

2.5 The Fur Trade along the Ottawa River

Through the 17th century, an almost endless stream of men plied the Ottawa River on long and dangerous fur-gathering expeditions. Their contribution to the fur trade was critical to the survival of New France. The Ottawa River was a route of choice for travel to fur-harvesting areas, and was considered simply to be an extension of the St. Lawrence.

The story of the fur trade along the Ottawa River can and should be told from at least two perspectives: that of the Europeans who crossed the ocean to a foreign land, taking great personal risks in pursuit of adventure and profit, and that of the First Nations Peoples who had been living in the land and using its waterways as trade conduits for several thousand years. The very term “fur trade” only refers to half of this complex relationship. From a European perspective, there was a “fur trade,” since animal (primarily beaver) pelts were the commodity in demand. First Nations groups, on the other hand, were engaged in a trade for needles, thread, clothing, fishing hooks, axes, kettles, steel strike-a-lights, glass beads, alcohol, and other goods, mainly utilitarian items of metal (Kennedy 88). A more balanced account of the fur trade¹⁰ along the Ottawa River begins with the context in which both trading parties chose to engage in an exchange of goods.

2.5.1 European Demand

Change in the Ottawa River region in the 17th and 18th centuries was shaped in large part by European demand for beaver pelts. Fur was a luxury article in Europe. At the end of the 16th century, a fashion craze for broad-brimmed beaver hats swept the continent. As trapping reduced the Russian and Baltic beaver to extinction, European merchants turned increasingly to North America for a source of fur (McGill University Archives: In Pursuit).

Given this high demand, King Henry IV of France focused on the trade in furs in order to acquire the revenue required to establish a North American empire. Returns on the sale of beaver pelts were so high that it was profitable for French merchants of the time, even given the enormous investment involved, to send boats across the Atlantic for the sole purpose of collecting this fur (Gaffield 79). In fact, both English and French traders were soon selling beaver pelts on the European market for twenty times the price at which they had purchased them (McGill University Archives: “In Pursuit”).

For about two centuries, these economic incentives drove thousands of European men to make the trans-Atlantic voyage to take part in the lucrative North American fur trade.

2.5.2 First Nations Demand

While the Europeans were eager to acquire furs for profit, the First Nations Peoples of North America were able to benefit from this trade for the acquisition of utilitarian items for cooking, hunting, building, and sewing. Geographer David Thompson commented in 1787: “See the wife of an Indian sewing their leather clothing with a pointed, brittle bone, or a sharp thorn and the time and trouble it takes; show them an awl, or a strong needle, and they will gladly give the finest Beaver skin... they have to purchase it.” (qtd. in Kennedy 89). In the manner of his

¹⁰ Although the term “fur trade” is not wholly satisfactory, it is used in this report to make the story accessible to a wide audience of readers.

time, Thompson was describing a phenomenon that was occurring in many parts of the world as industrializing and non-industrialized cultures entered into contact with one another through trade.

The Pre-Contact Algonquin and the Mahamouc  b  

The Algonquins had long referred to the Great River as *Mahamouc  b  *, meaning “the river of trade.” The Great River was one of North America’s most important trade routes. Its waters connected several important trade areas of the time, allowing copper, obsidian, flint, and whalebone to circulate throughout the continent. The Great River provided a route from the Saint Lawrence to the Great lakes via Lake Nipissing and the Georgian Bay. It provided access to James Bay from the Saint Lawrence via the Dumoine River. Finally, by following the Gatineau River through the Saint Maurice River System, one could access the Lac St. Jean area (Gaffield 78).

As a result of early trade, European-made goods could be found by the late 16th century some 2,400 kilometres from the Atlantic coast well before penetration of the North American interior by European explorers (Gaffield 79). Algonquins, important traders, had long had contact with European traders on the St. Lawrence River. An excavation at an Aboriginal campsite in Renfrew County unearthed glass trade beads thought by archaeologists to have been made in Venice during the 14th century (Kennedy 86).

The Algonquins’ location on the Great River had enabled them to develop an economic niche as middlemen in this immense trading network (Gaffield 79). This powerful position shaped their early relations with French traders.

2.5.3 The Early Fur Trade on the Ottawa

For at least 160 years, France controlled most of the fur trade in what is now Canada. Throughout this period, the Ottawa River was within the domain of the French traders, with the exception of some periods during which threat of conflict with the Iroquois forced them to close the route to traders (Kennedy 90).

The fur trade was monopolized at different times by various French nobility, merchants and companies, many of whom disregarded the trade charters. Early on, the monopoly was held by de Monts and groups of French merchants; from 1621-1627, it was the de Cha  ns; from 1627-1645, the Compagnie des Cent-Associ  s, established by Richelieu; from 1645-1663, the Communaut  s des Habitants, the people actually living in New France; from 1663-1674, the Compagnie des Indes Occidentales (Kennedy 89).

Because of the Algonquin people’s traditional function as middlemen, they quickly assumed this role in trade between other First Nations groups and the French. The Nipissing and Huron would hunt beaver and transport it down the Great River to the Algonquin people, who would in turn bring it to the French at one of their early trading posts at the sites of Montreal, Trois-Rivi  res, and Quebec (Legget 1975: 37). The Algonquin maintained their economically advantageous position in this trade for several years (Gaffield 80).

