

HISTORY OF FOUR MAJOR BUSINESS FIRMS AND THEIR MAIL FROM THE SPANISH PHILIPPINES

by Don Peterson

This four-part series provides an historical account of four major business firms, two American and two British, in the Spanish Philippines. The firms, presented in chronological order, are Peele, Hubbell and Company (1822-1887); Russell, Sturgis and Company (1827-1876); Ker and Company (1827-20th Century); and Smith, Bell and Company (1846-20th Century).

Peele, Hubbell and Company (American) 1822-1887

American and British business firms played an important role in the agricultural and economic development of the Philippine Islands and in its contribution to international trade in the 19th Century. Not surprisingly, their business activities generated important postal history from the Spanish colonial period.

The American firm of Peele, Hubbell and Company is believed to be the earliest foreign (non-Spanish and non-Asian) business house in Manila. Prior to establishing permanent residency on the Islands, the Hubbells made several visits, presumably to determine if a business house would be economically feasible. In 1817, Captain Ezekiel Hubbell of Bridgeport, Connecticut, went to Manila aboard the *Citizen*, representing the firm, Hoyt and Tom and Company. He did not stay, however, but returned to New York with a load of sugar and indigo valued at \$10,000. In 1819, he returned to Manila on the *Citizen* with his son, George William Hubbell, as supercargo (officer on the ship in charge of the cargo). Again, both returned to the United States. These trips convinced the family that a profitable trade could be established between Manila and the United States.

In March 1821, George William Hubbell married; and in April, sailed with his father, Ezekiel Hubbell, and brother, Henry Wilson Hubbell, aboard the *Ajax* to Manila, arriving in August 1821. The conclusion of the third trip to the Philippines resulted in the formation of the firm, George W. Hubbell and Company, in Manila the following year. George W. Hubbell was president and Henry W. Hubbell served as a clerk in his brother's firm. This firm, the progenitor of Peele, Hubbell and Company, commenced business and issued its first commercial circulars on January 1, 1822. The Hubbells have the distinction of being the first Americans to permanently reside on the Islands.

Using ships and shipping connections of their father, Ezekiel Hubbell, this firm successfully traded Philippines goods to the United States and Europe. By 1823, the firm was already exporting sugar to South America, and doing increased business with the United States, particularly to firms in New York and Salem. Between 1825 and 1827, George W. Hubbell spent time in the United States promoting trade with Manila, resulting in increased trade with the Philippines.

George W. Hubbell died on May 3, 1831, at the age of 35. His brother, Henry W. Hubbell, then assumed control of the firm. Since Henry W. Hubbell was in Connecticut when his brother died, the business in Manila was directed by John McAuley, the senior staff member of the firm. Also, in 1831, Henry W. Hubbell formed a new partnership with J. W. Peele of Salem, Massachusetts. J. W. Peele arrived in Manila aboard the *Sapphire* in May 1832. On July 1, 1832, circulars were issued announcing the formation of the new firm, **Peele, Hubbell and Company**. Under the leadership of Henry W. Hubbell, an increased effort was made by this firm to improve trade between the Philippines with England and China.

J. W. Peele and John McAuley resided in Manila, while Henry W. Hubbell sailed about the world on ships owned and chartered by his father and other New England ship owners. In 1834, Henry W. Hubbell retired and was succeeded by Henry Lawrence of New York. In that same year, Ezekiel Hubbell died. J. W. Peele and Henry Lawrence retired in 1843. From then on, although the firm's name remained the same, the principal partners resided in Salem.

The earliest postal history of this firm is known by a forwarding agent handstamp. Rowe (1984) reports the use of a forwarding agent handstamp by Peele, Hubbell and Company in Manila on mail to, or from, or passing through Manila, between 1834 and 1841. The oval handstamp measures 40 by 17 millimeters, is either black or red, and contains the words, "Forwd' by Peele, Hubbell & Co. Manila." It is considered rare. My records show that this handstamp was in use as late as 1844.

Peele, Hubbell and Company in Manila acted as a forwarding agent for mail to and from other business firms and private individuals in the Far East at that time. According to Rowe (1984), a forwarding agent is "a person, or firm, who undertakes to see that the goods or correspondence of another are transported without himself acting as the carrier."

