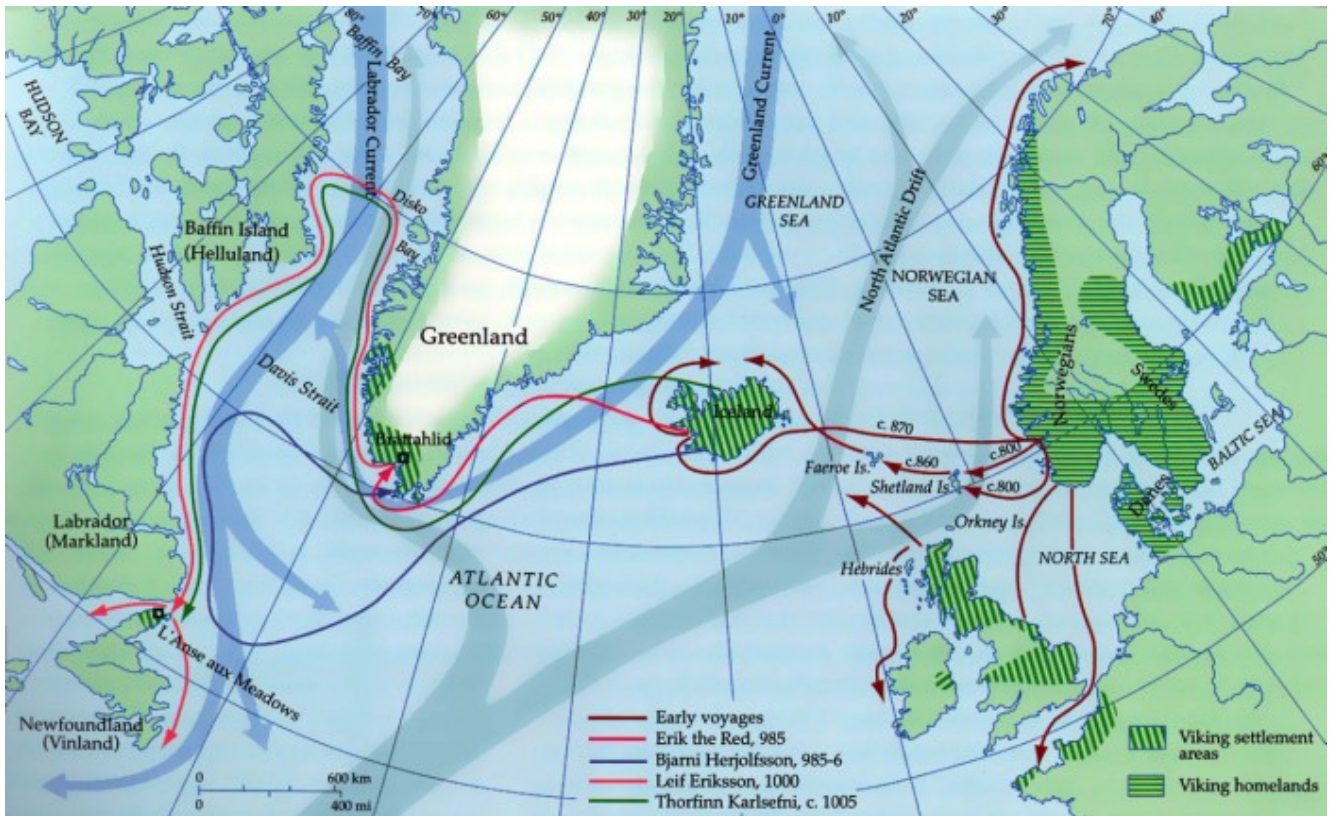


No North American Beaver, no New England, no America

While the American Bald Eagle is a symbol for America, in many ways it should be *Castor canadensis*, the North American beaver for without it and the industry that developed around its pelts, America as a nation may have never had gotten off the ground, so to speak.

There are too many industries to list when it comes to the overall success of the United States as a nation. New Bedford itself had eras when textile was the primary industry, followed by whaling which was replaced by fishing, lighting (New Bedford was once called "The city that lit the world") and as of late alternative energy. Some would suggest marijuana will be America's next major industry – one that New Bedford will join perhaps sometime around 2050.

