FOR TEACHERS

International Trade and the British Empire

The HBC fur trade was part of a very complex system of trade between England, its colonial possessions and other nations. This system involved the movement of goods with England at the centre. Goods would flow through England and then be re-directed to their final destination. This pattern of trade is part of an economic system called mercantilism. Mercantilism was prevalent in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries.

For the fur trade, goods were traded to First Nations for beaver pelts which were then sent to England for manufacturing into felt hats. As the relationship between HBC and First Nations developed, the Company provided a variety of trade goods that were valued by the Aboriginal people.

Teacher resource materials include suggested tasks to engage students in deeper learning about the system of international trade of which the HBC fur trade was a part. Using the trade goods that are represented on the map, teachers and students can explore how Hudson's Bay Company participated in England's mercantile system.

Woollen Blankets

The *HBC Point Blanket* was originally made in Oxfordshire, England. As demand increased in the HBC fur trade, blankets were also made in Yorkshire, England. The blankets were highly valued by First Nations and accounted for up to 50 percent of the goods traded for furs. Point blankets were often made into *capotes*, a type of blanket coat.

Notes

- Point blankets were manufactured in England using blends of wool from both Britain and New Zealand.
- The term 'point blanket' originated from the French word *empointer* meaning 'to make stitches in cloth.'
- Point blankets were introduced for trade in 1780.
- The number of points on the blanket indicated its size.
- The blanket served many purposes for the Aboriginal people, one being the material for a capote, a type of coat, influenced by French design.
- The 1733 Standard of Trade originally specified that one woollen blanket would be traded for one beaver pelt.

Questions

1. Why were woollen blankets valued as a trade good?
2. Why were the point blankets manufactured in England?

For More Information

HBC

Learning Centre: Hamper > HBC Point blanket
Our History: Standard of Trade
Our History: The Hudson's Bay Company Point Blanket
The Hudson's Bay Company Point Blanket: FAQs

External Links

The Point Blanket Site
Hudson's Bay Company: Uncovering the history of the HBC point blanket

Tobacco

For the fur trade, HBC provided *tobacco* that was imported from Virginia and Brazil. Tobacco grown in Brazil was favoured by First Nations because of its quality.

Notes

- Tobacco was grown in the Americas before the arrival of the Europeans and used as a medicine, trade good, and as a part of political and religious rituals.
- Gifts of tobacco played a major role in fur trading ceremonies. They still play a significant role in modern ceremonies of First Nations.
- The strain of tobacco grown in Virginia was from the West Indies as it was better quality than the tobacco native to Virginia.
- Tobacco grown in Brazil was a favourite choice of First Nations.
- According to the 1733 Standard of Trade, a beaver pelt could buy 2 pounds (.9 kg) of Brazilian tobacco.

Questions

1. Why was the tobacco provided by HBC valued as a trade good?
2. Why did HBC obtain tobacco from Virginia and Brazil?

For More Information

HBC

Trading Ceremony at York Factory, 1780s

External Links

Tobacco For the Fur Trade
Fur Trade Stories (based on HBC Archives in Manitoba)
Canadian Museum of Civilization Museum

Glass Trade Beads

Glass beads used in the fur trade were valued by First Nations for decoration because they were durable and came in a wide variety of colours and styles. Originally, HBC obtained the beads from Murano near Venice, Italy.

Notes

- HBC sourced glass beads from Europe specifically for trading with Aboriginal people.
- Beads were later imported to England from the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Germany.
- Before the use of glass beads, porcupine quills, bone, shell or stone were often used for decoration.
- In 1733, a beaver pelt could be traded for .75 lb (.34 kg) of coloured beads.

Questions

1. Why did First Nations want to trade for glass beads?
2. Why did HBC obtain glass beads from Murano?

For More Information

HBC

HBC Hamper: Glass Beads Teacher Resource

External

Museum of the Fur Trade
History of Murano Glass
History of Trade Beads
Northwest Journal: A Tale of Three Beads
Northwest Journal: Seed Beads in the Northwest

Alcohol

Alcohol was a small part of the overall trade with First Nations, often used as a gift to establish relations. HBC obtained *brandy* from France and rum from the Caribbean colonies for the fur trade.

Notes

- French brandy was often difficult to procure due to frequent hostilities between Britain and France during the 17th and 18th centuries.
- Rum was cheaper to produce than brandy because its production was tied to the sugar trade in English colonies.
- Brandy and rum were often diluted with water to make them go further.
- The 1733 Standard of Trade stated that 1 beaver pelt could be traded for 1 gallon (3.79 litres) of brandy, rum was not mentioned at this time.
- In 1843, HBC banned the trade in alcohol with First Nations out of concern for their health and welfare as well as its negative effects on the trade.

