

The Fur Trade

A collection of historical artifacts is displayed on a white cloth on a grassy area. In the background, a large white bundle wrapped in rope sits on the grass. To the right, a wooden boat is partially visible. In the foreground, a blue teapot, a green glass bottle, a metal pot, and various tools and weapons are laid out. A long wooden rifle lies across the center, and a smaller wooden object, possibly a pipe or a small container, is visible near the teapot. The scene is set outdoors on a grassy area.

**Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project
Booklet Series, No. 2
Western Michigan University
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2 Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

In 1998 Western Michigan University archaeologists were invited to Niles, Michigan to help locate the site of Fort St. Joseph, a seventeenth and eighteenth-century mission, garrison, and trading post complex established by the French along the St. Joseph River. With the help of documentary sources and the local community, a survey team dug shovel test pits and located material evidence of activities associated with the fort, including gunflints, imported ceramics, glass beads, hand-wrought nails, and iron knife blades stamped with the names of French cutlers. Subsequent work identified trash deposits, fireplaces, and building ruins, indicating that much of the fort remains undisturbed. After more than a century in search of the site, Fort St. Joseph had been found!

The site has become the focus of a community-based research project aimed at examining colonialism and the fur trade in southwest Michigan. An interdisciplinary team of historians, archaeologists, geographers, and geophysicists, in partnership with the City of Niles and community groups like Support the Fort, Inc., are investigating the site to examine colonialism along the frontier of New France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is the second issue in the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project Booklet Series, intended to summarize our findings and explore topics that appeal to a wider audience in an effort to understand Fort St. Joseph in the larger historical and cultural context of early North America. Its focus is on telling the story of the fur trade and its role in the relationships among the French and Native peoples.



Fig. 1 Field school students discuss excavations at Fort St. Joseph.



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Michigan Humanities Council

*Michigan People, Michigan Places
Our Stories, Our Lives*

This project is funded by the Michigan Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this project do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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4 New France and the Fur Trade

The French encountered many different Native peoples and a landscape rich in fur-bearing animals in their explorations of North America beginning in the sixteenth century. The first French settlements were fishing villages in coastal areas, but soon fur became a central part of New France's economy as the French entered into a Native trade network which had operated in North America long before the arrival of Europeans. The core of French settlement grew along the banks of the St. Lawrence River, concentrated in the towns of Montreal and Quebec. Further west, New France encompassed the Great Lakes region (known as the *pays d'en haut* or "upper country") and the area of the Mississippi River Valley stretching down to the Gulf Coast and Louisiana.

In an effort to secure the interior, establish Native alliances, and thwart British and Iroquois efforts to expand west of the Appalachians, the French established a network of trading posts, forts, and missions in the North American interior. These "islands" of French settlement in Native-controlled lands became the principal places of Native and European interaction and exchange in the fur trade.

Some of the most important posts in the western Great Lakes region included Fort Michilimackinac, Fort Pontchartrain at Detroit, and Fort St. Joseph.

The Place of Fort St. Joseph

Initially established in 1691 on the St. Joseph River, near a strategic portage that linked the river and the Great Lakes basin to the Mississippi drainage, Fort St. Joseph became the keystone of French control of the southern Lake Michigan region. For nearly a century, Fort St. Joseph served as a hub of commercial, military, and religious activity for local Native American populations and European colonial powers in southwest Michigan.

This mission-garrison-trading post complex, which the French named "St. Joseph" in honor of the patron saint of New France, included a palisade, a commandant's house, and a few other structures when it was first constructed. Governor General Frontenac of New France established the post in an



Fig. 2 Carte de la Nouvelle France by Nicolas de Fer (circa 1719) showing French claims in pink and yellow.

attempt to solidify French relations with the local Miami Indians and other Native groups to the west and north of the area. Frontenac hoped that the post, garrisoned by the French, would stimulate the fur trade in the region, and also check the expansion and power of the Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy and their British allies. The fort soon supported a commandant, 8 to 10 soldiers, a priest, an interpreter, a blacksmith, and about 15 fur traders, many of whom were married to Native women who occupied the post and were fully integrated into the life of the community.

Fort St. Joseph was a vital link in the colony's communications network, and played a major role in the exchange of manufactured commodities for furs obtained by the Natives. By the mid-eighteenth century, it ranked fourth among all of New France's posts in terms of volume of furs traded.





Fig. 3 Beaver felt hat.



Fig. 6 Beaver was not the only fur-bearing animal that was exploited in the fur trade.



Fig. 4 American beaver.

Beaver and Other Furs of the Trade

Broad-brimmed beaver felt hats became fashionable in Europe in the sixteenth century, and marked people's social status. Beaver had become extinct in western Europe due to overhunting, and European hat makers had to rely on Russian and Scandinavian beaver fur until North American furs eventually became available. Hatters wanted beaver fur as a material for felt making because the tiny barbs on the soft underfur ensured that it would remain matted when felted; thus beaver hats held their shape better and wore longer than hats made of other materials.

Beaver pelts were the mainstay of the fur trade in much of North America, but other peltries were also deemed desirable for various purposes. These included the furs of muskrat, mink, marten, otter, fisher, wolverine, raccoon, lynx, bobcat, panther, fox, squirrel, ermine, and buffalo, and the hides of deer, moose, elk, and caribou. Buffalo "robes" were used to make a variety of goods including blankets, coats, and boots. Sea otter was valued for its very dense and luxurious fur used to trim expensive robes and capes, and to make hats and winter coats. Deer hides were processed into leather for book covers, gloves, and other accessories.

Whatever the animal, European traders relied on Native peoples to capture and process them into hides and furs. The exchange of European manufactured and imported goods for Native-produced furs and hides served to cement relationships that were much more than economic in nature.



Fig. 5 Artist's recreation of voyageurs with canoes loaded with trade goods or furs.

6 North American Rivalries

The fur trade was a multi-faceted, global phenomenon that had a formative influence on the history and cultures of peoples throughout North America. Beginning in the sixteenth century, European markets stimulated unprecedented demands for North American furs, which arguably fueled exploration and later western expansion, leading to profound transformations among Natives and newcomers that were seminal in the North American experience.

Early in the sixteenth century, Basque and French fishermen in the Newfoundland region began to exchange iron and brass items for furs along the Eastern Seaboard. In 1534, French explorer Jacques Cartier encountered Micmac Indians on the Gaspé Peninsula who wanted to trade furs for European goods. Failing to find gold or the fabled Northwest Passage, the British, Dutch, and French soon realized that they could exploit North America for other resources such as timber and fur. All three nations eventually established settlements near bodies of water that provided access to the rich resources of the continent's interior: the French along the St. Lawrence River, the British along the shores of Hudson Bay, and the Dutch along the Hudson River.

The Russians followed later, as the Bering expedition led to the discovery of Alaska's fur-bearing sea otter populations. Competition to obtain furs from Native producers drove political and economic relations in North America well into the nineteenth century.

More than Profits at Stake

While the fur trade was at times a profitable enterprise, other factors motivated the exchange and its expansion. Furs were lightweight and easy to transport in birchbark canoes. Beaver pelts, the trade's mainstay, fetched high prices in Europe where beaver felt hats were in high demand. However, by the late 1690s the supply of beaver began to outweigh demand. Because the French Crown guaranteed the price of furs, the oversupply meant that the fur trade sometimes actually lost money. If the trade lost money, why did the French keep it up? The trade represented more than just the value of furs. The fur trade became an economic, military, social, and cultural partnership between European and Native groups. It was the glue that bound the French to their Native allies.

Native groups engaged in trade as a social relationship that had important

implications. They viewed exchanges in terms of gifts, and not just as economic interactions. Gifts created special bonds between societies, and reinforced social alliances. Those who gave gifts gained prestige, honor, and influence, and those who received them had an obligation to the giver. Even clearly commercial exchanges began with an exchange of gifts which served to mark the social bond required before one could trade needed commodities. After all, one should greet a friend with a token of friendship and one does not trade with enemies. Many French traders married Native women to create kinship bonds and access to trading partners.

To a considerable extent, the structure of the early fur trade in northeastern North America arose as a product of European-Native American alliances and the geography of tribal territories. The French allied themselves with the Hurons, and with Algonquin groups living along the Ottawa River. This gave the French access to the upper Great Lakes region via the Ottawa River route from the St. Lawrence River to Georgian Bay. After 1673, the British allied with Iroquois groups living south and east of Lake Ontario. This created the possibility that the British could also gain access to the upper Great Lakes region by traveling through



Fig. 7 An engraving of the fur trade in North America.

Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, and into Lake Huron. The alliances with Native Americans that the French nurtured and maintained were crucial to French desires to prevent the British from expanding their trade network into the upper Great Lakes region.

Although the fur trade was not always profitable to the French, they did not want their British rivals to control the trade. The French, who had far fewer colonists than the British, strove to create and maintain amicable relationships with Native Americans. These alliances gave them an important advantage over the British and touched many aspects of life in New France, from personal matters to trade and politics. As trade networks grew in size and importance to both Native and European groups, it became in the best interest of the French to aid those with whom they traded against enemies and competitors.

The French went to great lengths to continue the fur trade in order to maintain their relationships with Native allies. After the British took control of New France in 1760, they discontinued the policy of gift-giving, leading to resentment and hostilities that precipitated Native unrest in 1763.

French, British, Russian, and American Fur Trades

The North American fur trade was really a series of various fur trades. Several European nations exploited different fur resources across the continent, interacted with various Native groups in different ways, and competed with one another. Relations between Europeans and the Native primary harvesters ranged from benign to brutally exploitative.

The fur trade was an essential social relationship that bound the interests of the French and their Native allies

together against their enemies—the British and the Iroquois. For the French, who never attracted as large a settler population as the British, Native relations in the fur trade were vital for their survival in the New World.

Although the majority of the British population was confined to the Atlantic Coast until the British victory in the Seven Years' War, they managed to siphon many furs from the interior at Albany. They also competed directly with the French by channeling peltries northward to Hudson Bay. The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht suppressed French competition in the north and left the Hudson's Bay Company in control of all of the posts on the Bay. However, the French then intensified their efforts in the *pays d'en haut*, expanding their activities toward the northwest.

While the French controlled much of the trade in the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes riverine system and further west, the English chartered the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1670, and established several posts along the shore of the Bay where Native groups would travel to trade. The presence of independent traders who traveled into the interior eventually forced the HBC to construct inland posts, beginning in 1774; this eventually led to western expansion into what would become British Columbia and Washington State. The potential wealth of this vast inland area spurred the establishment of the rival Montreal-based North West Company, during the 1780s.

continued on p. 8



Fig. 8 Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow, a Mohawk leader, during a diplomatic visit to Europe. He stands proudly with this fusil fin held closely by his side.



Fig. 9 Reenactors depicting British soldiers.

8 North American Rivalries



This triggered a period of intense competition that ended with its merger with the HBC in 1821.