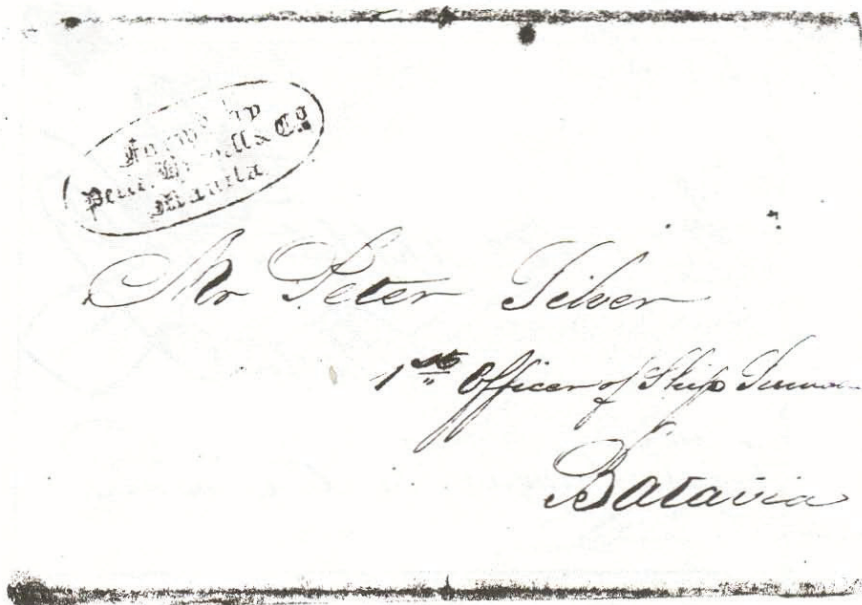


Figure 1

Figure 1 is an 1834 (October 20) Salem, Massachusetts-Batavia (Dutch East Indies) letter showing the use of the handstamp. The letter was sent to Manila, where it was forwarded by Peele, Hubbell and Company to Batavia, via the private American ship *Monsoon*. The handstamp was applied to the letter by this firm in Manila. This letter is the earliest known use of the Peele, Hubbell and Company forwarding agent handstamp.

In the 1830s and 1840s, Peele, Hubbell and Company and Russell, Sturgis and Company were the only two American firms in Manila. Both firms were primarily involved in trading indigo, sugar, hemp, and tobacco. In 1842, these two firms monopolized the export of hemp from the Islands, which was sent primarily to the United States, where it was manufactured in factories in or near Boston. Most of the sugar was shipped to England to the British broker/shipping agent, Fred Huth and Company in London.

This firm also provided "official" American presence in the Philippines. From June 1822 until late 1831, George W. Hubbell served as the U.S. Consul in Manila.

Mail to and from this firm is known between 1834 and 1880. Undoubtedly, mail exists before and after these dates, since the firm

