



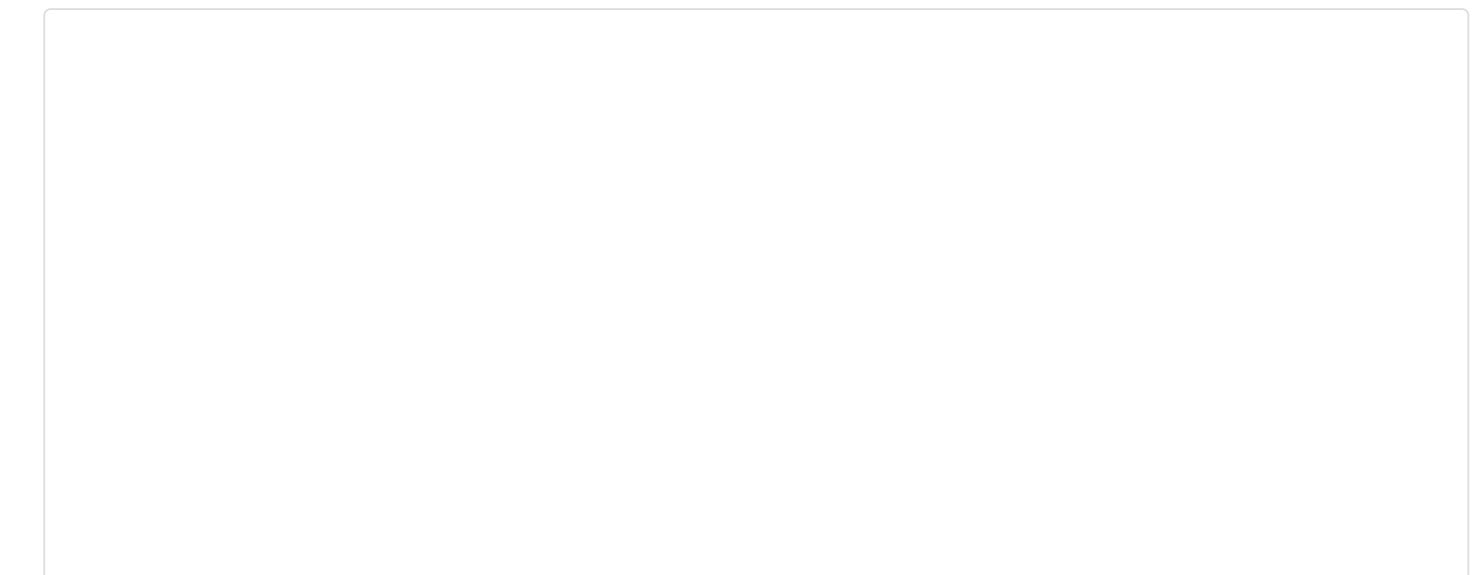
LEVI LEVERING'S HEADDRESS: BLURRING BORDERS AND BRIDGING CULTURES

Object Analysis and Report for Anthropology of Museums

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The feather headdress (<https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/105485>) labeled 38-2-1 in the Penn Museum Collection is richly colored and composed of many types of materials. It consists of a felt cap with a leather forehead band covered with a panel of vivid loomed beadwork (in orange, blue, yellow, and white tipi shapes) and two beaded rosettes (blue, yellow, white, and red) on either end of the band. Hanging from each side are ear pendants made of buckskin with metal beads attached, and dyed downy feathers and long ribbons trail from the headdress. Extending from the top of the band are felt cylinders (faded perhaps due to light exposure?), red and yellow down feathers, and long turkey feathers topped off with more green and pink down feathers.





(/collections/object/105485)

Feather headdress, object # 38-2-1 (/collections/object/105485), Penn Museum, held by Academic Engagement Coordinator Stephanie Mach. Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

Beyond its vivid hues, the headdress includes both modern (brightly dyed feathers and glass beads) and traditional (leather ear pendants and turkey feathers) elements. The catalogue card creates more questions than it does answers, with a cryptic mention of the “Order of Red Men” and references to an “Indian princess” and “Levi Levering” whose alias is “Chief White Horn.” Horace Tenbrook Dumont, Jr., who sold this headdress to the Penn Museum, wrote:

“I have been for several years, the proud owner of an authentic American Indian headdress. It was made by an Indian princess and presented to me by a Omaha Indian chieftain. It is, I imagine, rather valuable. As I have no way of taking care of it, it merely stands in an obscure corner and collects dust.”[1]

The “chieftain” was Levi Levering, from the Omaha tribe in Nebraska. He bridges White and traditional Native cultures, just as the headdress itself is an embodiment of the complex relationship between these two different cultural groups. By delving into the history behind the headdress and its donor, one uncovers unexpected facets of shifting American identities. The headdress and Levering’s story evoke the impact of White culture on Native Americans and the acculturation that occurred, as reflected in cultural artifacts, religion, clothing, education, and politics.



