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The Great Lakes

FUR TRADE

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In the 1600s the French explored the Great Lakes looking for a shortcut across North America. They never found the mythical Northwest Passage. Instead, they found an abundance of fur-bearing animals whose **pelts** were made into hats popular in Europe.

The Great Lakes fur trade was a **barter** system between Europeans and Native Americans. The Europeans offered blankets, guns, hatchets, knives, needles, liquor, and metal cooking pots. The Native Americans offered pelts.

All types of pelts were exchanged, but the most popular was the beaver. A beaver pelt, when properly treated, makes strong and attractive felt cloth. Beaver hats were so popular that the animal had been hunted into extinction in Europe.

The earliest Great Lakes fur traders came to Native American villages with trade goods. As the fur trade pushed farther into the interior of North America, permanent trading posts were built. One of the biggest fur-trading posts was at the Straits of Mackinac.

In the late fall and early winter, Native Americans trapped the animals. In the spring, fur traders left Montreal and headed west to Mackinac

with trade goods. At the same time, the Native Americans took the pelts to Mackinac.

At Mackinac, fur traders and the Native Americans **haggled** over the value of the pelts. Once a deal was completed, pelts were exchanged for trade goods. "Made beaver" was the term used to describe the value of furs. A made beaver was equal to one **prime** beaver pelt. A gun might be

worth 14 made beaver or a blanket worth 7 made beaver. After the exchange, the pelts were shipped to Europe to be made into hats.

The fur trade became so important that France and Great Britain fought wars over the control of North America. After the Americans won independence from Great Britain, the two nations struggled over the North American fur trade.

In 1808, German immigrant John Jacob Astor founded the American Fur Company. By the early 1820s, Astor's company dominated the Great Lakes fur trade. The company, whose headquarters were on Mackinac Island, employed hundreds of workers. In 1834, Astor sold the company and it moved to St. Louis, Missouri.

