



Primary Source Lesson Plan

Fur Trappers and Beaver Pelts

Name of Primary Source

- The primary sources include *Making Money from Beaver Pelts*, *Hat Fashions and the Price of Pelts*, and *Decline of the Beaver Pelt Trade*.

How primary source ties into text

- Qualifies:** The materials include an historian's introductions to the beaver pelt trade and primary sources by George Frederick Ruxton and Ernest T. Seton about the fur trade, specifically the beaver pelt trade.
- Elaborates:** The primary sources give specific information about how the beavers were trapped for their pelts, how beaver fur was used, the value of the pelts, and how this industry lured explorers towards the west for hopes of a better life.
- Raises questions:** Through these primary sources students will be able to complete a cause and effect graphic organizer. Students will focus on why beaver trapping was such an enticing enterprise and what effect beaver trapping had on the west's human population and beaver population.
- Corresponding Lesson:** Use as an in-depth learning after teaching lessons 14 and 15, *Mountain Men*. Students will use these primary sources to help them see connections within what they are learning.

Colorado Standards

- Social Studies Standard 1 History:** History develops moral understanding, defines identity, and creates and appreciation of how things change while building skills in judgment and decision making. History enhances the ability to read varied sources and develop the skills to analyze, interpret, and communicate.
 - Grade level expectation: People in the past influence the development and interaction of different communities or regions.
- Reading and Writing 1:** Read and understand a variety of materials
- Reading and Writing 3:** Write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling

Big Idea

- Cause and effect of fur trading on westward expansion.
- Cause and effect of men's fashions and changes in fashions on the fur trade.
- Read and respond to the *Doing History Keeping the Past* articles about the fur trading industry to understand the effect that the beaver trade had on the westward expansion.

Critical thinking

- What effect did the price paid for beaver pelts have on the fur trade in Colorado?
- What effect did the fur trade have on the settlement of Colorado and the West by white European-Americans?

Mini-Lesson

Teaching

Begin by having students write in their own words the definition of cause and effect. Next, have students write a

personal cause and effect statement about something that happened to them during the week. Give an example if needed such as Cause: I forgot to set my alarm clock at night, Effect: I was one hour late to school. Read through one of the Their Own Words articles from the Doing History Keeping the Past web pages about the beaver fur trade. Have a discussion with students about what lured trappers to the west and what were they looking for. Why was the fur trade such a profitable industry? Who was making the profits? Who/What was suffering because of the fur trade?

Active Engagement

Students work independently on reading the three primary sources describing beaver fur trapping. Have them complete the Cause and Effect Graphic Organizer 1-2 by identifying two or three sets of causes and effects about the fur trade.

Sharing/Closing

Bring students back together to share their Cause and Effect graphic organizers.

Trapping Beaver: An Introduction

When Europeans came to North America, beaver lived in almost every region that had streams and creeks. The newcomers trapped the beaver for its pelt. Its soft under-fur was highly valued for making men's hats. As Europeans and then Americans moved westward, they trapped so much that beaver nearly disappeared.

From 1800 to about 1840, beaver fur was in great demand for making felt hats. These were in fashion in Europe and in the eastern United States. The pelts of beaver brought an average of \$4 a pound at trading posts or at the annual rendezvous. One pelt usually weighed about a pound and a half. The saying "six dollar a plew, prime," referred to a whole beaver pelt("plew") in "prime" (or the best) condition.

The beaver coat was thickest in winter. That was the best time to trap beaver. But since trapping in deep snow during winter time was nearly impossible, the trappers got most of their pelts during the fall and spring hunts.

Hat Fashions and the Price of Pelts

Beaver has so depreciated [declined] in value within the last few years [the 1840s], that trapping has been almost abandoned; the price paid for the skin of this valuable animal having fallen from six and eight dollars per pound to one dollar. Which hardly pays the expenses of traps, animals, and equipment for the hunt. . . . The cause of the great decrease in value of beaver-fur is the substitute which has been found for it in the skins of the fur-seal and nutria—the improved preparation of other skins of little value, such as the hare and rabbit—and, more than all, in the use of silk in the manufacture of hats, which has in a great measure superceded [sic] that of beaver. The curse of the trapper is leveled against all the new-fashioned materials of Paris hats.

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, *Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: True Tale of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War*, ed. Horace Kephart. (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 146.

Decline of the Beaver Pelt Trade

Beaver fur was at one time extensively used in the manufacture of hats but has become so rare and valuable that it is now chiefly used for muffs, collars, and trimming. The early prosperity of New York and Canada was based on the beaver...which lured on the early explorers and brought here original colonists; and it was the beaver pelt that, bartered for the manufactured products of the old world, first made life tolerable for...[people] in the new [world].

Source: Ernest T. Seton, *Animals: Selected from Life Histories of Northern Animals* (New York: Doubleday, 1926), pp. 101-102.

Making Money from Beaver Pelts

A good hunter can take an average of 120 [beaver] skins in a year...worth in Boston about \$1,000. [The trappers] can be hired for about \$400 payable in goods at an average of \$600 per profit.

Source: Nathaniel Wyeth, quoted in David Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the America West, 1807-1840* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 197-198.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Cause and Effect

