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11-2021

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### Recommended Citation

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Professor Ritchie

Humanities III

19 May 2021

### Fur Trade in Minnesota: the Rise and Fall of Ojibwe Power

Before any Europeans came to the shores of North America, Native Americans inhabited these lands. They fished the waters, harvested the earth, and hunted the game. Within the large continent, the Great Lakes region was especially abundant, and the Ojibwe tribe lived off the land surrounding Lake Superior and much of northern Minnesota, stretching into present-day Canada (Warren 126). The Ojibwe traded with other tribes “along the waterways of present-day Minnesota and across the Great Lakes for centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the mid-1600s” (“The Fur Trade”). However, with the introduction of European settlers, trade only increased. Ojibwe tribal members in Minnesota traded animal furs with the French, British, and eventually American traders in exchange for manufactured goods (Warren 125). The fur trade helped foster relationships between settlers and the Ojibwe, sometimes leading to interracial marriages. As time went on however, many settlers became greedy for wealth and land to the point where the Ojibwe and other Minnesotan tribes were mistreated, exploited, and assimilated. The fur trade began to decline and much Ojibwe land was stolen, but the legacy of the fur trade lives on. An important part of Ojibwe livelihood, the fur trade helped increase the Ojibwe peoples’ influence and Minnesota’s importance as a state; however, what was beneficial at first ultimately led to a decline in power, land, and cultural influence for the Ojibwe in the area.

The first foreigners the Ojibwe interacted with were the French. Although the French arrived in North America around 1600, it took them forty years to reach the Ojibwe people

through the Great Lakes (Treuer 12). Voyageurs, or “travelers” in French, were hired to transport trade goods throughout the vast territory to the east coast (“The Fur Trade”). Now, instead of having to make or find everything that they needed to survive, the Ojibwe could trade furs and animal skins with the white settlers. In exchange for furs, the Ojibwe received goods such as firearms, ammunition, cloth, and metal tools. Through these interactions with the French fur traders, the Ojibwe increased their standard of living. The benefits of trade drove the Ojibwe to expand westward into the richer fur-bearing lands of the Dakota tribe. During the early eighteenth century, the Ojibwe and Dakota fought over the region around the western point of Lake Superior and the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The Ojibwe were overall successful and managed to push the Dakota farther west into Minnesota and the Dakotas, establishing themselves as one of the major fur trading tribes (“Ojibwe History”). During this time the Ojibwe became such an important part of the French fur trade that the Ojibwe language became the lingua franca of these economic transactions. This explains why Ojibwe names dominate maps of the Great Lakes region to this day (Treuer 14).

The success of the French enticed others to engage in the trade, and soon the British moved into the area. At this point the “Ojibwe were at the center of the trade, and it was a powerful position. Their military and trade allegiance was actively courted by both the French and the British” (Treuer 13). The Ojibwe were able to maintain control over the economy at this time because “no European had a monopoly over the fur trade” (Trigger and Washburn 131). If they were not satisfied with one trader’s offer, the Ojibwe could usually find another. The Ojibwe continued to hold sway over the European traders as the French and British even adopted many Ojibwe protocols in dealing with all tribal peoples and favored their customs such as the use of councils and cooperative diplomacy (Treuer 13). European settlers also used the Ojibwe’s birch

bark canoes because they were the best way to quickly maneuver throughout the various lakes and rivers of the Great Lakes region. The canoes were relatively easy to build and repair, and they could fit through passages that the large boats Europeans used to cross the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes could not. As the demand for furs increased, tensions grew between the French and the British as both countries wanted sole domination of the fur trade and the riches it accorded. Eventually, war broke out, with the Ojibwe siding with their French allies. Ultimately the French were completely pushed off of the continent of North America. After the French and Indian War ended in 1763, “the British replaced the French as the primary suppliers of goods for the Great Lakes fur trade” (Gilman 12). The Ojibwe did not trust the British as much as they had their original European trading partners. Nevertheless, relationships continued and even extended beyond the fur trade. With the intermingling of the Ojibwe and white settlers, marriages were not uncommon. For both the Europeans and the Native Americans, marriage was a way to make important alliances (Gilman 78). In particular, the French had “sought to cement their relationships with the Ojibwe by arranging marriages between their fur brokers and Ojibwe women, blending the blood and cultures of both people. Even today, more than a third of Ojibwe band members in Minnesota carry French surnames” (Treuer 14). The biracial children resulting from these unions “formed the nucleus of a tight-knit fur trade community” (Gilman 78). Despite this, in the early 1800s, the fur trade social practice of intermarriage came under increasing censure from a new wave of permanent settlers, missionaries, and trade officials brought on by Britain’s success in the war. This is because there “was an era of hardening racial distinctions in the British Empire,” which eventually moved to North America, sharpening racial and class boundaries within the fur trade as well (Podruchny and Peers 126).

