Abstract:

Fur trade flourished in the northern regions of the Americas as Europeans established trading posts with the Native Americans, once interracial marriage became frequent. The union of these Native American women to European settlers allowed for peaceful trade. These women were powerful in both their societies and were often allowed a dual membership between the two peoples. They encouraged communication, peaceful trade bargains, and acceptance of blending cultures. Women held a high status in their native tribal society and were often at trading posts with products that they had harvested. They also worked very hard in their community to catch animals, skin them, and sell the pelts. Understanding both their tribal culture and that of their European husbands, these women would work as intermediaries to assist the trading posts, and ultimately, the major fur companies. After being married to a settler, the Native American women worked hard to learn about the technology and tools that Europeans would provide for trade and help their communities grow. Native American women were crucial to the fur trade and allowed many northern regions to survive by uniting their tribes with the Europeans and encouraging peaceful trade.
The Role of Native American Women in the Fur Trade in the Northern Regions of America and the Hudson Bay Region of Canada

She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

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Fur trade flourished in the northern regions of the Americas as Europeans established trading posts with the Native Americans, once interracial marriage became frequent. The union of these Native American women to European settlers allowed for peaceful trade. These women were powerful in both their societies and were often allowed a dual membership between the two peoples. They encouraged communication, peaceful trade bargains, and acceptance of blending cultures. Women held a high status in their native tribal society and were often at trading posts with products that they had harvested. They also worked very hard in their community to catch animals, skin them, and sell the pelts. Understanding both their tribal culture and that of their European husbands, these women would work as intermediaries to assist the trading posts, and ultimately, the major fur companies. After being married to a settler, the Native American women worked hard to learn about the technology and tools that Europeans would provide for trade and help their communities grow. Native American women were crucial to the fur trade and allowed many northern regions to survive by uniting their tribes with the Europeans and encouraging peaceful trade.

Introduction

When learning about the fur trade in the northern regions of the United States and Canada during the colonial period, one would mostly encounter stories of the French and
eventually British setting up trading posts along rivers. Early in the colonial era, Native American tribes would frequent these trading posts, supplying many Europeans with excellent grade furs including beaver, buffalo, and deer. In return for the finely stripped pelts, the European colonists would supply the Native American tribes with tools for building and planting, along with weapons to defend themselves from other tribes and perhaps unfriendly encounters with other European posts. The Native American tribes in these northern regions had plenty access to beaver, deer, and buffalo, and by nature of geography, the members of the tribe needed these skins and pelts to protect themselves from the harsh winters and used them for building their homes. Their society depended on these pelts so much that they became the experts on how to tan the skins into the finest quality. The European’s knowledge and technology was necessary for the Native American tribes to compete with their neighbors, and the colonists needed the pelts for clothing, bags, bedding, and many other uses.

What is not as often mentioned is the huge role women played in these unions between the European traders and the Native American tribes. These women were also not what you would expect; the white women may have travelled with some of their husbands if they were traders, however the award for the largest role in uniting these two peoples goes to the Native American women. They were resourceful intermediaries that worked to great lengths to keep their two families/societies at peace and interacting at a level that benefitted both sides economically, politically, and of course socially.

In this paper, I will attempt to discuss, in full, Native American women’s contributions and relevance to the fur trade. I will also be giving answers on how their marriage to European settlers impacted the fur trade and relations between the two
peoples. I hope to convey how these unions affected the economies of the settlers and of
the Native American tribes, both specific tribes in the northern region of the Americas
and Canada, and in general.

The interracial marriages of the Native Americans and European settlers within
the fur trade is relevant to United States Economic History in the way that it helps
describe relations between the natives and settlers and how that ultimately affected
American economies. Fur trade was important in colonial history, especially to the
Hudson Bay region, and understanding small, more specific details of this help clearly
paint the larger picture of how the United States is functioning today.

The Beginning of the Fur Trade in the Northern Colonial United States and Canada

According to Michael Lansing, fur trade among Europeans and Native American
tribes started up in Missouri in the 1730s-1740s and rose to a peak in the 1830s. During
this time, the British had mostly taken over the Spanish, and the French established fur
trading posts. The Native American tribes that lived in this region provided beaver, deer,
and buffalo pelts. The Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company had taken
over the existing French posts set up by French traders, such as Pierre Gaultier de
Varennes, by the 1780s. The French traded with the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara
tribes, and they established trading posts further west that included the Assiniboine, Gros
Ventres, Blackfeet, Crows, and Lakota tribes. The American Fur Company dominated
the region in 1826 (Lansing, 414).