The Russians took advantage of the economic value of sea otter pelts in the Pacific. They found a lucrative market in China, and by 1742 they had crossed the Bering Strait into North America in search of furs. In 1799 Tsar Paul I granted the Russian-American Company (RAC) a charter giving it a monopoly over all Russian economic activities in North America. Employing Hawaiians, various Native Alaskans, Native Californians, and Creoles (individuals of mixed European and Native ancestry), the Russians instituted a system that involved Native

hunters directly acquiring furs for the RAC from Alaskan waters and as far south as California, which could be sold at a considerable profit to Chinese merchants. This expansion became possible when the Company contracted with American ship captains for joint ventures, and later built its own ships that brought Native Alaskan hunters to California waters.

Americans came to realize the bounty of furs in the American West with the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and subsequent exploration by Lewis and Clark. John Jacob Astor established the American Fur Company in 1808 with the hopes of gaining a monopoly on the trade from St. Louis

to the Pacific, and his company played a significant role in westward American expansion. Astor created a subsidiary of the American Fur Company, the Pacific Fur Company, which aimed to capitalize on furs from the area west of the Rockies by both sea and by land. His efforts led to the establishment of Fort Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River, which eventually failed due to uneasy relations with local Indian groups. Meanwhile, the dangerously successful American trade in buffalo robes, which accelerated after 1812 (especially along the Missouri River and in the Southwest), helped drive the American bison toward near extinction.

A View from the Pacific

Fort Vancouver

In an effort to anchor Britain's claims to the Oregon Country, the HBC established the headquarters of its Columbia Department at Fort Vancouver in 1825. Over the next two decades, the fort became the fur trade capital of the Pacific Coast, with warehouses, locally-produced goods, and agricultural surpluses to supply fur brigades, Natives, settlers, and over 20 other Company posts in the Department in present-day British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.

A rigid social hierarchy was composed of clerks and officers who occupied buildings within the fort's palisade and *engagés* who lived in a multiethnic village of over 600 people. While some were from Europe, namely England and Scotland, many were French-Canadian, Hawaiian, Portuguese, *métis*, or from one of more than 30 Native American groups including the Iroquois, Delaware, and Cree.

In 1860, soon after the site was declared to be on American soil, the Company abandoned the fort. Fires and decay had destroyed all the structures by 1866. The National Park Service currently administers this site, where ongoing archaeology contributes to the interpretations of the fur trade and the multiethnic population that supported it.



Fig. 10 This unsigned sketch of Fort Vancouver (c. 1851) depicts the north end of the village area.

Various countries sponsored the fur trade in North America at different historical moments. The French, British, Russians, and Americans were dominant in the regions shown in Figs. 11 and 12 at the peak of their involvement.

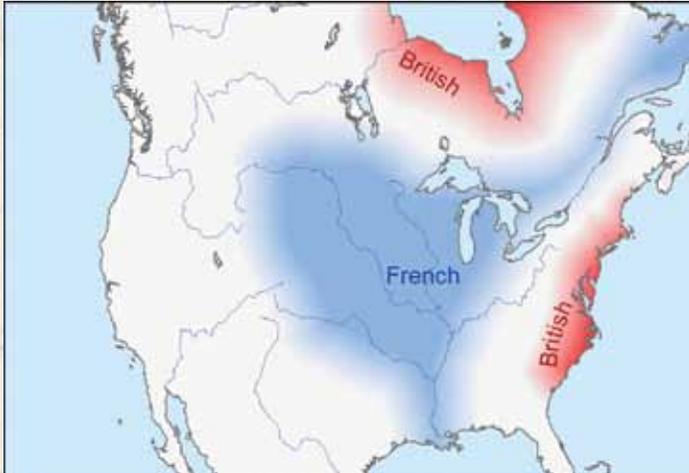


Fig. 11 North American French and British fur trades, 1750s.

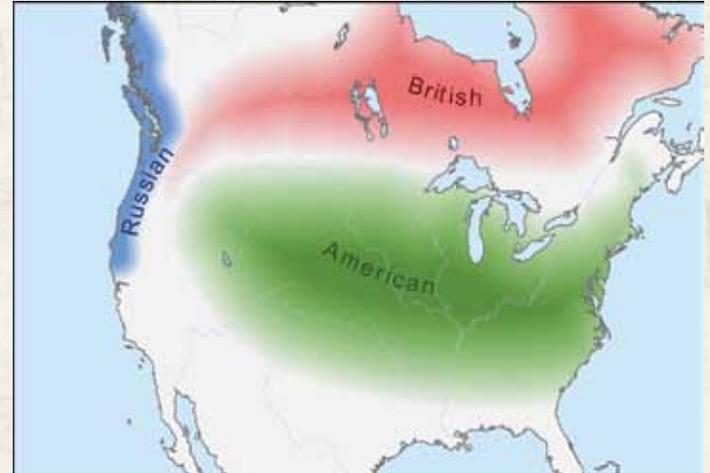


Fig. 12 North American British, American, and Russian fur trades, 1820s-30s.

Fort Ross

Russian exploration along the California coast led to the establishment of Ross Colony in 1812, near the mouth of the Russian River just north of San Francisco Bay. This settlement, which has been investigated archaeologically, was intended to grow wheat and other crops to sustain Russian outposts in Alaska, hunt marine mammals, and trade with Spanish California.

The Russians built redwood structures and a wooden palisade with two blockhouses on the northwest and southeast corners. Buildings included the manager's house, the clerks' quarters, artisans' workshops, Russian officials' barracks, and a chapel. A number of these buildings have been reconstructed and are maintained and interpreted as part of the Fort Ross State Historic Park.

Many of the Company's Russian, Creole (people of mixed Russian and indigenous ancestry), and Native Alaskan men married or formed relationships with Native Californian women and established interethnic households located immediately outside of the stockade. These unions, although informal and often transitory, led to unique cultural exchanges. Various neighborhoods reflect these populations' negotiation and maintenance of ethnic identity. Native Alaskans formed their settlements on bluffs overlooking the ocean, following their tradition. Fort Ross functioned as a successful multicultural settlement for nearly 30 years.

By the late 1830s, sea otters had been overhunted, and the HBC at Fort Vancouver began supplying the Russians with agricultural provisions for their north Pacific settlements.



Fig. 13 The reconstructed Kuskov House at Fort Ross served as headquarters for the first manager.



Fig. 14 Native Alaskans hunting sea otters with spears in baidarkas.

10 How the Fur Trade Worked

Historians have documented the diversity of ways in which the fur trade worked. The motivations for participating in the trade, the goods exchanged, and the organization of labor to collect and process furs differed among the participants over time and space.

Government Regulation

In New France, the French Crown tried to use fur trade monopolies to limit competition and stabilize prices. Traders could legally sell their furs only to the monopoly, but the monopoly had to buy furs at a fixed price regardless of market value. Even so, supply and demand still affected the prices for goods. Over time, the monopoly changed hands. Sometimes the Crown controlled it, while at other times companies of French merchants paid the Crown for the right to the trade. At yet other times post commanders were given the right to trade at a particular post as part of their pay, and they could lease it out to others for a fee.

French officials also created a licensing system in 1681 to regulate the number of men leaving the colony to work in the fur trade and to restrict the supply of furs. The Crown issued a limited number of *congés* (permits) each year. The sale of *congés* helped support the poor, but the system failed to prevent men from trading furs illegally. Independent fur traders, or *coureurs de bois* (literally “runners of the woods”), traded directly with Natives without a license. Threats of fines or prison had little effect. *Coureurs de bois* continued to operate illegally, smuggling furs into Montreal or supplying the British with furs at Albany.

From Montreal to the West: The Flow of Trade

At the beginnings of the fur trade in North America, Natives brought their furs and hides to trade with Europeans along the coast within sight of European ships. As the French expanded into the St. Lawrence River Valley, the sites of exchange moved with them. They sent men out to Native villages to learn their language and customs, and to persuade them to bring their furs to French settlements. Montreal became the central location of exchange. Montreal's trade fairs peaked each summer in the 1650s and 1660s when hundreds of Natives came in birchbark canoes loaded with furs, ready to trade for European goods and to renew alliances with the French. They often traveled in large convoys to defend against the danger of Iroquois attacks.

After peace with the Iroquois in 1666, the main sites of exchange shifted westward to forts, trading posts, Native villages, and hunting camps. Throughout the 1670s and 1680s, Montreal's trade fairs dwindled as *voyageurs* (hired fur traders) and illegal *coureurs de bois* increased their range farther



Fig. 15 Commitment made by Pierre Papillon called Périgny, of Batiscan, to De Croisil and Jean-Baptiste Lecouste, to go to Michilimakinac.

inland. However, Montreal remained the fur trade's base for merchants, supplies, and labor.

Merchants in Montreal who held a license obtained European trade goods and hired *voyageurs*, who contracted to take these goods west to exchange them with Native groups for furs. When the *voyageurs* returned to Montreal, the merchants sold the furs to the monopoly, which then shipped them to France.

As furs were depleted in the Great Lakes region, French, British, and later American fur traders expanded their range ever westward. The grand rendezvous of mountain men of the 1840s and 1850s American West have left a vivid impression on the modern imagination of the fur trade era. These massive get-togethers were the social event of the year for fur traders who ranged in search of furs, living relatively isolated lives during the rest of the year. They brought their furs in to sell, bought provisions, and renewed their supplies of trade goods for the upcoming year. A carnival-like sense of festivity pervaded the affair, and often traders were accused of drinking, gambling, and spending to excess, to compensate for their rugged and often isolated life during the rest of the year.

"The Indians who live at a greater distance, never come to Canada at all; and, lest they should bring their goods to the English as the English go to them, the French are obliged to undertake journies and purchase the Indian goods in the country of the Indians. This trade is chiefly carried on at Montreal, and a great number of young and old men every year, undertake long and troublesome voyages for that purpose, carrying with them such goods as they know the Indians like, and are in want of. It is not necessary to take money on such a journey, as the Indians do not value it; and indeed I think the French, who go on these journies, scarce ever take a sol or penny with them."

— Peter Kalm, 1749 (Forster 1771:269-271)

Fig. 16 A mouth harp [left] and bone gaming pieces recovered from Fort St. Joseph.



Fig. 18 A nineteenth-century Hudson Bay Company trading post.

Fig. 17 Reenactor depicting a voyageur on the St. Joseph River.



Birchbark canoes held heavy loads and kept passengers and their goods dry. They gave the Natives and French who used them an advantage over those who could not obtain the canoes or the birchbark to build them. The British and the Iroquois often had to make do with canoes made of elm bark, or with heavy dugouts, which were not nearly as serviceable. Farther north, British Hudson's Bay Company employees were handicapped by lack of canoes and skilled canoe men until well into the nineteenth century when they developed the wooden York boat.

By 1640, large groups of Natives, mostly Algonquians, had settled along the St. Lawrence River at Quebec and Three Rivers. They began trading into the interior of the continent, and supplied voyaging and military canoes to the French and other Natives. Some Native Americans lived permanently at Michilimackinac, and made their living gathering and trading supplies that the European fur traders needed, including birchbark for canoes and shelters. The Huron, Ottawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi who eventually settled at Detroit supplied canoes to the French at Detroit and farther

Fig. 21 Canoe repair materials, as replicated by Timothy Kent. The birchbark container holds a small piece of patching bark, a length of peeled and split black spruce root, a birchbark roll containing pieces of gum (pitch and fat mixture, with pulverized charcoal added), a piece of gum in a split sapling holder, and a small melting torch of folded birchbark in a split sapling handle.



south. They either gathered the raw materials farther north or traded for them, and made a profitable business in canoe construction.

