



THE PILGRIMS & THE FUR TRADE

Peggy M. Baker, Director Emerita
Pilgrim Hall Museum

We all know – or think we know - who the Pilgrims were. We know them as people on the cutting edge of a religious reformation that altered every aspect of European society. We know them as precursors of a great wave of colonization and migration that left an indelible imprint on this continent. We know them as political trailblazers, writing and agreeing to a compact that laid out their community's ideals of self-government and the rule of law. We know them as the people who (in the minds of most Americans) “invented” Thanksgiving!

But what many people may NOT realize is that Pilgrims were also on the cutting edge of a great economic change. Their voyage was not just an adventure, it was an investment.

In at the beginnings of the system that we today know as capitalism, the Pilgrims were true economic pioneers. Their adventure was one of spirituality, of settlement, and of finance.

Most of the Pilgrims were not wealthy. They knew they would need a lot of money if their new colony in America were to be a success: money to rent a ship and crew, money for supplies for the voyage, money to support the colony until it could become economically self-sufficient.

And so, the Pilgrims asked some London merchants to invest in the colony. After much negotiation, 70 merchants decided to form a joint stock company with the Pilgrims. Because this was a risky venture, they were known as “merchant adventurers.”

We know that the merchant adventurers invested between £1200 and £1600 before the *Mayflower* sailed. We also know that the Pilgrims were dangerously short of supplies.

Shares were issued, each worth £10. The merchant adventurers bought their shares. The adult colonists – who were, after all, putting life and livelihood on the line – were each given one share and given the option to purchase more shares. For the first 7 years, everything remained in the “common stock,” owned by all the shareholders. The common stock would furnish the Pilgrims with food, clothing and tools. At the end of the 7 years, the shareholders (Pilgrims and merchant adventurers alike) would divide equally the capital and profits (lands, houses and goods).

In the meantime, the Pilgrims planned to engage in businesses such as lumbering and fishing, sending wood and fish to England to be sold.

In actuality, however, instead of sending back goods, the Pilgrims had to ask the merchant adventurers for even more money, again and again and again. The Pilgrims' debt became very large very quickly. The merchant adventurers were NOT happy and the Pilgrims agreed to buy them out.

Beginning in 1628, the Pilgrims were to pay the merchants £200 a year until they had paid £1800.

By that time, with the extra money invested in the struggling little colony, the debt may have been as high as £7000. The merchants decided, however, that they would rather be sure of having some of their investment returned, instead of running the risk of losing it all. Three of the merchants (James Sherley, John Beauchamp and Richard Andrews) continued as partners with the Pilgrims as they struggled to pay off their debt.

Although the money to be repaid was not nearly as much as they had borrowed, it was still a large amount of money for the Pilgrims. One of the ways they found to make the money they needed to repay their debt was through the fur trade, particularly the trade in beaver fur.

And where were the best furs to be found? In Maine, where Native Americans had been hunting beaver for generations.

By 1625, the Pilgrims had established a fur-trading business in Maine with a permanent trading base on the Kennebec. They then extended operations farther north, moving into the Penobscot area, territory already claimed by the French.

When the Pilgrims received their official boundaries as determined by the Warwick/Bradford Patent of 1629, a significant grant of land in Maine was included. This was as much “Plymouth Colony” as the town of Plymouth itself!

The Pilgrims’ venture in fur trading was very successful during the 1630s. And, while it lasted, the fur trade was essential to the success of Plymouth Colony. But, by 1650, beaver became scarce in eastern New England.

Due to pressure from other countries and other colonies, the Plymouth colonists were not able to expand the geographic range of their fur trading. Eventually, fish and lumber overshadowed Plymouth’s exports of fur. Plymouth Colony finally sold its land along the Kennebec in the 1660s.

While it lasted, fur trading had a very important effect on the development of America. Fur traders explored land and rivers, they built outposts that later became towns, they established cooperative relationships with the Native Americans. Fur trade enabled not only the English, but also the French and Dutch to establish settlements in America.

Now, that’s a summary, and it sounds very clear and straightforward. Let me assure you – it was not, not even to the Pilgrims!

The reason? Financial rules were still being invented. Bookkeeping was not standardized. Communications were poor. Not only were there as many unethical businessmen as there are today, but the rules of business ethics were not universally agreed upon. Commercial practices were largely unregulated. Even the simplest of transactions was fraught with potential danger.

And the fur trade was far from simple.

The fur trade operated through a complex system of exchange and a rather remarkable series of interactions along a chain that began with the beaver in his dam and ended with the ultimate consumer who purchased the product made out of fur.

And this is where it REALLY gets interesting!

Let’s trace each player in the game.



PLAYER NUMBER ONE - THE BEAVER!

Beavers are very large rodents, weighing as much as 60 pounds. Beavers cut down trees to build dams, creating ponds around their lodges. Female beavers have “kits” only once a year; there are usually only 3 or 4 in a litter and they are very vulnerable to hawks and owls. Beaver meat is said to be tasty and the beaver pelt - beautiful, thick, durable, warm and water repellent - is highly prized. William Wood wrote in 1634:

“... the English ... seldom or never kills any of them, being not patient to lay a long siege or to be so often deceived by their cunning evasions, so that all the beaver which the English have comes first from the Indians whose time and experience fits them for that employment.”