During this time, smaller companies came and went, competing with the larger
companies, which promoted more and more trading posts to be established in the Plains
regions. This further promoted Native American tribes and settlers to set up small communities around and/or near these posts, which contributed to more contact between the Europeans and natives. The Native American women would greet European traders with gifts of corn along with other goods and welcomed trade as well as good relations with their new neighbors, knowing that making friends would lead to free trade that would essentially economically benefit their tribe. Interracial marriage began to increase and flourish in these trading posts to encourage and promote a free, bartering system based market, creating a strong, economically sound, fur trading interracial society (Lansing, 413-416).

Canada, especially in the Hudson Bay region, thrived due to the success of the Hudson Bay Company, which promoted Native American and European contact for trading purposes. Similarly, Native Americans and Europeans in this region depended on each other for a functioning market in trading furs, mainly beaver pelts, for the exchange of tools, weapons, cooking utensils, and European, as well as some Native American, planting and harvesting techniques. The Native Americans would provide the pelts, and the settlers would provide the tools, weapons, knowledge, skills, etc (Van Kirk, 9). This system of bartering at the trading posts under the Hudson Bay Company led to a huge boost in the economy that spread to the surrounding tribes, villages, and settlements.

Native American Women and Intermarriage Benefits to Both the European Settlements and Native American Tribes

The committee to decide on the policies for the Hudson Bay Company consisted of shareholders back in London. These English shareholders were concerned that if the
traders in the port took wives and had children, it would drain from the Hudson Bay Company’s profits. This led to a strict policy, obviously poorly enforced, in which traders at the Hudson Bay Company’s ports were not permitted to marry from around the 1740s to the 1760s. Many of the traders ignored the rule, including most of the important workers in the ports that held offices, such as the factors and chief factors. Not only did they completely ignore the rule, they often married more than one Native American woman (often recorded numbers count up to six women). They felt as though they could marry multiple women since they were already breaking the rule with one wife. Also, the traders knew that they could extract resources from the families of his wives; expanding to multiple marriages added to an increase in his relative wealth and the economy of the trading post he was employed under. After the major Hudson Bay Company’s officials were seen breaking this marriage restriction rule, many of the ordinary workers that were employed at the ports as traders began to marry at around the 1780s (Gottfred, 1-6). It seems that since the London Committee of shareholders was located across the ocean, the Hudson Bay Company workers felt as though they could get away with breaking the rules. When rumors of men taking Native American women in their homes, many described the work the women were doing, including making, mending, and knitting, but always excluded the fact that they were marrying these women (Gottfred, 5-7). These relationships are what fostered the economic semi-dependence of the Native American tribes on the European traders as well as the colonists on the Native Americans.

This new interracial society that grew significantly at the turn of the century involved women at every level. Firstly, the interracial couple, typically involving a European trader and a Native American harvester (which was a traditionally female role
in the Native American society), would hold a marriage à la façon du pays, or “according to the custom of the country”. This meant that the wedding would go according to the traditions of the tribe in which the Native American woman came from. The European trader would give financially (or otherwise give other important items that the tribal family needed) to compensate the family of the Native American bride, especially if she was the daughter of an important tribal leader. This would function much like a dowry and represent the European traders’ commitment to the tribal family he was gaining, including an expected life-long agreement of trade between the European trader and the Native American tribe he was marrying into (Wishart, 341).

