

# Beavers and the Fur Trade of the Hudson Valley

Andrew Mikolajczyk



# Beavers, A Commodity?

- European demand for pelts used in coats and hats at the time made beavers a valuable commodity
- 100+ years' beaver pelts were the main export of the Hudson Valley
- Dutch settlers held a monopoly on the fur trade at Fort Orange



# Supply Can't Meet Demand

- Fur trade led to a rapid decline in population with beavers vanishing almost entirely from the Hudson River Valley
- Prior to European colonization, beavers in North America numbered between 60-400 million, but by the 1900's their numbers had dropped to only 100,000

# Origins of the Trade

- Origins of the fur trade sprung from seafaring merchants
- Fishermen would often trade small items for fur with Native Americans
- Within the Hudson Valley, Henry Hudson's journey is credited with its beginning
- Crew members aboard the *Halfmoon* wrote of beaver populations along the river, sparking interest back home in Holland



# New Sources of Beaver!

- Fur coats and felt hats were prominent fashions at the time
- Europeans had already eliminated the beavers on their own land and were desperately looking for a new sources
- New York State looked to be a prime location for such a trade
- Fort Orange (later Beverwyk and present day Albany) became the primary trading post due to its convenient location between the Hudson and Mohawk rivers
- Trappers travel west along the Mohawk to trap beavers then transport them down the Hudson to ports in Manhattan

# Native Americans liked Non-Native Stuff

- Native American involvement in the fur trade were for European goods such as jewelry, mirrors, cosmetics, clothing, blankets, cooking utensils, needles, knives, guns, and liquor
- Native Americans' had a desperate desire for weaponry and alcohol
- Conflicts between other tribes were constant and European guns gave some tribes a clear advantage
- Having never truly experienced the effects of liquor before, the Native Americans were not cautious in their consumption and began to crave it
- Many believe that the fur trade turned the Natives into addicts, desperately seeking European goods

# Why Beavers?

- Beaver's fur was considered more valuable than other animals because it had two layers
- Beaver's fur consists of a coarse outer layer as well as a smooth, short inner layer



# Sneaky Beavers

- Due to the elusive and aquatic dwelling nature of beavers Europeans found them difficult to trap, particularly in large quantities
- In order to fill this need contracts were create with Native American tribes
- Native Americans were much better at trapping, known to have stalked beavers with iron tipped spears and guns, and set traps to lure them in with castoreum



# Relations with the Natives

- When the fur trade began to boom the Native Americans were finally given the opportunity to control their relations with Europeans
- Tribes saw the importance over fur trade control and fought each other for use of territories, especially as the beaver population began declining in the east and new sources were needed
- The Iroquois and Dutch formed a long lasting alliance, and as such the Iroquois were able to remain in the Hudson Valley undisturbed by Europeans for far longer than most other tribes

# New Trade, New Dutch Company

- Early Dutch settlers established the Dutch West India Company in order to regulate the trade of pelts
- Dutch West India Company flourished, in 1624 4,700 beaver pelts were transported to Holland
- By 1636 16,304 pelts were shipped to Holland



# Albany Better Than the Rest

- Albany held the undisputed monopoly on fur trading and in order to keep it as such legislation was put in place requiring that all trade occur at the Albany fort and be shipped overseas via Manhattan
- Amounts of pelts exported per year averaging around 46,000
- Albany fort had more success than the French in Montreal because they paid at least double

# Beavers Are Almost Extinct

- A decline in local beaver populations became an economic nightmare for fur traders
- Tribes were encroaching on each other's land while trapping resulted in bloody conflicts
- Beaver hats were beginning to go out of style during the 1700's so by the time tribes were at peace and able to resume trapping, the price for skins had fallen

# Why Beavers Were Disappearing

- The greatest factor for the decline of the fur trade was the disappearance of beavers from the Hudson Valley
- Beavers do not breed often
- Beavers are not traditionally migratory animals, traveling around only 6 miles to find a new home
- By 1640 there was little to no sign of beavers from the Hudson River west to the Genesee River

# Why Beavers Are Important

- The most commonly known influence that beavers have on the environment is in the building of dams
- Dams help to raise the water level in ponds and rivers which encourages plant growth and creates a lush ecological environment
- When the fur trade eradicated beavers from the Hudson Valley it disrupted entire ecosystems such as this, creating a chain of events that put several other species at risk and forced to find new habitats
- Beavers are known as a keystone species, a title given to species that provide the basis of support for an ecosystem

# Resurrecting the Beaver

- In 1895, there were only two known colonies of beavers located in the nearby Adirondacks
- Beavers were reintroduced to the Adirondacks and Hudson Valley region from Canada and Yellowstone National Park
- These combined efforts have succeeded in bringing the once nearly extinct species back

# The Annoying Side of Beavers

- The return of beavers has created some unforeseen annoyances
- A single beaver chews down hundreds of trees per year, creating an issue of deforestation
- Flooding of fields and crop damages effect farmers because of beavers
- Residents of beaver dwelling areas complain of road and trail flooding
- The return of beavers has such a positive impact on the building and diversification of ecosystems that it is essential for their human neighbors to develop adaptive measures so the two groups may live together in peace

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