By 1730, heightened competition between the French and British—along with the Native Americans' growing demand for cloth garments, woven fabrics, and other merchandise—resulted in a large increase in the amount of trade goods moving west, necessitating larger canoes. The earlier canoes, with a maximum length of 16 feet and a carrying capacity of about 1,750 lbs., were replaced by the *canot du maître*, a canoe often as long as 36 feet which carried about 6,000 lbs. These larger craft were best suited for Great Lakes travel, while various smaller versions remained the preferred river canoes. All of these craft were propelled by paddles, setting poles, towing lines, and square sails.



Fig. 22 Great Lakes woman sewing birchbark panels onto a canoe.

"All these nations make a great many bark canoes, which Are very profitable for Them. They do this Sort of work in the summer, The women sew these canoes with Roots; the men cut and shape the bark and make the gunwales, thwarts, and ribs; the women gum Them. It is no small labor to make a canoe, in which there is much symmetry and measurement; and it is a curious sight."

—Jacques Sabrevois de Bleury, commandant at Fort Pontchartrain, Detroit, 1717

14 Trade Routes and Transportation



Fig. 23 This Ojibwe canoe is 15 ft. 9.5 in. in length.

Alexander Henry On Canoes

Alexander Henry was a British fur trader at Fort Michilimackinac who survived the 1763 attack on the fort because he had been adopted into an Ojibwe family. His *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776* is a valuable account of the fur trade. In the following passage, Henry wrote about the construction, characteristics, and handling of birchbark canoes.

“The canoes which I provided for my undertaking were, as is usual, five fathoms and a half [33-36 feet] in length and four feet and a half in their extreme breadth, and formed of birch-tree bark a quarter of an inch in thickness. The bark is lined with small splints of cedar-wood; and the vessel is further strengthened with ribs of the same wood, of which the two ends are fastened to the gunwales; several bars, rather than seats, are also laid across the canoe, from gunwale to gunwale. The small roots of the spruce tree afford the wattap, with which the bark is sewed; and the gum of the pine tree supplies the place of tar and oakum. Bark, some spare wattap, and gum are always carried in each canoe for the repairs which frequently become necessary.

The canoes are worked, not with oars but with paddles, and occasionally with a sail. To each canoe there are eight men; and to every three or four canoes, which constitute a brigade, there is a guide, or conductor. Skilful men, at double the wages of the rest, are placed in the head and stern. They engage to go from Montreal to Michilimackinac and back to Montreal again, the middle-men at one hundred and fifty livres and the end men at three hundred livres each. The guide has the command of his brigade, and is answerable for all pillage and loss, and in return every man's wages is answerable to him. This regulation was established under the French government.

The freight of a canoe of the substance and dimensions which I have detailed consists in sixty pieces, or packages of merchandise, of the weight of from ninety to a hundred pounds each, and provisions to the amount of one thousand weight. To this is to be added the weight of eight men and of eight bags weighing forty pounds each, one of which every man is privileged to put on board. The whole weight must therefore exceed eight thousand pounds, or may perhaps be averaged at four tons.”

—Alexander Henry, 1809, reminiscing about his travels (Henry 1971: 8-9)

Making a Hat

The first step in turning a beaver pelt into a hat was the plucking of the coarse guard hairs from the beaver pelt with a large knife or tweezers; hatmakers then brushed the pelt with a solution of nitrate of mercury to make the scales on the small hairs stand up and become more firmly locked together in a process called carroting. If carried out in a poorly ventilated room, the mercury fumes could damage the brain, hence the expression "mad as a hatter."

After the mercury dried, the wool was shaved off using a circular knife, and the wool was placed on a bench in a workroom known as the hurdle, which had rows and columns of slots in which the fluff could get caught and matt. A hatter's bow hung suspended over the bench, very much like an oversized violin bow. The vibrations of the bow helped separate and evenly distribute the hairs, until they had formed into a thick but loosely structured mat of material known as the batt.

Several batts would then be shaped into a cone and reduced in size by boiling, and then rolled to create a firm dense felt. This would then be formed into an oval to be sent on to the hatter, who would mold it to the required shape, add a lining, and finish it.



Fig. 24 This famous nineteenth-century painting, *Shooting the Rapids* by Frances Anne Hopkins, depicts fur traders running rapids in a Montreal canoe.

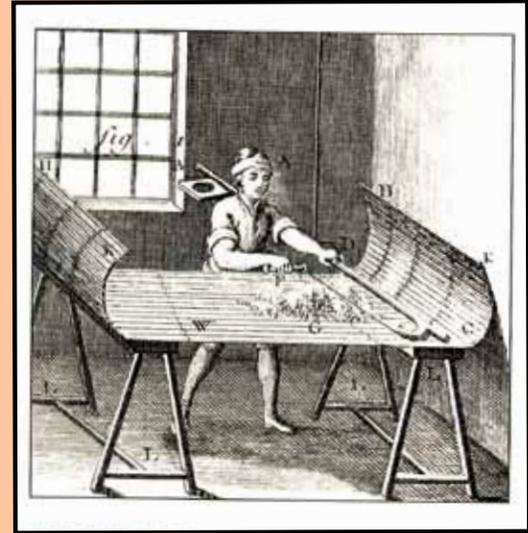


Fig. 25 A hatter uses a bow to form the fur into a batt.

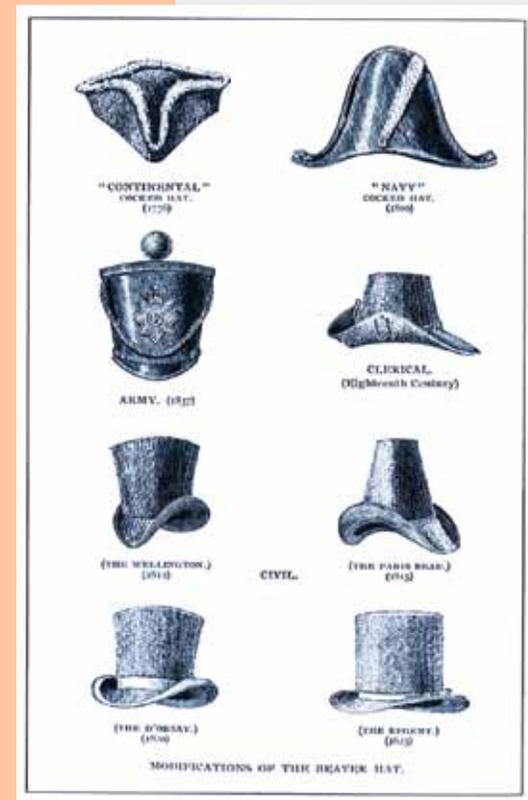


Fig. 26 There were many different styles of beaver hats, though they generally went out of fashion with the decline of the fur trade.

16 A Two Way Trade: The Movement of Good

Fort Michilimackinac was a major distribution center for much of the interior region during the French era. Here *voyageurs* stopped to stock up on supplies, canoes, and merchandise, or to spend the winter, before setting out to destinations further west or back east to Montreal. Its strategic location at the Straits of Mackinac was vital to its importance. It allowed traders to collect furs from drainages that flowed into the western Great Lakes region, while it also served as a central *entrepôt* for foodstuffs, canoes, canoe repair materials, and birchbark rolls to cover travelling shelters, as well as inbound merchandise and supplies and outbound furs and hides. Michilimackinac was also the center for diplomacy in the western Great Lakes. Most major alliances were made and reaffirmed here during the French era.



Fig. 27 Reconstructed Fort Michilimackinac.

In the **St. Lawrence communities**, large numbers of French residents worked in a wide variety of occupations related to fur trade commerce. These men and women supplied merchandise, equipment, transport vehicles, and provisions, as well as manpower and many diverse talents. For instance, as Timothy Kent (2004) explains, seamstresses created shirts and hooded coats, as well as a few other garments and hundreds of shipping bags; finger weavers fashioned sashes and garters; pewterers cast buttons; coopers turned out kegs of various sizes; carpenters and joiners assembled rough packing crates, finer chests, and trunks; carvers made stone bowls for calumet pipes as well as canoe paddles; basket weavers fashioned durable hampers for transporting nested kettles; blacksmiths forged axes, hatchets, harpoon heads, and ice chisels; warehouse laborers unpacked, packed, and hauled cargoes; canoe builders fashioned and repaired watercraft; forest workers gathered birchbark, lashing roots, and sealant pitch for these crafts; and farmers raised pigs, peas, corn, wheat, and tobacco for provisions.

In the territory surrounding **Native villages**, Native hunters harvested peltries. Native women then processed the pelts. The Natives then brought the furs to trading posts or forts, where traders baled the pelts they collected in trade into packs for transport to Montreal. Many of the goods produced in Europe and in the St. Lawrence Valley for the trade and destined for Native hands have been recovered from Native sites, where they were lost, disposed of, or intentionally deposited as mortuary offerings. This is seen at Rock Island (Wisconsin), the Fletcher site (Saginaw, Michigan), and at sites associated with Natives who lived nearby and frequented Fort St. Joseph.



Fort St. Joseph was one of the many permanent outposts that the French maintained. It stood near the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins as well as the Sauk Trail. Traders there exchanged European goods like cloth, metal tools, firearms, and kettles for furs and hides that the local Native peoples (like the Potawatomi and Miami) brought to the post. While some documentary sources exist from the fort, its recent discovery and ongoing archaeological study are providing new evidence about the daily activities that took place at this trading post in the North American interior.



Fig. 28 Native women prepared hides. A woman smokes a skin [left], another cleans the flesh off the back [center], and another sews.



Fig. 29 Eighteenth-century brass kettle from the vicinity of Fort St. Joseph.

Kettles made of sheet metal were among the most popular trade items because they provided distinct advantages to Natives who acquired them. Kettles did not break easily and they were more portable than ceramic pots; they could be repaired with metal patches, and could be repurposed for other uses when the kettle was no longer repairable. Trade good lists often recorded kettles by value of pound weight (or nest weight) and whether they were made of brass, copper, or tinplate. In terms of value by weight, tinplate kettles (made of sheet or plated with tin) were the most expensive, followed by copper and then brass.

When copper or brass kettles had out served their intended function and were no longer usable, Native people cut them into pieces and reworked them to serve new purposes. They turned some of these scraps into decorative tinkling cones, which they attached to bags, moccasins, or other items of clothing. The cones made a light jingling sound as the wearer moved. Evidence for their production has been recovered from excavations at Fort St. Joseph.

Fig. 30 Pieces of scrap metal from worn-out trade kettles have been recovered from Fort St. Joseph. They were often recycled to serve new purposes as rivets, arrow points, and tinkling cones.



Montreal was the site of large trade fairs during the early years of the fur trade. As the sites of exchange moved westward, Montreal remained the central location of the French merchants, outfitters of supplies, and labor. Merchants ordered goods from Europe and had them shipped to Quebec and then Montreal. Then they hired (or sold goods on credit to) fur traders and *voyageurs*, who transported these goods to trading posts and brought back peltries, which were then sent to Quebec and loaded aboard ships for transport to Europe.

