

# An Introduction to the History of the Fur Trade on the Northern Plains

By W. Raymond Wood



The fur trade, which encompassed both the Missouri River and Red River drainages in North Dakota, is impossible to overemphasize in the state's history. As the foundation that led to the area's discovery by Euro-Americans, the fur trade stimulated exploration, was a prime factor in the destruction of Indian culture, and brought the first white people to settle the area. Most of what we know about the fur trade concerns the "classic" era of the trade, when steamboats were ascending the Missouri River in large numbers and Red River cart trains were plying the northern plains.<sup>1</sup> The trade began much earlier, however, and for more than half a century, most of the traders were coming to what is now North Dakota from Canada, stimulated by French-Canadian westward expansion.

In the early 1700s, France controlled the lower Missouri River and the territory that was to become the **Louisiana Purchase** (which included the upper Missouri River). The penetration of lands that were to become North Dakota, however, came from New France—the name for Canada before the French ceded it to Great Britain at the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. The first Europeans to visit the state came as a result of the French expansion westward from the Great Lakes that took place in the 1730s under the direction of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, the Sieur de la Vérendrye.

In 1737 **La Vérendrye** was given the authority to establish a series of small forts extending westward from Lake Superior into the Great Plains, forts that challenged the English fur traders operating from Hudson Bay. These forts, the westernmost of which was Fort La Reine (1738–c. 1756), provided bases for ever deeper exploration into the plains. Fort La Reine was located on the Assiniboine River near present-day Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. In 1738 La Vérendrye and his party left Fort La Reine to visit the Mandan Indians at the mouth of the Heart River. They were the first white explorers known to enter North Dakota.<sup>2</sup> This was an auspicious beginning; however, La Vérendrye was recalled to eastern New France in 1744 because of political indifference to his accomplishments and the fact

that Upper Missouri River beaver pelts were poor and sparse in contrast to those taken further north. Formal exploration in the northern plains was discontinued, but Fort La Reine remained active until about 1756 or a little later.

In the 1780s, the British **North West Company** founded Pine Fort (1785–1794) on the Assiniboine River near the former site of Fort La Reine.<sup>3</sup> The traders at Pine Fort and its satellite posts were soon challenged by the construction of a nearby competition post, Brandon House (c. 1794–1856), erected by the **Hudson's Bay Company**. These two companies continued to vie for the fur trade of the Indians of western Canada and the Missouri River almost to the time of their merger in 1821.

Between about 1785 and 1812, there was a brisk trade between these Canadian posts and the Mandan and Hidatsa villages. Almost every winter, competing North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company employees—sometimes called "**North Traders**"—made the voyage from their posts in Canada to the Mandan and Hidatsa who lived at the mouth of the Knife River. It was a dangerous venture, for there was the constant threat of attacks by Assiniboines and Sioux Indians en route, and many traders died at their hands. The traders were usually on foot, and

the trek to the villages was a long one with little shelter or firewood on the open prairie north of the Missouri. **David Thompson** tells of his trip to the Mandans on a North West Company expedition in 1797 when the temperature rose above zero for only a few of the thirty-three days he was on the road.<sup>4</sup>

The goods carried to the river were, for the most part, small items such as firearms and gun accessories, knives and other edged and pointed tools and weapons, personal vanities, tobacco, blankets and other woven goods, and glass beads. Given the prominence alcohol played in later fur trade history, it is interesting that not one of the surviving documents from the British era mentions that liquor was carried to the Missouri River, although it was in wide use at that time at their posts on the Assiniboine River. Indian goods traded to the Europeans were primarily buffalo robes, wolf and fox pelts, beaver pelts, and a few otter pelts and bear skins. Beaver pelts were the preferred product, but only a few of them could be obtained from the village Indians. Other important commodities were horses, mules, dogs,

Indian corn, and slave women; of course, trading the latter was not sanctioned by the trading companies.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the North West and Hudson's Bay Company employees who visited the Missouri, there was a class of independent free traders who lived in the Mandan and Hidatsa villages. Some of them were deserters from the British posts in Canada, but most of them were of unknown origin. **Toussaint Charbonneau**, the French husband of Sakakawea, is perhaps the best known of them, but there were others of equally long residence in the villages. These "residenters" or "tenant traders" had Indian wives and children and were undoubtedly more influential in bringing alien Euro-American ideas to the Indians than were the transient Canadian traders who arrived only seasonally. One of these tenant traders was "Old Menard," whose importance may be gauged by the fact that at least eleven contemporary sources mention him and the information he provided them about the area.<sup>6</sup> He lived in one of the Hidatsa villages, the Sakakawea site.

