

Introduction

In the early 1800s European and American trappers entered the land that would become Utah in search of beaver pelts, which were a valuable product that was in large demand in Europe. For the next 40 years, American, French, British, and Native American trappers interacted with the Indigenous people of the region. Indigenous Utahns had a significant impact on the fur trade, and the trappers likewise impacted Indigenous cultures. In this inquiry students will explore the impact that the various groups had on each other.

Native Tribes Clarifications

There are three key groups of Native Americans that are important in this inquiry. The first are the Indigenous peoples living in the region that is now Utah. In the early 1800s the Ute, Shoshone, Paiute, Goshute, and Navajo nations inhabited this land and the surrounding area. The second group are the Indigenous nations of the West and Great Plains that interacted with the nations of Utah. Trappers who passed through Utah wrote about the Nez Perce, Blackfeet, Omaha, Crow, Mandans, Souliers, Erorakas, Comanche, and Flatheads who lived in the surrounding area. The third group included Native Americans that came from the East who were working for European trading companies. These Native Americans, often from the Iroquois nation, felt no connection to the Utah tribes and were more affiliated with their European employers than with any Indigenous group in the West. Because spelling was inconsistent and Indigenous nations had different names in their native language, French, and English, it can be challenging identifying the specific nation being described in an account, such as the Pipi in one document in the archives. When the documents refer to any nation, the reader should be careful

to acknowledge where these people came from and their connection to the Utah Native American groups.

Shoshone Trade Fairs

Long before European arrival in what is now the western United States, the Native American tribes that inhabited the area had established complex political systems, including trade networks. The nations that lived in the region that would become Utah in the centuries before Europeans arrived were the Shoshone, Goshute, Ute, Paiute, and Navajo tribes. These nations interacted with each other and with tribes from surrounding areas, politically, socially, and economically, establishing alliances, participating in feuds, and building trade patterns that greatly influenced the people and the land even after the arrival of European and American trappers.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Shoshone nation prospered, due in part to annual trade fairs that they held. These fairs took place during salmon season and brought together Indigenous traders from the Pacific Coast to the Great Plains. Nez Perce merchants came from the northwest where modern-day Idaho, Washington, and Oregon meet, bringing horses to trade. Crow traders came from the Wyoming area to trade goods or find wives. Various tribes came from the Pacific coast bringing coastal goods including ornamental seashells. Local Shoshoni merchants met the many Indian groups at their trade centers, offering buffalo hides and meat and dried salmon to barter.

These trade gatherings were important because they allowed diverse people to come together and benefit from trade and socialization. The Shoshone nation in particular profited greatly and entered a golden age by the end of the eighteenth century. This legacy of trade would lead to the

involvement of Shoshone trappers in the fur trade with Europeans and Americans. Shoshone trade fairs became a precursor of exchanges during the height of the Rocky Mountain fur trade.

Early Spanish Traders

The earliest European traders to enter what is today the western United States, including Utah, were Spanish. The first documented expedition sent by Spain was led by the Catholic priests Antanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Vélez de Escalante. This expedition mapped large parts of Utah and set up trade routes that would be used for generations to come. The two fathers also established trade networks with various Indigenous groups during their travels. They paved the way for other Spanish traders to enter the area. They also set the initial tone of peaceful trade between Indigenous people and Europeans.

The Dominguez and Escalante's expedition was influential in blazing the Old Spanish Trail. This trail was the main trading route between the southern and northern regions of the Spanish southwest for many generations. Running from Santa Fe to Los Angeles, it covered thousands of miles, with much of the trail passing through what would become Utah. The Old Spanish Trail opened trade networks that would grow with the dawn of the beaver-trapping era.

Independent European trappers, using Taos in modern New Mexico as a base of operations, explored and worked in the region that would become Utah. They impacted the Indigenous people throughout the Spanish southwest.

The influence of the Spanish diminished as the US gained land in the West. Spanish and Mexican traders abandoned the fur trade but continued their commerce in other commodities. Spanish

trappers were replaced by independent French, American, British, and Indigenous trappers who were not employed by any major company and continued to work out of Taos.

French Trappers and Traders

Many of the trappers who operated out of Taos were French speakers from Canada or France.

The French, unlike the British or Americans, did not have a centralized or state sponsored trapping organization. Despite this lack of centralized support, French speaking trappers had a significant impact on the fur trade of the West.

The Taos trappers resided in Taos, New Mexico for part of the year and conducted business at other times of the year in St Louis, Missouri. These two locations became prime recruiting ground for new trappers. Taos trappers maintained a network of colleagues that trapped in Utah and throughout the Southwest, with St Louis as the ultimate destination of their beaver pelts. Some of the best known French trappers were Etienne Provost, Antoine Robidoux, and Francois Antoine Larocque.

