

PELTS and PALISADES

Table of Contents

The Author

Preface

PELTS and PALISADES

I Royal Robes and Beaver Hats

II Vikings and Skraelings in Vinland

III Codfish Land Spawns a Fur Frontier

IV Samuel de Champlain Lights a Blaze of Red Terror

V England Moves to Extend Her Realm

VI Captain John Smith Takes to Trade

VII The Dutch Profit by a Mutiny

VIII Conception of New England

IX The Pilgrims Rely on God and Beaver

X A Border Fixed on the Coast of Maine

XI The Bay of Virginia

XII Kent Island and the Backside of Virginia

XIII New Netherland's South River

XIV Swedish Interlude On the Delaware

XV New Netherland Threatened Without and Within

XVI The English Close Their Coastal Ranks

XVII Westward the Fur Frontier of America

The Author

Nathaniel C. Hale graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1925. After serving in the Army, he resigned his commission to enter business, but joined the Army again on the outbreak of World War II. He was Commandant of an Officers Training School prior to overseas duty with the Signal Corps. Since the war, Colonel Hale has become well known as an author and historian. In 1952 he received the annual award of the Society of Colonial Wars in New York for his book, VIRGINIA VENTURER, which was cited as the outstanding contribution of the year in the field of American colonial history. Colonel Hale and his wife, both of Southern birth, make their home in the Rittenhouse Square section of Philadelphia and spend part of their summers at their cottage in Cape May, New Jersey.

*A Biography of William Claiborne
1600-1677*



**THE FUR TRADE FURNISHED THE MEANS OF CONTACT
BETWEEN WIDELY DIVERGENT CULTURES.**

To My Grandchildren

Preface

THE story of fur is as old as the story of man. Some brief account of ancient man's quest for fur is included in the beginning of this book. However, the main narrative is concerned with the rivalry for pelts in early America.

The discoverers of our country came here looking for gold. They found it in fur. After that the fur trade formed the pattern of exploration, trade and settlement. It sustained the colonies along the Atlantic seaboard until they could be rooted in agriculture and it was a controlling factor in the westward movement of our population.

In the seventeenth century there was a seemingly insatiable demand in Europe for beaver pelts, inflated in no small degree by early laws prohibiting the use of cheaper furs in hat making. Since there was an apparently inexhaustible supply of these pelts in America, the fur trade quickly became the economic lifeblood of the colonies. On it was laid the cornerstone of American commerce.

On it, too, was laid the cornerstone of European imperialism on this continent, the prosecution of which was largely motivated by the energies of the mercantile classes of the nations involved. The merchants, their factors, and the fur traders, shaped colonial policies. The statesmen only signed the implementing documents.

It was the trader in quest of beaver who first met and conducted diplomatic relations with the Indians and who first challenged the claims of competing nations. Indeed, it was this fur trader in the wilderness, making allies and building palisaded trading posts, or forts, who determined colonial borders and who largely influenced the outcome of the imperialistic struggle for the continent.

That struggle culminated in the French and Indian War and that is the event which ends the story in this book. *Pelts and Palisades* does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of the early American fur trade. Its only intent is to illustrate in narrative form the significant effect of that trade on the genesis of America and the westward movement of its people.

Included in the narrative are frank accounts of merchants and traders among our founding fathers who built their fortunes or their reputations on fur. As all the men who were prominent in this activity could not be named, only meaningful case histories that point up the pattern of the early fur trade have been cited. Fortunately, there are local histories, county and state, that do name most of these truly pioneer Americans and credit them with their individual accomplishments.

The era of the early fur trade, typified by the white trader and the Indian hunter, began drawing to a close after the French and Indian War. The white trader then became the trapper and a whole new conception of the fur trade in America developed as the frontier rolled across the plains and on to the Rocky Mountains. Today we may be on the threshold of still another era, that of the fur farmer.

In any case the fur industry continues to be big business in this country, total activity at all levels—raw furs, dressing and dyeing, and retail sales—being estimated at about one billion dollars. After exporting some twenty million dollars worth of domestic pelts, the United States annually consumes around two hundred million dollars worth of raw furs altogether—this, according to a recent bulletin of the Department of Commerce. About fifty percent of this consumption is imported.

Our imports are chiefly Persian lamb and caracul, mink, rabbit and squirrel. While the fur farms of this country produce great quantities of mink, fox, chinchilla and nutria, our principal domestic production of wild furs consists of muskrat, opossum, raccoon and mink. All other wild furs including “King Beaver” of colonial times run far behind this field.