Albany was the site of colonial rivalries in the fur trade. Originally established by the Dutch as Fort Orange, the site provided access to the furs and hides collected by their Iroquois and Mahican allies via the Hudson River. Later, the British took control of the area. Many illegal French traders (and some Native groups) brought furs to the British at Albany instead of their fellow Frenchmen at Montreal, hoping to make a better deal or avoid being caught without a license to trade.

Small industrial workshops in France and England began producing goods for the fur trade in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century textiles, axes, kettles, and other merchandise for the trade were being mass produced in most large, western European cities and smaller manufacturing centers throughout the countryside.

La Rochelle, France was the destination for the majority of peltries from New France, and was a major shipping port for manufactured goods to the New World. Here, certain of the furs, especially beaver and otters, would be processed into felt, sold to hat makers, and transformed into fashionable felt hats, while most of the other furs and hides would be used to create or decorate other items of clothing.

La Rochelle



Fig. 31 An eighteenth-century French kettle workshop.

18 People of the Trade in New France

Different people had various roles in the fur trade. In most cases Natives were the primary harvesters of furs and hides. European or *métis* traders gathered these peltries from Native hunters in exchange for European manufactured goods. Merchants, missionaries, and the military also played important roles in the trade.

Native Hunters and Hide Preparers

Most Native men hunted beaver for its meat and fur. Capture techniques varied from season to season and from place to place, but favored hunting over trapping.

In winter, when the fur was thickest, Native men cut holes in the ice near a beaver lodge and lowered nets through the holes. The hunters broke apart the lodge with an axe and caught the animals in the nets as they tried to escape. They then struck the beaver on the head to kill them. In warmer months, hunters broke down dams to drain the surrounding pond. The beaver, unable to escape to the water when their lodge was broken open, were caught by the hunter's dogs. Beaver were also shot with guns or bows and arrows. Deadfall traps, yet another technique, crushed the animal with heavy logs: their trigger mechanisms were baited with fresh aspen or poplar twigs. Other types of traps and snares could be set along beaver paths, or near water entry points to force beaver into deeper water where they eventually drowned.

Native women prepared the pelts. They first skinned the beaver, and washed the skin to remove blood and dirt. Then they used bone or stone tools to scrape off excess flesh and fat from the skin, before lacing it onto a stretching frame to dry. Once dried, these furs were hard and stiff like a board, and were known as *castor sec* (dry beaver).

Other furs and hides were made into blankets or robes, garments or moccasins for use before trading. This involved extra steps of tanning including soaking, removing hair, scraping, oiling with brains, stretching, breaking the grain, and smoking. Some archaeologists believe that smudge pits, like those found at Fort St. Joseph, were used to smoke hides, particularly those from deer, elk, and moose. After Native women scraped the hides clean of flesh, fat, and hair, they worked them with a mixture that included the cooked brains of animals. Then they laced them onto a stretching rack, worked them with a pole, and finally sewed them into a bag-like shape and placed them on a small frame over the smudge pits. Pinecones, green corncocks, or decayed wood were burned in the pit to produce substantial smoke. After smudging, the hides had a slightly golden color and remained flexible, making them readily useable and desirable for trade.

The women sewed the smoked furs together; they were worn with the fur side against the skin. Beaver pelts prepared this way were known as *castor gras* (greasy beaver). They were more valuable because friction from wear and the bear grease that Natives used to protect their skin had already loosened and removed the outer guard hairs – thus eliminating the first step in the felting process of hat-making.

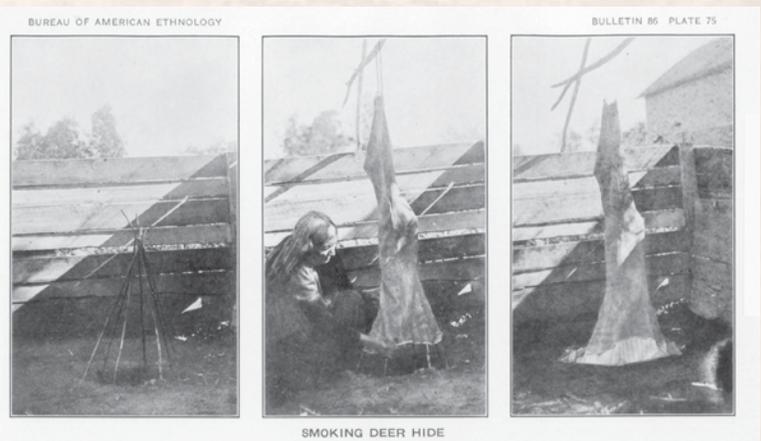


Fig. 32 A Native American woman smokes a deer hide.

Fiction
Steel traps

Fact
The steel trap became widespread only in the nineteenth century.



Fig. 33 The first Newhouse metal traps, like this one, were made around 1823 by the Oneida Community in Oneida, NY. This beaver trap was designed to snap shut on the animal's leg and the teeth were to prevent the animal from pulling its foot out.

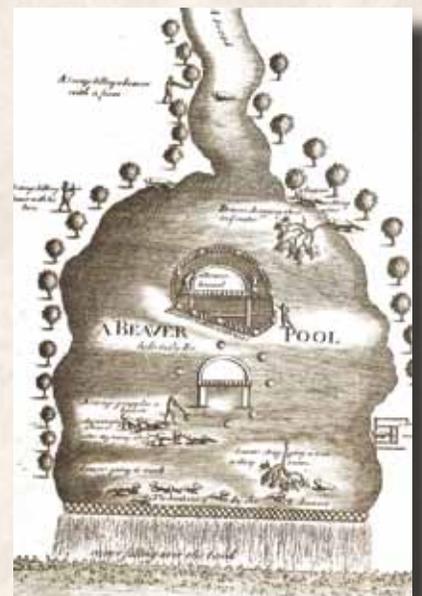


Fig. 34 Natives hunted beaver using many different methods as shown in this eighteenth-century illustration.

Montreal Merchants, the Military, and the Church

French traders traveling into the Great Lakes region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relied upon their merchant partners in Montreal for trade goods and supplies. By 1680, approximately 35 merchants operated in Montreal. Some of them were men of modest means who emigrated from France to engage in the fur trade. Others were *voyageurs* and traders who worked their way into the merchant business.

Although the citizens of Montreal did frequent the merchants' stores, the fur trade was a major part of the merchants' business. They imported trade goods from Europe, hired local craftsmen and women to manufacture some types of trade goods, outfitted the traders with supplies, handled shipping arrangements, and evaluated and stored furs received from their trading partners in the interior.

Small garrisons of *Troupes de la Marine* were also sent to western posts. Officers often accepted an assignment as a commandant at a western post as a way to make money and earn promotions. Part of a post commander's benefits was permission to trade in furs. Commanders granted permission to traders to come in and do business at their fort, and they supervised the trade.

Besides being presented with an opportunity to make money, they had the difficult task of maintaining alliances and helping avoid conflict. Post commanders were charged with keeping

Native groups at peace with one another and loyal to the French. As to the men he commanded, by the standards of the day, the troops received plenty of food and clothing and were well paid. When they retired from service, many of them established their own farms, receiving aid from the government for the first few years. *Voyageurs* reinforced troops and provided provisions and services, while troops provided markets and protection.

The Church also provided a market for goods, and attempted to pacify Natives. Missionaries had early hopes that the fur trade would help finance and facilitate evangelization. However, they developed concerns for keeping French and Natives separate to avoid "bad influences" on each other.

The intemperate or un-Christian-like behavior of some fur traders undermined the priests' efforts at conversion of Native peoples. Church officials also feared that traders would assimilate into Native society, and abandon their Christian beliefs to adopt non-Christian Native practices.



Fig. 35 Castor sec on a hide stretcher.



Fig. 36 A French marine button like this one found at Fort St. Joseph attests to a military presence at the fort.



Figs. 37 Reproduction of a Christian religious medallion recovered from Fort St. Joseph.

"The Jesuits undergo all these hardships for the sake of converting the Indians, and likewise for political reasons. The Jesuits are of great use to their king; for they are frequently able to persuade the Indians to break their treaty with the English, to make war upon them, to bring their furs to the French, and not to permit the English to come amongst them."

— Peter Kalm, 1749 (Forster 1771:142)

20 People of the Trade in New France

Voyageurs and Coureurs de Bois

From 1653 on, when French traders first ventured into the interior, the term *coureurs de bois* (“runners of the woods”) generally referred to anyone who went out to trade for furs; after 1681 it meant an outlaw who traded without a license. *Voyageurs* were legal, wage-earning canoe men who transported trade goods and supplies to the western posts, traded this merchandise, and brought back peltries. The majority of *voyageurs* came from parishes around Montreal and Three Rivers. Many only worked temporarily in the fur trade in return for food, clothing, and wages, and then went home to farms and families.

Voyageurs were hardy men who paddled heavily-laden canoes for many miles a day. In the summer they had to travel long distances quickly. Often they sang to set the pace of paddling, and to buoy themselves in times of exhaustion or fear. When they came to obstructions such as rapids or stretches of land between bodies of water, they had to portage—i.e., pick up and carry their canoes over land, along with the heavy packs of supplies and goods. Not only did the job require physical prowess, but it was dangerous. Many *voyageurs* lost their lives to the forces of nature or attacks from hostile Natives.

Most were illiterate, so it is hard to know the details of their daily lives because they left few written records. Researchers have to

rely on what others said about them, the contracts they signed, and archaeological evidence of their activities.

The inbound voyages from Montreal to the Straits of Mackinac usually took from five to eight weeks. Outbound trips typically took less time, due to the assistance of the prevailing westerly wind and the current on the long downstream run of the Ottawa River. During these voyages, the men toiled in the canoes ten to fifteen hours a day; at their evening campsites, they repaired the canoes, and ate meals of pea or corn soup with salted pork, along with biscuits or grease fried flour cakes, and brandy to wash it down. The men slept with a blanket beneath the overturned canoes, or in shelters made of a pole frame covered with long panels of birchbark.

Voyageurs maintained some of their French-Canadian identity but also entered the social domain of Native peoples. They adapted to a Native way of life by adopting new clothing styles, hunting technologies, and some of their customs and beliefs.



Figs. 38 Voyageurs, merchants, French marines, and Jesuits all played roles in the fur trade.

Fiction
French fur trappers

Fact
The French traded for furs and hides, but seldom if ever did any significant amount of harvesting themselves.

“It is the Paddle That Brings Us”

*Riding along the road from Rochelle city,
I met three girls and all of them were pretty.
It is the paddle that brings us, that brings us,
It is the paddle that brings us there.*

*–Translation of a traditional voyageur song.
(Podruchny 2006:86)*



Fig. 39 Voyageur reenactors unload their canoe.

"I have been unable to ascertain the exact number [of *coureurs de bois*] because everyone associated with them covers up for them."

—Jacques Duchesneau, 1680 (Eccles 1983:110)

"It is inconceivable what hardships the people in Canada must undergo on their journeys. Sometimes they must carry their goods a great way by land; frequently they are abused by the Indians, and sometimes they are killed by them. They often suffer hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, and are bit by gnats, and exposed to the bites of poisonous snakes, and other dangerous animals and insects. These destroy a great part of the youth in Canada, and prevent the people from growing old. By this means, however, they become such brave soldiers, and so inured to fatigue, that none of them fear danger or hardships. Many of them settle among the Indians far from Canada, marry Indian women, and never come back again."

