

**GEORGE CROGHAN
AND THE WESTWARD
MOVEMENT, 1741-1782**

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ALBERT T. VOLWILER

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I. THE INDIAN TRADER.

The mainspring which kept the Indian trade in North America in operation during the eighteenth century was the demand for furs and skins in western Europe. The customs and styles of dress among European nobles and courtiers, ecclesiastical and university officials, and wealthy burghers created the demand for furs; the demand for skins rested chiefly upon the needs of the more humble classes of society. A second great market for furs and skins was in China. Until towards the close of the period under consideration this market only indirectly affected the Indian trade by absorbing the cheaper grade of Russian furs and skins and thus decreasing the supply available for western Europe. By the time of the American Revolution, however, a considerable number of American furs and skins were sent from London to China, either through Russia or in the ships of the East India Company, thus foreshadowing the trading ventures of John Jacob Astor and Stephen Girard.¹

From the earliest days of the Greeks and Romans until the sixteenth century the people of central Asia and western Europe were supplied with furs and skins from the great northern plains of Eurasia. Here the Russian traders' frontier was gradually pushed east-

¹ Chambers Papers relating to Canada, 1692-1792. (N. Y. Pub. Lib.)

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ward until in the latter part of the eighteenth century it was moving rapidly down the western coast of North America.² At the time of the discovery of America, Vienna, Danzig, Lübeck and Hamburg were the great fur marts of Europe, and the bold voyages of English navigators to Muscovy were based in part upon the demand for furs. The furs and skins from the second great region of supply—northern North America—had to compete with those from Russia and Siberia in the markets of Europe. So successfully was this done that the great fur marts were shifted to London, Amsterdam and Paris, and the quest for furs took the place of the quest for gold, silver and precious stones in luring the white man to penetrate into the vast unknown regions north of Mexico.

If the trade in furs and skins is looked at from the point of view of the uncivilized native who could furnish peltry and hides, one finds equally strong economic forces influencing his conduct. In his estimation of values, based upon the laws of supply and demand, the exchange of a fine beaver pelt for a sharp knife was a great bargain and gave him as much satisfaction as it did to the more civilized trader. The mutual immense profits of the trade in furs and skins and other irresistible economic forces involved, led both savages and civilized men to desire to establish and maintain trading relations in spite of the heavy risks to life and property to all concerned in such trade.

The desire to control the lucrative trade in furs and skins with the natives in North America was one of the numerous causes for the great rivalry of England and

² The following quotation is suggestive for the colonizing movement in North America: "Der Zobel (sable) hat die Erschliessung und Eroberung Sibiriens veranlasst; er hat auch einen grossen Teil der Kosten, mit seiner Haut bezahlt."—Klein, Jos.: *Der Sibirische Pelzhandel und seine Bedeutung für die Eroberung Sibiriens*, p. i.—Cf. Golder, F. A.: *Russian Expansion on the Pacific, 1641-1859*.

France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Towards the close of the former century they entered upon an important trade war in North America for the control of this traffic which, unlike their military conflicts, never ceased until after 1763. In it the native tribes were mere tools and pawns which both sides exploited.

The trader's frontier in this conflict was long, wide, and constantly shifting. During the second quarter of the eighteenth century French and English traders met in the region between Lake Superior and Hudson's Bay, but here there were such vast regions to exploit that for a long time their rivalry was only serious to those immediately involved. Similar competition took place in the wilderness between New England and Canada, but here also the rivalry was not serious, for there were no longer rich fur fields to exploit in this region nor were there strategic lines of communication to threaten. The Indian country between New York and New France controlled great arteries of commerce; here, however, the English forces of expansion, which in earlier decades had begun to penetrate the region around Lake Michigan, lost vitality because of various conditions in colonial New York. One of these was the establishment, in spite of the opposition of both governments, of trading relations whereby Albany traders gave up their dreams of trading directly with the far West in return for the opportunity of exchanging English manufactured goods for French furs near at home. In contrast to the Indian traders of Pennsylvania, those of New York generally did not penetrate far into the interior to seek furs and skins at each Indian village, but utilized the Iroquois as middlemen to bring furs and skins to them at such posts as Albany and Oswego. In the extreme south, Carolina traders had once planned to develop the trans-Mississippi country and even the Ohio and

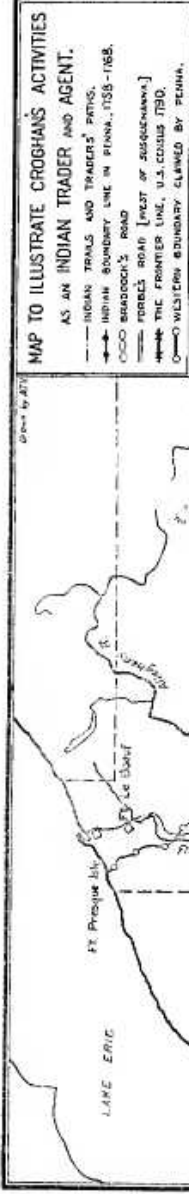
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Illinois regions. By about 1725 the French had limited the activities of the English until their trade with tribes which bordered on the Gulf of Mexico or on the Mississippi had almost ceased.³