PLAYER NUMBER TWO – the Native Americans who hunted beaver for its meat (for food) and for its fur (for clothing and robes).

When Europeans discovered the furs available in North America, they began to trade with the Native Americans. What did they offer in exchange for their furs? Grain was especially valued in the more northern climates such as Maine. Also traded were metal goods including cooking pots and tools, articles of clothing and blankets.

PLAYER NUMBER THREE – the Plymouth colonists, growing corn and buying trade goods to exchange with the Native Americans for furs on one hand and then sending the furs back to England on consignment to **PLAYER NUMBER FOUR** - the three remaining merchant adventurers, headquartered in London, a city that had been the center of the world fur trade since the 14th century.

The merchants received the furs on consignment and then sold them at auction. The price realized could vary widely,

depending on the quality of the pelts, the current demand for beaver and the number of beaver pelts available. The variables were many!

For instance, in 1636, plague broke out in London. All the gentlemen and merchants fled the city for their country homes. There was no trading, no buying, no money available. A shipment of furs from Plymouth arrived in London immediately after the plague struck. The furs had to be sold before they rotted, even though there was no market for them, and the Pilgrims realized almost nothing from this boatload. Or so they were told.... And how were they ever to know differently?

On most occasions, however, the venture proceeded smoothly and the furs moved along the chain, from the merchants to:

PLAYER NUMBER FIVE -

the hatters of London. Because the driving force behind the fur trade was, of all the unlikely things, the fashion in HATS.

The craze for high-crowned felt hats began in Europe about 1550. Quality hats demanded the best felting material available. Beaver fur is an excellent raw material; it is beautiful and holds its shape very well under rough wear and successive wettings.

Hatters were skilled craftsmen who took this raw product and turned it into a luxury commodity!

The process is complex. First, brush chemicals on the pelt to roughen the fiber and increase its matting ability. Shave off the wool, or "fluff." Second, vibrate the fluff (dirt falls off and the fibers lay in a random pattern) and mat the fibers into a large sheet. This is called "felting" and the sheet a "batt." Third, sprinkle the "batt," with water and massage it over heat to strength and condense it. Form the batt into a large cone. Fourth, dunk the cone in acid and roll it with a rolling pin to compact & shrink it to half its former size. Fifth, force the wet shrunken cone onto a wooden mold, creating the desired style and size of hat. Boil it in a large copper kettle with dye. Sixth, brush it with Gum Arabic, to stiffen it. Put it on another block – shape it, iron it, brush it, turn up the brim and trim it with ribbons and feathers. Voila! A hat!



A competent 17th century hatter made 2 hats a day.

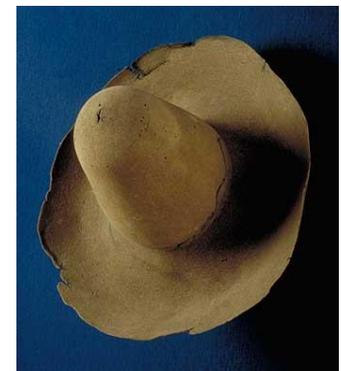
The hatter then moved the hat along to **PLAYERS NUMBER SIX** and **PLAYER NUMBER SEVEN** - the shopkeeper and the consumer.

You probably all know the adage that the ladies of Boston don't buy their hats, they simply HAVE them. Well, there is truth in the saying! People with old money and sure social status tend to spend their money – really, to save their money – by buying property or investments. People who are newly rich, on the other hand, spend their money on visible "status" items, with clothes and dress being particularly important.

London, in the early 17th century, was FILLED with new money. The population of London had grown dramatically – from 60,000 in 1540 to over 300,000 in 1640. More people, more wealthy people who had made their money in risky ventures, more luxury goods. Retail activity surged. Shops specializing in different types of clothing, such as hats, sprang up. London was filled with shops, open from dawn until dusk. Many shops were the ground floor of a house with a display of goods in their front windows.

The shopkeeper – or his wife or apprentice – would stand outside the door calling out, attempting to interest passing gentlemen and ladies in their wares, praising their goods, bargaining over prices, closing transactions, selling those hats.

Now, you might think that "Hats on London Heads" ends the interactions BUT... we have on display at Pilgrim Hall Museum a wonderful beaver hat attributed to Constance Hopkins – indicating that the beaver hats, once they had been produced, were sometimes sent back across the Atlantic to grace the heads of the Pilgrims. And that simple display of a beaver hat embodies what we do at Pilgrim Hall Museum. We preserve the artifacts of the Pilgrims and use them to illuminate the Pilgrim story. Pilgrim Hall Museum has a unique role in the Plymouth historical landscape. We are the only museum with actual artifacts that belonged to the Pilgrims. Those priceless artifacts bring the Mayflower voyagers to life.



I believe this is important.

History is a powerful tool for understanding who we are and who we can be. And I think we can all agree that there is no more compelling or important story in American history than that of the Pilgrims.

But, in order to make that story interesting, in order to make that story REAL for each new generation of Americans, we need Pilgrim Hall Museum – and the Pilgrim Society which supports it - to remain healthy and to thrive. I hope that those of you who are already members of the Pilgrim Society will visit Pilgrim Hall Museum as often as you can – and donate as generously as you can! And I hope those of you who are NOT yet members of the Pilgrim Society will consider joining us.