The fur trade prospered in the Lake Superior region during Britain's tenure of control. Permanent trading posts were set up as trade increased and more settlers streamed into the area in search of furs. The North West company, a major British fur trading company, operated out of trading posts in the Ojibwe lands of Minnesota and northern Wisconsin until the United States and Britain went to war again over maritime issues and expansionism (Warren 379). Ultimately "the War of 1812 split the territory between Britain and the United States. North of the international border the system was absorbed by the merged North West and Hudson's Bay companies. South of the border it became the province of the American Fur Company" (Gilman 3). From then on, the British were no longer a part of the Minnesota fur trade.

The American Fur Company was one of the largest, most powerful trade companies in the nation, and its influence in Minnesota increased permanent trade and settlement in the area. The company was originally incorporated in 1808 by John Jacob Astor in New York. It expanded from New York throughout the entire Great Lakes region and eventually to the Rocky Mountains. Most of the trading posts in Minnesota were established by the American Fur Company, one of the largest being at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers (Parker 157). Furs from the Northwest territory were traded from Native Americans who traveled to posts to trade furs, sell provisions, and return home with manufactured goods. For both Native Americans and settlers, "the pursuit of furs dominated post life" (Podruchny 220). The Ojibwe also provided other services to keep trade running smoothly between the two groups. Men would hunt for meat while women cured pelts and harvested crops. The Ojibwe could sometimes earn a living as part of the fur trade without actually trapping any furs themselves (Gilman 35). The Ojibwe lands held bountiful opportunities for fur traders, and they were profited from to great extent. From the headwaters of the Mississippi River, traders could send furs on an uninterrupted

journey all the way to the port of New Orleans. Also, northern Minnesota provided a natural route into the heart of the continent. Grand Portage, Minnesota became an important trading stop as it was used to reach the northern Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Athabasca Lake country through smaller lakes and rivers (Gilman 15). The bay was first used by the French, then the British North West Company, and finally the American Fur Company.

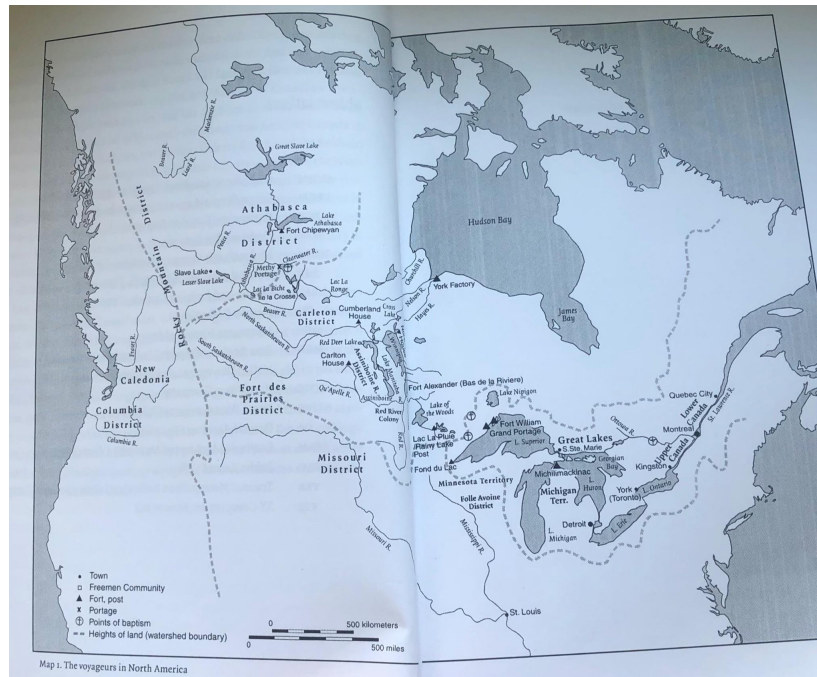
In order to control and maintain the stability of the Northwest region's fur trade, the U.S. government established Fort Snelling at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers; which led to an increase of settlers in the region and an overall decrease in Ojibwe power. From this point on, there were three parties working as part of the fur trade: Native Americans, fur trading companies, and the U.S. government ("The Fur Trade"). As a companion to the fort, the U.S. government established the St. Peters Indian Agency on the military land. The agency was "created as part of the US government's efforts to control trade between the US and Native American nations" ("The US Indian Agency (1820-1853)"). It was also responsible for settling disputes between Native Americans and white settlers and led assimilation efforts among the Native Americans in Minnesota. With the construction of Fort Snelling and the St. Peters Indian Agency, there was a massive influx of settlers into the region, which was devastating to the Ojibwe. Within a short period of time, the Ojibwe "went from being a regional power with sovereign control over large tracts of territory to being disempowered occupants of a small portion of their original homelands" (Treuer 24). Tribal leaders were often pressured to give up their land or face violence. The Ojibwe were no longer powerful enough to control the economy.