The Role of the Island Algonquins in the Fur Trade

The Kichessipirini, or people of the Great River, are of particular historical importance in the story of the fur trade. This Algonquin group was established on Morrison Island, and is for this reason often referred to as the Island Algonquins. The Kichessipirini had traditionally benefited from their establishment upon this island by playing a role in all trade passing by the island. With the coming of the Europeans to the Ottawa River region, the Kichessipirini used their already advantageous position to obtain a central role in the fur trade with the French.

The Kichessipirini desired and benefited from early trade with Europeans, and had a strong interest in ensuring that they maintained their position as middlemen in the trade. They preferred, as the Jesuits put it, that “the Hurons should not come to the French nor the French go to the Hurons, so that they themselves may carry away all the trade” (Thwaites: Vol. 9, 1636: 275).

The Jesuit Relations record that in 1636 the Chief Tessoüat Le Borgne sought to convince the Hurons to join a war of vengeance against the Iroquois. It is recorded that the Algonquin Chief, when facing their refusal, gave them a warning:

Le Borgne of the Isle said to the Hurons, in our presence, that his body was hatchets; he meant that the preservation of his person and of his Nation was the preservation of the hatchets, the kettles, and all the trade of the French, for the Hurons. They even say, whether true or false, that he is master of the French, and that he would lead us back to Québec and make us all recross the sea (qtd. in Thwaites: Vol. 10, 1639: 77).

The French would have preferred to trade more directly with the Hurons, and to avoid their reliance on middlemen in their trade on the Ottawa River. Out of fear of jeopardizing their alliance with the French, in 1615 the Kichessipirini allowed Champlain to pass Morrison Island on his way to the land of the Hurons, with whom he intended to develop direct trading relations.

Despite the developing relationship between the French and the Hurons, the Island Algonquins maintained their control of the fur trade, and exacted a heavy toll (paid in furs or in corn) upon all First Nations Peoples passing downriver on their way to the French settlements. The Island Algonquins closed the route to the Hurons in 1637, and required them to pay in gifts in order to regain access rights. In 1640, the Algonquin categorically refused passage to the Nipissings (Gaffield 82).

2.5.4 Impacts of Trade with the Europeans

Economic Dependence

Given their economically significant role in the fur trade, the Algonquin culture was under considerable stress. First Nations handicrafts were being abandoned for European manufactured goods, causing the Algonquin, like many other groups, to become economically dependent on trade with the French. Furthermore, their connection with the French was specialized in fur-bearing animals, and their hunting skills for other animals diminished as a result (Gaffield 83).

Missionaries

To strengthen their alliance with the Algonquins and the Hurons, the French soon sent missionaries upriver. The French government's goal, of course, was to strengthen their economic alliance with the First Nations Peoples by spreading Christianity (Gaffield 81). The missionaries led to the distortion of traditional First Nations values, a diminished power for the Medicine Man, and conflict within families. Despite repeated efforts, the Jesuits had a difficult time convincing the Algonquin people to convert to Christianity. The Hurons further upriver were more receptive to the preaching of the missionaries.

Epidemics

Missionaries imposed close contacts with First Nations Peoples, spreading contagion. Influenza was a killer of whole populations within a few months. In the 1630s and 1640s, epidemics such as smallpox, cholera, typhoid, typhus, and the flu swept almost constantly through Algonquin country. The Kichessipirini blamed the missionaries for infecting the Hurons who had in turn infected them (Gaffield 83).

2.5.5 A Brutal War

The Iroquois, a confederacy of five nations living in what is now Northern New York state and controlling important parts of trade along the Saint Lawrence, chose to attack the Algonquin during this weak period. The Iroquois had hunted beaver in their own region to the point of extinction, and were interested in moving into Algonquin territory to continue their profitable trading operation (Gaffield 83).

In the 1630s, the Algonquin communities in the Ottawa River Valley were raided repeatedly. The Iroquois were becoming well armed as a result of their trade with their Dutch allies, giving them a major advantage in war. By 1640, the Iroquois were also attacking French and Algonquin settlements in the St. Lawrence Valley (First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa).

The Algonquins were frequently forced to hide, and would winter with their Huron allies or near French settlements along the St. Lawrence. From 1643-44, guerrilla war brought trade in the region to a complete standstill. Tessoiat the Chief was forced to seek refuge with the French in exchange for his own baptism, a ceremony he had previously denounced.

The French were alarmed by the Iroquois' actions. They wished to sign a peace treaty with the Iroquois, and did so in 1645. However, it was broken in 1646 at Allumette Island as more raids took place in that year and in 1647 at Trois-Rivières against the Algonquins (Gaffield 79, 84). The Iroquois Wars were only brought to a halt in 1701 when the Iroquois ratified a treaty that committed them to neutrality in the wars between the British and the French (First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa).

By 1648, the Algonquin people were so weakened that they had lost their traditional economic control of the Great River. The Hurons soon passed down the Ottawa River to take over their role. The Hurons were often forced to detour around the Ottawa River, as it was for some time under Iroquois control. Instead, the Hurons would bring furs down to Trois Rivières and Quebec by way of the Gatineau River, or portage into the St. Maurice River system. Tragically, the Iroquois attacks upon the Huron nation led to its rapid decimation by 1649 (Gaffield 84). It was shortly after this, in 1653, that the French began trading more

extensively with the Odawa people, whose traditional territory was further west, in the Lake Huron and Manitoulin Island area (Gaffield 91).

