

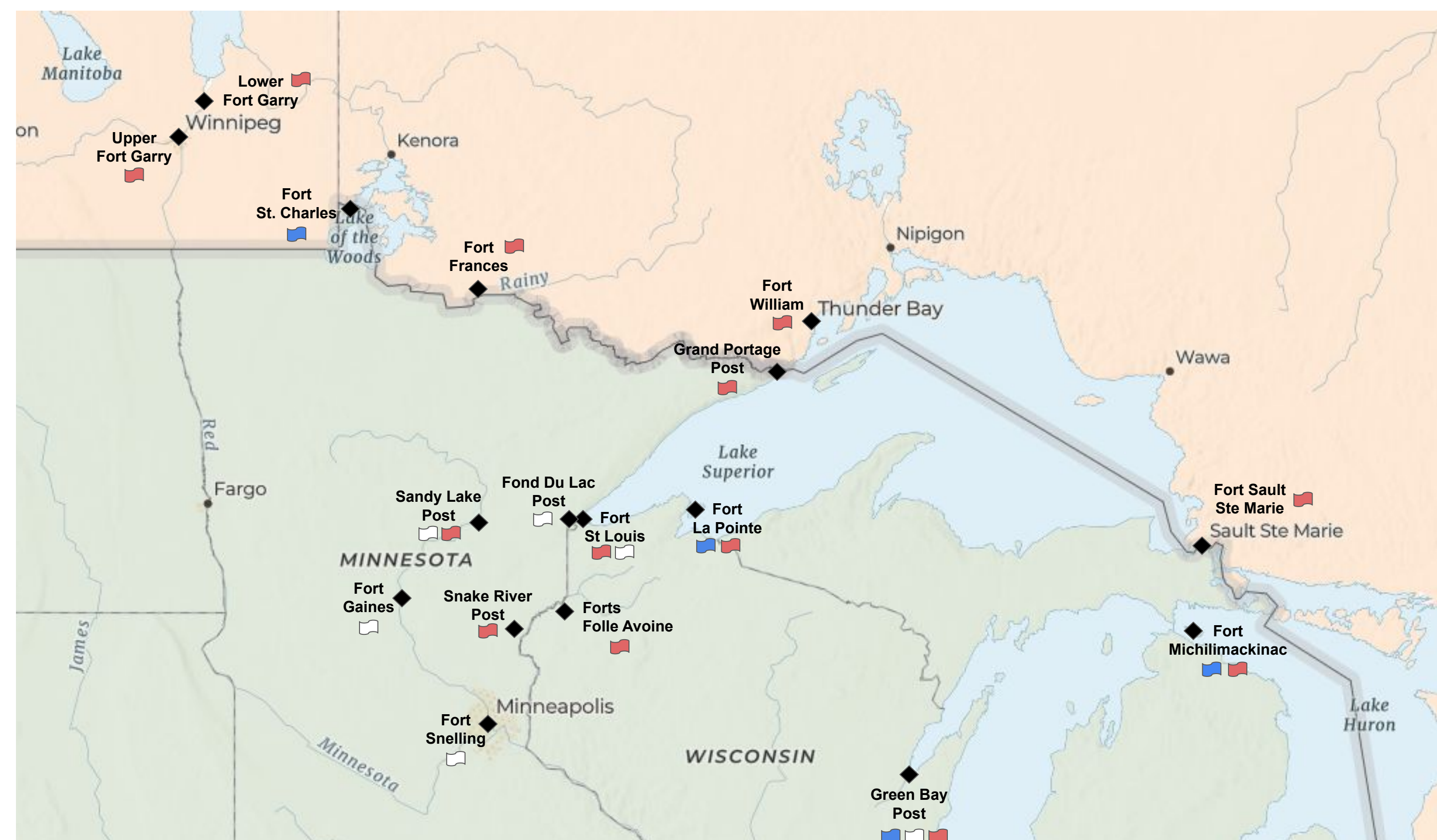
Trade Axes of the Western Great Lakes Region 1600-1900

Who were the Trade Companies?