—Peter Kalm, 1749 (Forster 1771:275)

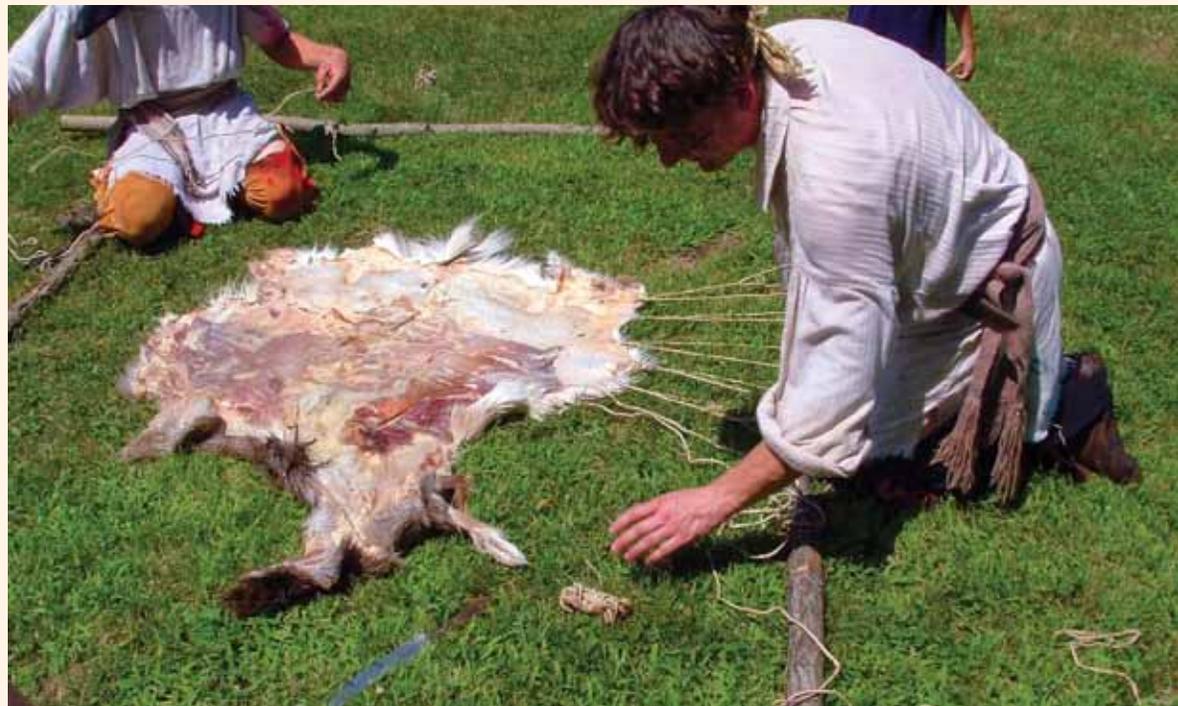


Fig. 41 Early nineteenth-century voyageurs breaking camp. Detail of Francis Anne Hopkins, *Voyageurs at Dawn*, 1871.

Fig. 42 A modern reenactor attaches a hide to a frame.



Fig. 40 Mouth harps, like this one found at Fort St. Joseph, were used to make music.



22 Fur Trade Society

Some fur trade scholars have coined the term “fur trade society” to refer to the new social relations, family structures, interethnic unions, and novel uses of material culture which characterize the cultural amalgamations that emerged wherever Natives and newcomers interacted. Others have found it useful to think of the western Great Lakes as a cultural middle ground, in which new social and conceptual spaces developed as an outcome of cross-cultural interactions that were neither French nor Native. A close examination of the documentary and archaeological records supports both interpretations.

Interdependence and Mutual Influences

Natives participated in the fur trade and formed military alliances with the French because they desired access to European trade goods, and the French offered them protection and assistance against enemies. Alliances with Natives gained the French allies to help them maintain their network of settlements and posts, and helped them contain the British along the Eastern Seaboard until 1763. Unlike the British colonists, the French did not occupy and settle large areas of land. Instead, with Native acceptance, they built a network of small settlements and posts in Native-controlled lands. These outposts depended upon their Native allies and trading partners not only for trade in furs, but for food, technology, and knowledge needed to survive the challenging conditions of the upper country.

Contact between Natives and *voyageurs* facilitated cultural exchange. Because of their close relations with Natives in the fur trade, *voyageurs* learned Native languages and cultures. They also adopted Native technologies in order to survive. They ate Native food, wore Native clothing, and used Native tools alongside their European tools. Sometimes *voyageurs*' values converged with or were adopted from Native peoples. Native ideas about property, wealth, and independence also influenced *voyageurs*' values.

Contact with Europeans affected Natives in similar ways as they adopted many European items of daily life and took up certain European customs.



Fig. 44 French fur traders adopted Native technologies like snowshoes.

Earrings and nosebobs, tinkling cones, sleeve buttons, and glass beads (all found at Fort St. Joseph) display some of the diversity of personal adornment and are material evidence of cultural exchange and interaction in fur trade society.



Fig. 43 The trade affected both Native and European attire.



Fig. 45 Glass beads found at Fort St. Joseph.

Métis and Country Wives

Many French *voyageurs* married into Native groups and took “country wives.” Often these Native women were members of nations with whom *voyageurs* traded or wanted to build trading relationships. Establishing kinship ties with Native groups helped to create good trade relations between Frenchmen and Natives, and bound them together both politically and socially. Marriage into a clan paved the way for traders because much of Native socio-economic activity was conditioned by kinship relationships and reciprocal obligations.

Native women sought men who could meet their economic needs. Marrying fur traders gave them access to European trade goods, and offered them potential influence in their tribe. Some Native women became traders themselves. However, while the bonds that formed between *voyageurs* and Native women were important to trading alliances, they were sometimes impermanent, because both *voyageurs* and Native women traveled extensively. *Voyageurs* often were relocated from one year to the next, while Native women often scheduled activities and moved in accordance with the seasonal availability of resources and group customs. Many such marriages, however, endured the lifetimes of the partners.

The children of Native women and French men were called *métis*, meaning that they were half French and half Native. They shared ties to both cultures, and some grew up to be diplomats who could operate in both Native and French worlds. Some *métis* children, especially daughters, were sent to Montreal to be educated. Many *métis* participated in the fur trade. A mixed heritage did not have negative social connotations; if anything, it allowed individuals to operate fully in the worlds of both their French fathers and Native mothers.

These kinds of interethnic relationships were not unique to New France. European women were in short supply, and officials of various European nations often encouraged relations with Native peoples because it established alliances and ensured close social and political cooperation. At sites



Fig. 46 Tinkling cones, like this one found at Fort St. Joseph, adorned both Native and voyageur garments.

like Fort Ross, many of the Russian-American Company's Russian, Creole (people of mixed Russian and indigenous ancestry), and Native Alaskan men married or formed relationships with local Native Californian women and established interethnic households. At the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Vancouver, although clerks and officers occupied buildings within the fort's palisade, *engagés* lived in a multiethnic village of over 600 people. By the nineteenth century, most of the interior of North America had witnessed some form of fur trade society, providing testimony to the trade's pervasive influence on the American experience.



Fig. 47 Glass inset [left] and sleeve buttons from Fort St. Joseph excavations.



Fig. 48 Earrings or nose bobs found at Fort St. Joseph.

24 Native Peoples and the Fur Trade



Fig. 49 Maurie, a nineteenth-century métis woman of the Potawatomi, holds a parasol and neckerchief while dressed in typical Potawatomi attire of the day. Native and métis readiness to use European cloth and clothing did not indicate rejection of their Native culture, but rather appropriation of generally desired innovations.



Fig. 50 Wampum belts, made from shell beads strung together, were often given as gifts to reinforce alliances.



Fig. 51 A shell bead found at Fort St. Joseph.

Archaeologists have greatly altered their view of the material record of the fur trade. They once viewed it merely as evidence of the acculturation or assimilation of Native peoples as they adopted European trade goods and abandoned their own technologies and traditional ways of life. They saw Europeans as the source of change and agency, and cast Native peoples in the roles of minor players at best or passive victims at worst.

However, more recent histories have laid to rest perspectives that commemorated fur trade history as a testimony to the triumph of the civilized over the savage, the Christian over the heathen, or viewed the fur trade as the precursor to inevitable settlement. Despite the fact that Natives played a vital role in the development of the trade, and scholars have documented the trade's severe consequences for Native groups, their centrality in the institution was long ignored. The field of ethnohistory, developed in the 1950s, constituted early efforts to employ written (and other) sources of evidence to examine the muted voices of Native peoples and recast fur trade history as an aspect of Native history. Likewise, archaeology recovers the remains of material goods in cultural context, often allowing investigators to ascertain how Natives used, modified, or discarded them in daily practice.



Fig. 52 Some Natives converted; those who did often still retained traditional beliefs alongside their Christian faith.

Shifting Political Alliances and Power

Political and military alliances created through the fur trade could entangle Native groups in wars with other Natives and between rival European groups. Although Algonquian peoples mostly allied themselves with the French, and Iroquois groups with the British, this was not always the case. Native groups sometimes remained independent and politically savvy; they could switch alliances to serve their best economic and diplomatic interests. However, they often became involved in European-related warfare and suffered the death and destruction of those conflicts.

Fiction
Traders cheated the Natives

Fact
Certainly some tried, but Natives had been trading among themselves for thousands of years. They knew quality and price, and how to get a good deal.

"Mi l pi bnowi ga dawadwat Neshnabek mine Wemtegozhik, ga nadkendmwat ma shna Neshnabek odi shke-nadzwen zam cage gego ga ansemget bgeji mteno zam shke-madshkewezwen. E-wi geget nsostmyag ga zhwebek, ta nadkendmned ga ezh-nendmwat. Mteno odi ta zhwebet geshpen nadkendmned wi-ji Neshnabemyag."

"So in that time when the Neshnabe and the French traded together, the Neshnabek sought to understand this new way, because everything had changed just a bit partly because of new technology. For us to truly understand what happened, we should seek to know how they thought. This can only happen if we learn how to speak the Neshnabe language."

Religion and Worldview

Roman Catholic missionaries attempted to persuade Native peoples to abandon their traditional beliefs and convert to Christianity. Some converted and others did not. Natives who converted often still retained traditional beliefs alongside their Christian faith. The introduction of Christianity caused many Natives to rethink their worldviews—especially in the face of widespread disease which their curing rituals could not control and which seemed to have little impact on Christian Europeans.

“Native people sought to shape the fur trade according to their own cultural values, and to use the trade to serve their best interests...The trade arose though a process of cultural compromise.”

—Dean Anderson, 1994

Cultural Change and Continuity

Contact with Europeans changed many aspects of Native culture, although many traditional practices endured.

European diseases, spread through contact via trade and missionary activity, killed vast numbers of Natives. Older members of societies who held cultural memories and political power were among the most affected. This undermined Native cultural practices and the ability of some groups to protect their interests effectively. The young were also heavily impacted by epidemic disease and this compromised a groups’ ability to maintain itself biologically. In a weakened state, many groups could not resist encroachment onto their lands by Europeans and Native intruders.

