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The Fur Trade in North America

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A nation was about to be born on something so simple that no one could have imagined it in their wildest dreams. A small, furry, rodent would be the basis for the creation of this great country that we call home. Little did the First Nations people know that they were contributing to their own fates by doing something that was second nature to them. The elaborate fur trade would begin as a simple trading of good between North American Natives and European fishermen. The fur trade would grow giving riches to some and misery to others all so Europeans could wear really nice hats.

Trade between the Natives of North America and Europeans could have taken place before any record of the continent had existed as there are rumors of Irish Monks, lead by Saint Brendan, sailing to the new land long before the Vikings ever arrived in Vinland. This is, however, only speculation and there are no records of this epic journey. There is, however, evidence of the Vikings reaching Newfoundland. Could have these Norsemen conducted trade with the locals? I believe that this was not the case as the evidence points more towards conflict between the two groups. The trade would come much later when the New World was located once again.

The desire to reach China would begin a journey that would take Europeans back to the North American continent. Christopher Columbus would discover the New World and start a chain of voyages to this new land. It, however, is John Cabot who would blaze the trail to the New Found Land and return to Europe with tails of fish that

could be caught “simply by letting down and drawing up baskets weighted with stones.”¹ This would bring fisherman in to the shores of the New World each spring to fish. They would preserve their catch in salt either on board their vessels or on the beach. Small fishing camps would spring up along the coast and the possibility of trade with the Native peoples arose. “Some ‘dry’ fishers obtained furs from the Native peoples as souvenirs and for their own use.”² Here we see the birth of the trade that would eventually spawn the very lucrative Hudson’s Bay Company.

“The Beaver had become almost extinct in Europe, and merchants eagerly sought even cast-off Amerindian beaver robes.”³ Traders were now sailing to the New World with other things than fishing on their minds. They wanted beaver pelts and were willing to give the Natives what they wanted, “European metal goods.”⁴ This trade would take shape and lead to Samuel Champlain sailing from the Fundy region up the St. Lawrence River. Several settlements would appear on the shore of the river as Quebec and Montreal would become two of New France’s strongest trading and military posts in the continent.

The French were not the only ones establishing trade with the Natives. The

¹Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; *Origins: Canadian History To Confederation* (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1996) p. 28.

²Ibid, p. 34

³Ibid, p. 40

⁴Ibid, p. 41

English had established colonies to the south in what is now the United States. They would rely on the Natives for food and to do work for the most part. The Dutch were also trading with the Natives to the south and were for a while the strongest competitors in the fur trade with the French. As the years past and the fur trade grew, wars were fought on both the sides of the Natives and the Europeans on who would control the land that the precious beaver lived on. The natives fought wars amongst themselves which would see their trade allies, the European settlers that they traded with the most, come to aid them. This went the other way as well. England and France would wage war several times and the conflict would reach the shores of the New World where French and English would clash along with their respective Native allies.

Who would think that the peaceful beaver would lead to fighting among supposedly civilized men? Who would have expected it would lead to people being removed from their homes and sent to live somewhere else far, far away? It happened and there are several instances. First we can look at Native displacement. Displacement that has occurred due to wars over beaver rich territories that would see one Nation of Natives forced to leave their ancestral lands or being forced out because the land was need for European settlers. Today, there are reserves for Native peoples to live on as the decedents of European settlers live on the lands that they once hunted and fish on. All this because of a beaver. We can also look back at the local region. The land that was settled by a group of French know as the Acadians. They lived here in peace under both French and English rule but when the English could no longer trust them, they were expelled from the lands that they called their own. If the fur trade was

not so important to the white man could the Acadians have been spared the horrors of the expulsion? It is hard to say because the English and French have always been opponents but would the importance of the small colony have been less if it did not sit as the gateway to the St. Lawrence River.

The beaver would also suffer from the fur trade. The rodent quickly became extinct in several territories. Natives would war over the region where beavers flourished. Many natives focused more on trapping beavers and less on the need to hunt and grow food. They would rely on trading the goods they received from the Europeans for the food stuffs they would need to survive.

Both sides in this trade believed that they were the victors. The Europeans believed that they were getting the upper hand. They were receiving the much sought after beaver which would be transformed into felt hats. There has been so many tales of the one-sided trade for example; “the Indians sold Manhattan Island for a few pounds of beads, and we have been informed of the many instances when Indians parted with valuable furs for trinkets and a drink.”⁵ It is easy to see that the Europeans could control the trade. The Europeans understood at a greater level what the beaver pelt was actually worth, however, the natives had a different perspective on the value of things than the white man. We see the native side of things from a quote taken from one of Father Le Jeune’s Native hosts, “The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it

⁵Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; Readings in Canadian History: Pre-Confederation, (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1998) p. 55.

makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; and in short, it makes everything.”⁶

This gives an idea of how the Natives felt about the trade. They saw the beaver sacrificing itself to help them make their lives easier. The introduction of metal tools and weapons would improve lifestyles and elevate their levels of protection. You could easily argue that the Natives were on the winning side of the trade. This, of course, is before the white man took total control of the land and corralled the Native population onto reserves.

The nation of Canada would be formed on the coat of a small rodent. The beaver would lead to the North American Natives and the Acadians to be forced from their lands. Neither side could claim to have the true upper hand in the trade until the British took control of the continent and forced their rule upon all peoples be it Native, French, etc. The only real loser in the trading of beaver pelts was the animal itself. The Beaver, that we as Canadians view as our mascot, one of our national icons, is on the verge of extinction. A land that used to be ruled by the Beaver now depends on artificial means, ie: raising kits;/: beaver young, in captivity for release into the wild, to maintain a population of one of the most important creatures in the history of this country. For without the sacrifice of the beaver Europeans could still only be using the shores of the Maritime region to salt and dry their fish to this day.

⁶Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; Readings in Canadian History: Pre-Confederation, (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1998) p. 55.