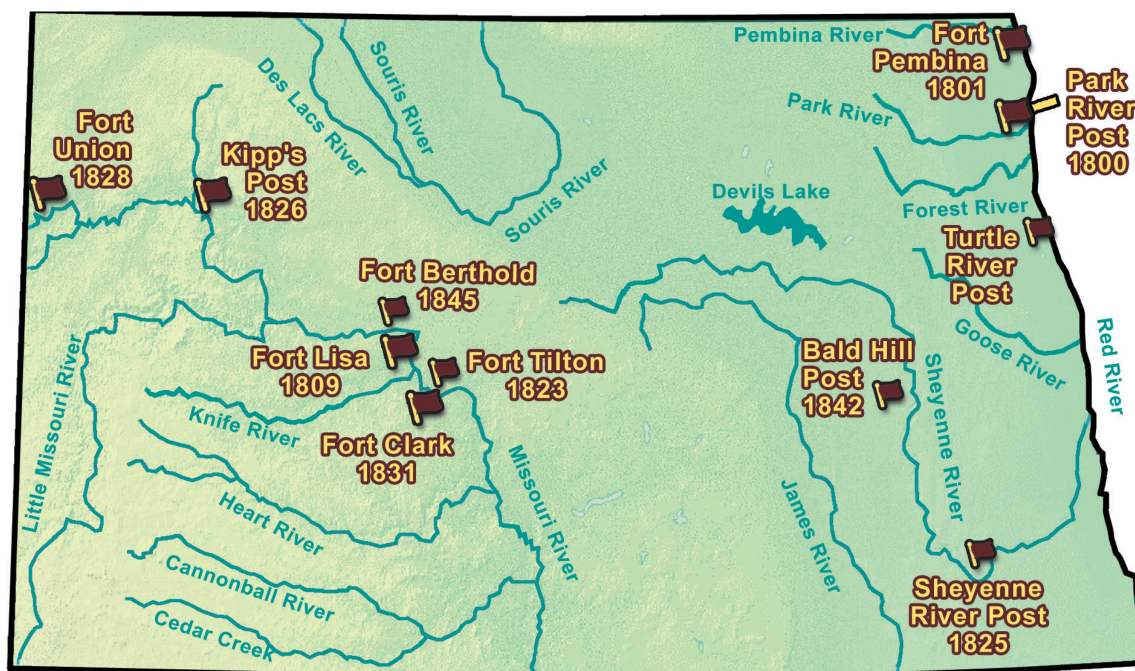


Figure 1. Map of major posts of the early fur trade on the northern plains. (Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

The only trading post on the Missouri during this era, called **Jusseume's Post**, was erected by René Jusseume for the North West Company in 1794 at a location somewhere between the Mandan and Hidatsa villages near the Knife River.<sup>7</sup> It seems not to have lasted after about 1797. French Louisiana, including the Upper Missouri River, came into the possession of the Spanish in 1762. It was not until 1792, however, that Spanish officials in St. Louis learned that the North Traders were illegally encroaching on their territory in the Upper Missouri River country. This discovery was made by the Frenchman Jacques D'Eglise, who visited the Mandan in 1792 and, on his return to St. Louis, informed officials that these Indians were trading "directly with the English" in Canada.<sup>8</sup>

Confirmation of his story quickly led to the formation of the Commercial Company for the Discovery of the Nations of the Upper Missouri (better known simply as the Missouri Company) by prominent St. Louis businessmen. In 1795 they sent a major expedition up the Missouri River, led by James Mackay and **John Evans**. While Mackay explored what is today northeastern Nebraska, Evans struck further upriver, reaching the Mandans on September 23, 1796. He appropriated Jusseume's Post, renamed it "Fort Makay," and spent the winter there. He left for St. Louis on May 9, 1797, without effecting any changes in the economic life of the Mandan-Hidatsa villages.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the Spanish expedition to the Knife River, although the most important exploration of the region before Lewis and Clark, is little more than a footnote to early fur trade history on the northern plains.

