First Nations’ Roles in the Western Fur Trade

The fur trade in North America began with the earliest contacts between First Nations people and Europeans. Within a few years of their arrival on the continent, French and British fur traders competed with one another to form trading relationships with First Nations. First Nations traders used British–French rivalries to their advantage. They frequently demanded, and received, better terms and goods in exchange for a partnership.

From the beginning, First Nations people eagerly sought European goods and paid for them in furs. The unit of currency in the fur trade was one “made-beaver,” a prime beaver pelt that had been worn until most of the beaver’s long outer hair had been worn off.

What Role Did First Nations Play in the Hudson’s Bay Company Fur Trade?

Like the Wendat (Huron), who had been the primary French middlemen in Nouvelle-France, the Inininomwin (Swampy Cree) and Nakota (Assiniboine) took this role for the Hudson’s Bay Company until the 1720s. Using their pre-existing trading alliances, the Inininomwin and Nakota controlled trade in the areas surrounding the HBC posts for many decades.

The HBC middlemen travelled upstream, especially along the Saskatchewan River, trading for furs with other First Nations. They then transported these furs to the trading posts on Hudson Bay. Many middlemen and their families began to settle near the HBC forts and became what were known as the home guard. Some First Nations people worked for the traders, hunting, paddling supply canoes, and making snowshoes.

After 1774, however, as the number of trading posts across the West grew, the role of middlemen declined because more First Nations traded directly with inland HBC posts. In later years, the home guard First Nations participated in the fur trade by supplying the European fur traders with food and other supplies.

How do you think the cultures of the home guard changed as the people began living in permanent or semi-permanent villages near the HBC forts? How do you think their cultures remained the same?
THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

Even though the Treaty of Utrecht gave the Hudson’s Bay Company sole trading rights in Rupert’s Land, the voyageurs continued to travel from the Northwest to Montréal every spring with their furs to trade. These men were sometimes called free traders. Many free traders returned to the Northwest as soon as their business in Montréal was complete. They were more at home among First Nations communities than in the villages of Nouvelle-France.

Many French traders took First Nations women as wives in a formal process known as the custom of the country. First Nations had a tradition of building alliances with other communities through marriages, so the practice was easily accepted. The fur traders and their masters in Montréal also encouraged these relationships. French officials believed the marriages would strengthen friendships and trade with First Nations. They hoped that marriage to French men would encourage First Nations women and their children to adopt French language, religion, and culture in a process known as acculturation. To the surprise and dismay of French authorities, the process of acculturation worked both ways: many of their French traders began adopting First Nations ways of life. In time, a new culture and people arose from these unions: the Métis. Métis children were raised with elements of both French and First Nations cultures and were immersed in the fur-trade culture and economy.

Take a historical perspective to consider the response of French officials to the acculturation of French men to First Nations ways of life. What does their surprise tell you about their worldview?

In contrast, the HBC’s London-based directors were concerned about the costs of supporting fur traders’ families at their posts. Therefore, the company strictly forbade its employees from marrying First Nations women. However, this rule was regularly violated by HBC employees. By the 1740s, when HBC employee James Isham reported that the HBC traders’ offspring around the posts had become “pretty Numerous,” the HBC acknowledged the limits of its control and eased off its rule. HBC employee families began to settle around HBC forts and became a significant part of the home guard. The children of the Baymen and First Nations women were known as Country-born. Country-born families developed a culture that was distinct from that of the French Métis along the Montréal trade routes.

Some Europeans stayed with their First Nations wives only as long as their posting in the Northwest, while others formed lifelong bonds. Many voyageurs, in particular, retired to live with their wife, children, and their wife’s extended family.
FIRST NATIONS WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE FUR TRADE

For fur traders, First Nations women provided companionship in a land with few European women. In addition, the unions were good for business. First Nations women were indispensable to European fur traders because of their knowledge of how to survive in the North American landscape. They accompanied explorers and fur traders on their long journeys and provided food, prepared furs for travel, and gathered supplies for canoe repairs. Sometimes whole families travelled with the fur brigades, and the women did much of the paddling. Many women also acted as guides.