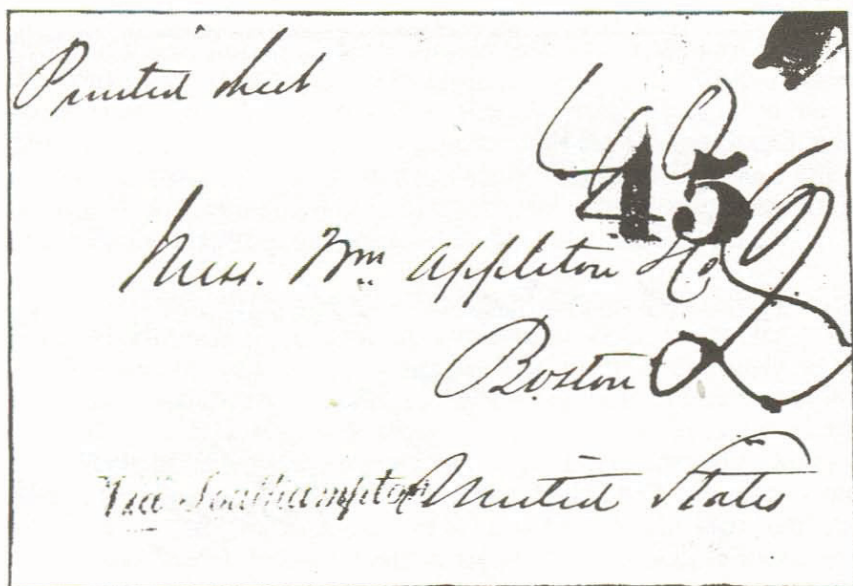


Figure 2

first opened in 1822 and closed in 1887. Figure 2 is an 1852 Manila-Boston letter containing a pre-printed "Manila Prices Current 17th May 1852" notice. The letter was carried to Hong Kong on a private vessel. According to Kirk (1982), the letter departed Hong Kong on May 23 aboard the British Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) packet steamer *Malta* to Galle (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka), then aboard the P&O steamer *RIPON* to Southampton, England. There, the letter was transferred to the British packet steamer, *Niagara*, arriving at Boston on August 5, 1852. The "45" (U.S. cents) on the front of the letter indicates the rate for a letter weighing less than 1/2 ounce that was carried from the Far East to England via the Southampton route.

Figure 3 is an interesting letter from this firm's historical standpoint. It is an 1855 (January 1) Manila-San Francisco pre-printed folded letter announcing the admittance of two new American partners to the firm in Manila: Richard D. Tucker and Ogden E. Edwards. The letter shows a "SHIP 6" handstamp (in black) on the front, which was applied at the San Francisco Post Office to indicate the 6-cent paid rate (at San Francisco) for mail carried by foreign or private American ships to the United States. In 1883, Mr. Tucker was still known to be with the firm.

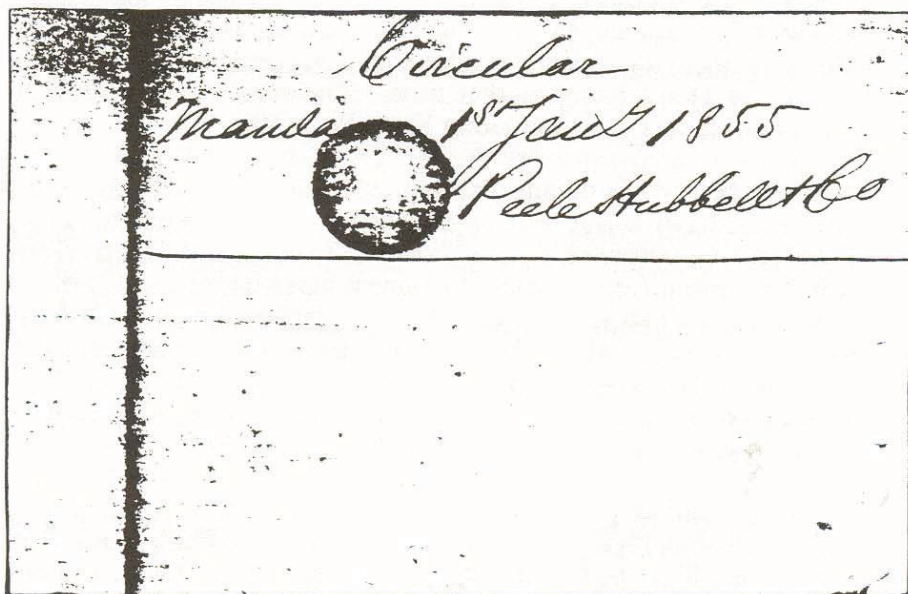
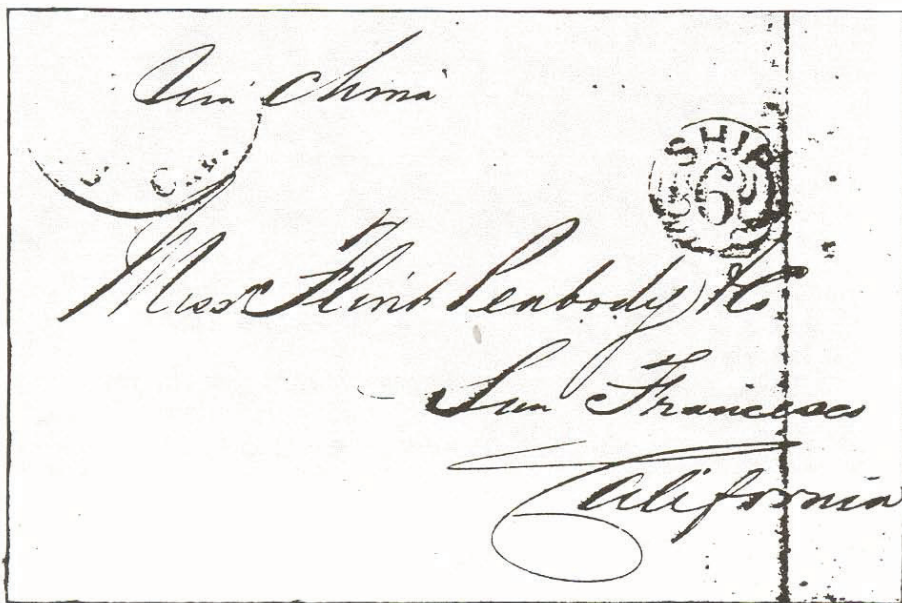


