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Fur Trade 09: Fur Trade Society

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Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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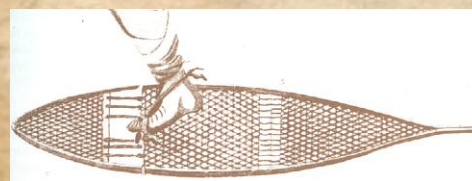
Fur Trade Society

Interdependence

Natives gained access to trade goods and allies through the fur trade and the French gained allies to help them maintain their network of settlements and posts.

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. These alliances with Natives allowed the French to contain the English along the eastern seaboard. Unlike the English colonists, the French did not occupy and settle large areas of land. Instead, with Native cooperation they built a network of small settlements and posts in Native-controlled lands which depended for their survival on alliances with Native groups.

Native technologies like birchbark canoes and snowshoes were adopted by French fur traders from Natives. Drawn from the original by Seth Eastman. From Schoolcraft, *History of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. The Newberry Library.



Mutual Influences

Contact between Natives and voyageurs facilitated cultural exchange.

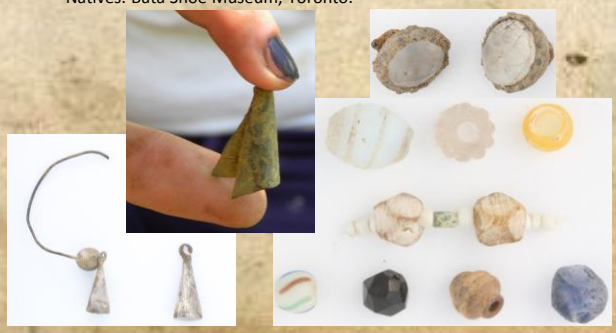
Natives influenced Europeans in many ways. Because of their close contact with Natives in the fur trade, *voyageurs* learned Native languages and cultures. They also adopted Native technologies in order to survive. They ate Native food, wore Native clothing, and used Native tools alongside their European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

In the same way, contact with Europeans affected Natives. Acquiring European trade goods was a vital part of the fur trade for Native societies. Contact with European ideas and religion impacted Native views as well.

“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, *Travels into North America*, 1749



The trade affected both Native and European attire. This image shows Natives [above] with adopted European dress and French habitants [below] with some aspects of dress adopted from the Natives. Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto.



[Clockwise from lower left] Earrings and nosebobs, tinkling cones, sleeve buttons, and glass beads found at Fort St. Joseph display some of the diversity of personal adornment in fur trade society. Photos by J. Lacko and C. Davis.



Maurie, a 19th century *métis* woman of the Potawatomi holds a parasol and neckerchief while dressed in typical Potawatomi attire of the day. Courtesy Tippecanoe County Historical Association, George Winter Collection.

Métis and Country Wives

Many voyageurs had intimate relations with Native women. The children of these intercultural unions were called métis and often traveled between cultures.

Many French *voyageurs* married into tribes or 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 politically and socially.

Native women sought men who could meet their economic needs. Marrying fur traders gave them access to European trade goods and offered potential influence in the tribe. Some Native women became traders themselves.

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. Many *métis* participated in the fur trade.