In addition, women provided European traders with First Nations kinship connections. In traditional First Nations societies, relationships were key. Until relationships were established, business could not be done. By marrying into a First Nations community, a fur trader established a kinship relationship with everyone in that community and, by extension, to other communities as well. These kinship relationships opened the door to trading partnerships.

In the early days of the HBC fur trade, First Nations women occasionally accompanied their husbands to Britain when the men retired from the fur trade. Most husbands returned to Britain alone, leaving their First Nations wives with their communities. Take a historical perspective to consider the benefits and drawbacks of each practice.

The women raised families, made moccasins, netted snowshoes, cleaned and tanned pelts, snared rabbits and small game, collected berries and other food from the land, tended gardens, fished, and, each spring, cleaned and scrubbed the posts in the annual spring cleaning. They dried fish and preserved other food, and helped make pemmican for the fur-trade brigades. Pemmican consists of dried bison meat mixed with fat and sometimes berries. It is light to transport and keeps well without spoiling. This food, long a staple in the diet of many First Nations, would eventually become the main food of all fur traders, European, Métis, and First Nations.

Most of the tasks done by women in the fur trade were traditional roles for women in First Nations communities. During the fur trade, however, many women's roles evolved as they became translators and intermediaries between their communities and the clerks and traders of the fur companies.
**FUR-TRADE PROBLEMS IN THE WEST**

As fur traders moved west, they carried diseases such as smallpox, influenza, measles, and scarlet fever. First Nations on the Atlantic coast and around the Great Lakes had been devastated by these diseases. Western First Nations, however, had had few direct contacts with Europeans until the fur trade expanded. With expansion, however, the diseases spread inland. From 1780 to 1784, a major smallpox epidemic spread throughout First Nations in the West. Entire communities were wiped out. Others were so weakened by the illnesses that they were unable to care for themselves.

As it had near the eastern Great Lakes, the uneven distribution of firearms among First Nations resulted in deadly conflicts between communities. For example, Ininew (Cree) and Nakota (Assiniboine) traders were among the first communities in the Northwest to receive firearms from the HBC. Using these guns, they pushed back other communities and expanded their territories to keep their position in the fur trade. In particular, Ininew home guard used guns to secure their position as middlemen between the HBC and Dene communities to the north. In 1717, soon after the peace agreement negotiated by Thanadelthur, the HBC built Fort Churchill, which was in Dene territory. Thereafter, the Dene had their own supply of firearms, and conflicts with the Ininew did not resume.

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**Figure 3-17 Trade Goods at York Factory**

What does this information tell you about changes in the lives of First Nations people during this period?

![Pie charts showing trade goods in 1720 and 1780](image)

Source: Historical Atlas of Canada

**Figure 3-18 Shifting Territories During the Fur Trade, 1670–1780**

Over time, the fur trade depleted fur stocks in some regions and First Nations moved from their traditional territories.

What problems do you think these movements caused?

![Map showing shifting territories](image)

* Dene territory not recorded

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**RECALL...REFLECT...RESPOND**

1. In which ways did the cultures of First Nations people of the Northwest adapt to change as the fur trade expanded west? In what ways did their cultures stay the same? How did European cultures change and stay the same?

2. How were these cultural changes historically significant?
The competition between Britain and France broke out into war in 1755, when the Seven Years’ War began. The war, which started in Europe, quickly spilled into North America. In 1759, the French surrendered to the British at Québec and Nouvelle-France was defeated soon afterward. The London committee of the Hudson’s Bay Company believed the fall of Nouvelle-France would mean the end of French competition for the fur trade. The committee members expected that the golden age of their fur-trade monopoly would begin.

This expectation, however, did not come to pass. Entrepreneurial English and Scottish traders, as well as Yankee traders from the Thirteen Colonies, rushed to Montréal to take over the profitable French trade routes. Many voyageurs continued their role in the fur trade, but now they sold their furs to English, Scottish, or Yankee traders. The Montréal-based traders ignored the HBC charter and its rules, and the fur trade continued to flourish in the city. Even though Nouvelle-France had fallen, the fur trade and its rivalries continued.

