The Fur Trade
Contact and Commerce between Indians and Settlers

A Lesson for the Fourth Grade

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Lesson Procedures and Worksheets

The Fur Trade: Contact and Commerce between Indians and Dutch Settlers

Essential Question:

How did trade between American Indians and Dutch settlers affect both parties?

Grade 4 Content Understandings, New York State Social Studies Standards:

Social Studies Standards
This lesson covers: Native Americans of New York State, Three Worlds Meet in the Americas, and Colonial and Revolutionary Periods. It requires students to consider how American Indians and Dutch settlers adapted to their physical environment; cultural similarities and differences between American Indians and Europeans; and the production and exchange of goods (economic systems).

Common Core Standards:

Reading Standards
By analyzing historic documents, this lesson will help students to develop essential reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. They will read and analyze informational texts and draw inferences from those texts. Students will explain what happened and why based on information from the readings. Additionally, as a class, students will discuss general academic and domain-specific words or phrases relevant to the unit.

Speaking and Listening Standards
Students will engage in group and teacher-led collaborative discussions. Using the images and texts provided, they will pose hypotheses and respond to specific questions. They will report to the class about their group’s assigned topic, explaining their own ideas, analyses, and observations. Furthermore, they will provide specific reasons and evidence to support their claims.

Writing Standards
To conclude this lesson, students will use relevant information and vocabulary from assigned readings to write a letter to the Dutch West India Company. They will analyze the experiences of American Indians and Dutch traders using descriptive details from the texts and drawing evidence from Isaack de Rasiere’s report to the directors of the West India Company.
Historical Context:

Acquiring furs—particularly beaver pelts—was the driving force behind the early decades of Dutch colonization of North America. Due to overhunting, beavers were almost extinct in Europe by 1621, when the Dutch West India Company was founded. But European demand for felt hats was high, and North American beavers served, for a time, to fill the gap in supply.

Traders who settled in New Netherland (a territory that spread across New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and parts of Connecticut and Pennsylvania) purchased pelts from Indians in exchange for wampum and/or goods manufactured in Europe. Wampum was a type of shell bead. The beads were initially produced for ceremonial purposes but came to circulate among Indians and Dutch settlers as money. Trade goods included duffels (a type of coarse woolen cloth), glass beads, and metal tools (such as axes, awls, and knives).

The following classroom activities explore contact and commerce between Indians and Dutch settlers, focusing on the goods supplied and the demands made by both parties. Together, the activities model the process of historical research, asking students to develop hypotheses and to revise those hypotheses based on new evidence. Translations of historic documents and other readings have been edited and simplified for use by elementary school students.

Activities:

Artifact Analysis by Expert Groups

The teacher should divide students into expert groups, each with a different image to analyze:

- **Group 1 - Wampum** (The image shows shells, beads in various states of production, and an iron drill known as a mux used to pierce the beads for stringing)

- **Group 2 – Beaver** (This lesson includes an image of a taxidermied beaver from the collection the Holland Society New York City. Teachers might choose to use an image of a beaver pelt as well.)

- **Group 3 – European trade goods** (The image shows glass and metal items that Indians could not themselves produce: glass beads, metal rings, lead musket balls, part of a flintlock musket, metal scissors, a metal hatchet, a metal pot, and arrow points fashioned from metal objects.)

Students should use a graphic organizer to record their answers to the following questions:

- What do you think this item is?
- Where and by whom do you think this item was produced?
- Who (Indians or Dutch colonists) do you think wanted to acquire this item through trade?
Note: Particularly in the case of wampum and beaver pelts, this is a bit of a trick question. Both Indians and Dutch settlers traded for these items, because they served as currency in New Netherland.

- How do you think it was used by Indians and/or the Dutch?
- How do you think acquiring this item might have affected Dutch or Indian daily life?

After discussion, the teacher should ask group representatives to share their hypotheses with the whole class.

Document Analysis by Expert Groups

To the same expert groups, the teacher should hand out a relevant historic document to analyze. After reading the document together, students in each group will list in the “what I learned” portion of their graphic organizers information from the document that supports or refutes their initial hypotheses. Students should use this new information to revise their hypotheses.

Group 1 will read the Johannes Megapolensis document on wampum.

Group 2 will read the Adriaen van der Donck document on beavers.

Group 3 will read archaeologist James Bradley’s chart on how Indians cut up and used a metal pot for raw materials from his book Before Albany.

After discussion, the teacher should ask group representatives to describe what they learned and to present their revised hypotheses with the whole class.

Whole Group Lesson on the Fur Trade

Students will partner and read an excerpt from L. F. Tantillo’s Edge of New Netherland, which provides an illustrated introduction to the history of the trade between Indians and Dutch settlers. After students complete partner reading, the teacher should lead the whole class in a discussion of the reading, including any difficult words.