In 1650, a Jesuit Priest gathered together one hundred Huron survivors and accompanied them on a journey down the Ottawa to Quebec. On his way, he passed through Algonquin land, and wrote the following reflections:

When I ascended the Great River, only thirteen years ago, I had seen it bordered with large numbers of people of the Algonquin tongue, who knew no God. These, in the midst of their unbelief, looked upon themselves as the Gods of the earth for the reason that nothing was lacking to them in the richness of their fisheries, their hunting grounds, and the traffic which they carried on with allied nations; add to which, they were the terror of their enemies. Since they have embraced the faith, and adored the Cross of Jesus Christ, he has given them, as their lot, a portion of that Cross, -verily a heavy one, having made them a prey to miseries, torments, and cruel deaths; in a word, they are a people wiped off the face of the earth (Thwaites Vol. 35, 1649-1650: 204).

In the manner of his time and vocation, this priest was describing the end of an era for the Algonquins on the Great River. Weakened, dispersed, and culturally eroded, the Anishnabek were a shattered nation. The Great River would no longer be known as the river of the Algonquins (Gaffield 84).

These dramatic and violent events along the Ottawa River Valley had important implications for the fur trade. The period in which First Nations groups traveled long distances to bring pelts to stationary Frenchmen was coming to an end, and a new era in which Europeans participated more directly in the pursuit of these furs was set in motion.

The Role of the Odawa

The Odawa were an important trading group along the Ottawa River for about thirty years, after the dispersal of the Algonquins and the decimation of the Hurons. A shift in the French government's policy caused the Odawa to lose their advantageous position as middlemen on the Ottawa River. As furs in the region became scarcer, and as Iroquois attacks continued, the group moved south and west. (Starnes E8). Historian Cellard describes their legacy to the Ottawa River:

In the history of the Outaouais region, this tribe played a part that was certainly outstanding but, in the end, highly transient. As for their impact on the history of the Outaouais region, it was quite marginal. Nevertheless, the Odawa bestowed their name on the river, the region and even the capital of Canada. The place names of the Outaouais, chosen by Europeans, are thus at total variance with the fact that the region was long inhabited by another people. The Europeans were accustomed to deciding for themselves the names of nations and tribes, of the territories they exploited and the rivers they navigated. Accordingly, with their mercantile viewpoint, they named the Great River after the native nation that most recently had traveled along it in significant numbers. The Great River of the Algonquins henceforth was known as the Ottawa River. From that time, the thousand-year connection of the Algonquins with the land of the Outaouais began to fade from collective memory (in Gaffield 92).

2.5.6 The Voyageur Era on the Ottawa

Emergence of a New Type of Fur Trade

In the early 1650s, New France was still “hardly more than a simple fur trading post” (Gaffield 90). Even by 1665, the total population of the little settlements along the St. Lawrence was a mere 3,215 *habitants* (Legget 1975: 42). The wars between the Iroquois and France’s allies therefore threatened the very survival of the young colony by paralyzing the most important component of its economy: the fur trade.

For a time, the Iroquois succeeded in closing the Great River to their enemies, strategically blocking French access to the fur markets of the Great Lakes and further west. In 1653, for example, no furs at all came down the Ottawa River to Montreal, and the situation appeared dismal for the young colony (Gaffield 90). Although trade with the Odawas did help to improve this situation in the following years, this trade remained irregular and therefore unreliable.

Given the difficulties that its new colony was facing, the French government opted to change its trading strategy in New France altogether: if the First Nations Peoples could not regularly journey down the Ottawa, then the settlers would follow the same route in the opposite direction, and would stock up on the desired furs at the source. And so, in 1654, France began issuing trading permits, called *congés*, to young Frenchmen who wished to travel into the North American interior in search of furs (Gaffield 91). This act heralded the beginning of the now famous *voyageurs* era.

Figure 2.18 Shooting the Rapids



Source : Frances Anne Hopkins/Library and Archives Canada/C-002774

The Voyages of des Groseilliers and Radisson

To further this effort to regain control of the fur trade, the governor of New France, Jean de Lauson, authorized Médard Chouart des Groseilliers and one of his companions to accompany western tribes returning home along the Great River. In their return to the French settlement in 1656, the men arrived with fifty canoes laden with furs. According to the Jesuits, their arrival “caused the Country universal joy” (Gaffield 91).

In 1659, des Groseilliers and Pierre-Esprit Radisson, described earlier, set out on yet another long voyage up the Ottawa, this time escorting First Nations Peoples to their home on the western shore of Lake Superior. The brothers-in-law aimed to return once more with a large convoy of furs. In 1660, the men were leading three hundred Odawas and sixty canoes laden with furs back along the Ottawa. This return set the stage for one of Canada’s most famous tales: the Massacre of Dollard des Ormeaux (Gaffield 91).

Massacre of Dollard des Ormeaux

In April of 1660, Dollard des Ormeaux, commander of the garrison at Ville-Marie, and sixteen companions canoed out to Long Sault to help protect the returning des Groseilliers, Radisson, and their accompanying flotilla (Gaffield 92).

