

Fur Trade

The voyage of the Mayflower was a business venture for the Merchant Adventurers of London.

In contrast to the colonization policies of other countries and other periods, the emigration from England was not directly sponsored by the government but by private groups of individuals whose chief motive was profit. (Alonzo L Hamby)

In negotiating their agreements, the terms of July 1, 1620 were not unlike those of other colonial enterprises tried in Virginia and Bermuda. The entire capital, including lands, was to be a joint stock fund, divided into shares.

Investors, called “adventurers,” purchased shares of stock to help finance the costs of establishing overseas settlements. Money from the sale of stock was used to pay for ships and supplies and to recruit and outfit laborers.

The Company paid all the costs of establishing each colony, and in return controlled all land and resources there and required everyone to work for the Company.

Under the agreement, all land and profits accrued to the company of merchant adventurers for 7 years, at which time the assets would be divided among the shareholders. Most of the Pilgrims held stock.

Every person over the age of sixteen going to the new colony was rated at £10, and £10 was accounted a single share. Any emigrant outfitting himself with £10 worth of provisions was considered worth £20 or a double share.

The merchant adventurers in London, who furnished the capital for the Pilgrim enterprise, expected large returns for their venture. Very naturally the colonists desired to meet their just expectations. (Maine Historical Society)

Pilgrims First Focused on Fishing and Farming

The colonists were initially thought to engage in fishing and farming beyond their own needs in order to raise funds.

New Plymouth at first had expected to engage in fishing, by now the source of successful returns to many small West Country merchants whose ships were cruising up and down the New England coast and then carrying dried fish to market in southern Europe.

The first fishing season was a failure; the boatmaker died; the saltmaker turned out to be incompetent.

The colonists at Plymouth called their town a “plantation,” a word that comes from the word “plant.” Farming was a major part of the Pilgrims’ lives. They grew crops in large open fields. Women planted and tended vegetables and herbs in small gardens behind their houses.

Because many of them had come from cities or towns in England with markets, many of the colonists had never farmed or gardened before coming to Plymouth. The settlers might not have survived had it not

been for Samoset, a Monhegan from Maine and Tisquantum (Squanto), a Wampanoag who befriended and helped the English that spring, showing them how to plant corn, fish and gather berries and nuts.

Families in Plymouth planted enough in their fields to feed themselves. Their main crop was a kind of corn they had never seen before. Because it was native to North America and grew better in America than English grains, the Pilgrims called it "Indian corn."

Along with Indian corn, with assistance from the Indians, the Pilgrims also grew some beans, pumpkins, wheat, barley, oats and peas in their fields.

In the gardens near their houses, women grew many different kinds of herbs and vegetables, like parsley, lettuce, spinach, carrots and turnips. Some foods, like salt, sugar, oil and vinegar, had to be imported from England. (plimoth-org)



Squanto

Fur Trade Was Colony's Economic Salvation

As the years passed, the Pilgrims began to grow more food than they needed to eat. The colonists traded their extra Indian corn with Native People to get furs. The furs were then sent back to England to be sold.

The money they made from selling furs was used to buy many of the goods they imported from England. Farming was not just a way to eat, then, but also a way to get goods that they could trade for sugar, spices, oil, vinegar, clothes, shoes, baskets and gunpowder. (plimoth-org)

For the first few years that the colony existed, the colonists struggled to make enough money to pay the investors back. In fact, they had to ask for more money just to keep the colony running and by the mid to late 1620s, they were deeply in debt to the investors. (Brooks)

The fur trade industry was the colony's economic salvation.

Why/What Was the Fur Trade?

The rise of the fur trade in the colonial context is a story of both supply and demand.

Prized for their warmth, luxurious texture, and the longevity of fur as a material, furs have played a large role in clothing people since the beginning of human history.

For everyday use or costume and decoration, furs have been used for the production of outerwear such as coats and cape, garment and shoe lining, a variety of head coverings, and ornamental trim and trappings.

European and Asian trade in felts and fur stretched back centuries, if not millennium. Depending on the supply of animals, Russian, Northern Scandinavia, and Central Asia were the major supplies of this trade through the 15th century.

Furs were supplied to the Mediterranean and Middle East through Constantinople. This trade can be traced back to the Classical Greek and Roman periods, and through to the modern era.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, Scandinavian and Viking Rus traders traded to Northern and central Europe a variety of furs including: marten, reindeer, bear, otter, sable, ermine, black and white fox, and beaver

From fur pelts three primary materials used in clothing production can be derived: the full pelt (fur and skin), leather or suede (the skin with all fur removed, and felts (removing the fur from the pelt, and processing it with heat and pressure to form a piece of pliable material).

