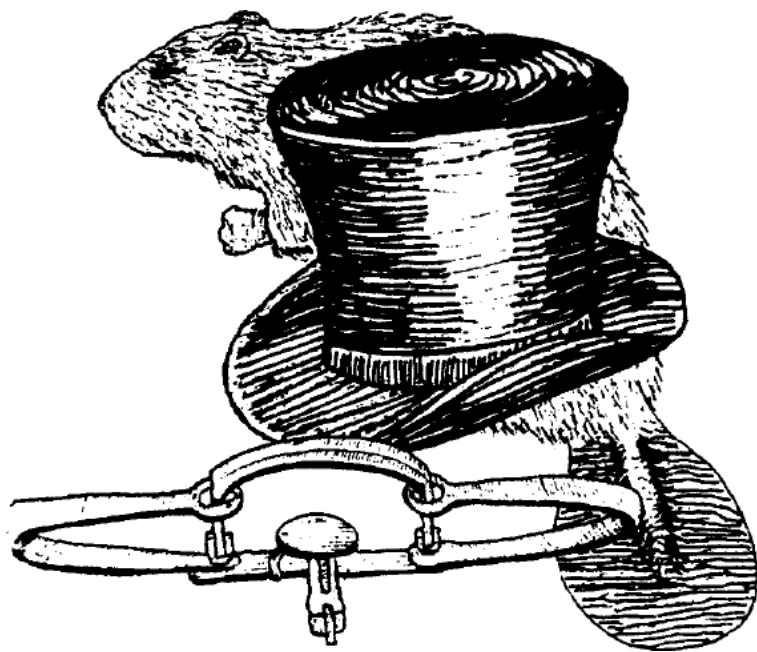


Furs and Lead: The Life of a Voyageur Along the Mississippi River



National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium

History Education Curriculum

Target Grades:	2 nd grade - adult
Key Words:	fur trade, fur bearer, trade goods, voyageur, American Indians, birch bark canoe, tump Line, flintlock trade gun
Subject Areas:	history, social studies
Duration:	45 minutes – 1 hour

Title: *Furs and Lead:
The Life of a Voyageur Along the Mississippi River*

Summary:

This program concentrates on exploration along the upper Mississippi River Valley by Europeans and later Americans, in their search for a water route across the continent and the riches that may be found along their search. Early explorers were hoping to find gold, but what they did find was an abundance of animal furs and lead ore. There was also competition between the great European powers of England, France, and Spain, and later America to control this great waterway and the wealth it held.

This program highlights the French fur trade period around the time of Julien Dubuque, for whom the City of Dubuque is named. Julien Dubuque arrived in the present day Dubuque area in 1788 to trade furs and lead with the local Mesquakie Indian tribe. He died in 1810 and is buried in a grave prominently seen downriver from Dubuque, on a bluff top overlooking the Mississippi River.

Objectives:

The objectives of this program is to give the participants a background in the exploration, control of trade, relationships between American Indian tribes and European descended traders and voyageurs. This program gives the students an introduction to the clothing, food, river transportation, furs, beaver felt hats, and way of life of the voyageurs and traders.

Group Size: Any sized group

Background for Educators:

The French fur trading period is very important along the Mississippi River Valley. Marquette and Joliet were two French Canadians who were sent by France to search for the great river that was known only from accounts told by the American Indians who visited and traded in the Green Bay area. In the search for a water route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Marquette and Joliet encountered the Mississippi River in 1673 with the guidance from American Indian guides. Later in the 1680's, LaSalle claimed the entire Mississippi River and its watershed for France, by planting a flag at the mouth of the Mississippi River in or near the Gulf of Mexico.

This claim became known as New France until the time of the French and Indian Wars, when England won the war. Rather than give up its claim of New France to England, France ceded the land to Spain. When Julien Dubuque arrived to trade furs and mine lead in 1788, Spain was in possession of the land on the west side of the river, around Dubuque. Julien Dubuque wrote a letter to the Spanish governor requesting an easement to mine the lead in Spanish claimed territory. He called his lead claim the Mines of Spain, which is now the name given to an Iowa State recreation area and park by that name.

The fur trade period along the Mississippi River started in the late 1600's and continued for the next 150 years until around 1840. The primary furs were that of beaver and otter, but also sought after were furs of marten, muskrat, fox, raccoon, bear, and deer hides. After trapping the beaver, the fur was skinned off of the animal and all meat and fat was scraped off. The raw fur was then stretched onto a willow sapling hoop until it was dried into a "blanket" or oval shaped pelt, called a pleut in French. The finished fur or "made beaver" was the exchange value during the fur trade period.

The fur trade blanket has four lines woven into one corner which represents the trade price of four beaver pelts.

The main use for the beaver pelt was to use the fur for making beaver felt that was then shaped into hats that were very much in style in Europe and the colonies. These hats were very expensive and took a lot of work to make. Many of the hat makers, termed hatters, went crazy due to the use of mercury in the process. Hatters absorbed mercury through their skin and often died early and were termed "mad hatters" as it destroyed their brains.