On the first of May, Dollard des Ormeaux’s men were eating in the open on the shore of the Ottawa River when they were ambushed by 250 armed Iroquois coming down the rapids. The Frenchmen were able to retreat to their small stockaded fort. The siege lasted eight or nine days before they were all either killed or captured. It is not known how many Iroquois died in this battle (Legget 1975: 38).

The location of the fort defended by Dollard des Ormeaux and his men is thought to be at the foot of the old Carillon portage on the north shore just downstream of Île Persévérance. The water impounded by the Carillon Dam now submerges this site (Legget 1975: 38). Although recent historians have offered different interpretations of this event, Dollard des Ormeaux’s massacre at Long Sault remains etched in Canada’s cultural memory as one of the country’s most heroic tales (Gaffield 92).

The Fur Trade during the Voyageur Era

Given the perils involved, the voyageur system was understandably slow to motivate French youths to engage in the fur trade. By the 1670s though, potential profits made the voyageur method the common manner of acquiring furs. Two parallel arrangements developed. In one, *voyageurs* obtained legal trading permits. In the other, *coureurs de bois* traded illegally, without permits.

In both cases, traders brought furs from the continent’s interior back to Montreal. An important component of French fur-gathering expeditions would both begin and end with a voyage along the Ottawa River.

Figure 2.19 Encampment of Voyageurs, Ontario, 1870



Source: Anne Frances Hopkins/Library and Archives Canada/Acc. No. R9286-277 Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana

A regular pattern in fur trade along the Ottawa Waterway emerged. Canoes would leave Montreal in the spring; supplies would be obtained at Michilimackinac, and the men would continue on to Lake Superior or Lake Michigan, winter with First Nations communities, engage in trade, and return down the Ottawa Waterway with their loads of furs to Montreal. The round trip would take at least one year. With the passing years of active fur-trading, greater and greater distances had to be traveled in order to find good furs, making the time required for a successful venture up to two or three years (Legget 1975: 43).

2.5.7 British Competition with the French

As the 17th century advanced, competition with the British for access to North American furs became an increasingly significant concern to the French colony. This competition was catalyzed by the formation of the British-run Hudson's Bay Company in 1670.

The Founding of the Hudson's Bay Company

Through their journeys, the famous explorers Radisson and des Groseilliers discovered a wealth of fur in the interior of the continent north and west of the Great Lakes, and also accessible via Hudson's Bay, part of the great Northern Sea. Despite their success, the French governor seized the furs that the men had brought to the French colony in 1660, prompting the adventurers to defect to the British (Legget 1975: 38).

Prince Rupert, cousin of King Charles II, used his influence and wealth to support their defection, and the two went on to help found the Hudson's Bay Company. On May 2nd 1660, King Charles II granted the initial group of investors – the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay" - a Royal Charter allowing them a monopoly to trade in the Hudson's Bay drainage basin. In 1672, the Company made its first public sale of furs - 27 lots, at Garraway's Coffee House in London (Hbc: "Our History").

Chevalier de Troyes and the Attack at Hudson's Bay

In 1685, news reached New France that the British had established permanent posts on Hudson's Bay, and had carried off a large shipment of beaver pelts intended for Quebec City. In response, French Governor Brisay de Denonville charged Chevalier de Troyes, a captain in the Piémont Regiment, to lead an expedition to rout the British from the bay. De Troyes was given the task of capturing any British that he could, especially associates of Pierre Radisson, who was by then regarded as a traitor (Legget 1975: 40). The expedition was funded in large part by the Compagnie du Nord, which then held the monopoly on the fur trade in the region for the French. In 1686, de Troyes and his three senior officers, the brothers Pierre, Paul, and Jacques Le Moyne, led 96 other men in over thirty canoes up the Ottawa River and on towards the English posts of Hudson's Bay.

The voyage went well. Leaving Montreal on March 20th, when ice was still on the Ottawa, they reached the junction at Mattawa on May 10th, but here, instead of following the accustomed route west, they continued north up the Ottawa and into Lake Temiskaming. The company followed the portage route into the Abitibi River, and finally reached James Bay on June 20th, exactly three months after their departure (Legget 1975: 40).

They captured three British forts without great difficulty - Monsipi (Moose Factory), Rupert (Charles), and Albany, and all without any losing of any of their men. Pierre Le Moyne remained in charge of the forts,

but de Troyes led the main body of the troop safely back to Quebec by that October. In total, the expedition resulted in the loss of only three men: two from drowning, and a third from exposure (Legget 1975: 40). The operation was therefore a military success with positive results for the *Compagnie du Nord*.

The Fur Trade Expands West

The signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 had major implications for the French colony. Through this treaty, France ceded Rupert's Land to Great Britain, still a rather undefined area but containing the valuable hunting grounds of the West. The French became even more economically dependent on the lifeline provided by the Ottawa Waterway.

Competition from the British came not only from the Bay in the north, but also from New York and Albany in the south. French dependence on the Ottawa was further enhanced when the British established a fort at Oswego on Lake Ontario in 1720. The Ottawa then became the only link with Louisiana, under French control until 1763, when France deeded this territory to Spain (Legget 1975: 44).

In response to British competition from the north and the south, the French opted to expand their fur trading activities in the West. The explorations of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, and of his three sons are a good example of this strategy to expand west.