Details of rosettes with tin cones. Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

Born in the latter half of the 19th century on an Omaha reservation, Levi Levering was surrounded by White Euro-American culture. At just age seven, he attended the reservation's government school and went on to attend a Presbyterian mission school for three years, Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania for nine years, and, finally, Bellevue University in Nebraska for another three years.[2] At Carlisle, Levering experienced life in an Indian boarding school that forcibly immersed Native youth in Euro-American cultures, with the goal of producing alumni who might eventually become key leaders in "handling the Indians' business." [3] Its self-declared purpose was to "train the Indian youth of both sexes to take upon themselves the duties of citizenship" and to make sure that its graduates "are successfully competing with whites, away from the reservation, in the trades and professions." [4] Native religious expression was not allowed; the school was Christian and students were required to attend church. Carlisle, like all of the Indian boarding schools, was expressly designed to acculturate Native Americans to White culture.

Levi Levering was apparently a model student. Carlisle kept comprehensive records on him, (http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_files/levi-levering-student-file) from his original admittance documents to newspaper clippings regarding his achievements later in his life.[5] He maintained close contact with the school following his graduation, attending commencements and eventually sending his children there. His first occupation (as he reported to the school) was as an "Indian Trader." Later he became a teacher, first at a government school in Fort Peck, Montana, and then at an Indian school in Fort Hall, Idaho.[6] It seems that Levering was a supporter of such Indian schools, but what was his perspective on keeping his culture alive in an increasingly White country? In one report to Carlisle, he wrote:

"No Carlisle graduate can do [more] to betterment his people, unless, he first help himself, what he can do, then he is helping his people. What I have done for myself and family, is I feel that I help my people; it takes talent, education, and force of character to lift the Indian & help them." [7]

Levering apparently functioned as a liaison between two very different cultures: Native and White American. He was a dedicated Presbyterian, a member of the local YMCA, and he became the first Native American commissioner and representative of the Omaha Presbytery to the Presbyterian Church General Assembly in 1911.[8]



(left to right) Levi Levering (Chief White Horn) with Don Schultze, George Howard (Jorge Essenay-Go-Sho-No), C.V. Davis, and Sam Early (Chief Blow Snake) at the Indian Garage on Upper Broad Street, Philadelphia, c. 1929. Photo by Don Schultz.

For church and school events, he dressed in a formal suit. But he also maintained a performative identity, as “Chief White Horn.” This appears to have been a self-claimed title, rather than a marker of traditional chieftainship. This expression of his Native identity is showcased through images of Levering dressed in traditional regalia, wearing another feather headdress that is different from the one held in the Penn Museum’s collections. While living in Philadelphia, Levering joined the “Indian Social Club,” and participated in events with Penn Professor Frank Speck. In a photograph taken around 1929, Levering and two other Native Americans (George Howard and Sam Early) don feather headdresses and traditional garments, and pose with linked hands at a party for their White friend, Don Schultze, who was leaving his job at the New Jersey AAA Auto Club.[9] This multicultural photo is an interesting representation of cultural mixing.

Levering also wore Native regalia for the annual Powhatan Confederacy Thanksgiving Ceremony, held by the Nanticoke nation at the Delaware River.[10] In a 1932 news article by Ta-De-Win for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Levering is referred to as Chief White Horn and is photographed in traditional regalia alongside another Native man, Wah-Ge (Frankin Fields). Ta-De-Win reported:

“Dominating the group was the visitor’s Omaha friend, Chief White Horn. . . he had leased his farm lands to whites and had come to Philadelphia where he obtained the position of night watchman in the zoo. The long, dark hours do not drag for him, for in his rounds, he sings his Omaha songs to the bears, ‘and do you know,’ he remarked, ‘that they actually sit up and listen.’”