After the fall of Nouvelle-France and the passing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the northwestern fur trade became, in many ways, a free-for-all. The competition between the Montréal-based trade and the Hudson Bay-based trade continued, but now the Montréal-based trade also competed with itself. The new English, Scottish, and Yankee traders formed several small companies that fought to dominate the Montréal trade.

How did life change for French fur traders after the fall of Nouvelle-France? In what ways do you think it remained the same?
After the 1680s, the Hudson's Bay Company was firmly established along Hudson Bay. Fur was transported by First Nations people from the western interior to the forts via the river systems that fed into the Bay. Birch-bark canoes were an efficient form of transportation: they were light enough for portages (places where canoes and cargo needed to be carried overland to the next water body), they could carry several times their weight in freight, they were easily repaired, and they moved easily through rough water.

The HBC had three main river routes to the interior: the Upper, Middle, and Lower Track Routes. It was on the Upper and Middle Track Routes—a maze of lakes and rivers—that the Ininew (Cree) of the Saskatchewan River travelled to trade furs with inland First Nations and then transport the furs back to the Bay. The Ininew’s skills of trapping, preparing furs, paddling, and building canoes were essential to the HBC’s success.

It was difficult to build birch-bark canoes at York Factory and Prince of Wales Fort because there were few birch trees in the surrounding area. The Baymen began experimenting with other forms of river transportation.

In 1749, William Sinclair, the chief factor at York Factory, oversaw construction of the first York boat. Sinclair was the Country-born son of a Scottish father and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Saulteaux) mother. Based on an old Orkney design, the York boat was larger, carried a greater load, and had a longer lifespan than a canoe. In addition, the York boat proved more stable in the sometimes rough waters of Manitoba’s larger lakes. The one notable disadvantage of the York boat came when portaging was necessary. Because the York boats were too heavy to carry, traders had to cut a path through the brush, lay poplar trees as rollers on the ground, and drag the boat overland.

After the fall of Nouvelle-France, the York boats were filled with French voyageurs, who joined the First Nations, Métis, and Country-born boatmen already working for the HBC. The heavy York boats could not be used on the Upper and Middle Track Routes, so the main route became the Lower Track Route. This route bypassed the Saskatchewan River, and the Ininew people whose economy had come to depend upon the fur trade.

Figure 3-20 The Upper, Middle, and Lower Track Routes

The Upper and Middle Track Routes had too many portages to use the York Boat, so HBC traders began to prefer the Lower Track Route.

Figure 3-21 The York boat’s heavy wood construction gave it an advantage in travelling through rocks or ice, making it sturdier than canoes against tears and punctures.

1. Create a web that shows the causes of the decline in the Saskatchewan River Ininew’s position in the fur trade.

2. Explain your analysis of the interrelated causes.
COMPETITION HEATS UP

The French approach to the fur trade was highly successful. In 1773, York Factory received 8000 beaver, down from 30 000 the decade before. The drop in furs reaching the Bay prompted the HBC to take action. In 1774, HBC employee Samuel Hearne built the first inland HBC post at Cumberland House near Pine Island Lake on the Saskatchewan River. Cumberland House was about forty days’ travelling time from York Factory. From the same point, the French traders had a five-month journey back to Montréal. The HBC hoped the post would give the company a competitive advantage.

THE NORTH WEST COMPANY IS FORMED

By the 1770s, the Montréal-based fur trade extended as far north and west as Lake Athabasca—separated from Montréal by 4800 kilometres. The route between Lake Athabasca and Montréal was one of the busiest and most profitable of the fur trade. As trade pushed farther into the interior, transportation expenses mounted. Before long, the major Montréal operators were pooling their efforts to save costs. In 1779, several of these operators formed the North West Company (NWC). The NWC was led by several businessmen, including Simon McTavish. By 1787, McTavish controlled eleven of the company’s twenty shares. Among the other shareholders were Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and Peter Pond, all fur traders and three of Canada’s best-known explorers.