It is the fishing industry, particularly cod, that drew Europeans in large numbers to the shores of the New World. The Atlantic fishing grounds were rich with life and it fueled Europe's economy. The first documented case of a European exploring the Atlantic beyond Europe's shores is with Icelandic explorer Erik the Red (ca. 950–1003). He reached Greenland and began a short-lived colony and interacted with natives called "Skraelings." He inspired his son Leif Erikson (c. 970–1020) with tales of his exploits so when he was of age Erik decided to go farther and he made it to Newfoundland and built a small settlement called L'Anse aux Meadows (Jellyfish Cove).



Around 1400 AD Easter Islanders land on the coast of Chile, themselves Polynesian settlers and shortly after in 1473 Portugal's João Vaz Corte-Real was exploring the Northeastern Coast of the United States. No one knows for sure where he visited but he called it Terra Nova do Bacalhau or the New Land of the Codfish, which suggests somewhere between New England or Canada.

After Corte-Real come a slew of familiar explorers and conquistadors like Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, Ponce de León, Cortés, Magellan, de Soto. The oldest permanent European settlement is founded by Spain's Pedro Menendez de Aviles at St. Augustine, Florida in 1565. By 1584 Walter Raleigh lands north of Florida to find land for Queen Elizabeth and calls it Virginia where the infamous story of Roanoke begins.

What is clear is that the tales of these European explorations and of the New World's abundant resources return to the Old World surely piquing the interests of countless Europeans, especially royalty and merchants whose eyes must have been seeing "dollar" signs and the gain in repute. The New World and its Amerindians had no idea what was about to come.

Now, I know in the back of many of our minds is the sad reality of American consumerism: while we appease our unquenching thirst for products it comes at the cost of our planet and the creatures that live on it, including ourselves. It is a resource that is not limitless and the more we take from our environment, the less we leave our children and their children. It's a necessary topic for discussion and one that must happen, however it is a fact that without these consumption industries there would be no America, no us.



All forays into America's history, any nation's history for that matter, are to dive into this gray area. The value in history is in the lessons to be culled while looking back, the desire to repeat our mistakes. We **can** look at our history, recognize those mistakes and **also** acknowledge and appreciate

the risk and sacrifice and that went into forming our country. Sacrifices and risks that led to the point in time where you are sitting right now – the home, career, car, and family you have.

So this is not a celebration by any means, simply a recognition.

The idea of using pelts as trade was not one conceived of by the explorers, settlers, and frontiersmen upon arrival to the New World as Amerindians had a robust one in place already since approximately 10,000 BCE. While Europeans were also trading pelts in the Old World it wasn't an industry at the scale and degree that it would eventually become in America's formative years, one so monumental that it would fuel and fund the basis for, and creation of, an entire nation.

Initially, it was exploration that drove Europeans across the Atlantic but with tales of the ocean's abundance, fish, specifically cod, would be the first industry of the nation to come. Combined with explorers' tales – often exaggerated – there was plenty of incentive and opportunity for merchants, royalty and the general populace alike.

Of course, merchants and royalty were drawn by the natural resources they could exploit to their financial benefit, but for the people there was opportunity to improve their station and escape impoverished conditions, lower social status, or religious persecution.



The very first resource to attract investors and businesses was that of fur trading and it was with the French starting in the 16th century along the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers. The primary reason it began with the French is that the entire European hat-making industry was centered in France and they needed to sate the demand. As the French dug in, their colony New France, expanded beyond the St. Lawrence River and Ottawa Rivers through the Great Lakes region.

