

Arrival Materialism

Anglo-American impact on the environment was limited before 1795. Confined to stations and towns with a small population, they had few opportunities to clear forests for farmland. Events were set into motion though that would transform the landscape. In particular, Anglo-Americans started to participate in the lingering fur trade of the French and Native Americans, commoditizing animals and beginning many species' removal from Illinois. Early capitalism developed, setting the stage for future changes.

The Fur Trade and Hunting

Pre-American Arrival Fur Trade

The start of the fur trade in Illinois predated Anglo-American arrival by nearly a century. It formed the backbone of the French economy in not just Illinois, but also throughout their North American colonies. St. Louis and the early French towns in the American Bottom prospered because the region's geography made it a confluence of Native groups along the Missouri, Mississippi, Illinois, and Wabash Rivers, as well as Indians from the



A product of the fur trade: a felt hat made out of beaver fur in a Canadian museum. [Image from Wikimedia Commons.](#)

Great Lakes, providing access to furs throughout the Midwest.¹ The basic function of the fur trade was simple: Native Americans hunted animals such as beaver, mink, and deer for their fur, then visited the French traders at their posts to trade the fur for European goods such as knives, kettles, hatchets, and guns. The traders would then send the furs to Europe to be manufactured into fine clothing. Especially popular among Europeans were beaver felt hats. It was a very profitable business for all participants including Native Americans, at least initially. Though the fur trade began with simple exchanges between French and Native American fishermen, increasing profit and complexity created firms that dealt exclusively in fur trading.²

Cronon spends a whole chapter on the ecological and economic implications of the fur trade in New England, which were undoubtedly similar in the Midwest where the fur trade played an even larger role in the economy. Initially New England Indians incorporated the fur trade into existing trade systems – in which material exchanges formed a crucial part of diplomatic and kinship relations. Trade goods were also a means of displaying status. As a result, Indians often used goods for Indian cultural purposes instead of European practical purposes, such as wearing brass and copper jewelry made from European kettles.³ The influx of European goods was not groundbreaking so much because of their technological use, but because of their exoticism and initial rarity. In New England, Indians used the new European goods as a means to maintain or expand political power in the aftermath of disease epidemics that wiped out perhaps 90 percent of Indian populations in New England.⁴

Illinois too underwent political turmoil around the same time, as the Illiniwek suffered their own smallpox epidemics resulting from close contact with the French, combined with warfare with other Indian groups.⁵ The fur trade was thus the means of the Illiniwek to both maintain their alliance with the French and establish status and political power.



A victim of the fur trade: the North American beaver. [Image from Steve Hersey.](#)

Indian demand for European goods both made them participants in the growing global, capitalist economy and shifted their ecological impact. Before European arrival, Native Americans had little reason to hunt fur-bearing animals on a large scale. They only killed animals for what they needed for food, clothing, and other use, rarely if ever for trade. As a result, animal populations remained stable, “less the result of enlightened ecological sensibility than of the Indians’ limited social definition of ‘need.’”⁶

Yet with the need for European goods for political power and with furs the only way to obtain these goods, Indians ravaged various animal populations throughout North America. Though

Europeans were the architects of the system, Indians were the primary instrument of destruction. As a result, various animals were on their way to disappearing from Illinois before Anglo-Americans even arrived.

Undoubtedly not all Indians participated in the fur trade. Some actively resisted French dominance in Illinois, such as the Kickapoo and Fox. Even those that did participate were not aware of the ramifications of the fur trade and ultimately became victims as well, becoming economically dependent on the French and losing a major part of their subsistence as animal populations depleted.⁷ For no tribe was this truer than the French's closest ally, the Illiniwek, who went from the dominant confederation in Illinois to a population decline of 98 percent, the result of disease, warfare, economic dependency, and a loss of their traditional subsistence practices.⁸

Anglo-Americans and the Fur Trade

Though the French were gradually abandoning Illinois when Anglo-Americans first arrived in the 1780s, the fur trade was still thriving. St. Louis was growing as a major hub of fur trading. In 1766, Pierre Laclède of St. Louis was receiving most if not all of the furs from Indians near the Missouri River, the upper Mississippi River, the Illinois River, and southern Lake Michigan.⁹ Yet there was a notable gap in fur trade coverage: southern Illinois. Most Native Americans resided in northern Illinois in the 1780s and 90s, and, according to Reynolds, they rarely hunted around white settlements in southern Illinois. Only the Illiniwek remained in the American Bottom, and they rarely went out to hunt, according to Reynolds. Unmolested by the fur trade, animals in southern Illinois were fairly numerous upon Anglo-American arrival.¹⁰

Reynolds mentions a number of animals fairly common on his arrival in 1800: bears, deer, raccoon, musk rats, and various birds, including swans. Less common, though Reynolds saw them, were beaver, otter, and elk. Reynolds had heard of buffalo sightings near the head of Big Muddy River in southern Illinois, but he never saw one.¹¹

With Anglo-Americans taking shelter in stations or villages from fears of Indian attacks, agriculture remained rudimentary. Though they had livestock and planted crops, Anglo-Americans were more dependent on hunting for subsistence before the War of 1812 and

especially before relative Indian peace in 1795. Reynolds further states that Anglo-Americans traded in furs themselves. Though he does not explicitly state it, it is likely that Anglo-Americans traded with the French in Kaskaskia and Cahokia, who further traded with St. Louis. As Reynolds writes, “Peltries and furs were the staple articles of the country, and were as current and as good as bank paper is at this time.” Deer skin with the hair shaved off was worth \$1 for three pounds. He further writes, “Books kept, and notes made in this manner were the common practice of the people, which answered for the standard of business; as the present age [1850s] has made the coin of the United States the measure of value.”¹²

Initially Anglo-Americans hunted for three reasons: food and other immediate uses, trading fur and skins for profit, and sport.