Visits by the North Traders began to diminish after 1812, and there is no record of any trade from Canada after 1818. Not only was British trade across the new international boundary discouraged, but, after 1809, there was too much competition for them from American-owned companies in St. Louis.<sup>10</sup>

St. Louis-based traders began seriously exploiting the Upper Missouri River area of the Louisiana

Purchase after the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806. The arrival of traders from downriver accelerated rapidly in the next few years. Small companies and independent traders proliferated, but they were soon to be eclipsed by large, well-organized expeditions.<sup>11</sup>

Fur trade history, especially that of the St. Louis-based enterprises, is a complex story, complicated by the many companies involved, and by the shifting business alliances that led to numerous dissolutions, mergers, and reorganizations of these firms between 1806 and 1867. A host of smaller firms also operated posts in competition with those of the major companies; their histories are equally convoluted.

A number of major trading posts were built along the Missouri River in North Dakota. A much larger number of smaller, ephemeral (short-lived) posts were also occupied, some of them for only a season or two. Some temporary posts were set up in the earthlodges of Indian "landlords," and other posts consisted of simple, casually built shelters erected outside the villages. In 1833 Prince Maximilian, for example, speaks of "small winter posts, called loghouses, or blockhouses, among the Indians, quickly erected, and as quickly abandoned: to these the Indians bring their furs, which are purchased, and sent, in the spring, to the trading posts."<sup>12</sup>

Other more or less temporary posts often were established as "opposition posts" by rivals for the trade attracted to the larger posts of the major fur companies. These posts and their impact on native life were, of course, significant; however, since most of these sites cannot be located and investigated and because, in some cases, almost no records exist for them, their historical role is difficult to assess. Histories of the fur trade will continue to be dominated by events at the posts operated by the major companies, because their business records often are preserved in large numbers and include such documents as invoices, orders for trade goods, and year-end inventories of the goods at various posts.

Numerous individual traders began a rush up the Missouri River in the wake of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, to be quickly overshadowed by the large companies. The first American trading post built in North Dakota was **Lisa's Post**, built by **Manuel Lisa** for the Missouri Fur Company in 1809.<sup>13</sup> It was erected on the Missouri River