Due to the strength and malleable quality of felts, they were used extensively in hat making. The soft under-fur of the beaver — the felt — is what hat-makers in Europe sought.

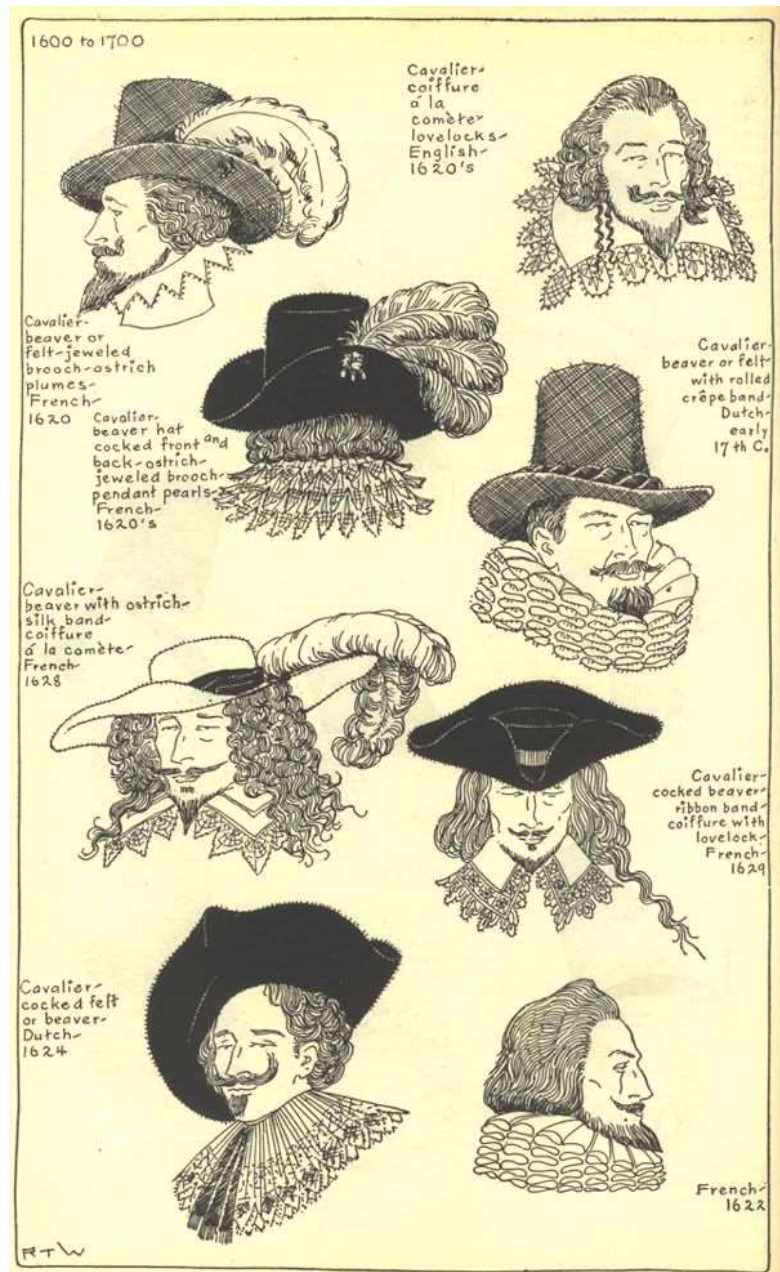
The physical structure of beaver fur predisposes it to the felting process, making it a highly desirable fur for felt production.

The aristocracy of Europe always was a reliable market for fur, a product that was viewed as functional, fashionable, and even regal depending on the specimen and the wearer.

European fur-bearing animal stocks, however, were being depleted by overhunting and by competition from expanding farming frontiers for territory. Beavers were effectively extinct in the British Isles by the 16th century; in France their numbers were similarly reduced.

Meeting royal and aristocratic demand for furs became the task of merchants.

Their principal source was Russia, but the discovery that furs could be obtained much more cheaply from North America reoriented the supply lines.



Merchants on the Atlantic coast of Europe parlayed what they earned in the fisheries into fur-trading operations, and the wealth they gained fueled the rise of a merchant class that would, itself, demand more furs.