La Vérendrye made his first journey into the West in 1731, following the Ottawa River, as described in a previous section. Through his many journeys west from Montreal via the Ottawa Waterway, he succeeded in opening the prairies for trade with Montreal. By 1763, he had established a route to the western plains, where French traders were in direct competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, descending from the north. The posts that La Vérendrye founded were extended west after his death (Legget 1975: 44). The many voyages of La Vérendrye are part of a grander story, but hold a special place in the history of the Ottawa River. The explorer and trader is commemorated in the name of Parc de La Vérendrye near the Ottawa River's source in Quebec.

The British on the Ottawa River

During the entire 18th century, the British and the French were at war on and off, with important consequences for their North American colonies. By 1760, British forces had taken both Quebec and Montreal. British and American merchants soon moved into Montreal to control an increasing share of the fur trade (Kennedy 91). During the 1760s, the exclusively French trade in furs up and down the Ottawa River gave way to an active trade by English-speaking merchants. This new phenomenon eventually led to the establishment of the North West Company (Legget 1975: 46).

As British forces attacked, British merchants followed quickly in their wake. As early as 1761, the British began issuing passes for travel to the 'upper country.' Alexander Henry was among the earliest of these traders, and supplied goods to the English army at Oswego (Legget 1975: 46). Another important figure on the Ottawa was John Long, an independent British trader.

The trade in furs and associated travel along the Ottawa Waterway increased rapidly as a result of British expansionism. This was despite antipathy from First Nations Peoples who were affiliated with the French, as evidenced by the Pontiac uprising. British voyageurs traveled increasingly into the west, with James Finlay likely to have been the first English-speaking trader to do so in the 1760s. Others, including

Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, Lawrence Ermatinger, Maurice Blondeau, James McGill, John Askin and Forrest Oakes were just some of those who became leaders in this trade (Legget 1975: 47).

The *Quebec Act* and the aftermath of the American Revolution, confirmed in 1783 by the *Treaty of Versailles*, had minor implications for the fur trade along the Ottawa River. However, a policy focus on trade in the West was reinforced by these political events (Legget 1975: 48).

The importance of the Ottawa Waterway as the start of the long route west is indicated in a report on the fur trade made by Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher in 1784:

The Inland Navigation from Montreal, by which the North-West business is carried on, is perhaps the most extensive of any in the known world, but it is only practicable for Canoes on account of the great number of Carrying places... Two sets of men are employed in this business, making together upwards of 500; one half of which are occupied in the transport of Goods from Montreal to the Grand Portage, in canoes of about Four Tons Burthen, Navigated by 8 to 10 men, and the other half are employed to take such goods forward to every Post in the interior Country to the extent of 1,000 to 2,000 miles and upwards, from Lake Superior, in canoes of about one a half Ton Burthen, made expressly for the inland service, and navigated by 4 to 5 men only, according to the places of their destination (qtd. in Legget 1975: 49).

The North West Company is Founded

As this trade into the West increased, the associated costs became so great that some of the traders, mainly French-Canadian voyageurs but also Scots, French and English, decided to cooperate with one another in the 1770s, forming the North West Company (Gaffield 102). It would exist under various forms for the next forty years, with principal forts at Chats Falls, Fort Coulonge, and Lake Temiskaming. The North West Company would finally amalgamate with its competitor, the Hudson's Bay Company, in 1821. All trading forts then became the property of the latter (Kennedy 91).

Through the first half of the 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company enhanced its efforts to control the fur trade by excluding private "petty" fur traders through the establishment of new trading posts along the Ottawa River and its tributaries. Posts at Lac des Sables on the Lièvre, and on the Desert River at Maniwaki continued until mid-century. The Hudson's Bay Company maintained a post at Fort Coulonge until 1844 and at Allumette Lake until the 1860s (Gaffield 155).

By maintaining this level of activity in the Ottawa Valley, the Hudson's Bay Company hoped to distract smaller traders from the expanding trade in the continent's interior. George Simpson, Governor of the company, explained in 1829 the Company's clear motivations for bolstering its presence in that area despite declining beaver populations in the area:

It is necessary, however, to maintain [the fur trade] as a protection to the interior country, as were the numerous petty traders by whom we are opposed here not kept in constant employment at home, they would penetrate to our most valuable frontier establishments, and occasion heavy losses where we are now making handsome profits (qtd. in Gaffield 156).

2.5.8 The Fur Trade and Settlement

The spread of settlement and the expansion of the forest economy, not to mention the building of the Rideau Canal, encouraged an increasing number of people to become involved in the fur trade. Many small fur-trading operations developed along the Ottawa during this era. For example, Governor Simpson was convinced that “every lumberer and contractor is a trader.” Furthermore, he argued, some lumbering operations were in fact established primarily in order to facilitate the fur trade. Although it is difficult to determine what number of fur traders were actually working outside of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s official monopoly, the involvement in the fur trade of leading figures such as the Wrights, as well as farmers and shantymen is recorded (Gaffield 157).

As a result of this continued activity at official posts (as well as at unofficial ones), canoes laden with furs remained a familiar sight on the Ottawa well into the 19th century. In 1860s, the Hudson’s Bay Company still ran general stores along the Ottawa River and carried on an extensive fur trade with First Nations Peoples.

