



## **Program Bulletin- Supplying the Great Lakes Fur Trade program**

### **Program Overview**

This program explains the way in which the merchants of the Great Lakes were able to obtain their merchandise, export furs, and make a profit. It includes information about how the furs were sourced and what products were imported to pay for them. Discussion of archaeological as well as documentary evidence will also be included.

### **Background**

Michilimackinac was established around 1715 by the French military. However, long before the arrival of Europeans, the area was a gathering place for the Anishnaabek and people from other native nations. These people gathered near the Straits of Mackinac annually to fish, trade, and conduct religious ceremonies. Soon after the fort was established, French Canadian families began settling in the new community and using it as a hub for fur trading operations. In 1761, British troops arrived to take control of the region and manage the fort. With this change in power, new groups of civilians were also allowed to move to the area and operate fur trading businesses. By the mid- to late 1770s perhaps as many as 2,000 people gathered at the fort during the summer trading season.

### **Logistics**

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, trade items from all over the world passed through Michilimackinac, reflecting the community's role in the global economy. Merchants, largely from Montreal, Albany or Detroit purchased large amounts of mostly European manufactured products and hired canoes and canoe men (voyageurs) to bring their merchandise to Michilimackinac. Most of these items were shipped to Michilimackinac through Montreal, a 750-mile journey that could take up to six weeks.

Once at the fort, voyageurs, clerks, and merchants unpacked everything and checked the inventory lists. Some of these historic lists have survived and are an important resource for researching the fur trade. Once satisfied that the trade goods had survived their journey to Michilimackinac, these items were repacked and shipped further into the interior north and west of the Great Lakes. In these places the items were traded or sold for furs that were harvested and prepared for shipping by Indigenous people.

Harvested and dried furs were then shipped back to Michilimackinac where they were repacked into larger canoes and sent further east. Once the furs reached European trade centers, professional tradespeople processed them into fur-felted hats and other accessories that were practical and fashionable. Some of those items, especially the hats, may have even made their way back across the ocean again to be worn in North America.

Nearly everyone involved in the fur trade profited in some way. The laborers moving the merchandise were paid using a contract system. Merchandise was purchased cheaply and sold at a mark-up and creditors charged interest. It was a bustling business for well over 200 years in the Great Lakes.

## Merchandise

Nearly all of the merchandise shipped into the Great Lakes was produced elsewhere, as the lack of equipment, knowledge and supplies prevented local manufacturing. Textiles and clothing were, by far, the most common class of items packed up and shipped into the area. They were manufactured in France, Britain, India, China, and other European nations. Metal tools like awls, garden tools, and personal items like jewelry and razors came mostly from Europe. Beads, gunshot, buttons, pins and other small items, all made overseas, are the most commonly discovered during our on-going archaeological work. Many of the excavated items can be seen in our *Treasures from the Sand* exhibit beneath the Northwest Rowhouse.

Indigenous people adopted the new technologies brought into the region and made them their own. High quality wool blankets were made into skirts, leggings, and breech cloths. Products like brass, copper and tin buckets were used as intended or sometimes harvested for their metal and made into jewelry and tools.

As you look around the fort you will see many different types of large packages. Wooden boxes were used to move breakable products. Barrels would be filled with liquids or small items like dried peas or gunpowder. Textiles and just about everything else was carefully wrapped in linen canvas and bundled into bales. These types of packages typically weighed around 90 lbs. Numbers, letters or symbols were used to mark them which made it possible for merchants to better manage their inventory.