Figure 3

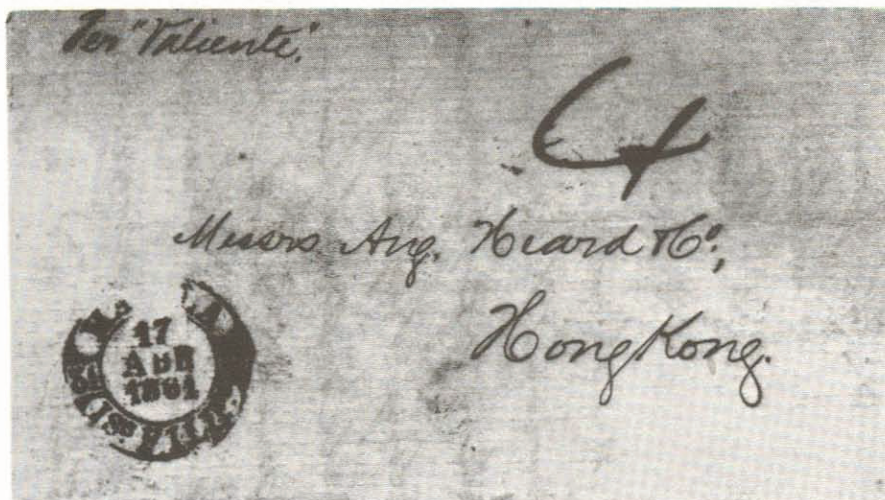


Figure 4

Finally, Figure 4 is an 1861 Manila-Hong Kong letter from this firm to Augustine Heard and Company. It discusses the current prices of hemp and rice (from Pangasinan). The letter, carried by the private Spanish ship, *Valiente*, shows a "4" in manuscript on the front of the letter, indicating the 4-pence private ship letter rate for mail between Manila and Hong Kong at that time. The rate was collected at destination; in this case, the Hong Kong Post Office.

Peele, Hubbell and Company also applied business handstamps on its mail. These handstamps were applied on the mail as a return address, for advertising purposes, or as a "control" to prevent the theft of the stamp. Several different types of business handstamps were used by this firm between 1834 and 1880. These handstamps occur in pale red, violet, and probably also in black. The handstamps are usually oval and contain the words, "Peele, Hubbell and Company" on top, "Manila" on the bottom and either the date or it is blank in the center. They are quite scarce.

As a broker and shipping agent, Peele, Hubbell and Company also represented other foreign firms doing business in the Philippines. For example, in 1875, the firm represented the Board of Marine Underwriters of San Francisco, Yangtze Insurance association of Shanghai, Queen Insurance Company of Liverpool and London, and the Union Insurance Society of Canton.

Beginning in the 1870s, the firm's success began to decline due to competition from British and other foreign firms in Manila and from two British banks in Manila (Chartered Bank of India, Australia, and China, and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation), which provided low interest loans to British (but not American) business firms there. These banks first opened in the Islands in 1872 and 1875, respectively.

In 1887, after 65 years of operation, Peele, Hubbell and Company closed its doors. The business was sold to the Anglo-American firm of Warner, Blodgett and Company, which continued to operate a brokerage/shipping firm in the Philippines into the 20th century. ■

(Editor's Note: All covers shown are from Don Peterson's personal collection.)

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