Etienne Provost, the namesake of the city of Provo, was born in Quebec, Canada and spent most of his life in St Louis. He was one of the earliest trappers to enter what is today Utah. Provost built several forts, trapped, and befriended or feuded with local Indigenous groups. He gained the legacy of being a “Man-of-the-Mountains” due to his service as a guide for several trapping expeditions.

British Trappers

The British, unlike the French, had large fur trading companies based in Canada. The two most famous were the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. Diverse European and Indigenous trappers worked for these British companies and their subsidiaries. The Hudson's Bay Company, which was established in 1670 with a charter from the British royal family, dominated the trapping industry by building scores of trading posts across Canada and the Great Plains. From these depots their agents obtained supplies and directions before heading into the wilderness. They returned months later with valuable furs. In the 1820s conflict increased between the Hudson's Bay Company and its rival, the North West Company leading to their government-mandated merger under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company. With a monopoly on fur trade in the region, the power and influence of the Hudson's Bay Company expanded until it acted as proxy for the British government in remote regions of Canada.

One of the North West Company's most important trappers was Peter Skene Ogden. Ogden, fluent in both French and English, was born in Quebec City Canada and raised in Montreal. At nineteen he joined the North West Company as a clerk, eventually leading company employees on numerous expeditions. After the merger of the British companies Ogden became an important figure in the Hudson's Bay Company, leading two expeditions into the region that would become Utah.

Determined to discourage rival companies from coming into the region, his company attempted to trap out the beaver and create a fur desert. Despite these efforts, his men had increasingly frequent encounters with American trappers. In 1825, in what is now called Mountain Green along the Weber River, with several independent French fur trappers looking on, American trappers working for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company confronted Ogden, claiming that his party was trespassing on United States land. When Ogden refused to leave, the Americans lured

about 20 of Ogden's Iroquois and French-Canadian trappers to join their group by offering to pay significantly more for beaver pelts and to charge much less for supplies. The Americans then drove Ogden's company out of the area, strengthening the American claim to land that belonged to Mexico at the time. Despite his retreat, Ogden would return later to the region. The modern city of Ogden was named for the influential trapper.

American Trappers/Traders

Recognizing an opportunity to profit from the lucrative beaver trapping industry, American investors formed the American Fur Company in 1808 and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1822. By the early 1820s, American trappers and traders working for these companies had discovered the beaver-rich rivers and streams that flow through what is today Utah. American trappers in these companies, and various independent trappers, spent the season trapping, collecting furs, and conducting trade.

One of the challenges associated with the fur trade was the great distance between the cities of the East, where supplies could be obtained, and the rivers of the West, where beavers were trapped. In 1825, William Henry Ashley and Andrew Henry, founders of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, came up with a revolutionary idea. Rather than building permanent posts in remote regions that were expensive to maintain as the British companies had done, they would hold annual rendezvous, trade fairs during which trappers could deliver their pelts to company officials and could resupply for the upcoming year. The rendezvous, which were held annually in predetermined locations between 1825 and 1840, became places where American, French, British, and Native American people gathered to exchange goods and socialize. These

rendezvous became a key factor in the fur trade in what would become Utah, bringing together people and goods from many cultures.

One of the most influential American traders and mountain men was Jedediah Smith. He was one of the first Americans to cross the Great Basin to California, and thus was the first to encounter many landmarks and peoples in the West. Smith's party was the first to cross the Sierra Nevada mountains, blazing an overland route to California. His party was one of the first American groups to interact with people from the Paiute and Goshute nations, as well as various other western Native American tribes. Jedediah Smith's journal recounts tales of bravery and survival during his various expeditions in the West. He eventually became an employee of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and continued to participate in the fur trade until his death during a violent encounter with Comanche Indians in 1831.

Other important American fur traders include Osborne Russel, Jim Bridger, William Craig, and Warren Ferris, all mountain men who participated in the Rocky Mountain fur trade and came into contact with Indigenous Utahns and European trappers in what would become Utah.

End of an Era

Changes in fashion led to the decline and end of the trapping era in the western United States and Canada. Some trappers returned to their lives in eastern cities. Some became guides for pioneer groups, leading the newcomers on trails they had traveled for years. Others repurposed their trading posts to outfit the wagon trains of people traveling to Oregon, California, and Utah.

Extra Sources:

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hudsons-bay-company>

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/north-west-company>

<https://www.nps.gov/dino/learn/historyculture/the-dominguez-and-escalante-expedition.htm>

<https://www.visitutah.com/articles/traveling-back-in-time-on-the-old-spanish-trail>

<https://oldspanishtrail.org/our-history/>

<https://historytogo.utah.gov/traders/>

https://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/p/PROVOST_ETIENNE.shtml

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hudsons-bay-company>

<https://www.historylink.org/File/9693>

<https://historytogo.utah.gov/ogden-peter-skene/>