2.5.9 Decline of the Fur Trade

As a result of the fur trade, the North American beaver was close to extinction by the mid-19th century. There were an estimated six million beavers in Canada before the start of the fur trade. As early as 1626, individual traders were taking up to 22,000 skins annually back to France (Legget 1975: 42). During the peak of exports, 100,000 pelts were being shipped to Europe each year. Forest fires and epidemics of distemper further contributed to the threat upon the species (McGill University Archives: “In Pursuit”).

As the population of North American beavers was reduced, the investment required to trap them

Figure 2.20 Burial Place of the Voyageurs, Ontario, 1841



Source : William Henry Bartlett/Library and Archives Canada/C-040707

increased, requiring longer and more involved voyages into the West. As a result, the profitability of the fur trade decreased for Europeans. But in the end, the salvation of the beaver was the same as its greatest threat: the whims of the European fashion industry. After Europeans took a liking to silk hats, the demand for beaver pelts all but disappeared.

The decline in the fur trade in the first half of the 19th century and the closing of the trading posts in the middle of the century ended the grand period of trade in the Outaouais after more than two centuries of activity.

2.5.10 Lifestyle of the Voyageurs

The Routes

The Ottawa River led to two strategically important sites for the fur trade: The first was Lake Temiskaming post, the largest trading post on the Ottawa under the French. The second, Michilimackinac (now called Mackinaw City, Michigan), was the fur-trading hub for the Great Lakes region. It was an 18-20 day voyage from Lachine to Lake Temiskaming, or a 35-40 day voyage from Lachine to Michilimackinac. This second route was extremely important to the fur trade: following the Ottawa River to the Mattawa Forks, voyageurs would then turn west along the Mattawa River, across Lake Nipissing, along the French River, and finally, through the Great Lakes to Michilimackinac (Gaffield 93).

Figure 2.21 Voyageurs and Raftsmen on the Ottawa, ca. 1818



Source : Charles William Jefferys/Library and Archives Canada/C-005946

The Task

The voyageurs' tasks varied with the seasons. In summer, they would make long journeys into the continent's interior, usually following the Ottawa River for much of their way. Their days of paddling were long: they would leave early in the morning and often continue until far into the night.

In autumn, they would establish a winter camp near a First Nations village and a body of water. Here, they would build a fort and a few dwellings, and from this base, would trade throughout the winter with First Nations Peoples. In this way, the voyageurs would collect furs from the tribes, even those that lived at great distances. In the springtime, the voyageurs would return along the same route to Montreal. Life was so hard for the voyageurs that desertions were common.

The Team

Typically, a wealthy merchant would finance an expedition. The team, however, would be made up of a guide, paddlers for the canoe, an interpreter, a clerk, and several inexperienced men. Groups of three or four canoes would often travel together, forming what was called a *brigade*, each one with its own guide (Gaffield 93).

The Food

The voyageurs had a monotonous diet. Their monthly ration was a bushel of corn and nearly a kilogram of lard each. At times, they would replace the lard with bear fat. Before setting out, four or five litres of rum were also distributed to each voyageur in an attempt to manage morale (Gaffield 95).

The Canoes

The canoes used by the voyageurs were built following Aboriginal methods, but were designed to fit the colonists' needs. A voyageur canoe could measure as much as ten metres in length and 1.4 metres in width. The boat bore an extremely heavy load. Eight men, each carrying a bag weighing around 18 kg, as well as a total of 450 kg of provisions, were piled in alongside 60 to 80 bundles, each weighing from 41 to 45 kg. In total, these slight vessels would carry a load of about 3,600 kg. Later, canoes carrying 15 people were constructed.

Figure 2.22 At the Junction of the Mattawa and Ottawa Rivers



Source : Library and Archives Canada/C-055206

Made of birch bark, it was only 6.5 mm thick. Given this, navigation along the rivers was both difficult and dangerous: even a small collision with a rock or piece of floating wood could pierce the canoe's bark and spoil its precious cargo. After every night of paddling, the canoe had to be unloaded, pulled out of the water, inspected, and repaired (Gaffield 93).

Portages

The Ottawa River's rapids and waterfalls interrupted the days of regular paddling of the voyageurs. Whenever the waters became impassable, the men were forced to stop, disembark, and carry their cargo and canoes through the forest until the waters were again calm enough to continue paddling. The voyageur setting out from Lachine would have twenty portages on his way to Lake Temiskaming, and thirty-five on his way to Michilimackinac (Gaffield 94). The majority of these portages were located on the north shore of the river, and followed already-existing First Nations portage routes that they fortified to withstand the increased traffic.

Figure 2.23 On the Portage – Lake Comandeu



Source : Picturessque Canada

These portages were long and exhausting. Each man carried two or three bundles of merchandise weighing approximately forty-one kilograms each. The men would often have to take several trips back and forth in order to transport all of the gear to the end of the portage route. Portages were so exhausting that the voyageurs measured the exact number of paces required to walk from the beginning to the end of each route. (For example, it was recorded that the particularly challenging Grand Calumet portage measured some 2,035 paces long! (Gaffield 94)).