There was a specific hierarchical order to the Native American societies, where women of more prominent families cost more to marry to the extreme in which the lower income employees of the trading posts could not afford the dowry of a Native American chieftain’s daughter. However, European men would use this knowledge of the hierarchy to choose a Plains woman in which the compensation to her family would consist of a large portion or most of his assets and wealth. He would in return get many gifts from the Native tribal family and experience a net gain. The wife would be able to produce more in her tribal society, adding to their wealth, and he would eventually experience a relative economic gain. The same was true for the Native American women; they understood that there was a hierarchy in the trading post companies where the officials were the wealthiest, followed by intermediaries, and lastly followed by the common laborers. The families of the Native American women were very picky with whom the Plains woman would choose to marry, for they expected to gain economically from their union as well (Lansing, 422-424).
The traders would also often annul their marriage to the Native American women or simply leave them, enabling them to move to a new post or make some economic gain off of a different tribe or relationship. They would leave the Native American woman with a ‘parting gift’ of sorts that included nice clothing, food, money, tools, etc. that she could share with her tribe. The Plains women were found leaving their white trader husbands almost as often as the European men were leaving their Native wives. The women, just as the men, sought out to benefit her society, and if that meant leaving the European trader for another man, white or Native American, she would not hesitate. Since the women in the Native American societies, for the most part, had just as much say over her romantic relationships as the men, these Native American women would leave if they saw an opportunity to gain more economically for their tribe as a whole, her family, or just herself. Native American wives would occasionally travel with their European trader husbands if their relationships were deeper than the economic gain they could extract from each other, or if it were more beneficial for the woman to go along with the European trader. These women would continue being intermediaries for their husbands with other surrounding tribes in trading posts. In summary, ending an interracial marriage in this trading post society could potentially be just as beneficial to the economies of both peoples as beginning one, leading to many relationships beginning and failing (Lansing, 420-421).

Native American Women and Their Role in Both Societies

Starting with the initial trade of goods, the women would trade their produce such as beans, squash, pumpkins, etc. for the dressed skins of animals, which were produced
by other Native American women. Bison, beaver, and otter pelts were dressed by these women to be used as hats and clothing for both the Native American tribe members as well as the European traders and settlers (Radke, 2). At trading fairs, Native American women were in charge of the exchanges made for their goods and their supply, mainly because they were the ones producing the products they had to sell. They were, for some time, treated as equal to the men in the bargaining arena of the trading posts. As more Europeans entered their trade, interracial marriages were a way of women becoming messengers or “go-betweens” of the tribes and settlers, as well as promoting a peaceful union between the tribes and the Europeans. These women remained intermediaries of all people involved in the fur trade through the 1860s (Lansing, 416-417).

Native American Women as Members of Specific Tribes or Instances

The Native American women are usually not written about, although they played arguably the most crucial role in the connection between the European traders and the Native American tribes in the upper American regions and Canada. For example, the French trader Manuel Lisa in St. Louis married the daughter of an Omaha chief, named Mitain, in 1814 to make the European colonists and the Omaha tribe allies. This bond lasted through the War of 1812, as the Omaha tribe continued to provide the British colonists with beaver pelts at Manuel Lisa’s post (Radke, 1).

The Native Americans in the Objiwa tribes believed that roles in the community were assigned based on the spirit of the person, as opposed to their gender. This allowed women to participate in trade between their tribe and European settlers. Often women would be directly involved with the trade agreements that were made about the goods that
they themselves produced, as well as the goods that their husbands (Native American or European) provided at the trading posts. The Natives would trade beaver pelts for tobacco, kettles, and tools provided by the Europeans (White, 109-112). It was also common for the Europeans to give or sell wool blankets, pans, needles, awls, cloth, glass beads, steel knives, etc. in exchange for the pelts (Radke, 2).

**Native American Women and Dual Citizenship: A Benefit to Both Peoples**

Fur companies began manipulating Native American tribes through interracial contact with these Native American women. They would exploit romantic relationships with the Indian women to secure their trade agreements with the tribes, and “they made plains women [from the Native American tribes] extractive instruments of a worldwide economic system” (Lansing, 417). The native women would seek out these relationships for personal gain as well, for they saw the European men as powerful with technology and wealth that far exceeded that of their tribes. They would gain skills and knowledge from European settlers to pass on to their tribes.

The European traders began implementing the Native American women in all parts of their lives and society as a whole in order to gain the most economic benefits from the relationship as possible. There are accounts of traders attempting and succeeding to get a trading post to officially hire a Native American woman. The more integrated the Native American women were in the European trading society, the more they were willing to cooperate and provide their pelts for cheap prices. There are specific accounts recorded in history where traders would include Native American women in games or bets to benefit financially, and there are even accounts of the trading posts that
would host a ball and allow traders to bring Native American wives or just allow the Plains women who frequently participated at the trading post to attend (Lansing, 415-417). The European traders tried to include the Native American women in their daily society to eventually reap the economic benefits of their close interactions and interracial relationships.