Some possible discussion questions:

- Were there any words that you did not know? Were you able to figure what they meant? How did you figure that out?
- What did you learn about the fur trade that you did not know?
- Did anything you learned surprise you? What? Why?
- From what you know from the documents and artifacts, you studied, is there anything you would add to Tantillo’s description of the fur trade?
Whole Group Document Analysis
The teacher should hand out copies of Isaack de Rasiere’s 1626 report to the directors of the West Indian Company. (The West India Company was a private corporation empowered by the Dutch government to administer Dutch colonies in North and South America.) The class should read the document out loud together, stopping to define difficult words. Students should be prepared to discuss the question of how and why Dutch traders tried to meet Indian demands.

Culminating Activity and Assessment
The teacher should assign students to new collaborative groups; each group should include at least one representative from each of the three expert groups. Working collaboratively, the new groups will examine hypotheses and review the evidence before writing a response letter to Mr. de Rasiere from the perspective of the directors of the West India Company. Students should draw evidence not only from De Rasiere’s letter but also from other artifacts and readings. It should explore how Indian demands shaped Dutch policy.

Alternative assignment might require students to write a short position paper or design a poster on the question: How did trade affect the cultures and economies of American Indians and Dutch settlers? Which of the two was most changed by trade? Use evidence from artifacts and documents to support your argument.
Artifacts

The artifacts of the fur trade come from the collections of the New York State Museum and the Holland Society of New York. Images of the artifacts appear on subsequent pages.

**Wampum:** This image shows shell beads in various states of production, along with an iron drill, known as a mux, used to pierce the beads for stringing. Wampum beads—like beaver pelts—served as a medium of exchange among Indians and Europeans in New Netherland. Courtesy of the New York State Museum.

**Beaver:** This taxidermied beaver belongs to the Holland Society of New York. Photograph by Eric Ruijssenaars.

**European Trade Goods:** These goods were manufactured by Europeans for trade with Indians, typically in exchange for pelts. The items shown include glass beads, metal rings, lead musket balls, part of a flintlock musket, metal scissors, a metal hatchet, a metal pot, and arrow points fashioned from metal objects. Courtesy of the New York State Museum.
Artifact 1

Courtesy of the New York State Museum
Artifact 2

Artifact 3

Courtesy of the New York State Museum
Readings

These historic (primary source) and modern (secondary source) documents have been shortened and simplified for use in elementary school classrooms. The historic documents were originally written in Dutch.

**Historic Document:** Excerpt from Johannes Megapolensis, A Short Account of the Mohawks, 1644.

**Historic Document:** Excerpt from Adriaen van der Donck, A Description of New Netherland, 1655-1656.

**Modern Document:** Chart on “recycling a copper pot” from James Bradley, Before Albany, 2006.

**Readings**

**Historic Document 1**

*Excerpt from Johannes Megapolensis, *A Short Account of the Mohawks*, 1644.*

The Mohawks’ money consists of certain little bones, made of shells or cockles, which are found on the sea-beach; a hole is drilled through the middle of the little bones, and these they string upon thread, or they make of them belts as broad as a hand, or broader, and hang them on their necks, or around their bodies. They have also several holes in their ears, and there they likewise hang some. They value these little bones as highly as many Christians do gold, silver and pearls; but they do not like our money, and esteem it no better than iron. I once showed one of their chiefs a silver coin; he asked how much it was worth among the Christians; and when I told him he laughed exceedingly at us, saying we were fools to value a piece of iron so highly; and if he had such money he would throw it into the river.

**Additional information:** Dutch settler Adriaen van der Donck wrote in *Description of New Netherland*: “Wampum is the only money circulating among the Indians and in which one can trade with them. Among our people, too, it is in general use for buying everything one needs.”


**Biography:** Johannes Megapolensis was a protestant minister (Dutch Reformed Church). He traveled to New Netherland in 1642. He was an employee of Kiliaen van Rensselaer, the patroon of Rensselaerswijck (now part of Albany and Rensselaer counties). In addition to ministering to the Dutch settlers, Megapolensis also learned the Mohawk language and offered religious services to local Indians. The pamphlet, *A Short Account of the Mohawks*, is based on Megapolensis’s letters to friends in Europe.
Adriaen van der Donck, *A Description of New Netherland*, 1655-1656.

The beaver pelt, or skin, is thick and densely covered all over with very fine fur. The color is ash gray. The fur is made into the best hats that are worn and by now well known throughout Europe. On the top of the fur some shiny hair is to be seen, which is known as guard hair or more properly winter hair, since it falls out in summer and re-grows in autumn. For hat making the winter hair is pulled out, being coarse and of no value. If the skins are first to go from here to Russia, as is usual, the shiny hair is what makes them sought after. It seems that the Russians value the skins for this hair and cut them into strips and edging for women’s overcoats.