Soon the wealthiest merchants were sporting fur hats and trim on their coats. The top hat (or stovepipe hat) didn't appear until the 19th century, but its forerunners were symbols of rising merchant status, adding height to the wearer and acting as a kind of mercantile crown.

This meant that even if demand for furs among the gentry was fully satisfied, there was a growing and effectively insatiable market in the cities of Western Europe where a new class of citizen — the bourgeois or bourgeoisie — (the middle class) was sufficiently prosperous and influential to drive the industry forward.

The North American fur trade was a response to declining populations of fur-bearing animals in Western Europe and the cost of purchasing and importing furs from Russia.

The French were the first into the American supply line, at least officially. Furs from Fort Orange (now Albany, New York) were transferred downriver to New Amsterdam (New York after 1667), most of which seemed to be coming from the lands around Lake Ontario.

This grew out of the early contact between Indians and European fisherman who were netting cod on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland and on the Bay of Gaspé near Quebec.

Indians would trade the pelts of small animals, such as mink, for knives and other iron-based products, or for textiles.

Exchange at first was haphazard and it was only in the late sixteenth century, when the wearing of beaver hats became fashionable, that firms were established who dealt exclusively in furs. High quality pelts are available only where winters are severe, so the trade took place predominantly in the regions we now know as Canada. (Carlos)

Eventually, all of the North American colonies, even the Carolinas, produced some furs for markets in Europe, and there was a lively trade in furs and deer hides out of Louisiana, but the best furs were to be obtained north of the Great Lakes.

What Europeans wanted most was treated pelts that had been cleaned of the longer guard hairs, leaving more of the rich felt exposed and ready for use. (Information in this section is primarily from *The Fur Trade in Global Perspective*, opentextbc-ca)

Beaver pelts could be made into either full-fur or felted-fur hats. Beaver hats were imported into England from Holland and Spain until the 15th century, after which England was able to obtain beaver felts from Russia, via Holland, and manufacture the actual hats within the British Isles.

Hats, like other forms of dress, played a large role in reflecting one's social identity. The shape and style of one's hat indicated to a passerby one's profession, wealth, and social rank and position. Color, shape, and material all carried specific meaning. In seventeenth century England, the shape and style of one's hat reflected political and religious affiliation. Due to the expense of a beaver hat, being able to purchase one made a visual statement about one's wealth and social status.

Catching Beaver

But catching, killing, skinning, and tanning beaver hides was a laborious process that left the guard hairs in place. Aboriginal peoples who had already done all the work of trapping and processing inadvertently added value: by using the pelts as blankets or clothing they wore off the guard hairs.

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.” (Pilgrim Hall Museum)

Jesuit Paul Le Jeune, in Jesuit Relations (1634) notes,

“The beaver is taken in several ways. The Indians say that it is the animal well beloved by the French, English, and Basques: in a word, by the Europeans.”

“I heard my host say one day, jokingly, Missi picoutau amiscou, ‘The beaver knows how to make all things to perfection: It makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; in short, it makes everything.’”

“He was making sport of our Europeans, who have such a fondness for the skin of this animal and who fight to see who will give the most to these barbarians to get it. They carry this to such an extent that my host said to me one day, showing me a very beautiful knife,

‘The English have no sense; they give us twenty knives like this for one beaver skin.’

“In the spring, the beaver is taken in a trap baited with the wood it eats. The Indians are very clever in setting these traps, such that, when set off, they cause a heavy piece of wood to fall upon the animal and knock it out.”

“Sometimes the dogs find a beaver outside its house, whereupon they will pursue it and capture it easily. I have never seen this chase but have been told of it; and the Indians highly value a dog which can scent and flush out this animal.”

Plymouth Colonists Entered the Fur Trade

The Pilgrims “at Plymouth were not only exerting themselves to the utmost to provide subsistence for the members of the colony, but at the same time they were earnestly endeavoring to pay their indebtedness to the merchant adventurers in London.”

The colonists established a beaver fur trading base in Kennebec, Maine by 1625. Beaver were plentiful in Maine where the local Native-Americans tribe had hunted them for generations. (History of Massachusetts, Brooks)

“In 1625, after harvest, which was the most abundant they had gathered since the establishment of the colony, they dispatched a boat’s load of corn to ‘ye eastward, up a river called Kenibeck.’ (Bradford)...”

“Mr. Edward Winslow was in charge of this Kennebec venture. Proceeding up the river, he found the Indians exceedingly well disposed, and had no difficulty in exchanging his store of corn for beaver, of which he obtained seven hundred pounds.”