Deputy governor of the Hudson's Bay Company Nicholas Garry also described portaging the Montreal canoe, or *canot du maître* in his journal in the 1820s:

She is first turned over. Four men then go into the water, two at each End, raise the Canoe and then two more place themselves midships of the Gunwale on the opposite side. The weight of our Canoe was about 6 cwt. The Goods are carried on the Shoulders of the men and in this manner; each Canoe Man is provided with a leather Sling broad in the middle; the Ends he fastens to a Package, this is placed on his shoulders, the broad part of the Sling placed across his Forehead. On this Package a second is placed and in this manner they generally carry two Packages of 90 lbs. each and sometimes a third (qtd. in Kennedy 92.)

Figure 2.24 Portage Along the Ottawa River, 1836-1842



Figure 2.25 Chats Rapids, ca. 1838-1841



The Voyageur's Portages

Portage sites downstream of the capital

- Long-Sault Rapids
- Blondeau Falls
- Carillon Rapids

Portages between the mouth of the Ottawa River and Lake Deschênes:

- Chaudiere Falls (nowadays by-passed by a bridge)
- Little Chaudiere Rapids
- Brébeuf Park in Hull

Traces of the trails used by First Nations paddlers, voyageurs and European explorers are still visible. In 1956, to commemorate this important part of the history of Hull, a plaque was installed at the level of Squaw Bay in Brébeuf Park.

Portages upstream of the capital:

- Chats Falls

- Grand Calumet Island
- Allumette Island (2)
- Rapides-des-Joachims (2) (Gaffield 96-102).

2.5.11 The Rise of the Trapper

Through their rigorous work outdoors and frequent contact with First Nations Peoples, the *coureurs de bois* were exposed to a way of life drastically different from their European heritage. Many *coureurs de bois* chose to adopt a semi-western, semi-Aboriginal lifestyle. Taking from what they saw as the best of both worlds, these men became trappers. Living in wooden cabins, trappers would build their own bark canoes, snowshoes, and clothes, and would live a relatively free life in the forest. These men would rely upon their trapping lines to supply them with furs to trade for those things that they could not directly obtain.

Nowadays, there are strict rules about trapping, but the tradition lives on. Many descendants of trappers still take care of trapping lines as a hobby.

Just How Did They Catch the Beaver?

Beavers were hunted in a special way. Here is a description provided by North West Trading Company partner Alexander Henry in his 1809 journal:

To kill beaver, we used to go several miles up the rivers, before the approach of night, and after the dusk came on, suffer the canoe to drift gently down the current, without noise. The beaver, in this part of the evening, come abroad to procure food, or materials for repairing their habitations; and as they are not alarmed by the canoe, they often pass it within gun-shot [...] The most common way of taking the beaver is that of breaking up its house, which is done with trenching-tools, during the winter, when the ice is strong enough to allow of approaching them; and when, also, the fur is in its most valuable state. Breaking up the house, however, is only a preparatory step. During the operation, the family makes their escape to one or more of their washes. These are to be discovered, by striking the ice along the bank, and where the holes are, a hollow sound is returned. [...] I was taught occasionally to distinguish a full wash from an empty one, by the motion of the water above its entrance, occasioned by the breathing of the animals concealed in it. From the washes, they must be taken out with the hands; and in doing this, the hunter sometimes receives severe wounds from their teeth (McGill University Archives: "In Pursuit").

2.2.12 The Ottawa River Forts

The fur trade required a certain level of infrastructure. As trade developed, forts began to dot the landscape of the Ottawa River's shores. Although called forts, these buildings were in reality modest trading posts that were intended to ensure control over the fur trade. As symbols of European (French and then later British) sovereignty, they were meant to protect traders from Iroquois attacks. In reality though, the forts were unmanned and had more the flavour of inns than of forts (Gaffield 98).

These trading posts were usually located near the tributaries of the Ottawa River. This made them accessible by canoe, promoting contact with First Nations Peoples. The forts were of various

constructions; some consisted merely of a log cabin, while others included several buildings, and were flanked by a cemetery or a garden. Generally, posts were surrounded by stakes to guard against Iroquois attacks (Gaffield 99).

A head official and one or two assistant clerks usually inhabited a fort. Priests also often lived on site, or stopped in frequently. Although built to support trade, there were various other reasons for stopping there: to seek protection from hostile First Nations bands or shelter from rough weather, to have a drink, enjoy a good meal, and so on. Soldiers, clerks, merchants, *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* all frequented the forts. The forts also contained women (Gaffield 99). One shocked missionary described the use of forts thus:

Officers and soldiers reduce the King's service to four main occupations: the first one is to keep a public drinking house; the second one is to carry merchandise and spirits from one post to another; the third one is to make the fort a place that people are ashamed to call by its name, where women have learnt that their own bodies could serve as merchandise; the fourth one is gambling (Gaffield 100).

Île Perrot

Jean Talon, first intendant for New France (from 1665-68 and again from 1670-72), was deeply involved in the fur trade (Legget 1975: 40). Talon gave to his young relative François-Marie Perrot the governorship of Montreal. Perrot used this power to gain possession of the large island at the mouth of the Ottawa River that now bears his name. Here, Perrot established a trading post, and benefited from this strategic location to operate in the fur trade as a sort of robber baron.

Perrot's conduct was so questionable that Louis de Buade de Frontenac, the governor of New France from 1672-82 (and again from 1689-98), had him arrested and imprisoned. However, Perrot was able to resume his brigandage and to continue using these methods until 1683. His success in this strategic location is evidence that furs were still at this time being transported down the Ottawa River in significant quantities (Legget 1975: 40).

