

## How Could a Beaver Start a War?

Robert Millward

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

I OFTEN BEGIN LESSONS on the frontier fur trade with the question: How could a beaver start a war? The question usually generates great student discussion about how an animal could be responsible for starting a war. Students gain a better understanding of war and economics when the variables come alive through stories, artifacts, and paintings. For example, imagine a Shawnee boy or girl living in a small village in the Ohio Valley 300 years ago. It's early May, and the oak, maple, walnut, and poplar leaves are emerging 200 feet above the ground. Soon, this mass of leaves, branches, and vines will become so thick that it will block 80% of the sunlight from reaching the forest floor. A small village is located along the Ohio River and is home to twenty families living in wigwams covered with huge sheets of bark that have been peeled from the huge trees. The women are planting corn, beans, and squash in a field that stretches a quarter mile along the Ohio River. Corn is a major food crop for the village, and a good harvest next fall will insure the clan's survival next winter. The men in the village have trapped beaver and hunted deer throughout the past winter and now they have a huge supply of beaver pelts and deer skins that can be sewn into clothing and fur blankets for the coming winter.

But today, around noon, two strange-looking fur traders, along with eighteen heavily loaded pack horses, entered the village for the first time, and these two strangers will dramatically change village life forever. Until today, mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, and grandparents have never worn



*Figure 1: The Painted Tree, by Robert Griffing, 1997. Courtesy of the artist. This painting depicts two fur traders with several pack horses following an old Indian path into the backwoods of Pennsylvania. It was not uncommon for two fur traders to walk across the Pennsylvania frontier leading sixteen to eighteen pack horses loaded with trade goods. When they returned home, their horses were loaded with beaver and deer pelts that would be worth approximately \$200,000 in today's currency.*

a cloth shirt, never tasted sugar, never slept under a wool blanket, and never wore silver jewelry. Food was cooked in clay pots, and arrow points were fastened to arrow shafts using cordage made from wild plants that grew in the region. The Shawnee hunters have never used a rifle, never had a steel knife, and never started a fire with a fire striker. Up until now, the village relied for its survival on the wisdom passed down from older generations. For example, an eleven-year-old Shawnee boy could survive for a week in the forest wilderness with merely a spear, some pieces of flint, and some cordage. Shawnee women knew how to preserve food, how to weave mats, how to grow abundant supplies of corn, and how to insure the survival of the village. Yet many of these survival skills that were learned over generations will soon be lost because, today, the clan will become dependent on the yearly trade goods that these two fur traders have brought into the village.

These traders, aside from smelling pretty bad, are wearing knee-length shirts, woolen leggings, and floppy hats. Each one's shirt is gathered at the waist by a two-inch wide woolen sash that also holds a brightly polished tomahawk on one side and a knife on the other. One man has a heavily matted beard and long greasy hair that hangs down to his shoulder. It is obvious from their odor that neither man has had a bath within the past month. "Ugly" is probably the Shawnee's first impression of these traders. Their dirty hair and beards are unappealing simply because a Shawnee warrior considered facial hair ugly. Warriors removed their facial hair by clamping their whiskers between two sharpened clamshells and pulling them out at the root, which left their faces and scalp nice and smooth. Why? It was a fashion statement; it made them look handsome and made it much easier to apply red plant dye or black charcoal to their faces when they went to war or when they dressed for an important ceremony.

The traders probably began their journey from Philadelphia in late April since they could purchase their trade goods from a trade supply warehouse. From our perspective, the cost of these trade goods could easily exceed \$80,000 adjusted for today's currency.<sup>1</sup> The traders might stay two or three days at the Shawnee village until all the Shawnee hunters had an opportunity to exchange their furs for these tempting trade goods. Each Shawnee hunter often had hundreds of skins to exchange for trade goods, and it was not unusual for one hunter to obtain the following items just for his family:

3 tomahawks, 5 yards of flannel, 1 rifle, 1 tin kettle, 6 pairs of stockings, 6 pairs of women's stockings, 6 large blankets, 6 coats, 6 plain shirts, 3 ruffled shirts, 4 silver arm bands, 3 pounds of vermilion, 4 large silk handkerchiefs, 1 large silver cross, 4 pairs of silver ear bobs, 4 silver wrist bands, 10 pounds of gun powder, 20 bars of lead, 2 women's silver hair plates, 6