Alcohol, always a controversial trade item, also had devastating effects. Natives had no cultural mechanisms for alcohol use—they drank mostly to become intoxicated and reach a dream state which alcohol seemed to facilitate. Drunkenness led to violence and poor trades, while prolonged alcohol use eventually led to the usual gamut of physical ailments.

Native gender roles shifted as patterns of life changed. Some Europeans deliberately tried to get Natives to farm in a European manner, even among those groups that already practiced horticulture. For example, among Iroquoian groups missionaries attempted to get males to farm, when in fact it was traditionally women’s work.

The fur trade encouraged hunting for purposes of trade and not just for subsistence. In fact, over time, the emphasis of Native life changed toward the harvesting of furs and hides.

Likewise, contact with Indians, whom Europeans had not known of only a few decades before, challenged European perspectives. Europeans had to rethink their view of the Bible (the central text of European worldview) which appeared not to have accounted for the existence of Native Americans. At the same time, close contact with a culture so different from their own, yet obviously complex, led Europeans to contemplate the notion that there were multiple ways to organize society. This sort of cultural relativism was particularly pronounced among Jesuit missionaries who wrote about these ideas in books that were read by the intellectual elite in Europe.

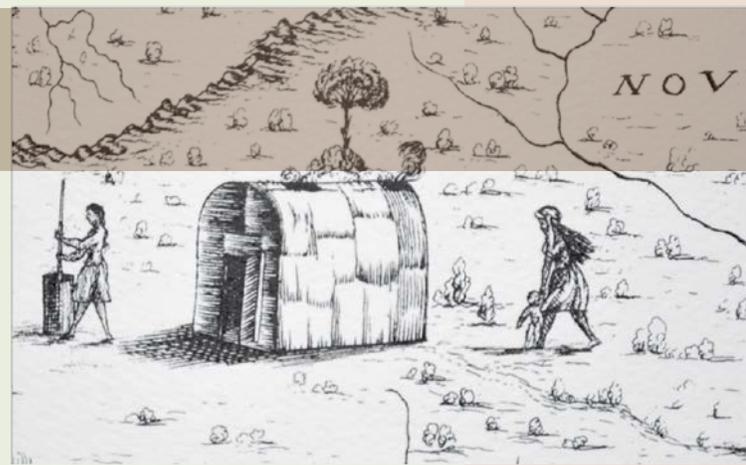


Fig. 53 Natives farming in the St. Lawrence Valley.

Then those peltries were used to purchase commercially-made commodities, rather than the Native people producing those articles themselves.

Natives readily incorporated European and American goods into their society, and used them to enhance prestige within the community and material prosperity. However, Native peoples selectively adopted and reinterpreted these goods to fit into their established cultures.

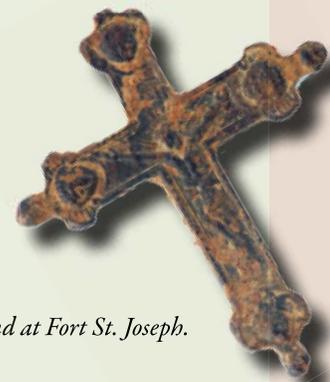


Fig. 54 Crucifix found at Fort St. Joseph.

26 Trade Goods and the Material Culture of t

“Though many nations imitate the French customs; yet I observed on the contrary, that the French in Canada in many respects follow the customs of the Indians, with whom they converse every day. They make use of the tobacco-pipes, shoes, garters, and girdles, of the Indians. They follow the Indian way of making war with exactness; they mix the same things with tobacco; they make use of the Indian bark-boats (canoes) and row them in the Indian way; they wrap square pieces of cloth round their feet, instead of stockings, and have adopted many other Indian fashions.”

—Peter Kalm, 1749 (Forster 1771: 254)

Interaction brought both Europeans and Native Americans into contact with new forms of material culture, which they selectively adopted or rejected.

Natives participated in the fur trade in part because they desired European trade goods that made their lives easier. Native groups selectively adopted trade goods to serve their own needs. Often they chose goods that were replacements for traditional objects with which they were already familiar, such as cutting tools (knives, axes), cooking vessels (brass kettles), and clothing. These goods did not necessarily create dependency. The archaeological record shows us that traditional technologies and tools continued to exist alongside new European ones for remarkably long periods of time. Natives carefully considered what trade goods they sought out. They adopted the most useful goods and used them in ways that blended into existing Native culture.

For their part, Europeans also selectively adopted many Native technologies, such as birchbark canoes, snowshoes,

and toboggans. They also adopted Native clothing styles and foodways, as attested to by many sources on the fur trade. Some of these foods included maple sugar, wild rice, and many wild greens and roots.

Cloth and Clothing

Cloth, sewing supplies, and clothing were among the most common trade goods in the western Great Lakes, by both value and volume. Cloth itself rarely preserves in the archaeological record, but historical documentation indicates that fabrics, completed garments, and sewing supplies accounted for more than 60% of trader expenditures for goods. Trade inventories recorded many ready-made items. Shirts, hooded coats, stockings, and neckerchiefs were the most numerous, with lesser numbers of breeches, waistcoats, caps, and jackets. The lists also included fabrics (woolens, linens, cottons, and silks), thread, ribbon, tape, lace, buttons, needles, straight pins, thimbles, and scissors. Archaeologists have recovered some of the latter objects at Fort St. Joseph.

Both Natives and Europeans greatly desired European clothing since garments needed constant replacement due to wear. For Native women, the use of European textiles instead of tanned hides reduced the amount of time and labor they had to invest in making clothing, leaving more time for other domestic activities as well as activities related to the fur trade. Native women also liked the greater comfort of cloth, compared to hides, and the increased variety of styles possible with fabric's flexibility and range of bright colors and textures.

Cloth had to be brought from Europe because both French and British laws banned its commercial production in the colonies. Lengths were carefully inspected and marked with lead seals that showed that no one had tampered with the fabric. Seals sometimes recorded other information about the cloth, such as its place of manufacture, the company that imported it, and its quality. After being removed, lead seals could serve other purposes. They could be melted down into musketballs or shot, or molded into objects for personal adornment.

Fiction

Blankets came in “Points”: 2-point, 3-point, 4-point blankets. The points referred to the number of beaver pelts required to obtain one.

Fact

In reality, points denoted the size and quality of the blanket, not its price.



Fig. 55 Native groups adopted European goods like guns, kettles, axes, and cloth and blended them into their cultures.



Fig. 56 Straight pins recovered from Fort St. Joseph.

William Burnett's Trade List

The British abandoned Fort St. Joseph in 1781. When the area came under American control, American trader William Burnett carried on fur trade activity near the mouth of the St. Joseph River. On September 26, 1797 (16 years after the British abandoned Fort St. Joseph), he wrote a letter to ask to buy the following items from Mr. Robert Innes and Company in Detroit. Many of the articles are related to fabric and clothing:

- 4 pieces of Blue Stroud Small Cord
- 16 pieces of 2-1/2 point Blankets
- 15 pieces of Calico
- 4 pieces of Indian ribband
- 1 piece of Green Cloth 6 & 7/ p yard
- 3 Gross white Mettal Buttons
- 500 large Silver Brooches
- 2 pieces Striped Cotton
- 1000 Small broaches
- 15 pounds rice
- 1 Bushel Salt
- 2 pounds Hyson Tea
- 2 pounds of Green Tea
- 1 pound Salt Petre
- 2 € Large Nails



— William Burnett, 1797 (Burnett 1967:81-82)

Fig. 57 Europeans adopted tobacco from Native Americans. These stone pipe bowls are evidence of tobacco use at Fort St. Joseph.



Fig. 58 Lead seals once attached to cloth can provide details of how the fur trade worked. The writing on this seal, found during the 2011 field season at Fort St. Joseph, has been interpreted as "Bureau Foraine de Lille," which was a taxing authority in eighteenth-century France from a region well known for cloth production.

Clothing-related artifacts such as buttons, thimbles, straight pins, scissors, and an awl from Fort St. Joseph abound in the archaeological record, pointing to the importance of fabrics and clothing in everyday life.



Fig. 59 Metal and bone buttons.



Fig. 60 Thimbles and baling needles.



Fig. 61 Straight pins, scissors, and an awl.

Firearms

Firearms were a highly prized item in the fur trade. At first the French were wary of giving or trading guns to Natives. However, in the 1640s, the French reversed their policy after their enemies, the Iroquois, had acquired flintlocks from the Dutch. While Natives obtained the majority of guns through trade, a significant number were given as gifts to solidify alliances.

There were different types of flintlocks used in New France. *Fusils ordinaires* were the most common type of gun used in the fur trade. They did not possess tested barrels, and their decorations were etched into the gun's iron or brass furniture, not cast. Military muskets of various sizes were issued to soldiers stationed at forts, and consisted of simple yet durable locks and metal furniture. These guns were manufactured with proved (tested) barrels to increase accuracy and to guard against bursting when fired. Ornately adorned *fusils fins* were high quality muskets with proved barrels. They were carried by officers, prominent explorers, and traders, or presented to high-ranking Natives as gifts. *Fusils fins* were worth about twice as much as *fusils ordinaires*. Jean Boudriot estimated that about 1 *fusil fin* was shipped to America for every 20 *fusils ordinaires*.

Natives demanded muskets, but did not abandon their traditional weapons due to the sometimes unreliable nature of firearms. The early flintlock could be a remarkably ineffective weapon, and its initial military advantage is hotly debated. This was true of most early firearms. Guns could be notoriously erratic weapons, needing constant maintenance and cleaning; they easily broke down, were frequently in need of repair, and required a continual supply of gunpowder and shot. In contrast, bows and arrows were easier to acquire, faster to use, and often more effective. With technological improvements, firearms provided a major military advantage. Despite their drawbacks, firearms of all sorts were highly sought after, and granted the Native bearer a level of prestige.

Gifts of guns helped reinforce alliances because Native groups needed the services of French gunsmiths to keep the guns in working order, as they often did not have experience in repairs themselves. Natives often asked the Crown to provide gunsmiths to repair guns. Oftentimes gunsmiths were sent out with *voyageurs*, or they were *voyageurs* themselves. Sometimes they worked for the Church. A cache of gun parts recovered from Fort St. Joseph has been interpreted as associated with Antoine Deshêtres, the resident blacksmith/gunsmith at the post during the 1730s-40s.

Fiction

Muskets were so long because the traders made the Natives offer a stack of beaver pelts as high as the musket was long.



Fig. 63 Honey-colored, spall-type gunflints, like this one recovered from Fort St. Joseph, struck a steel frizzen to create the spark which ignited the gun powder.



Fig. 62 Flintlock hardware and ammunition from Fort St. Joseph: 1. gun cock, 2. honey-colored French gunflint, 3. vise screw, 4. lock plate with frizzen, 5. breech plug, 6. main spring, 7. serpentine sideplate fragment, 8. trigger guard, 9. musketballs, and 10. lead shot.

*"Let us trade light guns small in hand and well shap'd, with locks that will not freeze in the winter."
—Native trader quoted by Edward Umfreville,
"Present State of Hudson's Bay," London, 1790*

Fact
Weapon barrels were made long in an attempt to improve accuracy.