“When Winslow at length dropped down the river on his return homeward, he had laid the foundations of an exceedingly profitable trade, and he made his way back to Plymouth with high hopes that from this trade the colony would be able to discharge ere long its financial obligations in London.”

“These hopes were not doomed to disappointment. The sight of the beaver, as Winslow and his boat’s crew landed at Plymouth the proceeds of this Kennebec venture, was one with which the Pilgrims became more and more familiar as the years went by.”

“Little time was spent by the Plymouth men in fishing, but the colonists devoted themselves to ‘trading and planting,’ and this with ‘ye best industrie they could.’”

“They had now learned the value of corn for trading purposes, and the amount planted was considerably increased, the governor and those who were associated with him in managing the traffic for the benefit of the colony using all diligence in promoting the general welfare.”

“But in their traffic with the Indians other commodities than corn were desirable, and learning that the plantation at Monheg belonging to certain merchants in Plymouth, England, was to be broken up and that ‘diverse usefull goods’ brought there by these parties were to be sold, Governor Bradford and Mr. Winslow, with some other of the colonists, proceeded thither in a boat.” They bought the goods.

“The Plymouth men were now well supplied with articles for their traffic on that river. ‘With these goods,’ says Bradford, ‘and their corne after harvest, they gott good store of trade, so as they were enabled to pay their ingagements against ye time & to get some cloathing for ye people, and had some comodities beforehand.’” (Maine Historical Society)

“[T]he trade with the Indians on the Kennebec inspired hopefulness in the colonists.”

“They needed for this trade, however, a larger boat than they now possessed. They ran a great hazard in their trips along the coast in a small craft, especially in the winter season. In their perplexity the house carpenter of the colony was consulted.”

“He was an ‘ingenius man,’ according to Bradford, and had wrought with the ship carpenter, now dead, when he built the boats they had used hitherto. So he was asked to make trial of his skill in the same art.”

“This he did. Selecting one of the largest of the boats he sawed it ‘in ye midle and so lenthened her some 5 or 6 foote, and strengthened her with timbers, and so built her up and laid a deck on her.’”

“The result was a convenient and serviceable vessel, which the colony used for trading purposes on the Maine coast seven years.”

This fur trading business was very successful for the colonists and quickly became an essential part of their economy.

“Mr. Allerton was about to go to England for the purpose of adjusting financial matters with the merchant adventurers. They now directed him to secure for the Plymouth colonists a patent for such a tract of land on the Kennebec as would enable them to control the Indian traffic of the river.”

“Mr. Allerton was successful in his undertaking so far as the financial affairs of the colony were concerned. He also secured ‘a patente for Kenebeck’”.

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.

As noted by Bradford,

[The Lord] allso brought them a patente for Kenebeck, but it was so strait & ill bounded, as they were faine to renew & in large it the next year, as allso that which they had at home, to their great charge, as will after appeare. ...

Having procured a patente for Kenebeck, they now erected a house up above in ye river in ye most convenientest place for trade, as they conceived, and furnished the same with comodities for yt end, both winter & somer ...

... not only with corne, but also with such other commodities as ye fishermen had traded with them, as coats, shirts, ruggs, & blankets, biskett, pease, prunes, &c.; and what they could not have out of England, they bought of the fishing ships, and so carried on their bussines as well as they could.

The Kennebec Purchase of 1628 was better defined in the patent of January 13 , 1629 , which was granted by the Council for New England and covered both the region of New Plymouth and the Kennebec grant. Information on the Kennebec Patent is noted in a deed with the following language,

And whereas the said Council established at Plimouth in the County of Devon by the Charter and Deed of Affeofment, bearing Date the Sixteenth Day of January A. D. one thousand Six hundred and twenty Nine by virtue and authority of his said late Majesty's Letters Patents ...

... and for & in Consideration that William Bradford, and his Associates, had for these Nine years lived in New England aforesaid, and there inhabited and planted a Town called by the name of New Plimouth, at their own proper Costs and Charges; and seeing that by the special providence of God and their Extraordinary Care and Industry, they had increased their plantation to near three hundred People and were able to releive any New Planters or other his Majesty's Subjects upon that Coast; ...

