

The Old West

Tiffany & Co.'s history with New Mexico

Web exclusive

What does ultra-chic Tiffany's have in common with New Mexico? More than you'd expect.

From late-1800s Tiffany-Blue turquoise to a spectacular early 20th century silver service, Tiffany's ties to New Mexico are among the surprises awaiting visitors to the New Mexico History Museum, which opened May 24.



[+ Enlarge](#)

A New Mexico turquoise mine. The American Turquoise Company sold almost all of its turquoise directly to Tiffany & Co.

mines in New Mexico. It is worth \$4,000. ... [I]t is probable that gems to the value of \$200,000 a year may be obtained from this mine."

Clearly, Kunz had recognized the possibilities of further branding the Tiffany Blue color by maintaining almost-exclusive rights to the turquoise he made suddenly valuable.

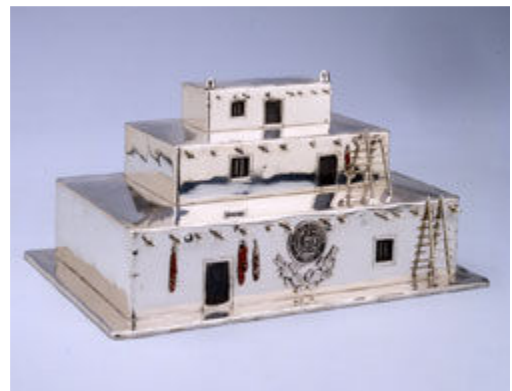
In that same year, James P McNulty came to Cerrillos, New Mexico, to mine turquoise, eventually landing with the American Turquoise Company, which owned the claims to a number of mines. The turquoise mined in Cerrillos at the time was of a very specific color — Tiffany Blue — and the ATC sold almost all of its turquoise directly to Tiffany & Co.

For the Tiffany tales' beginnings, go back to 1837, when Charles Lewis Tiffany founded Tiffany and Young, a fine-goods emporium that introduced a novel idea of the time: the non-negotiable selling price.


In that same year, Tiffany introduced the famous "Tiffany Blue Box" — a cherished trademark of Tiffany & Co.

In 1889, George F. Kunz, the company's renowned gemologist, won an award in Paris for a collection that contained a sample of New Mexico turquoise. In 1892, Kunz announced that certain colors of turquoise had come to be considered "gem quality" — namely, the Tiffany Blue color.

According to a New York newspaper: "That is a turquoise far and away the finest in America, and it came from these new




The 66 years New Mexico spent as a territory of the United States were turbulent. The territory was haunted by the Civil War, Indian raids, political bulldozing, and characters like Billy the Kid.

 Enlarge

Pueblo-shaped humidor presented to the USS New Mexico

McNulty's years working for the Tiffany mines in New Mexico created their own share of unruliness, including rattlesnakes, explosives, late salary payments, Indian attacks and, worst of all, lawyers.



 Enlarge

USS New Mexico

In 1896, McNulty encountered a group of four men on the mine's grounds, claiming to be picnicking. He accosted them and escorted them from the property. One of these men, Mariano F. Sena, soon filed a claim in the local courts, saying the mine was part of an old Spanish land grant and the ATC had to vacate and pay him \$50,000.

The lawsuit dragged on until 1911 when it was finally resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court. By then, the ATC had spent so much of its profits on legal fees that debt began to slowly suffocate the company, finishing it off in 1917.

McNulty continued to oversee the operation of his own mines in Cerrillos until his death in 1933, frequently being the only person to actually mine the stone.

Throughout his career, he sent countless cigar boxes packed with turquoise to Tiffany & Co. until the mine was finally exhausted. (Most turquoise used in the Native American jewelry sold on the Santa Fe Plaza today comes from nearby Arizona, but a few small claims are still mined in New Mexico.)

Tiffany & Co.'s connection to New Mexico doesn't end there. In 1918, the state of New Mexico presented a 56-piece Tiffany silver service set to the battleship *USS New Mexico*. The set contains a humidor in the shape of a pueblo-style building, as well as a number of plates, each of which has a different scene: Coronado's Expedition, 1540-42; San Miguel Chapel, The Oldest Church in the U.S.; and the First Locomotive through Raton Pass, 1879.

The *USS New Mexico* served as the first flagship of the United States Pacific Fleet, and was a vital part of U.S. operations in the Pacific Theater of WWII.

After the battleship was decommissioned in 1946, the service was used on the carrier *Midway* and the flat-top *Bon Homme Richard* before it was donated to the Palace of the Governors.

For the first time in decades, the service will be on display at the New Mexico History Museum, minus two plates. Those plates, depicting the Santa Fe Trail and Taos Pueblo, will be loaned to the U.S. Navy for display on the new Virginia-class submarine *New Mexico*, to be commissioned in October 2009.

See the September issue of C&I for more on visiting Santa Fe and the New Mexico History Museum and for a photo-spread of turquoise and silver jewelry.