

Deal Maker or Deal Breaker Alcohol in the North American Fur Trade

Alcohol was a part of the North American fur trade from the beginning, and many traders viewed it as a crucial ingredient in business success. For example, in 1764 a group of New York merchants petitioned the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations to change regulations banning fur traders from using alcohol in their commerce. They argued “when the vent of liquors is allow’d amongst them, it spurs them on to an unwearied application in hunting in order to supply the trading places with furs and skins in exchange for liquors.”¹

But not everyone who engaged in the fur trade saw it that way. This excerpt from a memoire by a Moravian missionary living in 18th century America, gives us a glimpse into the reasons one aboriginal man chose to deal with traders who did not use alcohol in their negotiations.



In the year 1769, an Indian from Susquehannah having come to Bethlehem with his sons to dispose of his peltry, was accosted by a trader from a neighbouring town, who addressed him thus: “Well! Thomas, I really believe you have turned Moravian.” “Moravian!” answered the Indian, “What makes you think so?” “Because” replied the other, “you used to come to us to sell your skins and peltry, and now you trade them away to the Moravians.” “So! Rejoined the Indian, “now I understand you well, and I know what you mean to say. Now hear me. See! My friend! When I come to this place with my skins and peltry to trade, the people are kind, they give me plenty of good victuals to eat, and pay me in money or whatever I want, and no one says a word to me about drinking rum neither do I ask for it! When I come to your place with my peltry, all call to me: Come, Thomas! Here’s rum, drink heartily, drink! It will not hurt you. All this is done for the purpose of cheating me. When you have obtained from me all you want, you call me a drunken dog, and kick me out of the room.”²

Others shared the perspective that drinking alcohol while trading furs could lead to negative consequences, and some officials tried to stop it through various actions. But their efforts failed and alcohol remained a part of the fur trade well into the 19th century.

¹ O’Callaghan, E.B. (ed.). *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (vol. 7, p. 613). Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1868. https://books.google.ca/books?id=-mtAAAAcAAJ&pg=PA589&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false

² Heckewelder, J. *An Account of the History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations, Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States* (p. 267). Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1881. (Original work published in 1819) <https://archive.org/details/histmannerscust00heckrich>