

THE BUSINESS THAT CREATED A COUNTRY

It's amazing to think that without a fad for a certain kind of hat, Canada might not exist, and the lives of Indigenous people would probably be completely different. Whether you think it mostly helped or harmed, there's no question that the fur trade changed everything.

Hats made from beaver pelts were such hot fashion items in Europe in the 1500s that within 20 years, there were almost no beavers left there. Meanwhile, European fishermen on the east coast of what's now Canada were trading with Indigenous people for food and furs.

Most men who settled in New France in the early to mid-1600s hoped to farm, but there were so few women that only one man in seven could find a wife and start a family to help him with the crops and animals. Many Frenchmen took off into the wilderness instead to make their living trading with Indigenous people for the furs Europeans desperately wanted.



COUREURS DE BOIS USUALLY WORKED ON THEIR OWN. THEY WERE EXPERTS AT TRAVELLING THE WILDERNESS, WHETHER ON WATER OR LAND, AND ALSO TRADED FOR FURS. **VOYAGEURS** USUALLY WORKED FOR A COMPANY, AND MOSTLY JUST PADDLED OTHERS, WHO DID THE ACTUAL TRADING.



These *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* (runners of the woods) paddled thousands of kilometres from Montreal into what was known then as the Northwest. They were looking for beaver, but also traded for what were called fancy furs such as fox, marten, mink, fisher and others.

Sometimes the traders went right to where Indigenous hunters and trappers lived, and sometimes the Indigenous people came to the trading posts set up by the Europeans (mainly English and Scottish). For 250 years, the fur trade boomed. It supported explorers who pushed west and north, mapping their journeys along the way. Its fur trade posts led European settlers all the way to the coast of British Columbia.

By the 1820s, beavers and many other fur-bearing animals had been severely over-hunted. In the 1830s, cheaper silk hats became fashionable, with even more types of cloth soon driving prices down even more. Within about 40 years, the trade in beaver pelts was pretty much over.



STYLIN' BEAVER

There were many popular kinds of hats made from beaver pelts



"CONTINENTAL" HAT



ARMY HAT



THE D'ORSAY



THE REGENT



NAVAL COCKED HAT



THE PARIS BEAU



THE WELLINGTON



A CLERICAL TYPE



FROM PELT TO HAT

A **coat pelt** or *castor gras* was several pelts sewn together into clothing and worn with the fur next to the body until the long guard hairs fell off. It was soft and easy to work with. A **parchment beaver** or *castor sec* was stretched and dried, and still had the long guard hairs attached. Hat-makers in Europe shaved the guard hairs off the pelt and smushed it so the little barbs on the soft undercoat stuck together. This process, called felting, created a high quality, stiff material that held its shape when made into a hat.

"HENCEFORTH ALL GENTLEMEN'S HATS SHALL BE FASHIONED OF BEAVERSKINS."

—KING CHARLES II, 1670

BEAVER HATS SHOWED A MAN WAS WEALTHY AND IMPORTANT, AND OFTEN SIGNALLED WHAT HIS JOB WAS. THEY ALSO SHED RAIN, WHICH WAS IMPORTANT IN DRIZZLY ENGLAND BEFORE THE UMBRELLA WAS INVENTED. A BEAVER HAT WAS HIGHLY PRIZED AND WOULD OFTEN BE PASSED FROM FATHER TO SON.

WHAT A BEAVER BOUGHT

For a while, each trading post offered different things in exchange for furs. Some Aboriginal people shopped around for the best deal. Eventually, Hudson's Bay factors caught on and set up what they called a "standard of trade" so that everyone used the same system. Here's how it worked in Fort Albany in 1733.



OR

TWO COMBS



20 FISH HOOKS

OR



A PAIR OF PANTS



TWO RED FEATHERS

OR

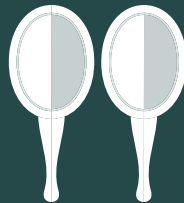


3/4 OF A POUND OF BUTTONS



A PISTOL

OR



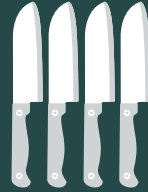
TWO MIRRORS

OR



SIX THIMBLES

OR



EIGHT KNIVES

THE FUR TRADE IS VERY DIFFERENT NOW. MOST FUR SUCH AS MINK AND FOX COMES FROM ANIMALS RAISED ON FARMS, BUT FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT STILL TRAP ANIMALS AND SELL THEIR FURS UNDER STRICT RULES.

