



Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

Intercultural and Anthropological Studies

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Fur Trade 01: Beaver: Mainstay of the Trade

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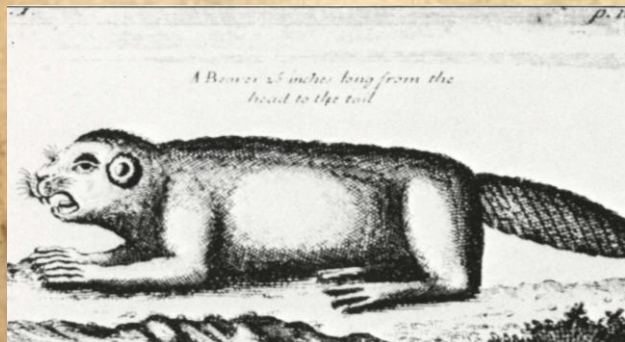
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An early 18th century engraving of a beaver. Detail from Baron de Lahontan's *New Voyages to North America*, 1703.

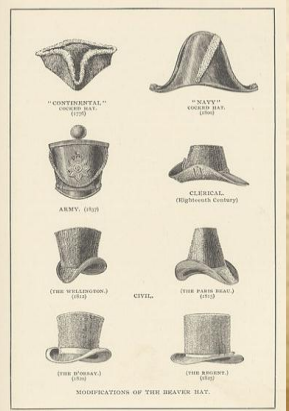
Why Beaver?

Beaver fur had special qualities that made it well suited to hat making and thus it was in high demand.

Broad-brimmed beaver felt hats became fashionable in Europe in the 16th century. Beavers were extinct in western Europe due to overhunting, and European hat makers had to rely on Russian and Scandinavian beaver fur until North American furs became available.

Hatters wanted beaver fur as a material for felt making because the tiny barbs on the soft underfur ensure that it will remain matted when felted, and thus beaver hats held their shape better and wore longer than hats made of other materials.

The desire for beaver felt hats helped fuel the fur trade. Image from *Castorologia*, by Horace T. Martin, 1892.



Hunting, Hides, and Hats

Native men hunted beaver and Native women prepared the hides. The French traded for the furs and shipped them to France in order to make hats.

Most Native men hunted beaver for its meat and fur, but those of the beaver clan did not participate. Hunting techniques varied from season to season and from place to place, but favored hunting over trapping.

Native women prepared the hides. They skinned the animal and scraped the hide clean. Next, they stretched the hide on a frame to dry. Once dried, these furs were known as *castor sec* (dry beaver). Sometimes the Natives sewed the pelts together into robes and wore them with the fur against their skin for several months. These beaver pelts 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 the outer guard hairs –the first step in the felting process.

Traders baled pelts into packs for transport to Montreal and then transshipment to La Rochelle, France. In France the fur was processed and made into felt for use in making fashionable hats. With the introduction of silk hats in the 1840s, felt hats went out of fashion and the beaver fur trade slowly went into decline.



Castor sec, also known as parchment beaver to English speakers. Photo by S. Barrante.



Other furs such as marten, fox, otter and mink were also traded, but beaver was the mainstay of the trade. Photo by B. Cook.



Hides were scraped clean and then stretched to dry on frames. Photo by B. Cook.



This stone hide scraper was found at Fort St. Joseph. Photo by J. Lacko.

Environmental Effects

Overhunting of beaver had adverse effects on wetland habitats.

Natives had traditionally hunted beaver as a food and fur source, but the fur trade 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. Trails created by the dragging of dam-logs also made paths for wildlife to access different food and shelter resources. The overhunting of beaver harmed these watersheds and wetland habitats.