

***FREDERICK
JACKSON TURNER***



***THE CHARACTER AND
INFLUENCE
OF THE INDIAN
TRADE IN WISCONSIN***

Frederick Jackson Turner

The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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INTRODUCTION.[1]

The trading post is an old and influential institution. Established in the midst of an undeveloped society by a more advanced people, it is a center not only of new economic influences, but also of all the transforming forces that accompany the intercourse of a higher with a lower civilization. The Phœnicians developed the institution into a great historic agency. Closely associated with piracy at first, their commerce gradually freed itself from this and spread throughout the Mediterranean lands. A passage in the Odyssey (Book XV.) enables us to trace the genesis of the Phœnician trading post:

"Thither came the Phœnicians, mariners renowned, greedy merchant-men with countless trinkets in a black ship.... They abode among us a whole year, and got together much wealth in their hollow ship. And when their hollow ship was now laden to depart, they sent a messenger.... There came a man versed in craft to my father's house with a golden chain strung here and there with amber beads. Now, the maidens in the hall and my lady mother were handling the chain and gazing on it and offering him their price."

It would appear that the traders at first sailed from port to port, bartering as they went. After a time they stayed at certain profitable places a twelvemonth, still trading from

their ships. Then came the fixed factory, and about it grew the trading colony.[2] The Phœnician trading post wove together the fabric of oriental civilization, brought arts and the alphabet to Greece, brought the elements of civilization to northern Africa, and disseminated eastern culture through the Mediterranean system of lands. It blended races and customs, developed commercial confidence, fostered the custom of depending on outside nations for certain supplies, and afforded a means of peaceful intercourse between societies naturally hostile.

Carthaginian, Greek, Etruscan and Roman trading posts continued the process. By traffic in amber, tin, furs, etc., with the tribes of the north of Europe, a continental commerce was developed. The routes of this trade have been ascertained.[3] For over a thousand years before the migration of the peoples Mediterranean commerce had flowed along the interlacing river valleys of Europe, and trading posts had been established. Museums show how important an effect was produced upon the economic life of northern Europe by this intercourse. It is a significant fact that the routes of the migration of the peoples were to a considerable extent the routes of Roman trade, and it is well worth inquiry whether this commerce did not leave more traces upon Teutonic society than we have heretofore considered, and whether one cause of the migrations of the peoples has not been neglected.[4]

That stage in the development of society when a primitive people comes into contact with a more advanced people deserves more study than has been given to it. As a factor in breaking the "cake of custom" the meeting of two

such societies is of great importance; and if, with Starcke,[5] we trace the origin of the family to economic considerations, and, with Schrader,[6] the institution of guest friendship to the same source, we may certainly expect to find important influences upon primitive society arising from commerce with a higher people. The extent to which such commerce has affected all peoples is remarkable. One may study the process from the days of Phœnicia to the days of England in Africa,[7] but nowhere is the material more abundant than in the history of the relations of the Europeans and the American Indians. The Phœnician factory, it is true, fostered the development of the Mediterranean civilization, while in America the trading post exploited the natives. The explanation of this difference is to be sought partly in race differences, partly in the greater gulf that separated the civilization of the European from the civilization of the American Indian as compared with that which parted the early Greeks and the Phœnicians. But the study of the destructive effect of the trading post is valuable as well as the study of its elevating influences; in both cases the effects are important and worth investigation and comparison.

PRIMITIVE INTER-TRIBAL TRADE.

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Long before the advent of the white trader, inter-tribal commercial intercourse existed. Mr. Charles Rau[8] and Sir Daniel Wilson[9] have shown that inter-tribal trade and division of labor were common among the mound-builders

and in the stone age generally. In historic times there is ample evidence of inter-tribal trade. Were positive evidence lacking, Indian institutions would disclose the fact. Differences in language were obviated by the sign language, [10] a fixed system of communication, intelligible to all the western tribes at least. The peace pipe, [11] or calumet, was used for settling disputes, strengthening alliances, and speaking to strangers—a sanctity attached to it. Wampum belts served in New England and the middle region as money and as symbols in the ratification of treaties. [12] The Chippeways had an institution called by a term signifying "to enter one another's lodges," [13] whereby a truce was made between them and the Sioux at the winter hunting season. During these seasons of peace it was not uncommon for a member of one tribe to adopt a member of another as his brother, a tie which was respected even after the expiration of the truce. The analogy of this custom to the classical "guest-friendship" needs no comment; and the economic cause of the institution is worth remark, as one of the means by which the rigor of primitive inter-tribal hostility was mitigated.

But it is not necessary to depend upon indirect evidence. The earliest travellers testify to the existence of a wide inter-tribal commerce. The historians of De Soto's expedition mention Indian merchants who sold salt to the inland tribes. "In 1565 and for some years previous bison skins were brought by the Indians down the Potomac, and thence carried along-shore in canoes to the French about the Gulf of St. Lawrence. During two years six thousand skins were thus obtained." [14] An Algonquin brought to Champlain at

Quebec a piece of copper a foot long, which he said came from a tributary of the Great Lakes.[15] Champlain also reports that among the Canadian Indians village councils were held to determine what number of men might go to trade with other tribes in the summer.[16] Morton in 1632 describes similar inter-tribal trade in New England, and adds that certain utensils are "but in certain parts of the country made, where the severall trades are appropriated to the inhabitants of those parts onely." [17] Marquette relates that the Illinois bought firearms of the Indians who traded directly with the French, and that they went to the south and west to carry off slaves, which they sold at a high price to other nations.[18] It was on the foundation, therefore, of an extensive inter-tribal trade that the white man built up the forest commerce.[19]

EARLY TRADE ALONG THE ATLANTIC COAST.

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The chroniclers of the earliest voyages to the Atlantic coast abound in references to this traffic. First of Europeans to purchase native furs in America appear to have been the Norsemen who settled Vinland. In the saga of Eric the Red [20] we find this interesting account: "Thereupon Karlsefni and his people displayed their shields, and when they came together they began to barter with each other. Especially did the strangers wish to buy red cloth, for which they offered in exchange peltries and quite grey skins. They also desired to buy swords and spears, but Karlsefni and

Snorri forbade this. In exchange for perfect unsullied skins the Skrellings would take red stuff a span in length, which they would bind around their heads. So their trade went on for a time, until Karlsefni and his people began to grow short of cloth, when they divided it into such narrow pieces that it was not more than a finger's breadth wide, but the Skrellings still continued to give just as much for this as before, or more."[\[21\]](#)

The account of Verrazano's voyage mentions his Indian trade. Captain John Smith, exploring New England in 1614, brought back a cargo of fish and 11,000 beaver skins.[\[22\]](#) These examples could be multiplied; in short, a way was prepared for colonization by the creation of a demand for European goods, and thus the opportunity for a lodgement was afforded.

NEW ENGLAND INDIAN TRADE.

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The Indian trade has a place in the early history of the New England colonies. The Plymouth settlers "found divers corn fields and little running brooks, a place ... fit for situation,"[\[23\]](#) and settled down cuckoo-like in Indian clearings. Mr. Weeden has shown that the Indian trade furnished a currency (wampum) to New England, and that it afforded the beginnings of her commerce. In September of their first year the Plymouth men sent out a shallop to trade with the Indians, and when a ship arrived from England in 1621 they speedily loaded her with a return cargo of beaver and lumber.[\[24\]](#) By frequent legislation the colonies