Figs. 64 and 65 Top and side views of an axe head found at Fort St. Joseph in 2011.



Metal Goods

Metal artifacts were among the goods that Native peoples chose to acquire in exchange for furs. At Fort St. Joseph and other similar sites, archaeologists have found iron axe heads, iron knife blades, gun parts, and brass kettle pieces, as well as myriad other metal objects.

Scholars long believed that Natives adopted European metal tools wholesale, and totally replaced all previously existing Native American technologies. This is not true, as Native American groups were selective in which metal items they adopted. They chose to adopt some, continued to use stone and bone tools alongside metal ones, and also found entirely new uses for some of the metal goods that the French had to offer.

The metal goods that Native peoples adopted most frequently include knives, axes, and kettles. These durable and efficient tools offered substantial advantages over traditional chipped and ground stone implements, and containers made of wood, bark, or clay. They did not adopt other European goods so quickly. Archaeologists have noted that Native Americans continued to use stone and bone tools at a number of sites long after French traders introduced metal tools. European metal fishhooks are found along the

western shore of Lake Michigan on Rock Island, Wisconsin, but bone fishing tools outnumber them. This suggests that Natives found these bone tools just as effective as metal ones, and did not entirely replace them. Stone scrapers were also as effective as similar metal tools, and were easier to obtain and maintain. Stone arrowheads are often found in the same context as metal implements and in some ways the bow and arrow was a more effective and flexible technology than the flintlock musket for some purposes.

While Native Americans used many European trade goods as they were intended, they modified many other goods and materials. Archaeologists often find metal tools that show evidence of having been used in unique ways or modified for new purposes. Examples include axe heads used as hammers, anvils and wedges; gun barrels flattened for use as digging tools and scrapers; gun buttplates modified into hide scrapers; and pieces of brass and copper kettles that were reshaped into tinkling cones, arrowheads, or scrapers.

Brass and copper kettles were one of the most commonly repurposed European metal goods. Natives recycled worn out kettles into new goods such as arrow points, scrapers, and awls, and ornaments such as tubular beads, pendants, and tinkling cones.

Evidence of how Natives modified metals for new purposes is shown in Figs. 66-68.



Fig. 66 An artifact that appears to be a musket barrel modified into a hide scraper.



Fig. 67 Decorative earring or nosebob.



Fig. 68 Brass tinkling cones.

30 Trade Goods and the Material Culture of t

Alcohol

Alcohol was a controversial trade item. French officials, religious leaders, and Native leaders attempted to limit its use in the fur trade.

Drinking alcohol was a common part of everyday life for many Europeans in fur trade society. Many viewed moderate consumption of it as an aid to health and digestion. *Voyageurs* were often allowed to bring their own personal ration of brandy along with them in their travels, and sometimes their employers provided it. This practice often made the use of alcohol in the fur trade hard to regulate, because it was difficult to tell how much was intended for personal use by the *voyageurs* and how much was intended for trade with Native Americans.

Some scholars have argued that Natives wanted alcohol because intoxication was thought to be a semi-spiritual experience. For them, alcohol was a new way to achieve an old traditional goal of reaching the spirit world. Most Natives were not immediately aware of the social problems alcohol could cause, because their culture had not had prior exposure to it. Later, some Native leaders attempted to prohibit or limit the use of alcohol by their people.

French missionaries and clergymen opposed the sale of alcohol to Native peoples, whom they sought to convert to Christianity. Drunkenness, alcoholism, and related violence became a troubling problem. The clergy also worried that traders would try to swindle Natives out of their hard-earned furs by getting them drunk before trading transactions. At one point, Bishop François de Laval threatened to excommunicate anyone known to have traded liquor to the Natives.

When the clergy demanded that French officials ban the sale of alcohol to Natives, some fur traders objected strongly. Alcohol, especially brandy, was a highly profitable trade item that Natives wanted to buy. Natives would constantly need to renew their supplies of this high-demand consumable item. The clergy and French officials sometimes bickered over the issue.



Alcohol in Fur Trade Lists

Alcohol does appear in fur trade ledgers, but during periods when it was illegal to trade, exact records were likely not kept in order to avoid penalties, making it difficult for historians to estimate how prevalent alcohol really was as a trade item. The following "account of David McCrae & Co. Dr to Goods for one Canoe for Msr. Landoise" was a fur trade record kept at Michilimacina and includes the following alcohol-related items:

2 Barrells Port Wine
Barrells & filling
1 do [ditto] Spiritts 8 Gallons
Barrell
1 do Brandy
8 Gallons for the Men
1 do do do for Landoise
—(Armour and Widder 1978:205)



Fig. 70 Spigots, like this one from Michilimackinac, were used to tap kegs.

Fig. 69 Church officials and missionaries were often outspoken about prohibiting alcohol as a trade item.

Figs. 71 and 72
 Archaeologists of the fur trade have recovered wine bottles and other glass containers that may have held alcohol, like these from Fort Michilimackinac [right] and these fragments from Fort St. Joseph [far right]. However, these containers were likely reused to hold various other types of liquid, so it is difficult to determine the frequency of alcohol consumption on the basis of the archaeological evidence.



Common Trade Goods

Because Native Americans were discerning customers, they desired some trade goods more than others. According to Peter Kalm, who traveled in North America from 1748-1751, Natives most often wanted the following trade goods:

- **Muskets, Powder, Shot, and Balls**
- **Pieces of white cloth, or of a coarse uncut cloth [blankets]** Both their men and women wear these pieces of cloth, which have commonly several blue or red stripes on the edge.
- **Blue or red cloth** Of this the Indian women make their petticoats, which reach only to their knees. They generally chuse the blue colour.
- **Shirts and shifts of linen**
- **Pieces of cloth, which they wrap around their legs instead of stockings [leggings]**
- **Hatchets, knives, scissors, needles, and a steel to strike fire with**
- **Kettles of copper or brass, sometimes tinned in the inside** They do not want iron boilers, because they cannot be easily carried on their continual journies.
- **Ear-rings of different sizes, commonly of brass, and sometimes of tin** They are worn by both men and women.
- **Vermillion** With this they paint their face, shirt, and several parts of the body.
- **Verdigrise** to paint their faces green.
- **Looking glasses**
- **Burning glasses**



Fig. 73 Modern recreations of common eighteenth-century trade goods. Kettles, firearms, axes, cloth and clothing, beads, and silver ornaments are among the goods Natives wanted.

- **Tobacco**
- **Wampum**
- **Glass beads of a small size, and white or other colours.** The Indian women know how to fasten them in their ribbands, pouches, and clothes.
- **Brass and Steel wire**
- **Brandy** On account of the many irregularities which are caused by the use of brandy, the sale of it has been prohibited under severe penalties; however, they do not always pay an implicit obedience to this order.

—Peter Kalm, 1749 (Forster 1771:269-271)

32 Animal Exploitation



Fig. 74 A bear mandible recovered from Fort St. Joseph.

Subsistence

Natives exploited fur-bearing animals for millennia, though their efforts intensified greatly in the seventeenth century due to the growing demands for furs. The most detailed information on animal exploitation and subsistence during the colonial fur trade era in the Great Lakes region comes from eighteenth-century archaeological sites such as Fort Michilimackinac, Fort Ouiatenon, and Fort St. Joseph.

The animal species that the French fur traders and Natives most relied upon for food at fur trade sites varied with environmental setting, the time period, and existing transportation networks. Foodways were also affected by the roles sites played, as well as the economic status and social class of the French inhabitants at the various posts.

Archaeozoologists can analyze animal remains found at fur trade sites to learn about the types of animals used in fur trade society. The remains of white-tailed deer [below], an important food resource for Natives and French fur traders, are frequently found at Fort St. Joseph. Perforated bear mandibles, which many experts think were used as leather working tools, are found at eighteenth-century Great Lakes fur trade sites. This bear mandible fragment [left] was found at Fort St. Joseph in 2011.

Unlike most large sites, smaller French forts and trading posts, such as Fort St. Joseph, were located close to villages of Native Americans. These close trading relationships provided the French with furs and access to local wild animal populations. Inter-marriage with Native American women from these neighboring villages also influenced what they ate.

The French inhabitants of Fort Michilimackinac depended on the abundant deepwater fish such as lake whitefish, ciscos, lake trout, burbot, and lake sturgeon, as well as walleye, suckers (e.g., redhorse), black bass, sunfish, and freshwater drum. Many mammal species were exploited including beaver, porcupine, snowshoe hare, squirrels, river otter, fisher, mink, bobcat or lynx, black bear, red fox, and wolf or dog. Diverse bird remains include swan, geese, ducks, loon, bittern, pied-billed grebe, herons, passenger pigeon, ruffed grouse, spruce grouse, domesticated chicken, hawks, shorebirds, gulls, and raven.

Interestingly, archaeological remains of white-tailed deer are sparse at Fort Michilimackinac because the mixed coniferous-deciduous forest in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula was not favorable for large populations. Supply routes to the Straits of Mackinac did not permit the establishment of domesticated animals until after 1730. More dependable supply routes and increased numbers of cattle, swine, and chickens coincided with the takeover of the fort by the British in 1761. However, houses within Fort Michilimackinac where French-Canadians and *métis* resided continued to yield remains of beaver in the refuse, in stark contrast to the new British occupants.

The deciduous forest setting to the south in the valleys of the St. Joseph and the Wabash rivers supported a different array of animals. Fort Ouiatenon, constructed in 1717 near present-day Lafayette, Indiana, was populated by a small garrison of marines and families of French fur traders that were involved with neighboring bands of Wea, Mascouten, Kickapoo, and Piankeshaw Indians.

Large and well-preserved samples of animal remains acquired during archaeological excavations reveal a diverse range of mammals, birds, fish, and turtles that residents hunted and trapped. Nearby grassland habitats typical of the Prairie Peninsula provided bison, badger, greater prairie



Fig. 75 Deer bone recovered in burned soil near a fireplace at Fort St. Joseph.



Fig. 76 Domesticated dogs were common at fur trade sites.

chicken, bobwhite, and ornate box turtle. White-tailed deer were by far the most important prey species. Natives hunted them for venison and hides, and modified their antlers and selected bones into various kinds of artifacts.

French *habitants* also raised swine in the area. Raccoon was the next most important wild mammal, followed by black bear and beaver. Archaeologists have recovered the remains of seventeen other species of mammals from the site including cattle, horse, elk, various

medium and small rodents, mustelids (river otter, fisher, and mink), canids (dog and/or coyote and fox), bobcat and domestic cat. More than 20 different kinds of birds were also used at the site, the most abundant being wild turkey, waterfowl (various ducks, Canada goose, and swan), and domesticated chicken. Passenger pigeons were also frequently hunted, and Carolina parakeet has also been identified. The Wabash River and its tributary creeks and floodplain lakes provided more than 16 kinds of fish with river catfish and suckers being most common. Turtle remains and freshwater mussel shells have also been found.