Questions

1. Why was alcohol part of the fur trade process?
2. Why did HBC purchase rum obtained from the Caribbean?

For More Information

HBC

HBC Spirits

HBC Heritage: Canoe Poster

Sugar

Sugar was a trade item with First Nations and was also a prized commodity for HBC employees living at the forts and posts. HBC had easy access to sugar because of England's involvement in the Caribbean sugar industry.

Notes

- Early European explorers successfully introduced sugar to the New World in the early 1500s.
- Sugar for trade came from England via plantations in the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, because of the conditions for growing.
- An example of sugar as a valued commodity for people who lived on the posts: a 50-pound (23-kilogram) keg of sugar was a staple brought for the people living at Fort William. This rare treat was locked in a storeroom when it reached Fort William.
- The 1733 Standard of Trade stated that a beaver pelt could be traded for 2 lbs (.9 kg) of sugar.
- There were strong connections between HBC and the sugar industry, through many individuals who were either investors in both industries, i.e. fur and sugar, or who had experience working in both. E.g., investors King Charles II, des Groseilliers and Sir Peter Colleton; the relationship of George Simpson, Andrew Wedderburn (Colvile) and Thomas Douglas, Lord Selkirk; James Douglas, Chief Factor at Victoria, was the illegitimate son of a Scottish West Indian sugar planter and a free Barbadian black woman.

Questions

1. Why was sugar part of the fur trade process?
2. Why did HBC purchase sugar obtained from the Caribbean?

For More Information

HBC

Our History: The Right Currency for the Right Time

Our History: Sugar Industry Connection to HBC: Lordes and Proprietors

Our History: Sugar Industry Connection to HBC: George Simpson

Vermilion

First Nations traded for *vermilion*, a red dye that they used for facial decoration, rubbed into soft tanned skins, and mixed with other items for painting various objects. HBC purchased vermilion that was imported from China.

Notes

- The 1733 Standard of Trade stated that a beaver pelt could be traded for 1 ½ oz. (.43 g) of vermilion.
- HBC named Coraline (vermilion red) as a color for Point Blankets.
- The North West Company named Fort Vermilion after colored clay found along the banks of the Peace River.

Questions

1. Why was vermilion part of the fur trade process?
2. Why did HBC purchase vermilion that was imported from China?

Metal Tools

Products made from *metals* were valued by First Nations because they were more durable and efficient than traditional Aboriginal items. HBC supplied metal cooking utensils and tools that were obtained from England and Germany.

Notes

- Kettles, awls, needles, fish hooks, buttons, guns, knives, cutlery, gun flints and fire-starters came from England (Sheffield, Birmingham, London).
- Aboriginal people traditionally used items made from bone, pottery, stone, and skin.
- Metal cooking utensils heated quickly and were strong.
- Weapons and tools accounted for 25% of the goods traded.
- The 1733 Standard of Trade outlined the worth of many metal products.

Questions

1. What traditional products were replaced by metal?
2. Why were metal products in demand by Aboriginal people?

For More Information

HBC

HBC Heritage: Canoe Poster

External

Native Canadian use of Metal

Northwest Journal: Basic Tinsmithing

Northwest Journal: Making a Copper Trade Kettle

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Big Idea

The fur trade introduced a variety of goods to First Nations which impacted international trade patterns and the lives of Aboriginal people.

Critical Thinking Questions

- How did HBC's fur trading process with First Nations impact on international trade patterns?
- How did the trade goods change the ways Aboriginal people did things?
- Why were the Aboriginal people interested in possessing trade goods?

Curriculum Connection

Business courses
Social Studies/History courses

Concept Impact on International Trade

Task

Students use the trade map information and other sources to investigate how HBC's trading with First Nations impacted international trade patterns.

In groups of 2 or 3, students choose one of the trade goods to examine in more depth.

Questions to Guide Students' Thinking:

- What do you know about the trade good?
- What further information do you want to find?
- Where can you look for the information?
- Why was the trade good part of the fur trade process?
- How did HBC's need to acquire this trade good connect with international trade and England's mercantile system?
- Each group decides how to present the information to an audience. They explain their thinking with specific examples.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Concept Trade Goods as Alternatives to Traditional Aboriginal Resources

Task

Students investigate how the trade goods included on the map provided alternatives to traditional resources used by Aboriginal people.

As a class, identify key questions to guide their research:

- What did the Aboriginal people use before they had access to this trade good?
- Why did the Aboriginal people value this trade good?
- How did it impact on their lives?
- What did they trade for this commodity?
- Was this a fair trade? Why or why not? Give reasons for your thinking.

Students examine a variety of resources to gather the information.

Students who researched the same trade commodity share their information and prepare a presentation that illustrates their findings.