Fort Union Fur Trade Overview

[Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site](http://www.nps.gov/fous/index.htm)



This map highlights the significance of Fort Union's location among the Upper Missouri Plains Tribes.

Overview

For 39 years, Fort Union was the longest-lasting and most profitable fur trading post on the Upper Missouri River. Here seven Northern Plains Indian Tribes, including the Assiniboine, traded buffalo robes and other furs for goods such as cloth, guns, blankets, and beads. A bastion of peaceful coexistence, this fort annually traded over 25,000 buffalo robes and $100,000 of merchandise.

American Fur Company
John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant, arrived in America in 1783 and developed a strong interest in the fur trade. By 1808, Astor chartered the powerful American Fur Company that initially operated in the Great Lakes trade and the eastern United States. Astor also was a partner in the North West Company out of Montreal and helped transport furs from Canada to the port of New York. After a period of very competitive struggle between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada, the two merged in 1821. The subsequent unemployment of Scots & Canadian workers resulted in a group of them creating the Columbia Fur Company in 1822.

To allow the company to legally trade in the United States, the Columbia Fur Company had to hire American citizens. Its key leaders were former North West Company men. One of them was Kenneth McKenzie, who had come to trade in Minnesota and the Dakotas. John Jacob Astor and his right-hand man, Ramsay Crooks, did not want competition between the two companies, so Crooks attempted to negotiate with Kenneth McKenzie. After several years of hard competition, they finally compromised in 1827. The Columbia Fur Company entered the American Fur Company as the Upper Missouri Outfit (UMO). By 1828, Pierre Chouteau, Jr. from St. Louis, was the Director of the Western Department of the American Fur Company. He had a created a very powerful position on the Upper Missouri. John Jacob Astor retired from the fur trade in 1834, and Pierre Chouteau, Jr. & Company bought out the Western Department. They continued to operate under the name American Fur Company.

Fort Union
Fur played a major role in North America from the beginning of European exploration. Jamestown, Plymouth, and Massachusetts Bay colonies were heavily involved in the fur trade business. One trade metropolis was St. Louis at the confluence, or meeting place, of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. St. Louis and Fort Union's river locations made them prime sites to trade and transfer fur, hides and pelts from the rich hunting grounds of the Upper Missouri. Fort Union Trading Post was established in 1828 by the American Fur Company. It was not a government or a military post, but a commercial venture established for the specific purpose of doing business with the northern plains tribes.
The fur trade was a global enterprise. Pelts, hides, and buffalo robes were collected at Fort Union and shipped to St. Louis then shipped to fur markets in New York, Montreal, London. These furs ended up in the farthest corners of the world. American Indians had traded with Euro-Americans years before the construction of Fort Union, so they knew how to identify quality goods. Consequently, agents of the American Fur Company scoured the world for goods to trade for the furs. Woolen cloth and blankets from England, fabrics from France, bells and mirrors from Germany, beads from Venice, and vermillion face paint from China -the list of demands from American Indian trading partners was long and sophisticated.

In order for Fort Union to run efficiently, workers required strong leadership by the fort's Bourgeois or manager. The Clerks inventoried the items loaded and unloaded from the steamboats. Clerks also assisted the bourgeois by accounting for sales and trades as well as doing the trading when the bourgeois requested them. Traders often worked with interpreters to conduct trades with American Indians who came to do business at the fort. Engages were the illiterate workers who did the heavy lifting: packing furs, gathering firewood, unloading or loading steamboats, and so on. Everyone cooperating and doing their tasks allowed Fort Union to run effectively for 39 years.

Why did American Indians trade at Fort Union?
Fort Union was built in Assiniboine (uh-Sin-uh-boin) territory, and as many as 10 different Upper Missouri Tribes traded at the post. The word "Assiniboine" is an Ojibwa word meaning, "those who cook with stones." The Assiniboine cooking method involved heating stones and putting them in their stews or other meals. They appreciated the time and labor saving convenience of the tin kettles and other metal pots they acquired from Fort Union. Negotiations between the Upper Missouri Tribes and the traders took hours because both parties wanted the best deal. Traders often married into American Indian families, so part of trade negotiations was catching up with families. In a sense, trade was an opportunity for family reunions.

