

Dynamic political and trading relationships between North American indigenous peoples and European explorers, colonizers, and colonists developed essentially as soon as contact between the groups occurred. Over the course of approximately 350 years, from around 1500 to the mid-1800s, political strategies and positions of influence, dominance, and domination shifted along with negotiating power in trade between native people and Europeans (and later Americans). Historian Daniel Richter explores this multifaceted reality in the readings for this week. European colonists' personal ambitions were influential on a micro-level. Among the most consequential factors to impact these positions and strategies of indigenous tribes was the transformation of the geopolitical landscape in North America brought by wars between the French and the British in the late 1600s through the 1760s. As the British gained hegemony of the continent after the Seven Years War, the negotiating positions of tribes and their leaders were weakened significantly. This change in power demanded a corresponding change in strategy for the indigenous peoples of North America.

Colonists generally sought to survive, secure land, and/or finally personally enrich themselves during this era. Survival for early colonists in New England, as well as in the Chesapeake, depended on reciprocal trade relationships with American Indians. Richter explains in chapter 5 of his *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* that "English men were bereft of food . . ." and trades with native people could result in being "showered . . . with foodstuffs . . ." by native leaders like Powhatan.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to gain access to or control of land took different forms depending on the relative power of the colonists involved. In the example of less-powerful Scots-Irish in Pennsylvania, "many moved west into either proprietary or Indian lands with little regard to the niceties of legal paperwork and no intention of paying quitrents".<sup>2</sup> Conversely, more powerful colonial leaders in Pennsylvania attempted to secure land with only slightly more regard towards traditional practices in using the "Covenant Chain" with the Iroquois to gain Native land cessions, whether or not other tribes observed Iroquois authority.<sup>3</sup> Colonists who were more focused on personal enrichment, like fishermen in the Newfoundland, began large scale trading for animal furs after they "awakened to the profits to be made from monopolizing the furs of Canada".<sup>4</sup> In any of these cases, American Indians experienced an array of relationships with the colonists who had arrived on their shores.

European nation-states, such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands, jockeyed for dominance in North America from the 1660s through the 1760s. At the center of this violently competitive process were imperial control of territory and development of trade relationships with native tribes that could be manipulated favorably for the Europeans. In order to gain control of territory, "treaties [were] written in English that most Lenapes [and others] could not read for themselves [and] described boundaries with deliberate ambiguity to allow the most capacious English interpretation".<sup>5</sup> These malevolent treaties did not define territorial control for the colonizers for long as war was the final result. Ultimately, the "origins of the Seven Years War lay in the disputed territory known as 'the Ohio country'".<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, immense wealth was available through trade with Native Americans. The Dutch VOC's "focus was trade . . . [and] to try to take over the trade routes not just of Spain and Portugal but of . . . England and France as well".<sup>7</sup> Trading became an important source of wealth extraction by for all imperial powers on the continent.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Past*, (Boston: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2011), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Richter, *Trade, Land, Power: The Struggle for Eastern North America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 160.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 162-165, 168.

<sup>4</sup> Richter, *Before*, 130.

<sup>5</sup> Richter, *Trade*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>7</sup> Richter, *Before*, 138.

The wars between the French and the British that occurred between the time of the Glorious Revolution and the end of the Seven Years War created dramatically different outcomes for Native cultures as compared to the outcomes for the European powers. Certainly, forfeiting influence in North America was a heavy cost for the French after the Treaty of Paris in 1763. This French forfeiture was of definite importance to indigenous tribes as well. As Dr. Jen McCutchen explained, without at least two potential European political and trading partners, the “play-off” strategy employed by many tribes was no longer possible.<sup>8</sup> As was the case for the Native Massasoit and his people, a relationship with the English gained them leverage to reduce tributary payments with neighboring tribes and to extract profit from others.<sup>9</sup> Pequot leaders cultivated similar relationships with the Dutch.<sup>10</sup> Obtaining European goods through trade was important in several ways for Native Americans, including affirming positions of prestige for leaders and their particular nations, safeguarding positions of power among tribes in particular regions, and securing utilitarian items that made everyday life easier. Even very early in the colonial period tribal leaders provided wives to English men to reinforce kinship bonds in trade.<sup>11</sup> Access to “European goods had become central to the struggles of the Algonquins, Innu, and Wendats against the Haudenosaunee”.<sup>12</sup> It is evident that the items obtained from Europeans carried prestige for Native people who could acquire them, as some chiefs wore axe heads as pendants as a display of power.<sup>13</sup> Guns and gunpowder received through trade became as important as metal axe heads and arrow points to tribes fortifying themselves against others.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the metal goods that Europeans could provide were “sharper, lighter, and less labor-intensive to acquire than stone, ceramic, or bone utensils used for centuries, these implements became commonplace . . . wherever Native people got ready access to them”.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the success and survival of indigenous tribes in the East depended on trading with Europeans.

After the Seven Years War concluded, the English stood as the predominant European power on the North American continent. This shift in power signaled a remarkable change for the future for Native people. Without the ability to play the Europeans off of each other, American Indians lost a crucial position of negotiating power. Goods upon which many had become dependent were only available from English sources. Land that Native Americans still claimed was being seized and settled in violation of negotiated agreements. In addition to each of these circumstances, rounds of epidemic disease and years of intertribal war had diminished the sheer number of Natives that had thrived on the land for centuries. By 1763, a story that would continue to play out as the United States expanded westward in the 19th century had begun in the American colonies.

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<sup>8</sup> Jen McCutchen, *Native Peoples and the French and Indian War*, Lecture, Minnesota State University - Mankato, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Richter, *Before*, 156.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> McCutchen, *Lecture*.

<sup>15</sup> Richter, *Before*, 128.

**Works Cited:**

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