From then on, land cession treaties transpired frequently as the U.S. government desired ever more land for further settlement and expansion. In 1837, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and several other tribes signed a treaty that sold their land to the government. The tribe only "signed

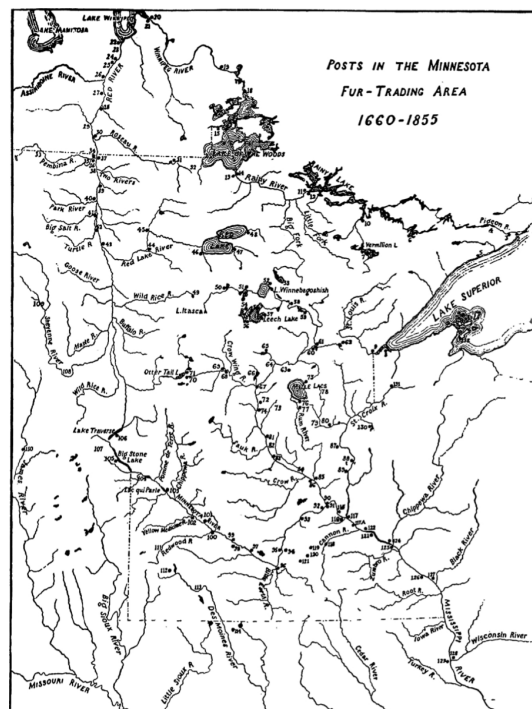
the Treaty of 1837 on the condition that they would still have the right to hunt, fish and gather in the ceded territory” (“Treaty of 1837”). The tribe would also receive annuity payments from the government for the land they had given away. Despite this, the government did not always give the Ojibwe what was agreed upon within their treaties. Instead, fur traders and companies exploited these payments and “rapidly diversified into lumbering, mining, land speculation, general merchandising, and transportation” (Gilman 2). As the Ojibwe lost hold of their power and land, resentment grew between them and the white settlers. Along with changing fashion tastes that did not require fur, the loss of land and increased hostility spelled the end of the fur trade.

At the beginning of their relationship, the Ojibwe and European settlers usually worked peacefully in ways that benefited both parties. However, as the U.S. government’s power grew and tribal powers weakened, this did not continue. The government wanted both Native American trade and Native American land, “but they could not have both. In the end they chose the land” (Gilman 108). The economic power of fur traders paved the way for American settlement. On land once held by the Ojibwe, settlers prospered as loggers, farmers, and fishermen. The economy of Minnesota is directly impacted by the land found within its borders that once belonged to the Native Americans. Without the fur trade, this land would have taken longer to be settled by Europeans and could have possibly remained untouched for some time. However, the desire of expansionism, so central to American identity, was unsatiated. The fur trade bolstered what probably would have been the inevitable settlement of the Northwest territory. Either way, the Ojibwe have played and continue to play an important role in the history and culture of the state of Minnesota. The fur trade that originally elevated the Ojibwe peoples’ status ultimately led to their decline in land and power.

## Maps



Podruchny does not give a provenance for this map. It appears to have been drawn for her book (2006).



Nute drew this map to go with her book *Posts in the Minnesota Fur-Trading Area 1660-1855* (1930).



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