

## Furs, Materiality, and the American Experience

For millennia, Native North Americans obtained furs, pelts, skins, and robes from a variety of indigenous mammals predominantly for their own use, until overseas demand driven by declines in European supplies led them to intensify the capture and processing of fur-bearing animals to satisfy global markets (Wolf 1982, 158–194). Furs were exchanged for imported goods such as cloth, iron tools, glass beads, brass kettles, alcohol, and other commodities that natives deemed desirable. The spatially and temporally extensive phenomenon known colloquially as the North American fur trade varied in the types of animals collected, how they were processed and shipped, the relationships that developed among groups in the course of extraction, and the uses to which products derived from these animals were put. The fur trade was implicated in numerous encounters between Europeans and native peoples for centuries over vast stretches of the North American continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Hudson's Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. Unprecedented demand for furs in North America stimulated by European markets beginning in the sixteenth century arguably fueled exploration, colonialism, imperial conflicts, and manifest destiny and had a profound impact on the daily lives of natives and newcomers well into the nineteenth century. I refer to this period as the fur trade era.

It may be difficult to identify any North American site or historical event of the fur trade era that was not implicated in some way by the trading of furs. For instance, furs were intimately tied to Native American and African slavery in the American South. English and Irish immigrants acquired

furs and native captives to create the wealth to purchase enslaved Africans (Wilder 2013, 90–91). The fur trade also stimulated industrial developments in New England, particularly the mass production of skinning knives that were used in the Southwest and upper Missouri country in the 1840s and 50s (Nassaney and Abel 2000, 245; Woodward 1927, 1970, 64–68). These connections underscore the extensive reach of the fur trade and challenge researchers to delineate the scope of its study. For Canadian historian Harold Innis (1962, 178–179), the fur trade had broad political significance. He attributed major confrontations such as the American Revolution and the Seven Years' War to the struggle between settlers and fur traders. England waged war on New France because the success of the French in the fur trade had limited westward expansion of the English colonies. Similarly, American patriots opposed the British fur trade, which also threatened manifest destiny. Other colonial wars (e.g., the Pequot War, King Philip's War, Pontiac's Rebellion) were also associated with the fur trade. But the goods exchanged for furs and the restructuring of the traditional rhythm of daily life were the most pervasive impacts of the trade. These affected everyone.

From local to global scales of analysis, the outcomes of fur trade interactions varied according to “geography, native culture type, and the specific nature of the European group—its size, composition, national and cultural origin, religious denomination, economic motivation, and general motivation” (Fitzhugh 1985, 6). The similarities of goods distributed to Native Americans who participated in the fur trade are “largely irrelevant to the individual histories of the groups involved” (Fitzhugh 1985, 6). That the fur trade experience was diverse and complex in nature (Rogers 1990, 21) is an understatement.

In a landmark exhibit catalog devoted to the Great Lakes region fur trade, Carolyn Gilman (1982, 1) proposed that while the fur trade has been perceived as a model of extractive industries that depleted resources, a mechanism of acculturation, and an example of intercultural economics, it was foremost about communication. Douglas A. Birk and Jeffrey Richner (2004, 1) expounded by noting that “beyond the mere swapping of furs and goods, the trade involved . . . [the] exchange of ideas, languages, worldviews, commodities, practices, technologies, diseases, and genes.” In the course of obtaining beaver furs, deerskins, buffalo hides, and sea otter pelts in the fur trade era, Native Americans and Europeans learned much about each other and the natural world in a dynamic relationship that was by no means temporally or

spatially monolithic. There were in reality many fur trades (Morantz 1980) that produced many fur trade societies (see Van Kirk 1980). This requires separate models to describe the trade in different geographical regions at particular historical moments (White 1982, 122). Often “economic activities were only one thread in an elaborate fabric of interaction involving the trade of tangible and intangible commodities” as well as services, “information, languages, loyalties, and people” (White 1982, 122).

Much has been written about the North American fur trade. The purpose of this book is to capture some of the salient issues that English-language scholars have addressed, particularly with regard to the materiality of the trade. Specifically, I aim to examine what an archaeological perspective can tell us about the fur trade and its legacy for the American experience. Though material goods harbor their own biases, the objects made, used, and discarded in the course of the fur trade can provide insight into the exchange relationships among the participants and their lifeways. And given the temporal duration and geographic extent of this expansive phenomenon, it seems reasonable that the way exchange was conducted, resisted, and transformed to meet various needs has left an indelible imprint upon the American psyche, particularly in the way the fur trade has been remembered and commemorated (Nassaney 2008a).

