

inSTALLations

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Historical Harvest The Fur Trade



In the 1500s, the European Beaver, *Castor fiber*, had been hunted nearly to extinction. By the early 1600s, Europeans were traveling to North America in search of new sources for furs and castoreum, a secretion from the beaver's scent gland believed to have medicinal properties. Here they found the American Beaver, *Castor canadensis*, as well as many other fur-bearing animals.

In 1808 the American Fur Company was chartered and shortly thereafter the fur trade began in earnest in the Saginaw Valley. Typically Native Americans were responsible for the trapping and skinning of hides. They then traded these hides with trading companies, receiving metal, wool, and glass trade items. Items such as iron



kettles, metal axes, and wool blankets were often more durable than the clay, stone, wooden, and bone tools previously available to the Native Americans.

By the 1840s the demand for beaver and other furs in Europe had declined and the American Fur Company moved west and closed its posts in Michigan. By this time the population of American Beavers was decimated.

Trading Tidbits



Furs were transported from the trading posts to the companies using large canoes. We refer to these as Voyageur canoes.

These boats were often constructed of birch bark using spruce, cedar bark, or basswood cordage and pine pitch to hold it together.



Besides the beaver, furs of martin, mink, otter, fisher, bear, and deer hides were traded.

Other items Native Americans traded included maple sugar, bear grease, wild rice, corn, dried fish, snowshoes, and guide service.

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