The company had twenty-three partners, but more than 2000 guides, interpreters, and voyageurs. McTavish and other Scots shareholders married French Canadian women and French Canadians played key roles in the company. French Canadians helped build and manage NWC trading posts, and were the majority of employees with face-to-face contact with First Nations people in the Northwest. The company’s blend of Scottish and French cultures kept it distinct from the more conservative, cautious HBC. The NWC became known for its bold and aggressive approach to business.
THE PATTERN OF EXPANSION

The NWC refused to recognize the monopoly claimed by the HBC in Rupert's Land, and the HBC had no way to enforce it. The Nor'Westers—as the NWC traders came to be known—continued the French pattern of travelling to First Nations to trade with them, and the HBC was forced to adopt similar methods. Both companies expanded their operations farther and farther west to keep ahead of the other.

Expansion in the West followed a distinct pattern: the NWC would build an inland trading post and the HBC would follow, building its fort next door. In some cases, forts were just metres apart.

EXPLORING THE WEST

The drive to establish forts drove both the HBC and NWC to fund more exploration.

One of the Nor'Westers to take charge of the Montréal fur-trade routes was Peter Pond. In 1783, he mapped the Methye Portage, a 19 kilometre portage in present-day northern Saskatchewan. The portage had been used by First Nations in the region for hundreds of years as part of their regular transportation routes. The portage brought Pond to the Clearwater and Athabasca Rivers and then on to Lake Athabasca, the source of some of the best beaver pelts in the trade. In 1788, the NWC established Fort Chipewyan on the lake's western tip (in what is now northern Alberta).

Pond also learned to make pemmican. In time, pemmican became the main food source of fur traders, and both the HBC and NWC would set up posts just to trade in pemmican. Many plains First Nations and Métis communities played a key role in the pemmican trade.

Pond was convinced that a route to the Pacific could be found from waters flowing into Lake Athabasca. However, the British government refused to fund his further exploration. Alexander Mackenzie, a NWC clerk who had followed Pond to the interior in 1785, was convinced Pond was correct. In 1789, Mackenzie left Fort Chipewyan along the Slave River and ended up at the Beaufort Sea. Disappointed with that route, he then tried the Peace River. Following this river and eventually a land route described to him by First Nations people he met along the way, Mackenzie reached the Pacific on July 22, 1793.

Although Mackenzie had reached the Pacific, the path he had taken was not practical as a major fur-trade route. The NWC began to explore for a route farther south. In 1808, Simon Fraser descended the river that would one day take his name and reached the ocean. However, the Fraser River had wild rapids and steep cliffs. Travel down the Fraser River was gruelling and dangerous, even for travellers without heavy bundles of furs or other goods.
MAPPING THE WEST
In 1811, it was David Thompson who finally found a more practical fur-trade route to the Pacific. Thompson first came to North America with the HBC, working at Prince of Wales Fort. Eventually, he learned the craft of surveying and found he was a talented mapmaker. He was so talented, in fact, that the NWC hired him away from the HBC in 1797, at four times his HBC salary.

Thompson became the chief surveyor for the NWC and spent seven years mapping the West. In the course of his work, he travelled more than 80,000 kilometres, usually accompanied by his Métis wife, Charlotte Small, and their children.

THE UNNAMED EXPLORERS
Like earlier explorers before them, Pond, Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson were accompanied by First Nations guides, whose contributions have often been overlooked by history. For example, although many explorers and traders took their First Nations and Métis wives with them, most company records either ignored them or dismissed the women as “women of the country.” David Thompson was a notable exception: he insisted that his wife be referred to by name in all his reports. Without First Nations labour, translation skills, and knowledge of the land, none of the explorers would have survived their journeys or found the routes they sought.

The expeditions were also made possible by voyageurs. Speaking a combination of French and First Nations languages, the voyageur was at home on the rivers of the Northwest. He paddled most waking hours of the day and, like the First Nations people who accompanied such ventures, was indispensable in the exploration of the West.

From today’s perspective, what was most historically significant about the maps of the West that explorers such as Pond and Thompson created?