Reynolds writes that he and his brothers hunted “considerably” in the early days of the frontier, which would have been in the 1800s before the War of 1812. Though they gained food and profit from the hunt, Reynold writes that he “possessed a fever for hunting,” though admits he was not very good at it.¹³ In addition to satisfying the needs of the settlers, hunting was an avenue to take out fear and aggression from Indian warfare and an alien landscape on nature. Even if they were not able to kill Indians, they could tame the wilderness by killing the animals that Indians relied on.

Increasingly settlers began to hunt for a fourth reason: protecting livestock and agriculture. Predators in particular such as wolves and coyote were targeted because they would prey on livestock. This practice was not widely common until after 1795, so I will address this type of hunting in the future.

Hunting however was not the sole cause of the decrease in wildlife. Loss of old growth forests and prairies to agricultural fields meant that animals lost habitat and either died off or migrated to other states. I will also discuss this in future eras.

Early Capitalism in the American Bottom

Though it is apparent that they played a part in the fur trade, future Whiteside researchers will need to determine Anglo-Americans’ precise role in the fur trade. Regardless, it is clear that,

even from the beginning, Anglo-Americans did not have just a subsistence economy. The French certainly never did; from the beginning their colonial model was to send and receive goods from Canada and France. Compared to the French, Anglo-Americans were much more self-sufficient, making their own clothes and tools with limited trade to the east. Americans were further barred from trading on the Mississippi River until 1795.¹⁴ Additionally, when compared to the commercial economy of the mid-nineteenth century Metro East, the frontier American Bottom hardly seems capitalist at all.

Yet comparing the frontier American Bottom to pre-Columbian Native American society reveals the seeds of a capitalist economy present from the arrival of the first Anglo-Americans. George Rogers Clark wrote in 1779 of his hope for “a flourishing Trade” in the Illinois Country, along with highlighting both the natural beauty of the American Bottom and the



Commercial shipping in 1770s Salem, Massachusetts; likely the sort of trade Clark had in mind for Illinois. [Image from Wikimedia Commons.](#)

potential to farm and raise cattle.¹⁵ Of course, trade does not make an economy capitalist by itself; human beings have traded valued goods for millennia. Capitalist trade is distinguished by its emphasis on profit. Using the fur trade as an example, fur traders sought fur from Native Americans not to use the fur themselves, but to sell the fur for a price.¹⁶ Capitalism thrived well by 1779 in the eastern states, and that sort of trade was what Clark envisioned for Illinois.

Yet capitalism took time to fully reach Illinois. Capitalist traits of Anglo-Americans may have been limited in the 1780s and early 1790s in the American Bottom, but a market economy had thrived among the French for more than a century. This provided a capitalist blueprint for Americans who came to build onto this economy, as seen in settler and merchant William Morrison. He migrated to the French town of Kaskaskia from Philadelphia in 1790, which Reynolds calls “one of the largest towns west of the Alleghany Mountains” at the time and had a “central position for commerce.” Reynolds writes that Morrison “was the head and front of almost all the commercial operations of Illinois and upper Louisiana during a long series of

years.” While Reynolds perhaps exaggerates, Morrison formed a partnership with his uncle in Philadelphia, Guy Bryant, and created the firm Bryant & Morrison. Morrison went on to increase the capitalist flavor of the American Bottom.¹⁷ We will revisit him in future eras.

An economy based on capital profit and not just subsistence would have a profound impact on the ecology of the American Bottom. Indians and French initially began this process with the fur trade, in which fur-bearing animals changed from food and clothing to a priced commodity. No matter how much the Illiniwek valued the beaver or mink rat, the pressing need for European goods outweighed ideology. Anglo-Americans continued to hunt animals both for food and profit and began to hunt animals that threatened their growing agriculture. As capitalism expanded, more of nature would turn into a commodity. For how this process continued after relative Indian peace in 1795, see [Goshen Materialism](#).

For the ideology of Anglo-Americans in this era, see [Arrival Ideology](#).

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1. Jay Gitlin, [The bourgeois frontier: French towns, French traders, and American expansion](#). (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2010), 15.
 2. Robert E. Warren, [“Illinois Indians and French Colonists: Cultural Collaboration and Change.”](#) Illinois History Teacher 11:1 (2004), 29 - 38; Peter Saundry (topic editor), [Economic history of the North American fur trade, 1670 to 1870](#). Encyclopedia of Earth. Ed. Cutler J. Cleveland. (Washington, D.C.: Environmental Information Coalition, National Council for Science and the Environment, last updated 2012).
 3. William Cronon, [Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England](#). (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 93.
 4. [Ibid., 94.](#)
 5. Warren, [“Illinois Indians and French Colonists.”](#) 29 - 38.
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 7. [Ibid., 107.](#)
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 9. [Gitlin, 16](#)
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 11. [Ibid.](#)
 12. [Ibid., 86.](#)
 13. [Ibid., 87 - 88.](#)
 14. James E. Davis, [Frontier Illinois](#). (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 103.

15. George Rogers Clark. [George Rogers Clark to George Mason, November 19, 1779](#). Letter. From Illinois State Historical Library, *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 154.

16. [Cronon. 75 - 76](#).

17. John Reynolds, [The pioneer history of Illinois](#) (Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1887), 160 - 161.