During the generation preceding 1754 the most dynamic and significant phase of the Anglo-French rivalry in the Indian trade was in the central and upper Ohio Valley and in the region south of Lake Erie. In preceding decades a few Carolina, New York and perhaps Virginia, traders had reached this region, but their visits were sporadic and not consistently followed up. Later, Pennsylvania traders began to develop consistently its rich trading possibilities. The expansion of the field of their activities was based upon a sufficient supply of low-priced merchandise and it was the result of their own initiative and resourcefulness; not until their influence had about reached its height did their government aid them. Meanwhile the French had been moving eastward into this region. They shifted their main line of communication between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi from the Fox-Wisconsin route to the Chicago-Illinois route and then to the Maunee-Wabash route. To control the latter, Ft. Ouiatenon was erected by New France, about 1720, at the head of navigation for large canoes on the Wabash, and Ft. Vincennes by Louisiana, in 1731, on the lower Wabash. At times, a small fort on the Maunee was maintained which, with Detroit, completed this line of defense against English penetration. The region east of this line was left open to the English. The first "Winning of the West" by the Anglo-Saxon followed; in almost every important Indian village in this region one or more Pennsylvania traders were to be found.

The growth of their influence is well shown by the

³ Crane, V. W.: "The Tennessee River as the Road to Carolina," *Miss. Valley Hist. Rev.*, 3: 3 ff; Crane: "The Southern Frontier in Queen Anne's War," *Am. Hist. Rev.*, 24: 379 ff.



2 30

May 26 1747

I am just return'd from the woods
and has bought a letter of peace for some time
for y^e Governor from a post of y^e Six Nations Indians
that has this Darling on y^e borders of Lake Erie
and not being able to go down my self to some
after such a long Journey I have found with out
it by the Peace in hopes it may reach to y^e
Governor hands before he shall these Indians were
always in the French Interest will now out.
This Spring almost all the Indians in this Woods
have Declared against y^e French & I think this
will be a fine opportunity if purchased by some
small presents to have all y^e French cut off in
these parts for the Indians are very much led
by any thing that will tend to their own self
Interest and will think a great deal of a little
powder and with this time besides it will
be a Means of Drawing them that has not yett Sog'd.
I remain with respects y^e humble servant to your
George Croghan

W^{ch} if there be any convenient
sent to these Indians you will
please to lett them know by y^e bearer
you will send back directly for
some of my Mine that I left
at the

GEORGE CROGHAN TO SECRETARY RICHARD PETERS
OF PHILADELPHIA

The original letter, of which the above facsimile is a reproduction on a smaller scale, is the earliest document written by Croghan that has been found. It is preserved in the Provincial Papers in the State Library at Harrisburg.

following incidents. In 1707, Governor Evans of Pennsylvania feared the influence of French traders even east of the lower Susquehanna; he personally led a party thither to capture Nicole Godin, a trader of French birth, who was suspected of aiding the enemy. The Governor reported to the provincial council that after he had captured Nicole, "having mounted Nicole upon a horse, and tied his legs under the Belly," he "brought him a Prisoner to Philadia, in the Common Gaol of which he now lies."¹ Less than half a century later, in the early fifties, Paul Pierce, a Pennsylvania trader, had "4,000 Weight of summer skins taken at another town on Wabasha. . . ."²

These incidents illustrate the fact that the Pennsylvania traders had assumed the aggressive and, in spite of the Appalachian barrier, had pushed the trader's frontier 500 miles westward in less than a half century; in 1750 this line was near the Wabash and Maumee rivers, nearly 500 miles in advance of the settler's frontier in Pennsylvania, which was just starting to move up the Juniata Valley and to cross the Blue Mountains. Nor had the expansive force of this movement been exhausted when it reached the Wabash and Maumee; it began to cross this line—a weak barrier at best—and move on towards the Mississippi, bringing anxiety into the hearts of the best French officials, who felt the potential power of English influence even in the distant Illinois country.³ A contemporary map legend

¹ Gov. Evans' Journal and Report, *Pa. Col. Rec.*, 2: 385, 390.

² Pierce's affidavit of losses, O. Co. MSS., 1: 32.

³ In 1742 Bienville reported home that the Illinois were restless and that some of them had gone east to meet English traders.—C 13A, 27: 81-84. (Archives Nationales, Paris.) Vaudreuil reported in 1744 and in 1745 recommending the establishment of a fort on the lower Ohio to limit the activities of the English traders and to keep control of the Kickapoo and Mascoutens.—C 13 A, 28: 245-250 and C 13A, 29: 69. In 1747 three Indian emissaries came to the Illinois tribes to win them over to the English and were frustrated with difficulty.—"Diary of Events in 1747," *Wis. Hist. Coll.* 17: 487. An