

FUR TRADE  
RELATIONS

NEW NETHERLAND - NEW FRANCE

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A study of the influence exerted by the fur trade interests  
of Holland and New Netherland on the Settlement of New France  
during the years 1600 to 1664

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Theodore Jan Kupp

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis intends to demonstrate that the Dutch merchants of the early seventeenth century were interested in the fur trade of New France from the moment that North American furs first appeared on the European market. Because of a favourable import and export agreement with Russia, the Dutch fur trade had at this time enjoyed a position that amounted to a monopoly. This situation was seriously threatened by the import of North American furs, which were cheaper and of better quality. The Dutch trader therefore made repeated attempts to control fur imports from North America, first by penetration into the New France trade, later by attempts to take over all, or at least a large share of, the fur trade of the American Continent, through the Dutch colony of New Netherland. We shall here consider Dutch efforts to control the North American fur trade during the period from 1600 approximately until the fall of New Netherland in 1664. Because of the length of this period, during which many nationalities were involved in the competition for the fur trade of North America it has been necessary to deal primarily with the commercial aspects of the relationship between Holland and France - especially between New Netherland and New France - in their struggle for the fur trade. Political influences are mentioned only occasionally. Furthermore, the contacts between the respective trades of the various European colonies on the Atlantic Coast are discussed when, in the opinion of the writer, such contacts influenced the major trade inland.

An eminent Canadian historian once confided that the main advantage of the historian was the disappearance of related documents. If that is true, those who delve into the economic history of New

France in the first half of the seventeenth century are very fortunate. Indeed, scarcity of documents is probably the reason why so few attempts have been made to investigate the contacts between the Dutch and French fur trade. Most historians, for example H.A. Innis in his Fur Trade of Canada, mention only occasionally the influence of the Netherlanders on the early development of the trade in Canada. Such mention is usually restricted to the gun trade of New Netherland. P. Desrosiers, in his Iroquoisie, noted the influence of the New Netherland colony, Rensselaer-swijck, on the fur trade of New France, but he did not trace the Dutch intervention further back than 1632 approximately. Generally speaking, one may state that the influence of the Dutch trader has been largely ignored. What makes this all the more remarkable is that there are a number of contemporary references to the Dutch-French trade rivalry.

From the early years of the first serious attempts to colonize New France, the French records mention Dutch interference in the affairs of French companies as the main danger to the development of the colony. Lescarbot, Champlain, the Jesuits, and Marie de l'Incarnation state very definitely that the Dutch trader threatened the planned development of the French colony by his repeated efforts to acquire a large share of the furs coming from the interior of the Continent. There is little reason for considering these accusations as exaggerated. Since the aggressive Dutch traders of the seventeenth century did not hesitate to challenge the privileged position of the Portuguese in the spice trade (eventually expelling them from the Moluccas) and since we know how ruthlessly they competed with the English from Spitsbergen to Amboyna and India, it would be surprising if they were to overlook the lucrative fur trade of the New World.

Historians agree that at the turn of the sixteenth century merchants of the United Republic laid the foundation for the Dutch commercial empire of the seventeenth century by penetration into the commerce of other nations, by the formation of joint-stock companies to which the population of Holland and other countries could subscribe, and through the Amsterdam Bourse. As the carriers of Europe they made their influence felt everywhere, and especially in France. The economists of seventeenth century France - for example Laffemas, de Montchretien, and Eon - admitted that the Dutch merchant, often acquiring French citizenship for the purpose, had taken over a sizeable portion of French commerce and industry. The historians of the past and present century, for example Bonnassieux, Hanotaux, Pigeonneau, Trocme, Delafosse, and others, provide numerous examples of Dutch enterprises in France. They mention France's dependence on the Dutch merchant navy for trade between the Atlantic and Mediterranean harbours, and attribute the decline of the French herring fisheries to the more efficient organization of the fishing fleet of the Republic. French efforts to centralize the monetary system of France were brought to nought by speculation on the Amsterdam Bourse; this gave Dutch merchants an advantage in the French market. The reasons advanced to explain the favourable position of the Dutch commerce are that the Netherlands trader was, characteristically, highly individualistic, not tolerating state control, believing in the Mare Librum, and ready to take any risk to attain his commercial ends. The Dutch trade was in many ways the forerunner of the unlimited free trade of the nineteenth century. In 1636 an Amsterdam merchant, when reproached by the Stadholder, Prince Frederick Hendrick, for selling gunpowder to the enemy - the Spaniards - replied: "Trade must not be

hindered. The merchant, if he can do so with gain, must sail through hell and risk his sails." This commercial spirit, often carried to extremes in the first decades of the seventeenth century, was the driving force behind Dutch trade in this period. When the French began their first attempts to develop the fur trade in North America, they clashed with Dutch vested interests in the Republic's trade with Russia.

Thanks to the patient work of the archivists of Amsterdam and La Rochelle, it has been possible to trace the Dutch influence on the fur trade of New France back to the years when the first well-organized company began its trading in the French colony. This organization was chartered in 1603. Much of the material used in the first two chapters of this thesis has hitherto been generally unknown; much of it, until now, scattered in Dutch periodicals which so far have not been translated. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate how events in New Netherland affected the early history of New France; this is done by comparing the development of the two colonies, using the few available records in order to come to some logical conclusion. Judging by the scarcity of evidence, one might conclude that in the period between 1625 and 1664 the Dutch and French colonies ignored each other's existence. Yet, our main source of information on the events of these years, the Jesuit Relations, makes it quite clear that the Dutch traders were determined in their effort to acquire a major share of the North American fur trade at the expense of New France. How can such a poverty of documentation be explained?

Agnes Laut in her work, The Fur Trade of North America, remarked that there does not exist a trade more secretive than the fur trade. From the few surviving letter books of Dutch and English traders it appears that even close relatives did not trust each other with

information on the procuring and trading of furs. It is regrettable that the accounts of the Dutch West India Company and the Company of One Hundred Associates have disappeared. Apart from giving a better insight into prices and volume of trade, it is doubtful whether their books would have provided any precise information on the trade itself. The fur trade was a contest between the European and primitive man, a game in which any practice was allowed as long as the officials remained ignorant of abuses or lacked sufficient blatant proof to make prosecution unavoidable. Often the officials themselves were deeply involved in those abuses. The gun and liquor trade are only two examples of the most glaring malpractices. The colonial history of the North American Continent is one great example of the abuses of the fur trade. Because of the numerous illegalities in the trade with the Indians, one cannot expect much documentation and certainly not any legalization of the trade by means of notarial acts or other legal documents. This explains why most references to the actual trade are hearsay, indirect and most often impersonal. One cannot expect the hardy race of the coureur du bois or the boschloper to have left much evidence behind, nor that the Montreal, Quebec, or Fort Orange settler-traders would attempt to commit to paper their aims in the trade, or their competitive practices. The researcher is therefore often forced to use circumstantial evidence and derive his conclusions from events and occasional remarks.

The Jesuits accused the Dutch traders of attempting to ruin New France in order to get complete control of the fur trade. The conclusion of this thesis agrees with the opinion of these sensitive observers of the early development of New France. In his attempts to attract the fur trade of the Continent to Fort Orange, the Dutch trader

did not hesitate to use existing tribal warfare, changing his tactics according to circumstances, but never deviating far from his initial policies. He was so successful that only direct military action by Louis XIV could save the French fur trade and the colony. The developments after the fall of New Netherland, when the political, but not the commercial, situation had changed, were the logical consequence of the Dutch policy formed at the beginning of the seventeenth century.