

# The Fur Trade



Fur Trapper and beaver pelt image from Friends of Spokane House

It is easy to simplify the story of Hudson's Bay Fort Colvile from 1825 to 1852 as just another fort in the long history of the Hudson's Bay Company that came and went along with the fur trade itself. That would be a trap cutting short our knowledge of the impact and culture that still lives on from the fort, much like the traps that cut short the lives of over 47 thousand fur-bearing animals in HBC's time in the Northwest.

By the time HBC Fort Colvile was established, the Hudson's Bay Company had been in the fur business for 150 years. Its own history goes back to French trappers, married to indigenous women in New France as early as 1534. Two French trappers, Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médard des Groseilliers, learned that there was good fur country north of Lake Superior but were prevented from developing it by the French Government which was concerned that trade routes would shift away from the St. Lawrence River. So they sought support from the British. After their own explorations, the British agreed that the Hudson Bay country, soon called Prince Rupert's Land, was worthy of investment after an English furrier, Thomas Glover, bought all of the first shipment from the ketch, Nonsuch, in 1669. So at the behest of French and Indian trappers, the Hudson's Bay Company was established in 1670. This collaboration of French, Natives and the English around fashion, money, monopolies, colonization and government exists to this day as HBC has transformed itself again and again over the years into a global marketing behemoth.

The HBC kept meticulous records so we can track how in the time period of the fort the quantity of beaver pelts declined. But it is worth noting that beaver pelts were far from the only animal whose furs were collected. Beaver, Badger, Black, Brown and Grizzly Bear, Fisher, Fox, Lynx, Martin, Raccoon, Wolverine, Wolf and a huge number of Muskrat skins were traded. (Ten muskrats were worth 1 beaver skin.) We might jump to

the conclusion that these species were wiped out by trappers. Although their numbers were greatly diminished, trappers realized that populations had to be maintained for the business to survive. In some cases, as when Peter Skene Ogden tried to clear the Snake River country of beaver so as to discourage other trappers from proceeding west, the HBC did try to destroy the population.

The business was in its height from 1810 to 1830. French and Indian trappers (Métis ) formed their own competing fur company in 1778. The North West Company was more egalitarian, with wealth distributed by shares to the “Wintering Partners”. It competed head-to-head with Hudson’s Bay. In April 1810, David Thompson engaged Jacques (Jaco) Finlay, a Métis free hunter, as a clerk and sent him to Spokane country with orders to build a small trading post at the confluence of the Spokane and Little Spokane Rivers for the North West Company. In 1812 another fur trading company, John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company arrived in the Spokane area, bringing competition from the Americans. The British put an end to that adventure by sending a frigate to destroy the Pacific Fur Company’s base in Astoria, Oregon. The threat of losing their outlet for shipping was enough to force the Astorians to sell their furs and fort to the North West Company in 1813.

Eight years later, in 1821, the British Government forced the consolidation of the Hudson’s Bay Company with the North West Company. That move eliminated many duplicate trading posts, often stationed right next to each other. But it also changed the structure of the Hudson’s Bay Company so that profits were shared more equitably.

This interplay of government, commerce, culture and ecology carried its inherent conflicts into the establishment of Hudson’s Bay Fort Colvile in 1825. To find out more about that history, visit <http://theheritagenetwork.org/>.