Curiously enough, the lowly, unwanted muskrat of the seventeenth century is now the “King” of the wild furs. Its main domicile is the State of Louisiana. Because of the muskrat’s residence there Louisiana produces many more pelts, all fur-bearing animals included, than any other state in the union. Southern Louisiana is in fact one of the most important fur producing areas on our continent. In that section alone there are approximately twenty thousand local trappers of muskrat, mink, otter and raccoon.

Altogether there are two million full or part-time trappers in the United States, bringing in about twenty million pelts a year. There are also some twenty thousand or more fur farms contributing several million pelts annually, although fur farming had its inception in this country not much more than thirty-five years ago. Additionally, there are the raw fur

imports. To transform all these pelts into dressed and dyed furs and retail them to milady calls for the services of thousands of additional people at manufacturing, jobbing and dealer levels.

Even as in ancient times such a great outpouring of commercial energy and money for fur is mainly decreed by fashion. The arbiters of fashion are fickle of course, but at a recent showing of designer collections for women in New York it was said that fur and fur trimmings were everywhere, with mink currently in most popular favor. As one newspaper correspondent reported, hats were made of fur or trimmed with it; coats were collared, cuffed, bordered or lined with it; suits wore wide fur collars and revers; and evening gowns had deep hemline borders of fur. And not so long ago in the *New York Times* appeared a full page advertisement for a chair upholstered in fur, "the world's most sumptuous hostess chair ... lavished with the enchanting elegance of genuine mink!"

The author wishes to acknowledge the many kindnesses of those who have been helpful to him. He is much indebted to the staffs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. He is also indebted to members of the General Society of Colonial Wars, the Netherlands Society, the Colonial Society of Pennsylvania and the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia who have assisted him in many ways. From papers he has delivered before these groups has come much of the material used in this book. The author is also very grateful to Professor Arthur Adams of Boston, Massachusetts for his criticism and advice.

A bibliography of the works consulted in the preparation of the manuscript is appended, special acknowledgement being due to Doctor Amandus Johnson of Philadelphia for his published documentations of the Swedish fur trade in the Delaware valley.

And, to his wife, Eliska, the writer of this book is very thankful for her patient understanding during the many week ends that he spent on the manuscript.

NATHANIEL C. HALE

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1959.

PELTS and PALISADES

*Friend, once 'twas Fame that led thee forth
To brave the Tropic Heat, the Frozen North;
Late it was Gold, then Beauty was the Spur;
But now our gallants venture but for Fur.*

JOHN DRYDEN, 1672.

I

Royal Robes and Beaver Hats

IT might be said that man's first true possession was the fur skin of an animal.

Prehistoric mankind prowled the earth seeking food, shelter and mates—only those needs intended by nature to preserve him and to perpetuate his species. He had no accumulated wealth. Even his first crude weapons, rocks and sticks, were expendable. He had nothing material to treasure until he began to acquire coverings for his body.

Body coverings must have become useful to primitive man in the last glacial period, during the very evolution of human society. His earliest needs were doubtless served by the pelts of such cold-climate animals as the reindeer and the bear. Once *Homo sapiens*, stretched out on the floor of a chilly cave, experienced the warmth of fur skins accumulated from these animals that he had eaten, it could have been but a short step to using pelts as clothing. All the world was not cold however.

In the middle latitudes early man knew little of thickly furred animals, and had less need for warm garments. He used foliage, grasses and eventually goat and sheep skins as skirts to hide his uncleanness. It was probably no more than modesty, a primal sense of shame, that first prompted him to cover himself. Later, as he learned to shape and weave and to appreciate his art, he fashioned his clothing for adornment.

Then it was that pelts stripped from bowed chiefs of the colder countries came to be prized as rarities of beauty and usefulness, as kingly trophies. Conquerors adopted them as ornaments and symbols of victory and power. Fur became prime loot. For many generations of man, while contacts between peoples remained essentially war-like, prize pelts from the farthest corners of the known world were brought home by warriors as evidence of their prowess and as tribute to their rulers.

Some rulers among the rising civilizations of the ancient world made extravagant use of fur skins, especially the brightly hued pelts of the big cats.

Tradition has it that the voluptuous Assyrian queen, Semiramis, acquired eight thousand tiger skins during a plundering campaign in India. Presumably, much of this loot was used to decorate the palace and hanging gardens of sinful Babylon which this storied enchantress is supposed to have founded.

Pharaohs and high priests of ancient Egypt used quantities of lion, leopard and panther skins as ornamental and ceremonial pieces. Men of high position draped these colorful pelts over their shoulders, tying the paws in the back with ribbons. The tail of the lion was appended animal-fashion by pharaohs to impart the beast's qualities to the wearer, and warriors stretched their frame-wood shields with leopard skins. Extant today is a wall painting on a tomb of the eighteenth dynasty which shows tax-paying Ethiopians bearing their tribute of pelts to an Egyptian king.