Although it may seem that the European traders were exploiting these women through romantic relationships with them, the Native American women also had their fair amount of exploitation as well. Upon marrying a white trader, she was instantly provided with better clothing, more food, and more comfortable living quarters in the trading post than in her old home in her Native tribe. She would experience an instantaneous relative increase in wealth as well as status, in most cases, as she would, depending on the tribe, be seen as a bringer of wealth, superior knowledge, and more efficient tools and weapons. It was not rare for the European men to realize that their Native American wives were playing the same game as them to economically benefit too. If a Native American woman was still married to a European trader up until his death, he would often include the wife in his will, leaving most, if not all, of his wealth to her and her family. She was then free to give portions of her wealth to her tribe, further benefitting the tribal society of her birth (Lansing, 417-419). Both the European traders and the Native American women had quite a bit of incentive to partake in these interracial trading and romantic relationships, and both parties definitely exploited the other to obtain economic gain for themselves and their societies.

These interracial marriages would often instantly benefit the women, for their material wealth gain was immediate. Gift giving played a crucial role in Indian societies
as well, so this immediate gain in material wealth would benefit other members of the tribe (Lansing, 417-418). The interracial marriage of Native American women and European settlers was the basis on which the fur trade society was built. Native American tribes often viewed marriage in a social and economic context in that they believed it was necessary for peace and mutual gain. It is also mentioned that many European men married Native American women because of the absence of women that would come to the Americas from Europe, as well as that it was dangerous to pursue Native American women romantically outside of marriage. These women provided helpful work to the European men through marriage such as skinning animals, cutting the meat, drying or cooking meat, and harvested/provided enough home cooked meals to last through the winter for their husbands, which aided their survival and success in the colonies (Van Kirk, 9-10).

It was commonplace for white men that were traders to marry the Métis women, which were daughters of an interracial marriage between either a European father and Native American mother or vice versa. This could actually improve their status in an already interracial, fur trade society by essentially binding the white male in a legal relationship with an interracial bond (the Métis woman) (Radke, 2).

Although the men caught the large animals for their fur, women would catch smaller animals, such as the marten, which held a high value to Europeans. The Native American women could use the marten pelts to make moccasins, snowshoes, canoes, and other items and equipment necessary to survive long winter hunts. The Native American women would often accompany their white trader husbands on hunts, as well (Radke, 2). The women also acted as intermediaries and peacemakers to make sure that their
community was still provided with the needles, kettles, knives, and other tools that were necessary for their work in their tribal communities (Van Kirk, 9).

It is also suggested that these Native American women were often treated better as wives of the European settlers than that of their roles in the tribal community. This was another incentive for the Indian women to engage in interracial marriages other than material wealth gain, knowledge, and peace between their families and the settlers. Plains women often felt compelled to learn more about European culture and to build upon their Euro-American society. They concluded that marriage to a European trader would help them understand the Europeans and their culture and build towards the growing strength of the interracial trading societies (Lansing, 419). The European traders would often help the women with their work and allow them to influence trade agreements at the posts, unlike in their native tribes. These women asserted power over the trading of their goods and greatly influenced fur trade agreements over the Plains region (White, 112-113).

The Decline of the Union Forged Between the Native American Tribes and The European Traders and the Effects on the Plains Women

The dual membership originally allowed the women to understand both cultures and to aid in peaceful arrangements that flourished the fur trade between both peoples. When arguments or violence arose between the natives and Europeans, the women were often the mediators that would establish peace or take either side of the argument. There are recorded instances in history where the Native American women with dual membership would have the power to save a fur trading company establishing a peaceful
agreement after a conflict that allowed the company to continue the trading posts as before and bring more economic success and stability to both peoples (Wright, 526-528).