Beaver pelts were traded by the American Indians for things that they could not make themselves from materials such as metal and glass that they did not yet know how to manufacture into items. Examples of sought after trade goods were brass buckets, tomahawks, guns, traps, beads, blankets, knives, arrowheads, tools, gunpowder, alcoholic drinks, bottles, metal jewelry, cloth, needles, fish hooks, and a large variety of other items that were common in Europe and early settlements of America. Most of these trade goods arrived in large birch bark canoes, and the furs were taken to the factory or trading house in these canoes.

The fur trade was strictly controlled by governments and fur trading companies. Fur trading companies were organized and fur trade posts, called factories, were established at Mackinac and Green Bay on the Great Lakes and Prairie Du Chien on the Mississippi River. The men who worked for the fur trading companies were predominantly French or French Indian mix. Head traders were known as bourgeois (boosh-wa, a French word meaning "boss"), assistant traders were called "commis" (kom-mi), and the skilled canoe men were called "voyageurs" (voy-a-jers). The voyageurs ate very simple meals of dried peas, corn, pemmican (dried and pounded meat), salt pork,(fat or lard), and hard crackers or biscuits.

For over q hundred years these fur companies were operated by French (1680-1761). Later the English established companies (1763-1816) and after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 the Americans established fur trading companies along the Mississippi River. Following the War of 1812, the United States government established control over the Mississippi River trade, and St. Louis became the leading fur trade center. French fur traders continued to be employed by AMERICAN COMPANIES. (1816-1850).

Trade Values

Trade Item	Beaver Skins
1 trade gun	10 – 12 beaver pelts
1 trap	5
1 Ax	2
12 rings	1
1 small tin kettle	3
1 large brass kettle	7
18 flints	1

1 pound of musket balls (14)	1
1 carrot of tobacco	5
1 two gallons of cheap (diluted) rum	5
1 medium sized silver Cross of Lorraine (two cross arms)	1
25 needles	1
12 awls	1
12 fire steels	2
4 large knives	1
1 package white beads	4
1 four point blanket	4
1 yard of Calico cloth	1
2 yards of scarlet cloth	6
1 yard of ribbon	$\frac{1}{2}$
1 iron spear head	$\frac{1}{2}$
1 fifteen foot birch bark canoe	10

Materials Needed:

- Fur trade trunk (containing trade goods, tanned beaver pelt, iron trap, brass kettle, glass beads, tomahawk, trade jewelry, leather tump line, and other props)
- Stretched beaver pelt
- Canoe paddle
- Flintlock trade gun and shooting pouch with powder horn
- Costumes of the French fur trade period
- Beaver felt hat

Procedure:

Set up all of the props for the fur trade program prior to the class arrival. Items should be taken from the trunk and set up on a cart or table using the fur trade blanket as a base cover on which to set up all of the other fur trade artifacts.

If possible dress in costume of the period and set the stage for the program by speaking some French or speaking in first person about the fur trade of the 1780's period. If not in costume perhaps have some of the students model some of the period clothing during the presentation.

Talk about the clothing of the period including straight last buckle shoes, breeches, men's stockings, long linen shirt, vest over the shirt, and most importantly the beaver hat. Originally three cornered and eventually top hat or "stove pipe" design.

Show trade goods and tell how the beaver was trapped and the hide dressed to be traded. Show some of the trade items and mention the value equivalents from trade goods to furs.

Talk about the transportation of both furs and trade goods by birch bark canoe and the leather tump line. Demonstrate the tump line, or portaging harness, with the help of a student volunteer.

Demonstrate the flintlock trade gun being sure to stress gun safety and safe handling of guns and gunpowder.

Sing a French voyageur song with the class if possible. The song Alouette is below.

The following song is a French song sung by voyageurs while paddling their canoes and is probably over 300 years old.

Alouette

CHORUS- Alouette, gentille alouette, Alouette, je t'y plumerai

1. Je t'y plumerai la tête (2times)
Et la tête, *Et la tête* Alouette, *Alouette* CHORUS
 2. Je t'y plumerai les yeux (2 times)
Et les yeux, *Et les yeux*, Et la tête, *Et la tête* , Alouette, *Alouette* CHORUS
 3. Je t'y plumerai le bec (2 times)
Et le bec, *Et le bec*, Et les yeux, *Et les yeux*, Et la tête, *Et la tête* ,
Alouette, *Alouette* CHORUS
 4. Je t'y plumerai le dos (2 times)
Et le dos, *Et le dos*, Et le bec, *Et le bec*, Et les yeux, *Et les yeux*,
Et la tête, *Et la tête* , Alouette, *Alouette* CHORUS
 5. Je t'y plumerai le cou (2 times)
Et la cou, *Et la cou*, Et le dos, *Et le dos*, Et le bec, *Et le bec*,
Et les yeux, *Et les yeux*, Et la tête, *Et la tête* , Alouette, *Alouette* CHORUS
- Oh--Alouette, gentille alouette, Alouette, je t'y plumerai

(translation : CHORUS - Alouette, gentle Alouette Allouette, I'm going to
pluck your feathers out

tete - head, les yeux – eyes, le bec – beak, le dos – back, la cou – neck)

Evaluation:

Additional resources: *Where Two Worlds Meet*, Minnesota Historical Society

Extensions:

- *Mammals of the Mississippi*
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Credits:

Mark D. Wagner, Director of Visitor Experience for the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium

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