Economic Impact

The social and economic effects of the North American fur trade had global implications and linked North America to Europe and Russia. The primary players for our study are France, Britain, and the Canadian and American colonies. Animal furs harvested in the Americas crossed into many parts of the world, and the production of the tools of the trade—such as trade axes—affected the economies of many countries and groups not directly involved in the trade itself. Axes produced in Spain, Holland, Austria, and other locations were carried by the French and traded to American Indian tribes. The British later emulated the style of the French axes while making them lighter—and as a result less reliable—with the purpose of increasing the number of axes that could be transported in order to maximize profits. Later, the American Fur Company would become the primary distributor of axes, bringing tools made in East Coast factories. Beginning in 1837 in the western Great Lakes Region, blacksmiths began producing annuity axes in conjunction with treaties made between Native Nations and the US government. Advances in metallurgy would change the effectiveness and durability of the tool through the years. Some shapes—like those produced by the Hudson’s Bay Company—were so effective that they continue to be produced today through modern processes.

Fur Trade Forts in the Western Great Lakes

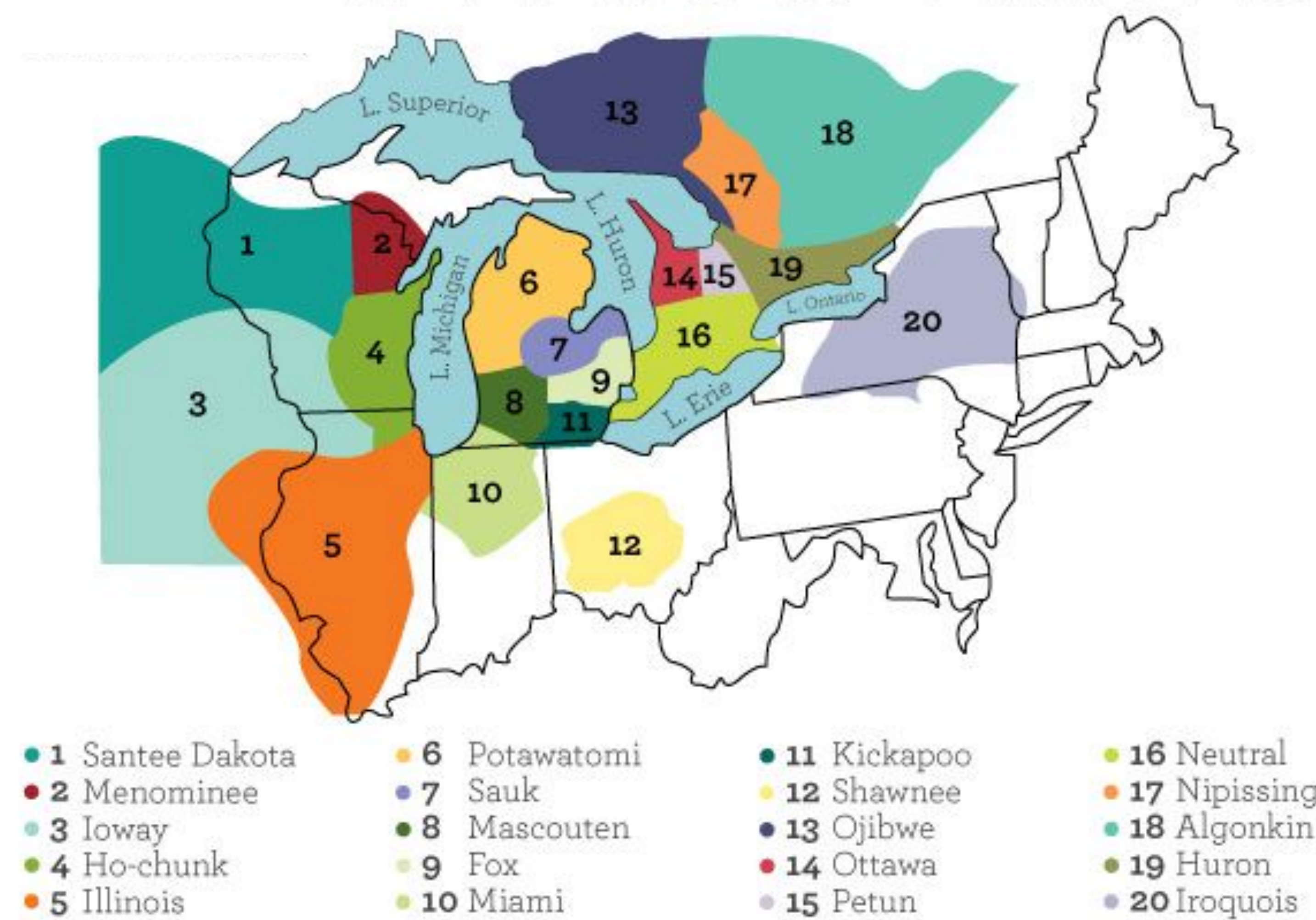


- French Fort
-Company of New France
- American Fort
-American Fur Company
- British Fort
-NorthWest Company
-Hudson’s Bay Company
-XY Company
-SouthWest Co(combination of British NWC & John Jacob Astor’s AMF)

Waterways and the Emergence of Trade Companies

As a result of the important financial resource that the North American waterways represented, many forts were established at strategic points to regulate trade and as military installations. Both governments and companies seeking to monopolize the fur trade established and maintained these locations. Forts would often change hands. Conflicts and wars dictated who had control or the rights to trade in certain areas. Initially global powers like France and Britain were the major factions involved in these struggles. Later, large and powerful trade organizations like the Hudson’s Bay Company, the Northwest Company, and the American Fur Company would have large-scale economic and geographic influence.