*Figure 2: The fur traders carried a variety of trade goods including such things as blankets, brass buckets, lead, scissors, thread, beads, trade shirts, vermillion, arm bracelets, sashes, mirrors, gorgets, wampum beads, twine, cloth, and many other items. Students are amazed at the amount of merchandise that was traded on the frontier. The lesson really comes to life when students can examine actual trade goods as shown in this photograph.*

gallons of rum, 15 beaver traps, 36 gun flints, 1 pound of White Wampum, 3 children's stockings, 1 large knife, 1 silver brooch, 1 looking glass, and 2 combs.<sup>2</sup>

The exchange of goods with just one Shawnee hunter could amount to \$15,000 worth of beaver or deer skins for the trader. In return, the trader offered about \$7,000 worth of merchandise to the Shawnee hunter. Within weeks, the fur traders headed back east with approximately \$200,000 in beaver and deer skins. The return trip to Philadelphia took almost a month.

Prior to the return trip, the fur traders compressed the fur into tightly bound bundles weighing about sixty pounds. A bundle of beaver skins was tied to each side of a pack horse, and the trader was careful that each bundle weighed the same to avoid the risk of having a horse become lame because of an unequal weight distribution. During the return to Philadel-

phia, about fourteen pack horses each carried 120 pounds of beaver pelts and the remaining horses carried fodder for the trip. Food for the horses was a major problem, since the thick forest canopy blocked most of the sunlight and prevented grass from growing on the forest floor. Trader Christopher Gist’s journal entries for one week reveals his concern for the condition of his horses: “Wednesday 27—Our horses and selves were so tired that we were obliged to stay this day to rest, for we were unable to travel ... Saturday 30—Stayed to rest our horses ... Thursday 4—We stayed here all day to rest our horses”<sup>3</sup> Such an entry often means that the trader found a natural meadow where the horses could finally eat grass to help them regain their strength before continuing over the rough mountain trails. At the time, there were no roads on the Pennsylvania and Ohio frontier.

During this era, at least 400 fur traders traveled throughout Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Western New York in search of beaver and deer pelts. These traders had a tremendous impact on the economy simply because the furs could total over \$30,000,000 in exports from the colonies to England.<sup>4</sup> Thus, traders, wholesale merchants, fashion designers, hat makers, blanket makers, shirt makers, jewelry designers, rifle manufacturers, lead foundries, knife makers, and artists all made profits from the fur trade. However, becoming a fur trader was no easy task, since you needed a huge amount of start-up capital to buy horses, pack saddles, harnesses, fodder, trade goods, reliable help, and a deep understanding of the Eastern Woodland Indians’ language and culture. To get started, you needed approximately \$50,000 to \$150,000.<sup>5</sup> For example, if you decided to travel with eighteen horses, here are the approximate costs:

|   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| 1. Purchase 18 horses at approximately \$2,000 ea.    | \$36,000         |
| 2. Purchase 18 pack saddles and harnesses at \$40 ea. | 720              |
| 3. Purchase food for the horses                       | 900              |
| 4. Employ hired helper (for 3 months)                 | 2,500            |
| 5. Purchase trade goods                               | <u>100,000</u>   |
| <b>Total Cost</b>                                     | <b>\$140,120</b> |

Expected value of resulting furs would range from \$100,000 to \$220,000.