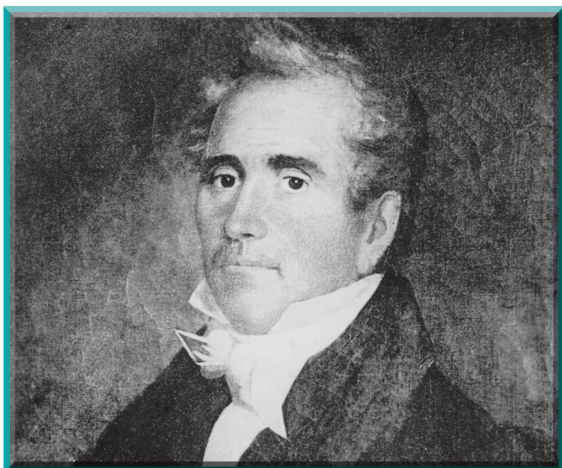
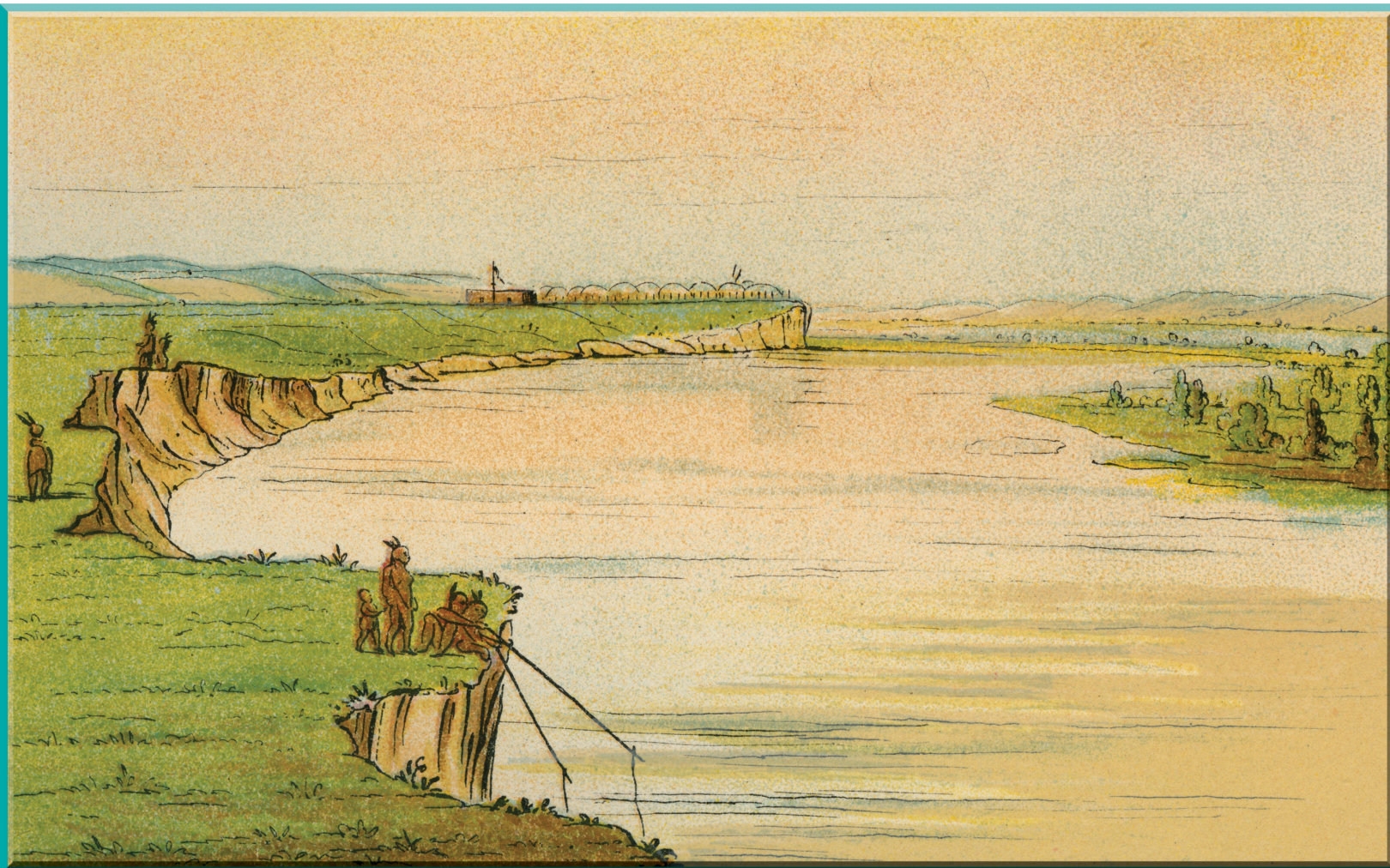