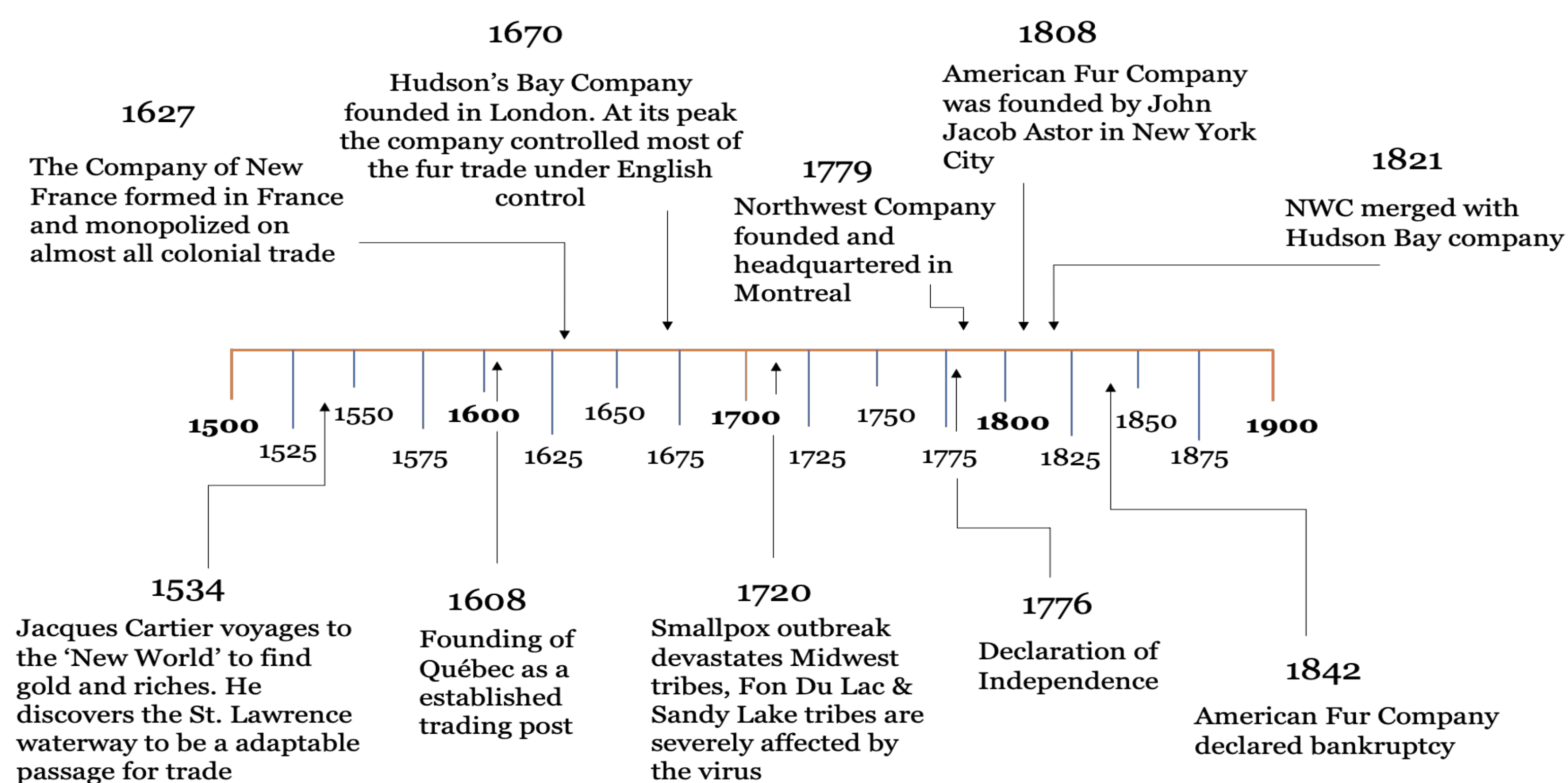
Great Lakes Tribes-1600



Axes and Trade

Axes were more than a tool for cutting wood. They were the primary survival tool of the fur traders. Similar shaped items had been made in stone by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Metal axes were integrated into indigenous culture and used for a huge range of purposes. Axes could be used to cut down trees and produce firewood, open holes in ice for fishing or hunting, skin and process game, and in more extreme cases, as a weapon of war. Life and death could be decided by the functionality an axe provided. Porters that transported furs throughout Canada and what is now the United States relied heavily on axes while traversing the unforgiving winters of North America. Packs of furs and axes could weigh in excess of ninety pounds and the porters would carry them—sometimes two at a time—long distances over land and while portaging their canoes from one body of water to the next. The extensive water systems of North America became the primary trade routes. Through these waterways, furs were transported by rivers and lakes to sea ports, where larger sailing vessels could carry them en masse to France, Britain, and the rest of the world. Axes and other trade goods made the reverse journey.

Timeline of Major Historical Events and Companies



What was the Annuity Period?

When the US Government signed treaties with Native Nations it agreed to make annual payments of various goods, money, or services. The US was often interested in obtaining mining rights, while the Nations were often interested in retaining traditional uses of the ceded territories. Teachers, farmers, or blacksmiths are among the roles listed in the treaties who were federal government employees hired for and sent to reservations.

The language from the 1854 Treaty with the Chippewa (Ojibwe) with connection to blacksmiths is cited here as it relates to the land that our University campus sits on.