Because of the fur trade, other aspects of American Indian material technology advanced. American Indian women wore elk, deer or other hide dresses in the winter. In the summer, they wanted the lighter fabric available at Fort Union. American Indian women enjoyed the variety of colors of fabrics and blankets. Additionally, pre Euro-American trade American Indian women used porcupine quills to decorate their belongings. This process involved flattening the quills with their teeth and dying them. Beads we pre-formed making them easier to work with, so American Indian women saved time and effort by decorating their belongings with them. In addition, American Indians had used bone knives and stone hatchets, but they desired more durable metal knives and hatchets. Furthermore, American Indians traded for guns, mostly flintlock North West Trade guns. Guns were important to the fur trade. In hopes for larger profits, guns were occasionally gifted to tribes who had a successful hunting season in order to secure the trade. American Indians were incredibly resourceful before trade with the Euro-Americans, but traded for the convenience and durability that the items at Fort Union provided.

Peaceful Coexistence equals Success
From its beginnings in 1828 to its dismantling in 1867, Fort Union came to symbolize the best of American Indian and Euro-American worlds. For this trade to occur, American Indian and Euro-Americans had to work together. Without this mutual commitment to business, the fur trade would not succeed. For a remarkable 39 years, this fur trade society existed peacefully.

**The Typical Trade Scene**

Traders did the actual trading and received $800-$1,000 a year. They also received a top hat and suit of clothes as part of their yearly salary. They lived in the dwelling range, but they ate the first table with the bourgeois. To see a video about the trade scene go to http://www.nps.gov/fous/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm

When a band of Upper Missouri Plains Indians (usually Assiniboine, but also Crow, Cree, and Blackfeet) arrived to trade, the chief and his head men were usually brought into the Reception Room to meet with a trader, one or two engages (laborers), and, if necessary, an interpreter. Upon their arrival the Upper Missouri Plains Indians found a fire blazing in the huge fireplace and coffee and buffalo stew or corn mush boiling in large kettles. After everyone was seated, bowls of steaming food were distributed, along with cups of sweetened coffee.

After the meal, pipes were brought forth, with the trader offering tobacco so that everyone could fill his pipe bowl. After the smoke, the trader stood and made a speech. In his remarks the trader emphasized a central theme: friendship and peace. The chief had probably been bringing his band to Fort Union for years, and he and the trader may have become good friends. The men of the fort commonly married Indian women, so they also may have been related. When the trader finished his speech the chief spoke in his turn, repeating many of the same things that the trader had said. He also told how his people survived the winter, and described any recent hardships.

Gifts changed hands after the speech making. The trader might give the chief some black powder, coffee, sugar, tobacco, beads, or maybe even a musket. In exchange, the chief might present the trader with a bow and arrows in a skin quiver, a rawhide parfleche (storage bag), or a beaded quilled pipe bag.
Finally the two men got down to the matter of trade negotiation. To do so before this moment would have been rude. At a sign or word from the chief, one of his followers spread out a buffalo robe and some other furs for the trader to examine. These were represented as typical of the type and quality of furs brought to Fort Union. The trader examined the furs- especially the buffalo robe- with great diligence, paying careful attention to the quality of fur and tanning.

While the trader examined the skins, the chief and his men talked about the furs. They told the trader how the men had scouted many long days for the herds of buffalo, how they lost good ponies in the hunt, or how the women worked tirelessly to skin the animals and tan the hides.

After the trader examined the skins, he ordered an engage to retrieve a few items from the Trade Shop. These would be some of the newest items to arrive on the summer steamboats. As the chief and his men examined the goods, the trader praised them. He might brag that the new wool blankets were much better than those of the previous year, or assure the Indians that the bottom of the tin cup would not fall off after steaming hot coffee was poured into it. Once both parties had examined each other’s wares, serious negotiations began. The chief conferred with his men, asking them what they thought of the new trade goods. The trader, in turn, conferred with the clerks. When this was concluded, the trader and the shrewdest negotiator among the Indians- who may or may not have been the chief- began haggling over the value of the skins and goods. This process could last for hours. The chief was setting the price of furs for all his tribe, and the trader is negotiating for Fort Union’s profit.

Once everyone was pleased with the vales set on the robes and the trade goods, the trade began. The chief and his men traded first, acquiring all that they desired before returning to camp. There, the chief announced to everyone that trading could now commence. On this news, the people made their way to the fort to trade. The band then visited old friends and family in the fort, feasted and relaxed. After a week or so, the entire band, having acquired all they needed or wanted, broke camp and returned to their traditional homeland. After a few parting salutations, the band disappeared until next year.