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Fur Trade 07: Native Peoples and the Fur Trade

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Native Peoples and the Fur Trade



Shifting Political Alliances and Power

The fur trade involved economic, social, political, and military ties between Natives and Europeans.

The fur trade was based not only on economic exchanges, but on a system of social and military alliances. Intermarriage with French traders established kinship relations between Native groups and the French which in turn reinforced economic ties. Many Native societies saw trade as a relationship in which each party had an obligation to the other, and often used this relationship to form military alliances.

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 were mostly allied with the French, and Iroquois groups with the British, this was not always the case. Native groups remained independent and politically savvy; they could switch alliances to serve their best economic and diplomatic interests. However, the outcomes of war—death and destruction—could not always be avoided.



Wampum belts, made from shell beads strung together, were often given as gifts during the making of alliances. Photo M. Meredith.

“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, “The Flow of European Trade Goods into the Western Great Lakes Region, 1715-1760.”

“Mi I pi bnowi ga dawadwat Neshnabek mine Wemtegozhik, ga nadkendmwat ma shna Neshnabek odi shke-nadzwen zam cage gego ga anjsemget bgeji mteno zam shke-madshkewezwen. E-wi geget nsostryag 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.” —Michael Zimmerman, Jr., Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi



Miss En Nah Go Gwah (cat. # 38). Painted by George Winter. Courtesy Tippecanoe County Historical Association, George Winter Collection.

“Among the changes resulting from just mere contact was a need to rethink Native worldviews due to the introduction of Christianity to Natives. Ironically, contact with Indians, whom Europeans had not known of, forced the same rethinking of European worldview.”—J.A. Brandão

Transformations of Culture

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

Contact with Europeans produced many cultural changes. Native gender roles shifted as patterns of life changed. The fur trade encouraged hunting for purposes of trade and not just for subsistence. Some Europeans deliberately tried to get Natives to farm in a European manner, even among those groups that already practiced horticulture. European diseases, spread through contact via trade and missionary activity, killed vast numbers of Natives. Alcohol, a controversial trade item, had devastating effects.



Natives farming. Detail from Francesco Guiseppe Bressani, S.J. “Novae Franciae Accurata Delineatio,” 1657. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Religion and Worldview

Natives rethought their worldviews as they confronted—even if they did not always accept—European practices and religion.

Roman Catholic missionaries attempted to persuade Native peoples to abandon their traditional beliefs and convert to Christianity. Some converted and others did not. Even those Natives who converted still retained traditional beliefs alongside their Christian faith.



Crucifix found at Fort St. Joseph. Photo by J. Lacko.