But what were your risks? George Croghan, who was nicknamed “King of the Traders,” made and lost fortunes in the fur trade when the French invaded the Ohio Valley and confiscated his trading posts.<sup>6</sup> Croghan lost a total of four trading posts to the French, which amounted to several millions of dollars.<sup>7</sup> John Frasier, another famous trader who was also an expert blacksmith and gun repairer, operated a trading post on the Allegheny River in the mid 1750s. When the French sent soldiers into the Allegheny and Ohio Valley, they confiscated Frasier’s trading post—although Frasier



*Figure 3: Blacksmith of Venango–1752, by John Buxton, 1999. Courtesy of the artist. This painting depicts the famous fur trader, John Frasier. Frasier lost his trading posts on the Allegheny River and the Monongahela River when the French invaded the Ohio Valley. Frasier was also an expert blacksmith and gunsmith, whose wife was captured by the Indians. She escaped after two years and returned to find that John had remarried. Some might argue the story ends on a happy note. John returned his second wife back to her father and lived the rest of his life with his first wife.*

escaped capture, he lost almost all his trade goods as well as his blacksmith shop. Many Seneca, Shawnee, Mingo, and Wyandot Indians stopped at his trading post not only to barter for trade goods, but to also have their rifles repaired. After escaping the French on the Allegheny, Frasier built a new trading post along the Monongahela River about nine miles from present-day Pittsburgh. In 1753, George Washington stopped at Frasier's trading post during his diplomatic mission to inform the French to vacate the Ohio Valley. Unfortunately for John Frasier, the French burned his new trading post within the first year of the French and Indian War.

As an aspiring trader, the French soldiers, however, weren't your only risk. The lack of roads into the frontier made traveling along narrow paths very dangerous, and pack horses would sometimes stumble and slide down the mountain. Some horses would develop back sores from carrying heavy

packs or become lame because of a loose fitting horseshoe. Heavy rains could flood a mountain trail and make small creeks impossible to cross. Traders often had to wait a week until the water level of a creek receded and it became safe to ford.

### **Could a Beaver Start a War?**

Could a Beaver Start a War? Absolutely! The beaver was responsible for generating a healthy economy in England, France, Canada, and the American Colonies. We know that both the French and English valued the fur trade. Merchants in both countries were becoming wealthy by designing and manufacturing the latest fur fashions. Fur hats and coats defined one's social status. Rich men wore a beaver hat as a social symbol that advertised their wealth and their social stature. Rich women likewise wore beaver-trimmed coats, beaver collars, and beaver hand muffs. It is difficult for students to understand how this furry animal could be the cause of a war. The problem began when the French claimed that the English fur traders were trespassing on French territory—which included Western Pennsylvania, present-day West Virginia, and the Ohio Frontier—and that these traders were hurting the French economy. In order to protect their own traders, merchants, and industrial interests, the French government sent thousands of soldiers to the Western Pennsylvania and Ohio Frontier to build forts along Lake Erie, the Allegheny River, and the Ohio Valley. In 1752, French soldiers began capturing and imprisoning English traders and confiscating their trade goods. As a result, the Colonial Governors in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania started preparing for war. In 1754, a young Virginia officer along with small band of Virginia militia engaged a small French force on a secluded mountain in Western Pennsylvania. Though the battle lasted only fifteen minutes, it launched what was to become the French and Indian War, which would last for seven years and change the lives of the Eastern Woodland Indians forever.

This short story about the fur trade generates lots of student questions about the fur economics, the Eastern Woodland Indians, trade artifacts, and war. Students are amazed at the multitude of trade items that were available on the frontier and are also amazed at how much money was exchanged as a result of the fur trade. They also begin to understand the dramatic impact that the fur trade had on the lives of the Eastern Woodland Indians. Students are intrigued with the variety of trade items that I bring to class, such as trade shirts, sashes, scissors, needles, twine, lead, vermillion, sugar, arm bands, silver earrings, necklaces, socks, blankets, cloth wampum, awls, wire, and variety of items. But the story, paintings, and artifacts help make the lesson on fur trade really come to life.

## Notes

1. Walter S. Dunn, *Opening New Markets: The British Army and the Old Northwest* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).
2. Ibid.
3. William Darlington, *Christopher Gist's Journals* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 2002; A Facsimile Reprint from 1893).
4. Walter S. Dunn, *Frontier Profit and Loss: The British Army and the Fur Traders, 1760-1764* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).
5. Dunn, *Opening New Markets*.
6. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Journals 1748-1765: Conrad Weiser, George Croghan, Frederick Post, and Thomas Morris* (Lewisburg, PA: Wennawoods Publishing, 1998).
7. Ibid.