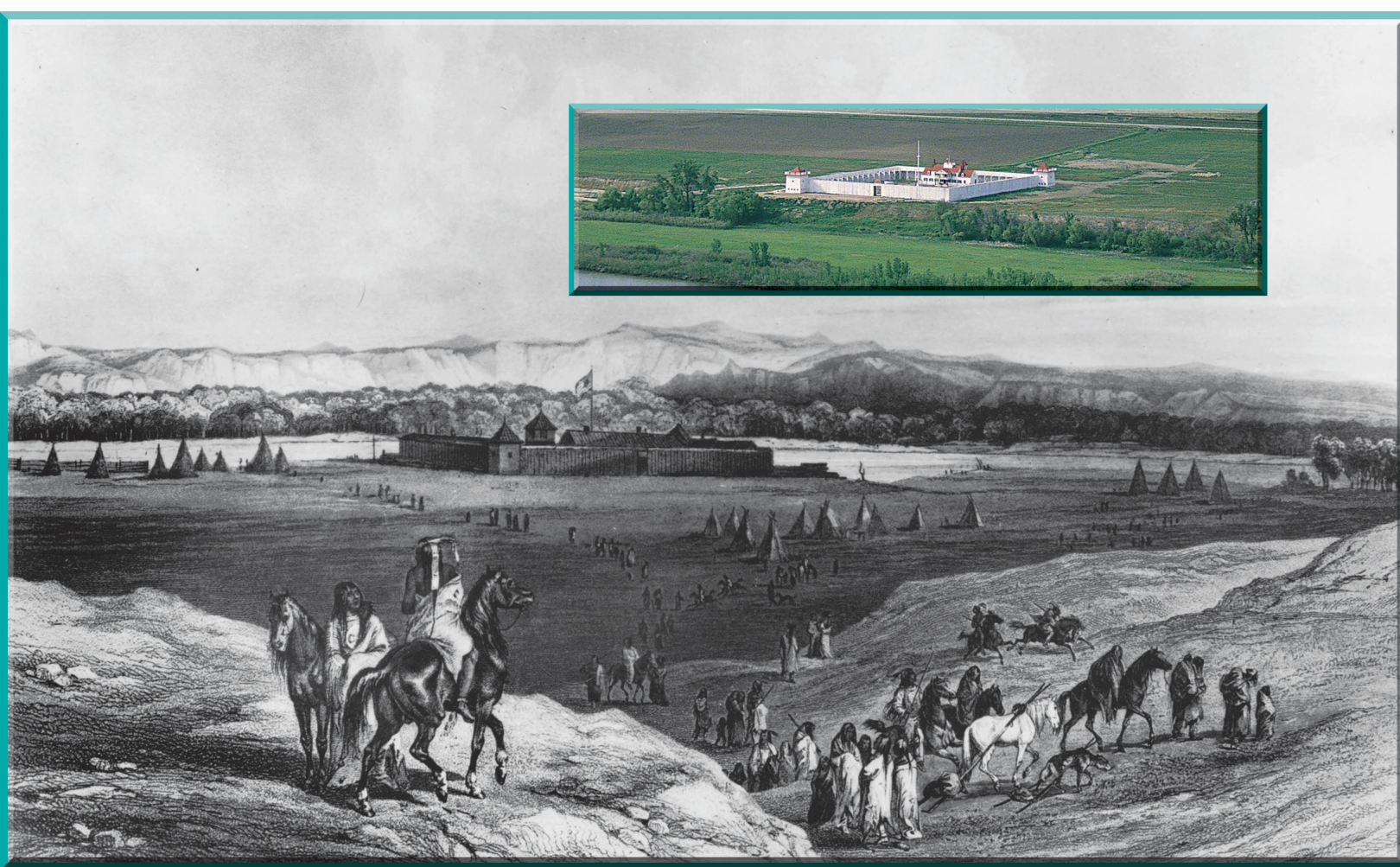
Figure 2. Manuel Lisa. (SHSND A5128)

a few miles above the mouth of the Knife River and was the first of several posts to be built in this general area. It seems to have been abandoned in the spring of 1812, when the War of 1812 disrupted American trading on the upper Missouri River.

