

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

History nugget

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 unwary 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 memoir 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.

Instructional strategies

1. Have the class read the [history nugget handout](#) and brainstorm about the positions that the various parties (colonial officials, fur traders, merchants, indigenous trappers, Moravian missionaries) might have toward alcohol and its role in the fur trade. What arguments might they offer in support of their positions? Have the class act out a mock negotiation between the various positions.
2. Have students compare and contrast the perspective of Thomas (the indigenous man in the excerpt) to the argument made by the New York merchants, and consider the factors that influenced the two perspectives (e.g., socio-economic status, social capital, culture, religion, education).

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=-mtAAAAAcAAJ&pg=PA589&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false

² Heckewolder, 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>



Drug literacy

Big ideas

- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- We can learn how to control drugs by examining human thinking through time, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other

Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and well-being of individuals, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity

Social Studies 9

Big ideas

- Disparities in power alter the balance of relationships between individuals and between societies
- Collective identity is constructed and can change over time

Competencies

- Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask questions; gather, interpret and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
- Assess the significance of people, places, events and developments, and compare varying perspectives on their historical significance at particular times and places and from group to group
- Assess the justification for competing historical accounts after investigating points of contention, reliability of sources and adequacy of evidence
- Assess how prevailing conditions and the actions of individuals or groups affect events, decisions and development
- Explain different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues and events by considering prevailing norms, values, worldviews and beliefs

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