... granted & assigned unto the said William Bradford his heirs associates and assigns all that part of New England ----(here follows a description of the tract in and about New Plymouth)

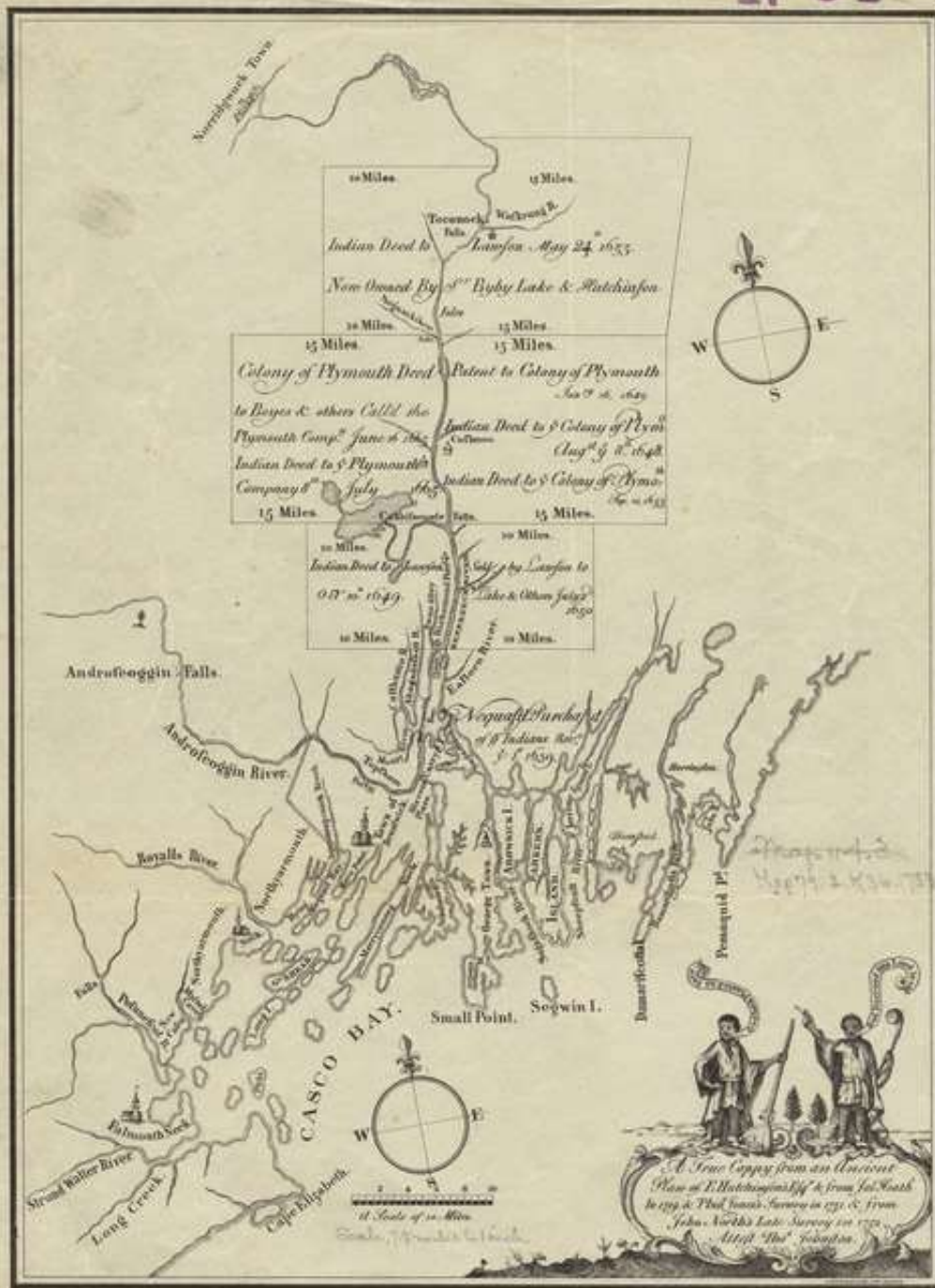
And forasmuch as they had no convenient place either of Trading or fishing within their own precincts, whereby after so long travel and great Pains so hopeful a plantation might subsist, as also that they may be encouraged the better to proceed in so pious a Work which might especially tend to the Propogation of Religion and the great increase of Trade to his Majesty's Realms and advancement of the publick plantation.

The said Council further granted and assigned unto the said William Bradford his heirs, associates & assigns All that Tract of land, or part of New England in America aforesaid, which lyeth within or between and extendeth itself ...