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**Voices**

Thus I have fully completed the survey of this part of North America from sea to sea and by almost innumerable astronomical Observations have determined the positions of the Mountains, Lakes and Rivers and other remarkable places of the northern part of this Continent, the Maps of all have been drawn, and laid down in geographical position, being now the work of twenty-seven years. The age of guessing has passed away.

— David Thompson on his life’s work

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**Figure 3-25 Exploring the Northwest, 1778–1812**
Alcohol and the Fur Trade

Fortunes could be made in the fur trade, and competition between Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company traders was fierce. Especially in later years, the drive to beat their competition and increase profits encouraged the use of alcohol as a trade item.

Alcohol had been introduced to the fur trade early in its history. In Nouvelle-France, Church leaders had campaigned against using alcohol in trade, but were overruled. The HBC also had early rules against using alcohol as a trade item. But as competition between the HBC and NWC intensified, both sides used alcohol to increase their profits.

Several reasons led to this turn of events. First, alcohol was cheaper to produce and transport than many other goods. The Nor’Westers had higher costs than the HBC and were always looking for ways to cut costs. In 1799, for example, the HBC had 498 men posted in North America, while the Nor’Westers had 1276 men. Nor’Westers, who were often a hard-drinking bunch themselves, were famous for freely distributing alcohol at trading parties. In 1787, an HBC employee complained about the Nor’Westers’ tactics to the governor of British North America:

It grieves us to see a Body of Indians destroyed by a set of men merely for self interest, doing all in their power to Destroy Posterity, so we hope that your Excellency will make such regulations as will preserve Posterity and not be Destroyed by fiery double Distilled Rum from Canada.

Despite this complaint, the HBC also used alcohol to smooth trade negotiations.

Second, the traders began to find that some First Nations trading partners began to say they had all the trade goods they wanted or needed. Some communities could not see the point in accumulating more. Alcohol, however, was a different kind of trade good. Unlike knives and blankets, it was consumable and addictive. As the fur trade moved into the nineteenth century, alcohol became a significant part of the fur trade.

Today, companies sometimes engage in practices that are destructive to human and natural environments, all in the name of greater profits. In a small group, think of modern examples. Discuss why companies might engage in activities that may lead to long-term problems.
THE NORTH WEST COMPANY’S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The North West Company dominated the fur trade until it merged with the HBC in 1821. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the NWC had almost four-fifths of the trade. In 1804, the NWC had 108 posts in the Northwest, compared to the HBC’s 57 posts. The NWC had several competitive advantages. First, the NWC was owned and operated by men who were themselves active in the business. Many of the partners travelled into the interior and traded there. These partners understood the challenges of the Northwest and had personal relationships with their First Nations trading partners. Their first-hand knowledge made them effective managers of their large labour force and extensive transportation network. The NWC also had the benefit of its skilled and experienced voyageurs.

In contrast, the HBC’s directors and investors were primarily English noblemen and financiers who governed the company from faraway London. Their interest in the business was overwhelmingly financial and their actual knowledge of the trade was secondhand, at best. Only some HBC employees learned First Nations languages and adopted the customs of the people. Few had much knowledge of the lands and people from which their furs came.

THE MÉTIS NATION

While the partners and clerks of the North West Company were mainly Scots, the lower ranks of the company were filled with voyageurs and Métis people. Many voyageurs married First Nations women of the Northwest. Supported by the NWC, these unions grew in number and gradually a distinct culture emerged. Métis children were raised to understand and appreciate both First Nations and French cultures, and Métis families increasingly lived and worked near one another. As had happened with the Country-born home guard living around HBC forts, distinct Métis communities began to emerge, especially near the Red River.

The Métis culture was born of the French fur trade. Métis people bridged cultural gaps, creating better trading relationships. They played a special and vital role in the fur trade due to not only their skills as voyageurs, hunters, and interpreters, but also their knowledge of the land.

RECALL…REFLECT…RESPOND

1. The fall of Nouvelle-France to the British had consequences for many people in the Northwest. What groups of people were affected and how?

2. In what ways did Métis and Country-born cultures show change and continuity over time?