cob into a dish.







## PUEBLO POTTERY

From where we were seated we could gaze upon her unobserved, and many an admiring glance was sent in that direction. She was of short stature and plump, but not unbecomingly so. Her eyes were almond shape, coal black, and possessed a voluptuous expression, which made them extremely fascinating. Her hair was...parted in the center, from the front all the way down behind, and put up at the sides in two large puffs, which, although odd to us, nevertheless seemed to enhance her beauty. Her complexion was much lighter than that of her family, and every movement of her head or exquisitely molded hands and arms or bare little feet was one of faultless grace.

“All the surroundings of the place, our reception, and the presence of this damsel, so unexpected and novel to us, overwhelmed us for a while with mute surprise, and we could only eat and look about

6. By 1900, Nampeyo had mastered the Sikyatki Revival style as seen in this large white-slipped bowl, with its bold and graceful design, ca. 1900. Photo: Elmore Indian Art.

7. Early Sikyatki Revival Ceramics: These two Polacca-slipped pieces by Nampeyo show some of her first efforts at introducing ancient Hopi designs into her work in the late 1880s. She is still struggling to perfect the seed jar form, which is still new to her. Photo: Elmore Indian Art.

us, almost believing we were acting in a dream. We had entered abruptly and awkwardly enough, with our hats unremoved and our garments ragged, travel-stained, and dusty; but on the approach of the modest and beautiful Num-pa-yu—signifying in the Moqui tongue a snake that will not bite—every head was uncovered in a moment, and each of us felt clumsy, dirty, and ashamed of our torn garments and unshaven faces.”

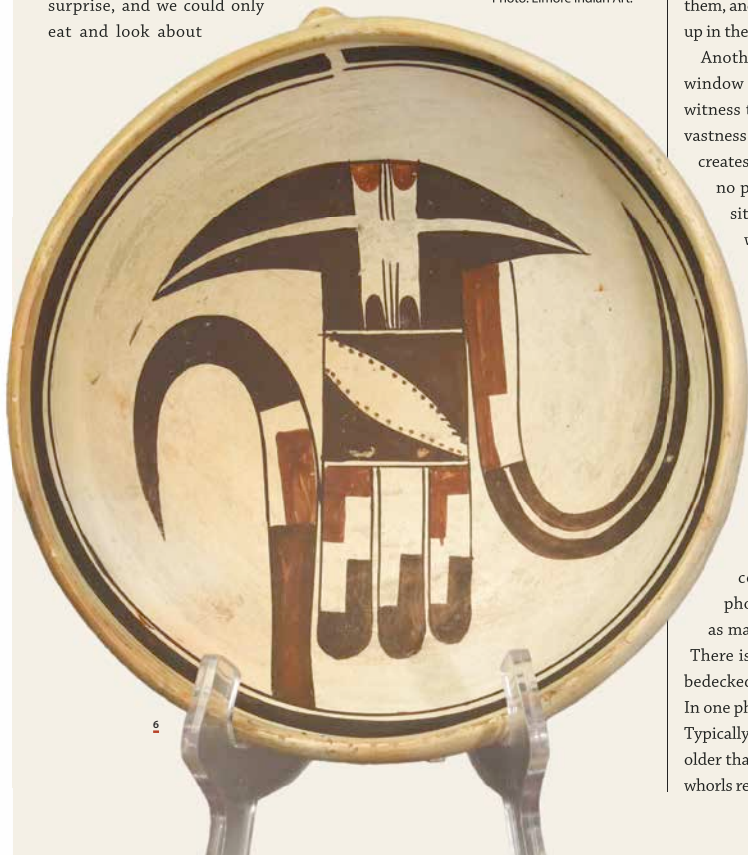
The Victorian eroticism of this passage is both notable and convincing. Yet there is not a word about the beautiful maiden as a potter.

Jackson's first photo of the young Nampeyo sitting in front of a traditional white-washed Pueblo home with her older brother Tom Polacca is a riot of photojournalistic detail from Hopi-land, 1875. The open dance plaza of Tewa Village is directly behind them, and a kiva ladder sporting a naked little boy rises up in the middle. On the left rooftop, more children.

Another unknown boy pokes his head out of the window on the top right, to both participate and witness the historic photograph in the making. The vastness of the disappearing horizon in the distance creates a feeling of emptiness and infinity. There is no pottery in the photograph. The two siblings sit a bit awkwardly in the foreground, but are willing participants in the photograph.

Two days later, Jackson photographed the young Nampeyo by herself, more as a personal portrait than as part of a landscape in the previous image. That he was clearly attracted to her is attested by his sketch of her in his notebook and a small portrait of Nampeyo he painted in oils. The image is of half of a stereopticon card; the image was widely circulated in its day.

