

Trade Goods

Material Culture of the Fur Trade

Natives actively sought out European trade goods and incorporated them into their societies in selective ways.

Natives participated in the fur trade in part because they desired European trade goods that made their lives easier.

Native groups selectively adopted trade goods to serve their own needs. These goods did not necessarily create dependency. The archaeological record shows us that traditional technologies and tools existed alongside new European ones for remarkably long periods of time. Natives were thoughtful about what trade goods they sought out. They adopted the most useful goods and used them in ways that blended into existing Native culture.



Modern recreations of common 18th century trade goods. Photo by B. Cook.

An Assortment of Common Trade Goods:

- | | | | |
|----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Awls | Combs | Hats | Rings |
| Axes | Dresses | Hawkbells | Shoes |
| Beads | Firesteels | Hoes | Shot |
| Blankets | Fishhooks | Kettles | Shirts |
| Brandy | Files | Knives | Sleeves |
| Breeches | Gloves | Lace | Thimbles |
| Buckles | Gowns | Mirrors | Thread |
| Buttons | Guns | Needles | Trim |
| Caps | Gunflints | Pins | Tobacco |
| Cloth | Gunpowder | Rasps | Vermillion |



Finger weaving was firmly established among Eastern Woodlands Natives. The technique employed plant fibers to create trumplines, garters, and other useful household articles and items of clothing. Europeans introduced wool and the sash. Native groups blended the two traditions to create the finger-woven sash. Kira McGirr. Photo by B. Schwaderer.



Finding lead seals at archaeological sites, such as these from Fort St. Joseph, can help us trace where cloth came from and where it may have ended up, helping us better understand details of how the fur trade worked. Photos by C. Davis. Top: Courtesy Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project. Bottom: Courtesy Fort St. Joseph Museum.

Cloth and Clothing

Cloth and clothing were likely the cornerstone trade goods in the western Great Lakes.

Cloth itself rarely preserves in the archaeological record, but historical documentation indicates that clothing accounted for more than 60% of trader expenditures for goods. Trade inventories recorded many ready-made items. Shirts, trousers, breeches, neckerchiefs, caps, mittens, stockings, leggings, and jackets are listed as well as fabric, thread, ribbons, tape, buttons, needles, and thimbles. Some of the latter objects have been recovered at Fort St. Joseph.

Both Natives and Europeans greatly desired European clothing. Clothing needed constant replacement due to wear. For Native women the use of European textiles reduced the amount of time and labor they had to invest in making clothing, leaving more time for other domestic activities and activities related to the fur trade.

Cloth had to be brought from Europe because both French and English laws banned its commercial production in the colonies. Lengths were carefully inspected and marked with lead seals that showed that no one had tampered with the cloth. Seals sometimes recorded other information about the cloth: place of manufacture, the company that imported it, and sometimes the cloth's quality. After being removed, lead seals could serve other purposes. They could be melted down into musketballs or shot or molded into objects for personal adornment.



Clothing-related artifacts such as [clockwise from upper left] buttons, thimbles, straight pins, scissors, and an awl from Fort St. Joseph abound in the archaeological record, pointing to the importance of cloth and clothing in everyday life. Photos by J. Lacko and J. Hughes.