No further posts were built in North Dakota for another ten years; when one was, it was again just north of the mouth of the Knife River. This post, **Fort Vanderburgh**, was the second and last post of the Missouri Fur Company. Built in 1822, it too was shortlived, ordered destroyed in the following spring. Another post replaced it immediately. **James Kipp** erected this one in the spring of 1823 for the newly formed Columbia Fur Company near Mih-tutta-hang-kush, the village built by the Mandan Indians several miles below the Knife River in about 1822. Called **Tilton's Post**, this establishment was dismantled in the summer of 1824 to enlarge and fortify Kipp's house (an unnamed trading post) in or near Mih-tutta-hang-kush.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 3. Fort Clark and the Mandan village of Mih-tutta-hang-kush. (SHSND 970.1 C289NL Plate 45)





**Figures 4 & 5. The Assiniboine break camp at Fort Union, painting by Karl Bodmer. (SHSND C0586) INSET. A reconstructed Fort Union today. (North Dakota Tourism)**

In 1826 Kipp left the Knife River area and built **Kipp's Post**, near the mouth of the White Earth River, for the Assiniboine trade. The post was abandoned in 1829 and burned, having been in use for only three years. This post was fully excavated by the State Historical Society of North Dakota in 1954, and its remains provide us with detailed information about the ground plan, architecture, and contents of one of these small posts.<sup>15</sup>

The Columbia Fur Company merged with John Jacob Astor's **American Fur Company** in July 1827, forming a subdepartment known as the **Upper Missouri Outfit**. It was this unit that built Fort Clark a few hundred yards south of Mih-tutta-hang-kush, in about 1831. **Fort Clark** was a major center of the company's activities on the Missouri River for the next thirty years; it was not abandoned until 1860. Details of Indian life there, portraits of some of its residents, and views of the surrounding country were recorded by two great western artists: **George Catlin**, who visited

the fort in the early summer of 1832, and **Karl Bodmer**, who accompanied Prince Maximilian in the winter of 1833–1834.<sup>16</sup>

**Fort Union**, the second major trading post built by the Upper Missouri Outfit, was erected at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers in 1829. Probably built by James Kipp, it was the largest and grandest of the posts and was the longest-lived of them all. It also was the seat of power on the Upper Missouri River, under the management of **Kenneth McKenzie** until 1837. There he was "called King by both enemy and friend."<sup>17</sup> Centrally located to trade with the Assiniboines, Crows, and Blackfoot, Fort Union also attracted Cree Indians and independent white trappers in the region.

The first steamboat, the **Yellow Stone**, arrived at Fort Clark and Fort Union in early summer 1832; with its arrival, the slow, laborious transportation (by keelboat) of trade goods upriver and furs downriver was at an end. Goods could now be

easily transported in quantity, and the fur trade entered its most voluminous and profitable era. By 1832, however, the beaver trade was all but over. The introduction of silk hats in place of beaver hats was only one of the reasons that the staple of the business became buffalo robes and elk skins until the collapse of the trade.

Many important illustrations of Fort Union, its traders, and various trading scenes were made by Rudolf Friedrich Kurz, a Swiss artist and employee of the Upper Missouri Outfit. He arrived at Fort Union in September 1851 for a stay of seven months. Kurz's work is especially valuable since neither Catlin nor Bodmer provided images of this aspect of the fur trade. Fort Union was finally abandoned in November of 1867.<sup>18</sup>

Analogous to the Mandan-Hidatsa trade at the mouth of the Knife River was the Chippewa trade at the juncture of the Pembina River with the Red River, for a cluster of forts accumulated in both locations. Peter Grant built a small North West Company post opposite the Pembina River in 1793. Despite being in Sioux country, it successfully attracted Chippewa customers from a wide area. This establishment was followed by a series of