Mary Wright argues that although the marriage to the Native Americans encouraged peaceful trade and economic success in the fur trade, it demoted their relative status in their tribes, which counters what my others sources, especially Lansing, seems to portray. The difference in women’s status when marrying a European settler depends on the tribe, but mostly on the timing of the marriage. A Native American woman that married a European trader would experience a boost in her status in both cultures until around the 1860s when large amounts of settlers immigrated to trading posts and nearby settlements. These European settlers did not experience interracial marriage frequently at that time and tended to discourage it. However, this contact between the Native American women and settlers was the foundation for success in both the fur trade and the regions that thrived on trading pelts (Wright, 525-526).

Although women were crucial to the fur trade, they were gradually forced into the ‘traditional domestic female role’ of society, and were no longer able to keep the peace between tribes and the Europeans. Originally, they were just as active as the Native American men at trading posts, selling, bargaining, and demonstrating power over their trade agreements. Once they were married to a settler, they were still considered a member of their tribal society, although they often lived with their husbands (Wright, 526-528). Over time, as the settlers came from Europe, the Native American women were forced to take on the European tradition of wives, and their independence and power decreased.
Eventually, the Métis women and children were looked down upon, only after mass immigration and settlement of European women. When the white women were again available to the European traders as wives, the traders began neglecting their bonds and friendships with the Native Americans and began building to the European population (Radke, 1-2).

In the late 1860s, conflict began to rise between the Europeans and the Native American tribes in the northern trading posts of America and Canada. Some traders thought it more economically beneficial to move his family, while the women and Euro-American children may have desired to stay close to the wife’s home tribe. The mutual exploitation rose to such a state as to cause tension and contempt between the two peoples. It grew increasingly more difficult to defend or stick by the Euro-American culture when new influxes of Europeans came to settle around the trading posts. The European newcomers tended to think the Native American tribes as lowly people and discouraged the interactions between the two cultures. As Christian ministers came to the settlements and trading post colonies, they often deemed the marriages between the European traders and Plains women as illegitimate. This caused a sudden separation of the Native American wives and their European husbands, for many of the traders desired to marry European women with customs and traditions that he aligned with and were familiar to him. A disruption in the family ties between the tribal family and the traders ensued (Lansing, 421-422).

The European ties with the Native Americans began to wither with the Métis population in the Hudson Bay and northern American regions. Slowly, the relationships
between the two peoples soured, and the strong trading bonds dissipated over time, as increased rivalry and tension festered.

Conclusion

The Native American women of the late 1700s through the 1800s played the most important yet most under-analyzed role in uniting European traders with the Native American tribes for trading purposes, which was mutually beneficial for many years. These women would marry European traders to gain knowledge, tools, weapons, and practical skills, while the European traders would get access to the finely tanned pelts of beaver, bison, deer, buffalo, marten, etc. These relationships fostered economic, political, and social growth in both the European trading posts and the Native American communities.

The trading agreements that lasted decades and united the Native American tribes to the European trading posts could not have been possible without the help of the Native American women. As wives, they would learn how to be intermediaries to represent both sides and help the two parties to come to agreements. The Native women were also responsible for much of the hard work; they would often go on the hunts for the pelts, dress the pelts, make shoes, canoes, and other items required for the hunts and survival. They would also harvest much of the food and were, for the most part, in charge of the products they produced at the trading posts.

Marrying a European trader would often bring great wealth to the Native American woman’s family. This wealth would spread to the rest of her tribe, since gift giving, generosity, and sharing are common attributes of a well-functioning Native
American tribe or community. After the Native American woman would experience an increase in overall relative wealth to her community, she would be viewed as a more valued member of her Native American tribe and would often receive better treatment. It was also commonplace for European traders to treat their wives in a more modern way, including better clothes, food, and shelter.

This marriage would also benefit the European trader, especially in the rise of the interracial society, where the joining of his family to a Native American tribe would bring an overall relative wealth increase (by means of increased access and selling of Native American pelts) to his family. This wealth of the many newly bonded couples would eventually spread itself throughout the settlements of the trading posts, increasing the overall wealth there as well. This interracial marriage would then make the newly married European trader a more prominent member of his society by essentially encouraging and promoting the sharing and selling of resources between the two peoples.

At the root of all of the success of the trade agreements between the Native American tribes and the European trading posts are the Native American women. The bonds made between the two communities would not have formed so quickly and so strongly if it were not for the interracial marriages and the women serving as intermediaries at the trading posts.
Bibliography