“The United States will also furnish a blacksmith and assistant, with the usual amount of stock, during the continuance of the annuity payments, and as much longer as the President may think proper, at each of the points herein set apart for the residence of the Indians [i.e., the reservation]...” (Article 5, 1854 Treaty)

“They shall be allowed a blacksmith, and the usual smith shop supplies and also two persons to instruct them in farming, whenever in the opinion of the President it shall be proper, and for such length of time as he shall direct.” (Article 12, 1854 Treaty)

The goal of assigning blacksmiths to tribes was to encourage the adoption of European farming techniques and a way of life that that required iron tools. The blacksmiths often took on Indian apprentices. The axes our study was conducted on are among the tools the smiths made.

“The blacksmith has two apprentices, one of whom has been with him since 1871, and is competent to shoe horses and repair wagons and other farm implements.” (1873 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs)

Fond du Lac Village and Trading Post



Source: MNopedia.org

Interviews with Axe Specialists

Researching axes is a time consuming and detailed activity. Many of the people that our mentor, Dave Peterson, has consulted with or learned from over the years do this work in addition to outside employment. To connect our research to living people, we interviewed a number of these specialists to learn how they got started doing this work and what they enjoy about researching axes.

“The axe is critical as a defense against wild animals and against warring people... you can also survive with it. Chopping down trees, making canoes to transport yourself on the water, or making fires... The Indigenous people of the past were hunters, fishers and trappers including gardeners who all needed axes.” - Dave Peterson

“A successful civilization can learn a lot from the success and failures of people and cultures who have lived before.” - Dave Peterson

“These axes were instrumental for the natives. They traded nationwide with each other. Sometimes, these axes were traded from tribe to tribe all over the continental United States and even into Canada.” - Mark Miller

“The trade axe is a story of people.” - Tom Przybilla