By the time the guard hair has gone and the skins are old, soiled, and seemingly worn out, they are returned to be made into hats. Before then, the skins are unsuitable for that purpose, for unless beaver fur is dirty, soiled, and greasy, it will not felt.


**Biography:** Adriaen van der Donck was a Dutch lawyer. He came to New Netherland in 1641 as an employee on Kiliaen van Rensselaer’s patroonship, Rensselaerswijck (now part of Albany and Rensselaer counties). Living near a major Indian trading route, Van der Donck observed Mohawk culture and learned the language. In 1645, he helped colonial officials negotiate a treaty with the Munsee Indians. As a reward for this service, Van der Donck received a 24,000 acre estate in what is now the city of Yonkers. However, Van der Donck’s political activities later put him in conflict with Director-General Petrus Stuyvesant. The main goal of *A Description of New Netherland* was to encourage interested Europeans to consider settling in New Netherland.
For Native people, kettles often served as a source of raw material from which other tools and objects could be made. One common practice was to cut a piece of kettle into a rectangular blank (a) that was then rolled into a tubular bead (b). In a similar manner, trapezoidal blanks (c) could be made into conical liners for wooden pipes (d) or bangles. Disc-shaped pendants (f) were produced in this way.

The heavier-gauge metal from the lugs was often used for implements. After being removed from the kettle, the lugs were hammered out flat and scored to be cut into arrow points (h). The finished points (i) could be perforated for easier attachment or not. Other implements made from kettle pieces included knives that mimicked the shape of European styles (j) or reflected Native taste (k). Even the kettle’s iron handle was re-used. After removal, it was hammered out straight and ground down into an awl (g).

Readings
Modern Document 2

L. F. Tantillo describes trapping, processing, and trading beaver fur.

Section 1

At first it was fur in North America that interested Europeans. Indians knew where and how to obtain it. There were a number of ways Indian hunters caught beavers. They used traps, snares, nets, arrows, and spears.

Indian women processed the fur. The hide was stretched out on a circular frame made of tree branches and rawhide cords. First, the skin was scraped clean. Then it was smeared with a mixture of cooked brains or liver. Afterward, the skin was washed and rubbed dry with a tight rope. A trading party would carry the furs to European settlements.

Section 2

Beaver pelts brought high prices in Europe, where they were used to make hats. Indians traded pelts for European goods, such as firearms, musket balls, gun powder, iron tools, metal cooking utensils, cloth, pipes, and tobacco. Some of these trade goods were transformed by Indian artisans to serve different uses. For example, an axe could be broken apart to make knives and scrapers. A copper kettle, instead of heating water, might be divided into smaller pieces and used as ornaments or arrowheads.

In addition, there was wampum or sewant, beads made from grinding and polishing shells. These beads varied in value depending on their color and quality. Wampum was like money and was accepted as currency by both Indians and European settlers.

Adapted from L. F. Tantillo, The Edge of New Netherland (2011).
Historic Document 3

Excerpt from Isaack de Rasiere’s report to the directors of the West India Company, September 23, 1626.

I am sending your Honors 110 defective kettles. They cannot be sold here, being broken and leaky. We have also a number of copper kettles, which cannot be traded here. I suppose you sent them for the French Indians.* They do not want such things from us because they can get enough of them from the French and because they are too heavy to carry far.

If your Honors will continue to supply me with duffels,** I shall know how to stock Fort Orange*** so that the French Indians will never again come there in vain. This is a matter that would discourage Indians from coming to us from so far off and that for nothing.

I have only about 30 pieces of cloth in colors that are in demand, that is, blue and standard grey. The rest I have are all red, of which I can hardly sell a yard. The Indians say that it hinders them in hunting, being visible too far off. They all call for black, the darker the color the better. Red and green they will not take. If your Honors will provide me with duffels, I hope to send back about 10,000 skins. In this way trade may be carried on in the most profitable way to the satisfaction of both sides. The Indians will be all the more diligent in hunting when they see that when they have skins they can get what they want. At present, the Mohawks complain bitterly, saying: “Why should we go hunting? Half the time you have no cloth.”

Notes:
* By “French Indians,” De Rasiere means natives of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa valleys, in what is now Canada. These Indians were allies of the French who settled there.
** Duffel was a type of coarse woolen cloth,
*** Fort Orange was a Dutch trading post located in present-day Albany, New York.

Adapted from A J F Van Laer, Documents Relating to Netherland, 1624-1626, in the Henry E. Huntington Library (1924).

Biography: Isaack de Rasiere was an employee of the Dutch West India Company (WIC). The WIC was the private corporation responsible for overseeing colonization of North and South America. In 1626, De Rasiere was sent by the WIC to New Netherland to report on conditions in the colony, particularly as related to the fur trade.