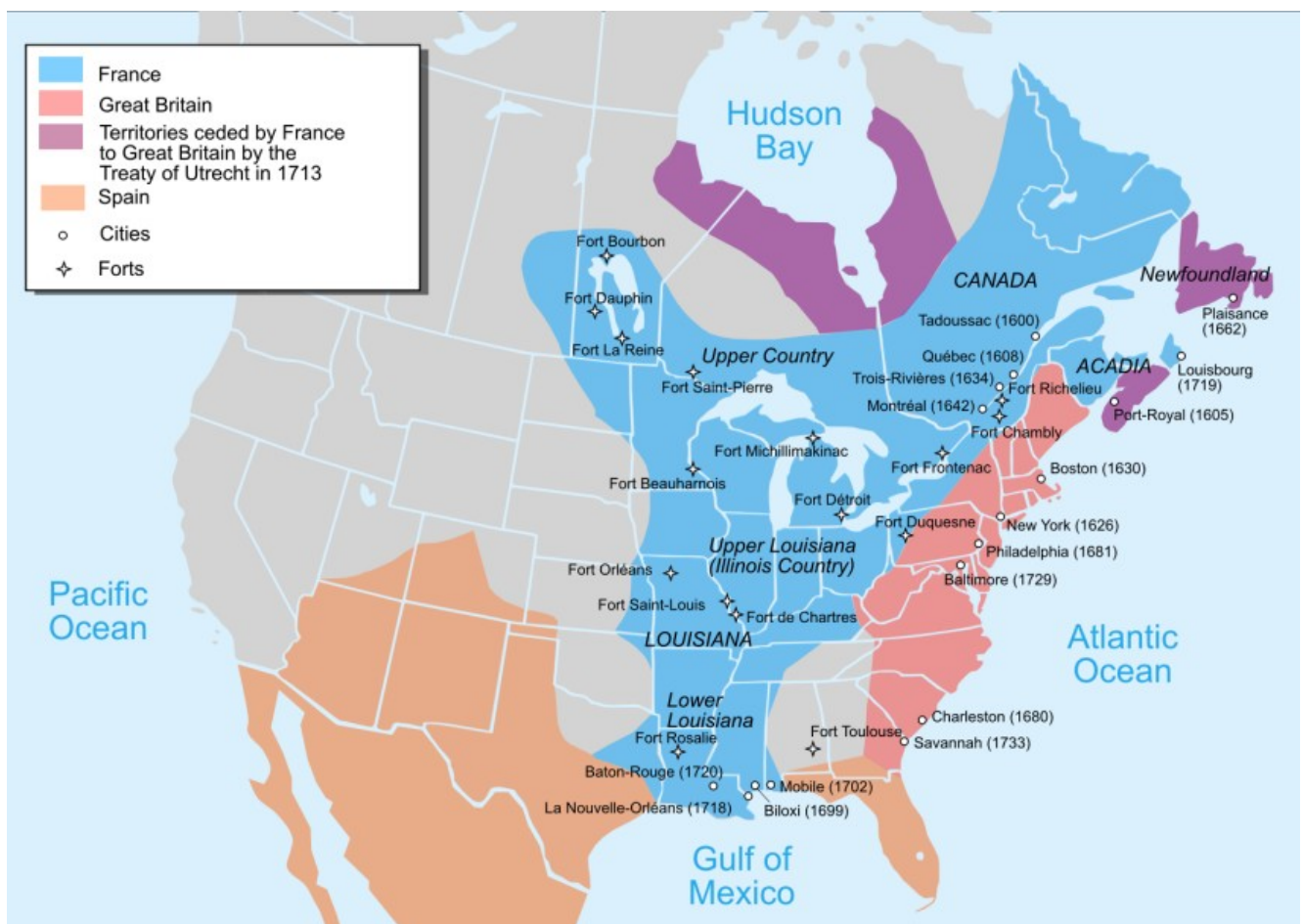
Trade began in colder aspects of North America, what we now call Canada and New England, because the severe winters predicated the need for fur to not only keep warm but survive the harsh climate. Initially, modest in nature it started with simply trapping beavers, skinning and then tanning their hides for hats not only in North America but as a commodity for transatlantic trade with Europe since Europe had already hunted beavers into virtual extinction.

In fact, the demand for beaver hats turned into an obsession for Europe and thus began the first case of a relationship when it comes to trends going across the Atlantic from America -a trend that continues to this day. They were highly

desirable for European aristocracy, royalty, and the well-to-do. They became a status symbol and fashion statement.

Seeing how lucrative this trading in fur was pushed the trade routes and networks southward as far as the Mississippi River and westward as far as the Rocky Mountains. It was the Appalachians that trappers found a new source for revenue and trade: deer, which were found there in abundance.

As other nations became involved in the New World the trade routes created by the French began to develop exponentially and they were followed in quick fashion by the English, then the Dutch, Spanish, even the Russians all creating quite elaborate networks throughout the eastern seaboard. Of particular note, are the English who in 1670 granted Hudson's Bay Company a charter and established trading posts in the Hudson Bay in present-day Canada.



Check out an interactive map that allows you to zoom in here. At these trading posts, trappers, frontiersmen, and settlers could exchange their harvest for flint, fishhooks, hatchets, pots, pans, tobacco, blades, guns and gunpowder, fishing nets, blankets, alcohol, needles, utensils, clothing, and a hundred other necessities and luxuries. So, you can see how the fur trade attracted all walks of life and was spurred on and fueled.