Nampeyo's countenance in the photo with her family and others is open and confident, gazing back proudly at the photographer, not shy with turned-away face as many Native Americans reacted to the camera. There is still no pottery present, but the necklace-bedecked young maiden is calm and self-possessed. In one photo, she knows the photograph is about her. Typically for the time, she is barefoot. And she looks older than 15, closer to 17 or 18. She has had her hair whorls redone and added more jewelry than in the first



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photo, so maybe she was enjoying her flirtations with the visiting white men!

Obviously, Nampeyo stood out at an early age, enough to make a lasting impression on sophisticated travelers of the time. After all, Hopi is a matriarchal society and women have power and influence. Her mother served as the Clan Mother for the Corn Clan, and Nampeyo became Clan Mother in her time. She bore 14 children and lost nine of them early. In her world, she was extremely competent, and she matured into a strong, capable adult and eventually a fine artist.

In 1875, Nampeyo's beauty and personal charisma, not her pottery, attracted Jackson to her as a subject for portraiture.

But by 1887, her situation had changed, as again revealed in Jackson's personal memoirs, *Time Exposure*. Of his second visit to Hopi, 12 years later, he wrote, "One picture of the 1875 trip, though not in itself remarkable, has a certain sentimental value for me. That is the portrait of 'Num-pa-yu' ('Serpent-that-has-no-tooth'), sister of Captain Tom (Polacca) of Tewa, who served us with bread and corn at our first meal. She was then seventeen or eighteen, and such a remarkably pretty maiden that a dozen years later when in the vicinity I remembered to ask after her: I was told that 'Numpayu,' still very beautiful, had become the most famous pottery maker of the Moquis."

By 1887, more than her youthful beauty distinguished Nampeyo. Neither Barbour the journalist nor Jackson the photographer mention Nampeyo's pottery making directly in 1875. But 12 years later, Jackson mentions it, with a tone of surprise. In stating his personal opinion that his portrait of Nampeyo was not in itself remarkable, Jackson expresses both modesty for his skills as a photographer and strongly suggests that Nampeyo was not yet known as a potter. Consequently, in 1875, we can assume that she was potting traditionally, not commercially—not yet.

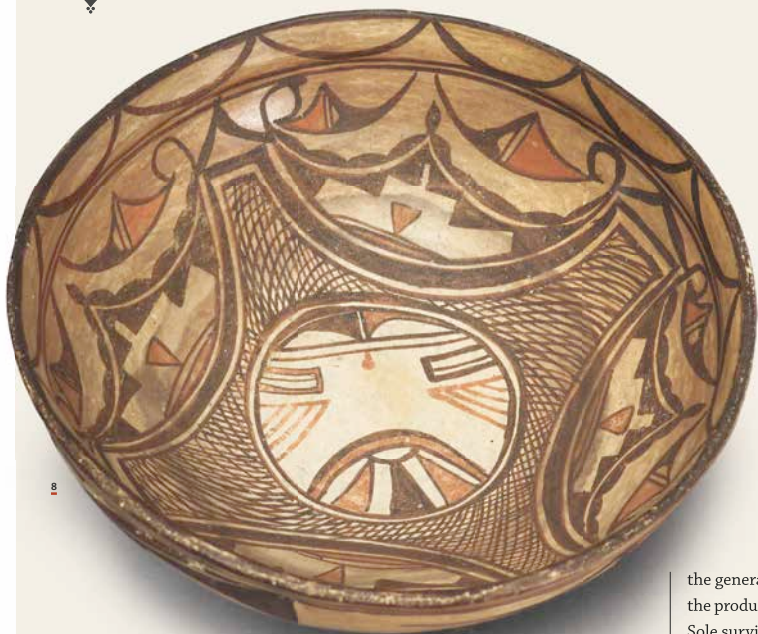
The business relationship between Keam and Nampeyo dramatically changed Hopi ceramics, beginning not with the Sikyatki Revival but with increased production of traditional Walpi and katsina ceramics that we see so clearly in the Keam Collection. Revivals of the older ceramics—the Sikyatki Revival—would begin later in the 1880s.

From Jackson's 1887 comment about Nampeyo becoming the most famous potter among the Moquis (an early term for Hopi) we know that Nampeyo did

significant potting between 1875 and 1887. This date is consistent with Nequatewa's reporting and my research on the Keam Collection. This uninterrupted creativity over a lifetime would become a large part of what establishes Nampeyo as a significant artist. Of her early production level, scholar Ron McCoy concludes: "Nampeyo's output must have been enormous, even early on, because Fewkes reported: 'Much of the pottery offered for sale by...dealers along the Santa Fe Railway in Arizona and New Mexico is imitation prehistoric Hopi ware made by Nampeyo.'"

But where is all the pottery she made during this early period? If most of her documented pieces date from after 1900, which of the older Hopi pieces in collections now were created by Nampeyo in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s? They haven't all disappeared. My answer, of course, is that many of them are in the Keam Collection, while others, as yet unattributed but similar, are in other museums and private collections. For example, I have seen numerous examples of ceramics similar to those in the Keam Collection at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Indeed, her ceramics are found throughout America. I have personally acquired her pieces from both Alaska and Hawaii as well as from most of the continental states.

