

## **Expansion: First Nations & the Fur Trade**

Early exploration of North America set the stage for expansion and colonization in Canada. We learned that the discovery of beaver and other animal pelts made Canada a desirable colony. Both France and England established fur trading companies here in the 1600s. They formed powerful companies that would dominate the fur trade and create alliances with First Nations groups for over two hundred years.



*Early trade was based on mutual respect*

The Europeans and First Nations recognized each other as sovereign nations, and created alliances that were beneficial for both sides. They created treaties and alliances that show respect between the two cultures, and their rights to maintain their own customs.

Alliances and trade benefitted both First Nations and Europeans. The First Nations people had tools, skills, and knowledge that helped the Europeans adapt to the new world. They knew the waterways and travel routes. They also had medicines that saved the lives of the newcomers.

The most important was spruce tea, which was full of vitamin C and prevented or treated scurvy, a disease that killed many white people.

European trade goods such as metal pots, axe heads, knives, needles, and guns, greatly improved the First Nations lifestyle when these tools and weapons replaced those made of stone, pottery and horn. Glass beads replaced porcupine quills coloured with natural dyes.

Unfortunately, the Europeans also brought deadly diseases- measles, influenza, smallpox – to which the First Nations had no immunities. After contact, many Native populations were decimated by diseases. A smallpox epidemic in 1862 may have killed off 1/3 of the Northwest Coastal people. 3/4 of the Micmac in New Brunswick probably died as a result of epidemics in the first hundred years after contact.



*Native drawing of a person suffering from smallpox*



### **New France**

Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec and New France in 1608. A fur trade company was created, and gradually more people started to settle there. The French developed an alliance with the Hurons, who sold them furs.

Unfortunately, this alliance provoked the Iroquois, who were enemies of the Hurons and allies of the British. The Iroquois increased their attacks on the Hurons, until they were almost wiped out by the mid-1600s. In 1701, the French Governor sponsored peace negotiations between the groups, and the Huron and Iroquois promised to live in peace.

The French expanded their empire and built fur-trading forts at strategic locations where Natives could bring their furs to trade. Native villages would grow up around the forts, as tribal groups came to trade their furs and seek jobs. In later years, many cities and towns would grow up where fur trade forts had been.

## Voyageurs & Coureurs-des-bois

French Canadian Voyageurs were the main labour force for the fur trade of New France. They paddled the canoes and carried the supplies and fur bales for the fur trading companies.

The French king made laws forbidding trading by anyone except the monopoly company, which made many young men break the law and move out into the wilds to trade for furs on their own. They became known as the coureurs-des-bois (runners in the woods).

Europeans traveling in the wilds had to create alliances with First Nations people who knew and controlled the waterways and transportation routes. The coureurs-de-bois needed Indigenous women to cook, prepare their food supplies for winter, make and repair their clothes, heal their wounds, and especially to make their moccasins and snowshoes, which were essential for travel. Some of these relationships developed into families. The children of these unions (between French Canadians and First Nations wives) would eventually become the Métis nation of Canada.



## The Hudson's Bay Company



A group of wealthy English merchants formed the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, and the King of England granted the Company a fur trade monopoly for all the lands drained by the rivers flowing into Hudson's Bay (even though the land did not belong to him or his country).

The First Nations people were essential to the fur trade, because they were the trappers. First Nations middlemen collected furs from the interior, and brought them to the forts on Hudson's Bay to trade them for rifles, ammunition, pots, cloth, needles, axes, knives, muskets, and glass beads.

First Nations people developed their own areas of control and kept rivals out. The fur trade changed the economy of First

Nations, because as well as hunting and trapping for subsistence, First Nations people were now trapping to acquire trade goods.



4. What did First Nations middlemen do?

5. How did the fur trade change the traditional economy of First Nations peoples?

### **Questions for Further Thought**

*CT8: I can determine what factors led to events and assess their short and long-term consequences.*

6. How do you think the establishment of the fur trade would change Canada? Or would it not? Explain.

7. What if the Indigenous peoples had been immune to smallpox? How might this change what Canada looks like today?