England got a monumental boost in 1685 when King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes which declared Protestantism illegal – though you were allowed once chance to convert to Catholicism on the spot. Overnight, Protestants fled France, and any French Protestant in its colonies and territories who had power in any facet were rendered impotent.

How did this significantly help England within the fur industry? Part of this exodus included France's skilled workforce and that included hatters, 10,000 of whom fled to England. Think of the magnitude of this revocation: if 10,000 hatters fled – a tiny portion of the overall workforce of France – it doesn't take much math to calculate how many skilled and unskilled people relocated to other countries. A negative impact on France's economy was a boon for the nearby nations, particularly England which now became the center for hat production.

But of course, the French would continue to fight for its top position and did so through strengthening its network and relationships with other European nations as well as those with local Indian tribes. For decades the French and English would swap positions of being top dog but within a century, this foothold in the region would eventually lead to a British stranglehold on the New England region. The nail in the coffin for the French was the conquest of New France in 1763 by the English after the Seven Years War from 1756-1763.



The war would include all the major European powers of the time broken into two coalitions, one consisting of Great Britain, Portugal, Prussia, various German states, and the other being France, Spain, Russia, the Austrian-led Holy Roman Empire, Sweden and Saxony. By proxy other nations who had interests with these powers were drawn into the far-away battle and included parts of West Africa, the Philippines, South America, and even India.

The war ended with two major treaties: the Treaty of Paris between Great Britain, Spain and France and the Treaty of Hubertusburg between Prussia, Saxony, and Austria. This was a massive windfall for Great Britain and their stranglehold on the burgeoning fur trade: they gained not only some Caribbean islands, Senegal, and the French trading posts in India but the vast majority of New France and all the outposts. In addition, a new relationship began with the Scottish merchants who were already operating out of Montreal.

The demand for beaver hats by this point was so high that trappers had overharvested and beaver populations were

depleting. This created a need to make aggregate versions of beaver hats, combining beaver with other hides from rabbits, mink, deer, et al. This depletion of the beaver population was devastating to the ecosystem and to the Amerindian tribes – those who weren't part of the fur trade and needed the beaver pelts to survive the harsh winters and those who lived in the ecosystems devastated by their overharvesting.

With the conclusion of the American Revolution in 1783, America's borders were altered, we took over the outposts, trade routes and overall industry and forced the English northward into Canada.



By the 1850s, the demand for North America's fur took a massive blow when the European fashion trends blew in a different direction and the subsequent collapse in fur prices devastated the industry. This forced Americans looking for work into other industries like textile, whaling, fishing, coal, iron, lumber, glass, rail, food processing, shoes and

sadly creating another example of overharvesting, Bison.

The fur trade collapse was a reprieve for the continent's animals that were the primary source for pelts and hides and while many populations rebounded some never have. However, this collapse wasn't a total one it just meant that merchants and corporations would have to diversify to survive. When it came to surviving, the damage to the beaver populations was catastrophic: from an estimated 60 million with the arrival of the first trappers to around 9 million by counts in 1988.

The Hudson's Bay Company would maintain its supremacy in the North America fur trade up until the mid-1990s when the social climate had changed wearing fur represented centuries of the slaughter of animals – a slaughter that was no longer necessary in a world where warm clothing could be obtained with other materials.

Wearing fur was by then solely a status symbol of one's wealth and the middle and lower class felt were united in agreement that it was "toxic." Hudson's Bay Company under this pressure and society's new view on animal rights decided to totally and completely end its that aspect of its operations.

This, however, did not lead to an end of the fur trade in North America and today it is responsible for 15% of the global fur industry – an industry that worldwide pulls in \$15 billion dollars.



A constellation of causes and conditions in the 16th century led to the singling out of *Castor Canadensis*. The fact that the European beaver population had been decimated didn't cause the demand for beaver hats to abate. The demand was still high and when explorers returning from the New World described the continent's resources, including the discovery of another beaver population, the powers-that-be dumped resources and virtually limitless funds into the fur industry and the side industries of trapping, felting, tanning, etc.

It was the lone beaver that created a monumental flow of both money and human traffic "across the pond" and this drove a transatlantic economy that was responsible for fueling the financial success of two continents. Without the beaver would there have been such a robust connection between the Old World and the New World? While there was a myriad of other natural resources that attracted merchant companies and many industries were rather large sources of revenue for these companies it was the fur trade, particularly sourced from the beaver, that was the "main artery," the lifeblood, a large slice of the pie, that was responsible for the founding of the thirteen colonies that would become the foundation for what would become the United States of America.