In this article, again, Levering is portrayed in a multicultural light, playing a part in traditional ceremonies while occupying a “modern” role in society.

Though Levering largely integrated himself into modern White culture, his activities often displayed an engagement with and commitment to his Indigenous culture. As a successful liaison, he used his positive standing with non-Native populations to benefit his own people. For example, as a Native American rights activist, he successfully lobbied Congress for tribal members’ rights to their native lands in 1920.[11]

Levering’s story is embodied by this headdress, which mixes traditional, modern, and pan-Indian elements. As Levi Levering, or as his alias, Chief White Horn, he occupied a sort of “in-between” space, straddling cultures and bringing them together. Yet, this created an interesting paradox. Although he fought to conserve Native culture by participating in traditional rituals and protecting Native lands, he also submitted to acculturation in his devotion to the Presbyterian church and support of Indian schools started by White men. Because of this, it is difficult to pinpoint where Levering really stood and whether his role really benefited the Native community.



Inside view of Levi Levering’s headdress. Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

Similarly, this headdress seems to occupy an in-between space. In general form, it is similar to Western Plains eagle feather headdresses, but the use of turkey feathers and garish colors (including brightly colored feathers inside the cap) makes it appear more like costume than regalia. As a simultaneously modern and traditional piece, it transcends clear-cut cultural borders. There are still many questions. Was this headdress potentially associated with the Improved Order of Red Men, a white fraternal organization that infamously appropriated Native culture as costume? Was the headdress modified from its original form by adding the brightly colored feathers? Did Levering ever actually wear this headdress? Lastly, who made it, and was she, as the card suggests, an “Indian princess?” Regardless of whether these questions are ever answered, this headdress acquired some kind of brightly colored story, as it passed through many sets of hands, representing a changed but still surviving Native American culture.

This object analysis was conducted for the Fall 2017 University of Pennsylvania course “Anthropology of Museums.” Students are examining Native American objects in the American Section of the Penn Museum by combining material analysis (elements, construction, design, condition, etc.) with documentation (texts, photographs, ethnographic data, etc.). Since some objects have minimal provenance data, we seek out similar materials, consult research articles and archives, and consider non-material evidence (oral traditions, ecosystems, museum memories, etc.) that might illuminate these objects. This research is designed to expand our understandings of object lives, using insights and information gathered from inside and outside of the Museum.

Sources Cited:

- [1] Letter from Horace T. Dumont to Horace Jayne, November 27, 1937, in Office of the Director Alphabetical Correspondence 1929-1940, Penn Museum Archives.
- [2] Levi Levering Student File (http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_files/levi-levering-student-file), Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, RG 75, Series 1327, box 133, folder 5245, National Archives and Records Administration.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] *Catalogue, United States Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1912* (Carlisle: Carlisle Indian Press, 1912), 10.
- [5] Levi Levering Student File. (http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_files/levi-levering-student-file)
- [6] *The Indian's Friend, Volumes 22-23*. (Philadelphia: National Indian Association and Women's National Indian Association, 1909), 8.
- [7] Reply to United States Indian Service, January 21, 1907, Levi Levering Student File. (http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_files/levi-levering-student-file)
- [8] *The Indian's Friend, Volumes 22-23*, 8.
- [9] “Stories behind Pictures” Email October 28, 1998 re: Don Schultze photograph (<http://redheart.tripod.com/storiesbehindpictures.html>), private collection.
- [10] Ta-de-win, “Chief White Horn Welcomed to Fete of Nonticoke Tribe,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 25, 1932.
- [11] R. Moring and A. Skelton, “Meet the Leverings: Levering Family Timeline.” Omaha.com.

Note: for additional posts on feather headdresses in the Penn Museum collections, see:

- Margaret Bruchac, “Considering the Feather Headdress,” (<https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/considering-the-feather-headdress/>) in *Beyond the Gallery Walls*, Penn Museum Blog, April 18, 2016.
- Danielle Tiger, “Investigating the Origins of a Turkey Feather Headdress,” (<https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/eastern-turkey-feather-headdress/>) in *Beyond the Gallery Walls*, Penn Museum Blog, April 18, 2016.

For an overview of the 2017 object studies in the Anthropology of Museums class, see:

- Margaret Bruchac. “Object Matters: Considering Materiality, Meaning, and Memory” (<https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/object-matters-considering-materiality-meaning-and-memory/>) in *Beyond*