In summary, Nequatewa's oral research among the Tewa potters after Nampeyo's death along with



8. This large traditional bowl features a Butterfly Maiden design surrounded by traditional Zuni elements. It was made by Nampeyo around 1880 and features her Polacca slip. Photo: Elmore Indian Art.

9. These two pieces are good examples of Nampeyo's early work around 1880. Both have her traditional Polacca slip as well as traditional stylized Sun kachinas in the design.

the historical photographs and writings of the photographer William H. Jackson's two visits, clearly establish that Nampeyo's career as an artist-potter began as early as 1875.

Nequatewa even states that Nampeyo was making quality pottery before 1875, and before the arrival of Keam. After all, her fellow villagers nicknamed her "The Old Lady" because as a young girl she could pot and paint as well as an older, experienced woman.

Viewed as a body of information, all of these sources strongly indicate that Nampeyo was a true child prodigy, gifted beyond her years with talent and drive, and even wisdom, as the future would reveal.

### Walter Hough

For more early historical evidence of Nampeyo's productivity and her singular role in the creation of the Sikyatki Revival, we are fortunate to have the writings of Walter Hough, who worked as Fewkes' assistant during the excavation of Sikyatki in 1896, and was later curator at the Smithsonian. In 1896, Hough describes his visit with Nampeyo, in which he refers to her as "an artist-potter, the sole survivor in Hano of

the generations of women artists who have deposited the product of their handicraft in the care of the dead." Sole survivor, indeed!

The young Hough was an early advocate of Nampeyo being recognized as an

artist. He accurately described her as an "artist-potter," donated her attributed pieces to the Smithsonian and wrote glowingly of her throughout the rest of his career.

### Lorenzo Hubbell

Keam sold his trading post to Lorenzo Hubbell in 1902 and retired to Britain. As early as 1905 we find *J. L. Hubbell, Indian Trader's Catalogue and Price List of Navajo Blankets & Indian Curio* pamphlet, in which Hubbell offers a large collection of "genuine Prehistoric pottery, embracing several distinct classes of ware, priced from \$2.50 to \$10.00 each."

He features a photograph of a seed jar by Nampeyo, with the following sales pitch: "Nanpea [sic] pottery; the only pottery that compares with the old in color, finish, and design. But one squaw living that knows the secret of making this pottery; from \$.50 to \$10.00."

Clearly, the reference to "but one squaw" signals Nampeyo's dominating significance, and omits all reference to other potters. The fact that Nampeyo makes the only pottery that compares with "the old in





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color, finish and design” also shows she was competing financially and artistically with prehistoric pottery. In 1905 ancient ceramics were an important part of the trader’s market. Nampeyo’s work sold for twice the price of other modernware Hopi pottery. At her top end, her pieces sold for as much as the old ones—\$10 a piece.

The 1906 federal Antiquities Act legally ended private pot hunting on federal lands. While excavation is legal today on private land, the Antiquities Act and the later Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 drastically reduced the art market for prehistoric ceramics. But there are thousands of prehistoric pieces in private hands that were fairly collected before any laws were enacted.

Hough’s writings from 1896, and Hubbell’s 1905 innovative mail order pamphlet both clearly indicate Nampeyo’s solitary status as an artist-potter. By 1905, she was a famous commodity.

In 1929, Ruth Bunzel in *Pueblo Pottery* wrote of the Sikyatki revival and Nampeyo: “Sikyatki ware, the finest pottery of the Hopi region...is the result of the efforts of one person.”

One last historical incident strongly supports Nampeyo’s singular position as the creative genius of the Sikyatki Revival. In 1907, when Nampeyo and Lesou left the Grand Canyon where she had been demonstrating pottery-making and returned to Hopi,

the Fred Harvey Company sought replacements for them. Edmund Nequatewa organized a group of Hopi potters to travel to the Grand Canyon as substitutes. But Nequatewa reports that when these potters saw Nampeyo’s pieces, they insisted they could not make pieces of such quality and asked to return to Hopi. Persuaded to stay, their work gradually improved as they struggled to equal Nampeyo’s pieces.

All of our historical sources on early Hopi pottery—Jackson, Fewkes, Hough, Stephen, Hubbell and later Bunzel and Nequatewa—specifically name Nampeyo as the single master potter of the time.

In sum, there is no historical evidence contradicting the view that Nampeyo made many of the modernwares in the Keam Collection. Indeed, there is much hard evidence to support it. My photographic analysis of the modernware ceramics in the Keam Collection provides the visual evidence of the ceramic comparisons that support this view. Hopefully, one of America’s earliest modern artists will be properly recognized and her work given proper credit. ❧

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*This article is excerpted from Elmore’s book In Search of Nampeyo: The Early Years, 1875-1892 that is available through [www.elmoreindianart.com](http://www.elmoreindianart.com).*