Fort St. Joseph resembled Fort Ouiatenon in the composition of its inhabitants. Archaeologists have

found remains of domesticated animals (swine, cattle, horse, and chicken) at Fort St. Joseph, but the evidence indicates a much greater reliance on wild animals than any of the French colonial sites in the Upper Great Lakes region that have been studied to date. Like Fort Ouiatenon, white-tailed deer is the most prevalent species, followed in frequency by raccoon and beaver. Other mammals include elk, porcupine, black bear, squirrel, eastern cottontail, bobcat, gray fox, and dog, coyote, or wolf. The most commonly found bird remains are ducks, Canada goose, trumpeter swan, wild turkey, and passenger pigeon. Evidence of burning and butcher marks on the bones clearly indicate that people used these animals for food.

Fig. 77 Furs of various animals were exploited in the fur trade.



34 Animal Exploitation

Environmental Effects

Natives traditionally hunted beaver as a food and a fur source, but the intensification of hunting caused by the fur trade eventually decimated the beaver population. Beaver had built dams that formed ponds and wetlands and created new habitats for wildlife like birds, fish, insects, and amphibians. The dragging of dam-logs also made paths for wildlife to access different resources for food and shelter. The overhunting of beaver led to harmful, long-term environmental consequences for these watersheds and wetland habitats.

Other fur trades, especially in sea otter and buffalo, also caused drastic drops in animal populations. Years of overhunting nearly drove these species to extinction. This trend continued until the early twentieth century, when government regulations were put in place to reverse centuries'-old practices and restore their numbers.



Fig. 78 The trade in buffalo robes led to the near extinction of the American bison on the Plains in the nineteenth century.

Fig. 79

"Their [beaver] decreasing in number is very easily accounted for; because the Indians, before the arrival of the Europeans, only caught as many as they found necessary to clothe themselves with, there being then no trade with the skins. At present a number of ships go annually to Europe, laden chiefly with beaver skins; the English and French endeavour to outdo each other, by paying the Indians well for them, and this encourages the latter to extirpate these animals."

— Peter Kalm, 1749 (Forster 1771: 297)



Aftermath

Fur traders moved on to exploit new areas as fur-bearing animal populations declined. This led to westward expansion of the French, British and American fur trades. As the fur trade moved westward, so did the territorial aspirations of these nations. In addition, fur traders had to rely on “second-line” species such as muskrat, raccoon, and white-tailed deer as overhunting depleted preferred species such as beaver, river otter, fisher, marten, and mink. Overexploitation of the beaver may have contributed to the use of new raw materials and techniques in hat making.

Legacies of the Fur Trade

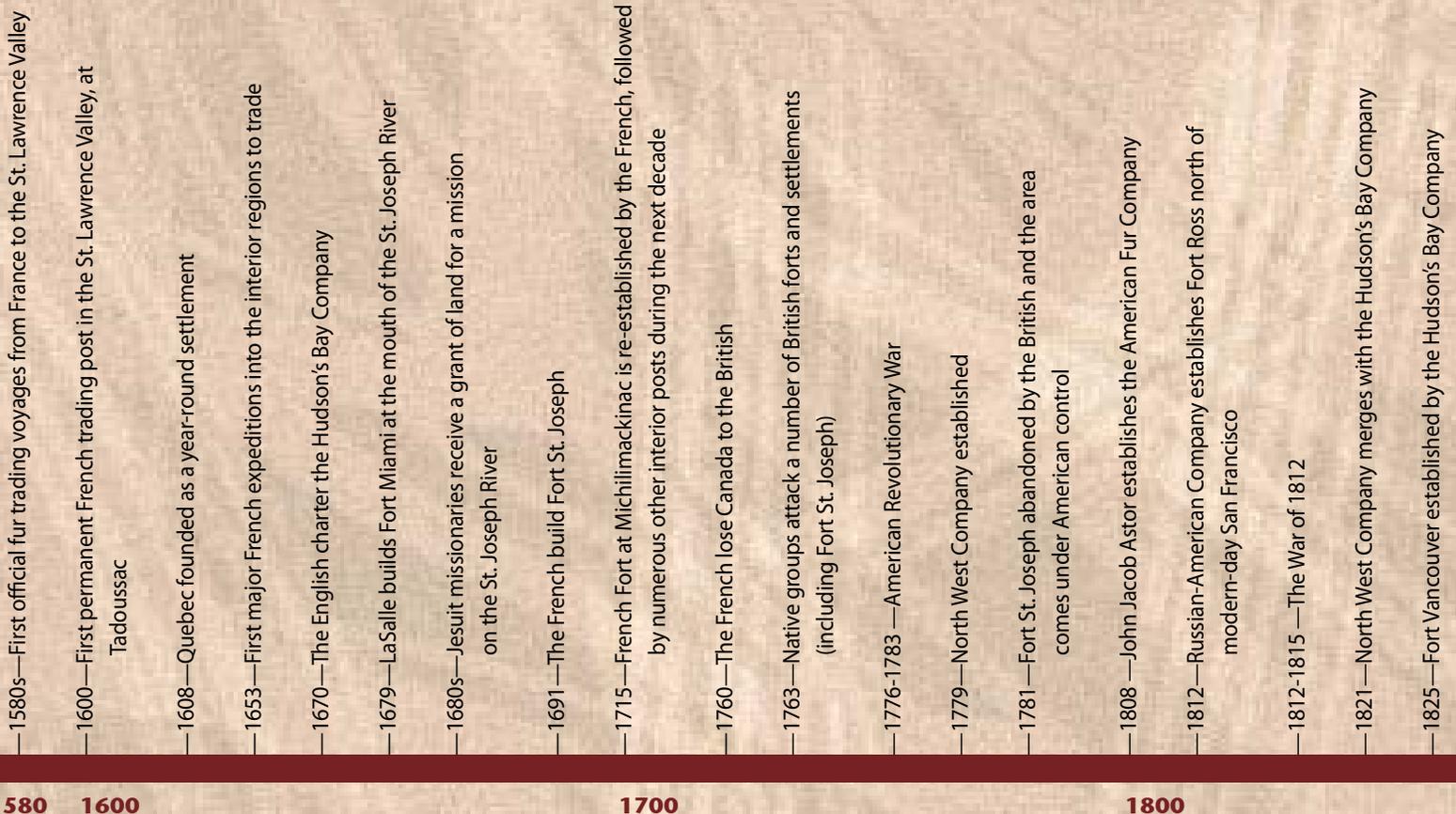
The fur trade was a global phenomenon that had varying consequences for both Natives and newcomers throughout North America. Above all, it brought together people of varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds in economic, social, and political relationships. As scholars have noted, the fur trade required people of markedly different backgrounds

to communicate and negotiate their places in a rapidly changing world.

The fur trade had no inevitable nor predictable outcomes. Although the fur trade is a distant practice, the relations that it engendered through the transfer of objects on a daily basis have left a lasting legacy. Both Europeans and Natives learned to employ objects that served their needs in an effort to ensure their survival and success. The ways in which they made, used, and conceived of objects defy simple expectations drawn from a world of increasingly rapid technological change.

Examining the fur trade through the objects left behind gives us insights into the worlds of people who occupied the same space yet often viewed it in very different terms. Further study of that material legacy, together with the oral traditions and words written by the people themselves, bring us just a little closer to understanding the ways in which exchanges can serve as bridges across cultural boundaries.

Fur Trade Timeline



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The production of this booklet was a collaborative effort. The subject “The Fur Trade,” was the theme of the Third Annual Summer Lecture Series in Archaeology and the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project’s 2011 Open House. Initial research by Rachel B. Juen (Public History Graduate Student, WMU) and students of Michael S. Nassaney’s Spring 2011 Historical Archaeology course (especially Stephen Archambault, Bryan Bommersbach, Cathrine Davis, Tom Fleury, Eric Kolbe, Lance Meister, Krystine Newton, Kenneth Sarkozy, Erica Stone, Brian R. Van Hyfte, and Chris Wood) led to the creation of a series of ten informational panels, which were displayed at the Open House in conjunction with living history reenactments of fur trade activities and on-going excavations. The text of those panels has been supplemented and edited by Rachel B. Juen, Michael S. Nassaney (Professor of Anthropology, WMU and Principal Investigator, Fort St. Joseph Archeological Project), the lecture series presenters, and other individuals associated with the project.

We wish to thank the following individuals who both reviewed earlier drafts of the text and provided additional material or text which was used in the booklet:

- Dean Anderson, Office of the State Archaeologist, State of Michigan
- José Antônio Brandão, Professor and Chair of History, WMU
- Timothy J. Kent, Author and Independent Scholar
- Kent Lightfoot, Professor of Anthropology, University of California-Berkeley
- Terrance Martin, Curator and Chair of Anthropology, Illinois State Museum
- Robert C. Myers, Curator, The History Center at Courthouse Square, Berrien Springs
- Barbara Schwaderer, Historical Interpreter and Costumer, Board member of The Northwest Territory Alliance
- Michael Zimmerman, Jr., Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi

We also thank Erica A. D’Elia (Anthropology Graduate Student, WMU) who reviewed an earlier draft of the text. Archival research was aided by Sharon Carlson (Director of Archives and Regional History, Western Michigan University). Jason Glatz (Maps Coordinator, Waldo Library, WMU) kindly created and patiently revised several maps for the Open House panels and this booklet.

The following individuals aided in the procurement of images from the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project’s files: Erica Stone (Public History Undergraduate Student, WMU and 2011-12 Fort St. Joseph Museum Intern); Ian Kerr (Anthropology Graduate Student, WMU and 2010-11 Fort St. Joseph Museum Intern); and Stacey Moore (History Ph.D. Candidate, WMU). Cathrine Davis (Anthropology Undergraduate Student, WMU and 2011 Fort St. Joseph Site Photographer) provided photographs of excavations, artifacts, and reenactments. We also wish to thank the many other photographers associated with the project, including: Stephanie Barrante, Barbara Cook, Brock Giordano, Jessica Hughes, John Lacko, Andrew Robinson, and Barbara Schwaderer.

We appreciate the work of Cheri Bales on booklet layout and design. Publication of this booklet was made possible by a grant from the Michigan Humanities Council. Additional funding was provided by the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project and Western Michigan University’s Departments of History and Anthropology. We are grateful to the members of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeology Advisory Committee, the City of Niles, WMU College of Arts and Sciences, and the local community for their ongoing support.

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Fig. 32: *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 86, Plate 75, “Smoking Deer Hide.” Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

Fig. 33: From Harding, A.R. *Steel Traps*. Columbus, OH: A.R. Harding Publishing Co., 1907.

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- Fig. 43: “Genre Studies of habitants and Indians: 7 Indian figures in European and Indian dress and 6 habitant figures” from Virtual Museum Canada, “On Canadian Ground: Stories of Footwear in Early Canada.” Courtesy of Bata Shoe Museum.
- Fig. 44: “Indian hunter descending a precipice on snow shoes,” 1840. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. R9266-444, Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana.
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- Fig. 61: Photo by Brock Giordano. Courtesy of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project.
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- Fig. 70: From Lynn Evans, *Keys to the Past*, p. 27. Courtesy of Mackinac State Historic Parks Collection.
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- Fig. 72: Photo by John Lacko. Courtesy of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project.
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- Fig. 75: Photo by Cathrine Davis. Courtesy of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project.
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- Fig. 78: “Life on the Prairie, The Buffalo Hunt,” lithograph by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, published by Currier & Ives, 1862. Image courtesy of the Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.
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