## **The North American Incubator**

The North American fur trade was nurtured by a host of environmental, ecological, geographic, economic, social, political, and historical factors that are elaborated on throughout this book. As Mann (2003, 28) succinctly states, “The most salient features of the landscape for traders were fur bearing animals, Native labor, and rivers to transport furs to world markets.” Here I briefly summarize the conditions that made the fur trade possible. Until large-scale urbanization, suburban sprawl, and accelerated population growth reduced wildlife habitat in many areas of North America in the twentieth century, fur-bearing animals (beaver, bison, deer, lynx, marten, mink, muskrat, and sea otter, to name the predominant species targeted for exploitation) were plentiful (figure 1.1). While Europeans had familiarity with some of these animals (e.g., deer), most wild species had been eradicated in proximity to living spaces in the Old World except in the countryside that was set aside for hunting by the nobility. Having relied on domesticated ani-

mals for food since the Neolithic, most Europeans had limited knowledge of game habitat and hunting techniques. In contrast, Native Americans had exploited a host of species for subsistence and raw materials (e.g., bone, antler) to produce essential goods for generations. Europeans readily depended upon native producers to capture animals and process furs to supply distant



Figure 1.1. Furs from select species are still collected, processed, and sold along the north shore of Lake Superior in Hovland, Minnesota, where animal populations have been sustained or rebounded from earlier overexploitation. Photo by Michael S. Nassaney.

markets (e.g., Lapham 2005, 9–12). A notable exception is the Rocky Mountain system, by which “mountain men” trapped beavers for their own profit, “competing directly with the Indians who were seeking the same animals” (Wood et al. 2011, 99).

Natives had also effectively solved the problem of transportation throughout the interior of this immense continent by taking advantage of the elaborate network of lakes and rivers linked together by portages. The technology of birch bark canoes allowed furs to be moved by Natives and voyageurs to entrepôts such as Albany and Montreal, from which they were shipped to overseas markets (figure 1.2; Kent 1997). These portable vessels then returned along the same routes filled with imported goods to supply native consumers. Native Americans also developed land transportation to supplement aquatic routes. They used toboggans on frozen ground during the winter in the north. They also captured feral horses from Spanish herds in the Southwest and traded them onto the Plains by the eighteenth century (Wood and Thiessen 1985, 63).

With these conditions in places, the driving forces needed to stimulate the fur trade were consumer demand for furs and production centers ca-



Figure 1.2. Birch bark canoes, like this replica at Grand Portage located along the north shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota, were integral to the movement of goods and people in the Great Lakes fur trade. Photo by Michael S. Nassaney.

pable of providing goods in exchange. Furs supplied felt, leather, and other products that Europeans of all social classes needed. European workshops produced all manner of finished goods that would find their way into native hands, even if only as raw materials to be altered into forms that were more suitable to native tastes. Although scholars have suggested that principles other than supply and demand operated in the fur trade and that the exchanges that took place were more than merely economic in nature, an economic motive clearly fueled the trade (see Innis 1962; Juen and Nassaney 2012, 6–7; White 2011, 94–141). Both producers and traders understood a fair bargain, even if rates changed in accordance with the social context of exchange or fluctuations in global prices. It is unlikely that the trade could have been sustained if either side felt cheated on a regular basis (Ray and Freeman 1978).

### Sources for the Study of the Fur Trades

The study of the fur trade was initially the domain of historians, who recognized its economic, social, and political importance to the settlement of North America (e.g., Chittenden 1902; Innis 1962; Norton 1974; Phillips 1961; Turner 1891). Their work has produced an enormous historiography on the fur trades (see Cuthbertson and Ewers 1939; Donnelly 1947; Hanson 2005; Peterson and Anfinson 1984). Researchers have relied on a voluminous archive of primary sources such as journals, letters, company records, public documents, account books, bills of sale, vouchers, private papers of prominent fur traders, maps, drawings, voyageur contracts, newspapers, and unpublished manuscripts to produce a mountain of books, dissertations, and articles in scholarly journals.

Until recently, most document-based histories have generally ignored oral histories, archaeological data, and additional forms of materiality that provide insight into the fur trade (cf. Miller 2000). Yet investigations of fur trade sites were among the earliest developments in historical archaeology (Orser 2004, 31–33). As the heyday of the trade came to a close in the late nineteenth century, antiquarians sought material manifestations of sites that had been identified in the documents, thereby laying the groundwork for what would become historical archaeology (Beeson 1900). They were followed by archaeologists who sought to analyze the material traces of the fur trade through the lens of the research questions current at the time (e.g., Caywood