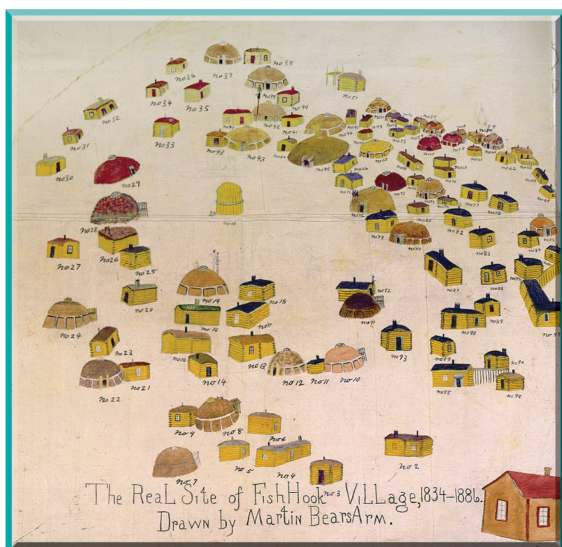
others, some of them to be opposed by the Hudson Bay Company and the XY Company. In 1800 **Alexander Henry the Younger** built the first permanent post in present-day North Dakota, at the mouth of the Park River, but the rise of the Métis and the growing presence of settlers by 1830 led to the near extinction of the Chippewa trade.<sup>19</sup>

The establishment of the Northwest Fur Company in 1865 came in the twilight of the Upper Missouri River fur trade. With the abandonment of Fort Union, the company began trading at other posts, including **Fort Totten**, near Devils Lake. The company disbanded in 1869, as the fur trade dissolved into settlement. An era was over.

No single institution had more devastating effects on the culture of North Dakota's native peoples than did the fur trade. No major part of the fabric of their lives remained intact after Euro-American contact. They began building log cabins not long after the founding of Fort Clark; such buildings used no more timber than their native earthlodges. The first of such cabins appears to have been built at Mih-tutta-hang-kush, beside Primeau's Post.

Much of the native technology was lost when homemade goods were replaced by Euro-American substitutes. Trade goods continued to enter their lives, transported by the ton aboard the many fur trade company steamboats. Even more Indian technology vanished when native specialists, skilled in making "high technology" implements, died in the numerous disease epidemics that periodically decimated the Indian tribes on the northern plains.

In 1780 and again in 1837, smallpox ravaged the Missouri River Indian villages, lowering the population to a fraction of its original size, for the Indians had no natural immunity to this and other European-derived diseases. Reduced to small villages scarcely able to defend themselves against their enemies, principally the Sioux, the Mandans and Hidatsas eventually moved into a single town, **Like-a-Fishhook Village**.<sup>20</sup> Smallpox again took its toll of them in 1856, and in 1862, the remnants of the Mandans and Hidatsas were joined by the



**Figure 6. Like-A-Fishhook Village**, named for its location, was built by the Mandans and Hidatsas. (SHSND 799)

Arikaras. By this time native lifeways were shattered, and many aspects of their original culture remained only in the memory of older adults.

The abandonment of the Missouri River fur trade posts eventually was to result in the loss of all their above-ground remains. Fort Clark was in part torn down and its timber fed into the fireboxes of steamboats to meet their insatiable need for fuel; Fort Union was purchased by the government, and its buildings were dismantled and used to build nearby Fort Buford.

Nearly two decades passed before the first settlers moved into the localities abandoned by Forts Clark and Union. Today, the grass-covered remains of Fort Clark and the associated Indian village may be visited at Fort Clark State Historic Site near Stanton, under the management of the State Historical Society. At Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, where the National Park Service has reconstructed the fort and trading post, visitors may stroll the

grounds and imagine what life was like during its heyday. Fort Totten, which served as a military post from 1867 to 1890 and then became, successively, an Indian boarding school, health facility, and reservation school (1891–1959), is preserved today as Fort Totten State Historic Site with seventeen original buildings still maintained. The legacy of the Missouri River fur trade era is embodied in these remaining posts and in the rare historical sources preserved from this period in North Dakota history.

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## About the Author

W. Raymond Wood is professor emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Missouri at Columbia. He received the undergraduate and M.A. degree at the University of Nebraska and the Ph.D. from the University of Oregon. Dr. Wood has written extensively about both the prehistoric and historic eras on the northern plains and has conducted archaeological investigations at many Missouri River sites.

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3. W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738–1818* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), p. 10.
4. Wood and Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade*, pp. 96–112.
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6. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–47.
7. A.P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785–1804* (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), vol. 1, p. 331.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 160–161.
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