



Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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Fur Trade 04: Trade Goods 2

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Trade Goods

Firearms

Firearms were a highly prized item in the fur trade. They were both traded for and given as gifts to solidify alliances.

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, acquired flintlocks from the Dutch. While the majority of guns were acquired by Natives through trade, a significant number were given as gifts to help solidify alliances.

The *fusil* is a French flintlock that was developed during the 17th century. The fur trade era saw three main categories of flintlock present in New France: military muskets (*fusils de munitions*), high quality muskets (*fusil fins*), and trade guns (*fusil ordinaires*). The most common type of gun in the fur trade, the *fusil ordinaires* was manufactured in quantity to meet demand.

Natives demanded muskets but did not abandon their traditional weapons because of the firearms' unreliable nature. Muskets required gunpowder and shot and constantly needed repair. Native groups needed French gunsmiths to repair their firearms because they did not have experience in repair themselves.

“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



European goods like guns, kettles, axes and cloth were adopted by Native groups and blended into their cultures. *Costume of Domiciliated Indians*, George Heriot, 1807. Courtesy Library and Archives Canada, C-012781.

Metal Goods

Natives selectively adopted many types of European metal goods and often modified them to suit their own cultures and needs.

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, gun parts, brass kettle pieces, and knife blades as well as a myriad of other metal objects. Knives, guns, axes, and kettles seem to be among the most frequently adopted. They were durable and efficient tools that Natives often embraced in place of chipped and ground stone implements and ceramic containers.

However, in some cases bone and stone tools were retained. Stone scrapers and bone fish hooks were just as effective as similar metal tools, and were easier to obtain and maintain. Stone arrowheads are often found in the same context as metal tools and it has been suggested that bow and arrow technology was more effective for some purposes and a less limited tool than the flintlock musket.

Archaeologists often find metal tools that show evidence of being used in unique ways or modified for new purposes. Examples include axe heads that were used as hammers, anvils and wedges; gun barrels that were flattened and used as digging tools and scrapers [see below left]; gun butt plates modified into hide scrapers; and pieces of brass kettles that were reformed into tinkling cones [see below right] or arrowheads.



Flintlock parts found at Fort St. Joseph: 1. gun cock 2. honey-colored flint 3. vice screw 4. lock plate with frizzen 5. breech plug 6. main spring 7. serpentine side plate fragment 8. triggerguard 9. musket balls 10. lead shot. Photo by B. Giordano, labels by L. Meister.



Honey-colored gun flints, like this one recovered from Fort St. Joseph in 2011, were used to create the spark which ignited the gun powder. Photo by C. Davis.



Axe head found at Fort St. Joseph. Photo by A. Robinson.

“The flintlock was a remarkably finicky weapon, prone to breaking down and its military advantage is hotly debated. Despite that, it and firearms of all sorts were highly sought after.”— J. A. Brandão



Artifacts such as what appears to be a musket barrel modified into a hide scraper [left], and brass tinkling cones [right] found at Fort St. Joseph are evidence of metal modification and reuse for new purposes. Photos by C. Davis and J. Lacko. Courtesy of Fort St. Joseph Museum and Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project.