Château de Senneville

A second fort and outpost was located at the mouth of the Ottawa River in today's municipality of Senneville. Jean Talon granted land to Captain Michel Sidac du Gué, one of the officers of the Carignan Regiment. This officer constructed a small log building at the extreme western tip of the island of Montreal. In 1679, du Gué sold this land and building to Jacques le Ber and Charles Le Moyne, father of the famous brothers. The trading post thrived under their direction. The store sold tinware, food, clothing, spirits and guns to the fur traders, local settlers and fishermen. Le Moyne died shortly after, but le Ber

Figure 2.26 Freight Canoe, Hudson Bay Company Post, Lake Temagami, 1896



Source: G.M. Kelley/Library and Archives Canada/PA-123365

began to improve the property, erecting a fortified windmill on site (Borough of Pierrefonds/Senneville: "History").

The small outpost was attacked by Iroquois in 1687 and again in 1691, but the assaults were successfully resisted, though the windmill was razed. A stone fort was constructed on the site in 1692, one of Canada's earliest masonry structures outside of Quebec. Called the Château de Senneville, this fort served as a fortress and was used even in 1776, when Benedict Arnold established headquarters there during the American invasion of Canada. Its remains could still be seen in the 1970s (Legget 1975: 41).

Carillon

The merchants of New France were slowly pushing their way upriver to access a greater control of the fur trade. Philippe Carrion du Fresnay obtained Carillon Island, and established a trading post at the western end of the Lake of Two Mountains (Legget 1975: 42). Carillon is thought to be a corruption of this man's name.

List of Forts Along the Ottawa River

French Forts

- The fort at Lake of Two Mountains: built of stone before the British Conquest in 1760, this fort located in Oka was the only one used for military purposes.
- Carillon Fort: built by the French as well.
- Long Sault Forts: two forts at the Long Sault were located on opposite banks of the river, right before falls. From this position, the French were able to control some of the traffic along the Ottawa River. Algonquins, Nipissings, and Iroquois traded with the French at these forts.
- Petite-Nation River Fort (1670-1760)
- Fort du Lièvre
- Joseph Mondion's old house: this ex-settler traded out of his house, which became a fort from 1798 to 1837.
- Fort Coulonge: located upstream of the confluence of the Coulonge and the Ottawa, this fort was established in the 17th century by the grandnephew of Louis d'Ailleboust de Coulonge, one of New France's first governors. The first trading post built on the Ottawa, it contained: a boathouse for storing canoes, a store, two houses for employees, an inn, a smithy, a servants' house, and an icehouse. In 1784 it passed into the hands on the North West Company in 1784. Its buildings were abandoned in 1855. The small wooden building survived the longest of the forts, only disappearing in the early 20th century.
- Allumette Lake
- Dumoine River
- Rapides-des-Joachims
- Mattawa Forks
- Fort Temiskaming: built between 1679 and 1685, this was the largest trading post on the Ottawa built under the French. The fort was destroyed by the Iroquois and abandoned in 1688, and then reopened after 1720. All other trading posts along the Ottawa were subordinate to the Temiskaming Fort. The fort was very important. For example, in 1755, 2% of colonial fur production passed through the fort, compared to 0.4% for Fort Frontenac. This fort also offset the British Hudson's Bay posts.

British Forts

When the British took control of New France, Fort Témiscamingue was put in charge of the four other posts then open on the Ottawa River (Gaffield 101-102). Through the first half of the 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company enhanced its efforts to control the fur trade by excluding private "petty" fur traders through the establishment of new trading posts along the Ottawa River and its tributaries.

- Posts at Lac des Sables on the Lièvre
- On the Desert River at Maniwaki, continued until mid-century.
- The Hudson's Bay Company maintained a post at Fort Coulonge until 1844
- HBC maintained a second post at Allumette Lake until the 1860s (Gaffield 155).

Summary

When Europeans arrived in the Ottawa River region in the early 1600s, the Great River was already an important trading route. Europe's high demand for beaver furs set in motion the development of an extensive fur-trading network involving both French and First Nations Peoples and later, the British. This trading network quickly became the foundation of France's North American colonial economy, and led to the cultural development of the now famous *coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs* era. Later British competition led to the creation of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies, key companies to Canada's economic and political development. The frenzied trade in furs set in motion much adventurous travel up and down the Ottawa Waterway, and shaped early European settlement patterns in the region. Fascinating relics of this by-gone era can still be seen along the Ottawa's shores, including the remains of some of the Ottawa River forts.

For First Nations Peoples, the trade in furs caused traditional trade routes to shift and brought them into increasing contact with Europeans. As various First Nations groups wished to gain greater control of trade, tension soon led to open conflict among groups. The Ottawa River region experienced a brutal war in the 1600s. This war, coupled with epidemics spread by European diseases, severely damaged First Nations social groupings and led to the dispersal of its survivors (Gaffield 78).

Amid the profound social, political, and economic changes of the 17th century, the Ottawa River remained one of North America's most important trading routes. It played a central role in the story of the fur trade in North America, and thus in the development of Canada. Even after the opening of the St. Lawrence route, the Ottawa remained the main route to the west and to the north, providing a shorter and more protected route to the interior.