... from the utmost Limits of Cobbiseconte alias Comasseconte, which adjoineth to the River of Kennebeck, alias Kenebekike, towards the Western Ocean and a place called the falls of Neguamkike, in America aforesaid, and the space of fifteen English Miles on each side of the said River, commonly called Kenebeck river ...

... and all the said River called Kenebeck, that lies within the said Limits and Bounds, Eastward, Westward, Northward or Southward last above mentioned, and all Lands, Grounds, Soils, Rivers, Waters, Fishings, situate lying and being, arising, happening or accruing in or within the said Limits and Bounds, or either of them ...

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... together with all Rights and Jurisdictions thereof, the Admiralty Jurisdiction excepted, in as free, large, ample and beneficial manner, to all Intents, Constructions and purposes whatsoever, as the said Council, by virtue of his Majesty's Letters Patents might or could grant ...

To have and to hold the said Tract and Tracts of land and all & singular the premises above mentioned to be granted with their and every of their Appurtenancies to the said William Bradford, his heirs, associates and assigns forever ...

... yielding and paying unto our said Sovereign Lord the King, his heirs and Successors forever One fifth Part of the Oar of the mines of Gold and Silver, and one other fifth part thereof to the President and Council which may be had, possessed and obtained within the precincts aforesaid, for all Services whatsoever, as in said Charter may more fully appear.

This grant, which was designed to further the settlement of America, contained 1,500,000 acres of land.

This was as much "Plymouth Colony" as the town of Plymouth itself.

"It should be noticed that the patent makes prominent the fact that the Kennebec afforded facilities for trading with the Indians which Plymouth and the neighboring localities did not furnish."

"It should also be noticed that while this grant to the Pilgrims did not extend to the mouth of the Kennebec river, it secured to them the right to pass in and out, and they could easily hold the trade of the river, having the first chance of meeting the Indians as they descended the stream in their fur-laden canoes."

"On the banks of the Kennebec, upon this tract of land thus secured, the Pilgrims erected a fort and trading house." "After they had thus firmly established themselves on the Kennebec, Bradford and his associates came into possession of a trading house on the Penobscot."

"This trading post at the Penobscot was not altogether a source of profit to the Pilgrims. In 1631, the house was robbed by some Frenchmen, who secured beaver and goods to the value of from four hundred to five hundred pounds." (Maine Historical Society)

Later, John Hocking (Hoskins) confronted the Pilgrims and tried to secure trade with the Indians in the Plymouth property. Pilgrim Moses Talbot was killed, as was Hocking (Hoskins). Subsequent proceedings concluded, that while "they all wished these things had never been, yet they could not but lay ye blame & guilt on Hockins owne head."

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. "Nowhere else had the fur trade been so industriously and profitably followed." (Hanson)

According to Bradford, between November, 1631, and June, 24, 1636, the Pilgrims sent to England 12,530 pounds of beaver, the most of which was obtained from the Indians on the Kennebec.

It was from the sale of this beaver in a great measure that they were able at length to extricate themselves from the financial difficulties in which they had become involved through their London agents.

After the Pilgrims had settled their accounts in London so that they were no longer indebted to the merchants there for both outfit and subsequent advances of money and goods, but had become in dependent, each member of the colony working for his own interest, the trade with the Indians on the Kennebec was leased to parties interested in its maintenance.

In 1640, Bradford surrendered the patent of the lands occupied by the colony to the freemen of the colony, the patent, including the Kennebec grant having been issued to him, his heirs and associates and assigns. (Maine Historical Society)

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.

When the General Court met at Plymouth June 6, 1660, it was voted that if £500 could be obtained for the colony's interest on the Kennebec, it should be sold.

In accordance with this vote, the Pilgrims in 1661 sold all their lands on either side of the Kennebec, secured by their patent, also by deeds from the Indians, to Antipas Boies, Edward Tyng, Thomas Brattle and John Winslow.

These persons and their heirs held their Kennebec lands nearly a century, making no endeavor to colonize them, but holding them for trading purposes only. (Maine Historical Society)

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. (Most of the Information in this section is from Pilgrim Hall Museum)

Information here is primarily from The Plymouth Colonists in Maine, Maine Historical Society, Rev. Henry Burrage; Pilgrim Hall Museum; Bradford; History of Massachusetts, Brooks; Alonzo L Hamby; plimoth-org; Jesuit Relations, Paul Le Jeune, 1634; The Fur Trade in Global Perspective, opentextbc-ca

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young