And, when barter finally joined hands with a war as a better means of contact between peoples, it was fur that helped bring it about. Evidence of such military commerce emerges from the mists of Greek antiquity. The legend of Jason and his quest for the Golden Fleece is in all likelihood the fanciful story of a fur trading expedition in the thirteenth or fourteenth century B.C.

Some students of Greek mythology interpret the Golden Fleece as symbolism of one kind or another. However, it is specifically identified in the legend as the pelt of a golden ram and ornamental pelts are shown in archaic bas-reliefs to have been an integral part of Greek culture.

The perils encountered by Jason and his adventurers, as first related by them, were probably intended to point up the difficulties of their achievement and to help guard the secrets of their trade-route discoveries. No doubt Greek hero worship contributed to the subsequent embellishment of the legend. But, if like most other folk tradition this epic of the Argonauts had its origin in some simple fact now obscured by the telling, that fact must lie in the Golden Fleece itself. Certainly, without its existence in some form, as the object of the voyage, there would be no motivation—no story.

But of course there is a story, and a good one, even after eliminating the delightful folk-tale embroidery.

For recognition of his right to the throne Prince Jason of Greece bargained with his crafty uncle, King Pelias, to go on a dangerous voyage to the Euxine Sea in search of the Golden Fleece. Jason planned well. All the gods and great heroes of Greece came to his assistance. With Juno's help a ship called

the *Argo* was built for the expedition. According to the legend it was capable of holding over fifty men, but the building of a ship to accommodate half that number would have been a gigantic accomplishment for those days. After manning the *Argo* with heroes selected for their particular talents in sailing, fighting and overcoming special dangers of the voyage, Jason set out on his quest.

The Argonauts were involved in many perilous adventures after they left Greece. Nevertheless, they negotiated the treacherous straits at the entrance to the Euxine Sea and followed its shore until at great length they came to the country of Colchis. There they bargained and fought against tremendous odds for the Golden Fleece, much the same as fur trading adventurers who crossed another unknown sea to a New World some three thousand years or more later.

But, when Jason returned with the treasure and placed it at the feet of Pelias, the king became very wrathful. It seems the fleece was no longer golden.

This is entirely believable, whether it was lambskin or something else. Assuredly, prime lambskin, even a mutated sort, could have had no more lustre than royal baum marten, ermine, sealskin or other fine pelts available to Jason in the region he had visited.

In any event Pelias thought he had a good excuse not to keep his end of the bargain with Jason, a common enough denouement in itself, one that has been acted out untold times in both history and fiction.

That is the plot of the legend, as related only to the probable fact of the fleece's existence. How the fleece came into being, that is, how the golden ram descended from the heavens first into Greece and then betook himself to the far off country of Colchis to be slaughtered for his radiant coat, all would seem to lie in the realm of pure myth. So would many other imaginative passages of the legend as recited variously by bards who have embroidered on the tale. And, of course, the episodic adventures of the Argonauts have little or no bearing on the plot.

The story in its origin does appear to have been simply that of a Greek expedition bent on military commerce in the Black Sea, the first organized fur trading voyage in recorded history.

From the ancient Greeks, too, comes the English word which describes the fur skin of an animal. Pelt, a contraction of peltry from the old Anglo-French *pelterie*, is derived from the Greek *pelta*. A *pelta* was a half shield made of the skin of an animal. It was carried by the warriors of Greece and later by the Romans. A foot soldier armed with a *pelta* and a short spear or javelin was called a *peltast*. Hence also the verb pelt, used to indicate repeated blows by striking or hurling missiles, as against a *pelta*.

Although the Greeks had competition on occasion from the Persians and others, they drove a great trade in the Black Sea for over a thousand years. At the Bosphorus they founded Byzantium, one of the world's best known emporiums. Great quantities of fur trimmings for the tall bonnets and robes of the Mesopotamians were traded there. The felting used so extensively by the Scythians, as well as the valuable pelts

which the Israelites used as temple decorations and as offerings to the deity, all passed through this famous fur market. And of course from Byzantium came the pelts which the Greeks themselves used so extravagantly as house decorations and body raiment, especially battle dress.

After the Romans took over Greece's trade, they in turn carried on a brisk commerce in pelts through Byzantium where lambskin, marten, sable and ermine were exacted in vast quantities as tribute.

The market for pelts expanded tremendously under Rome's driving demand for luxuries. From the Slavic steppes and forests and from the shores of the Black and Caspian Seas came all manner of pelts. Furs of the finest quality—pure white ermine, black fox and silvery sable—along with silks and gems, came by trade caravan from Mongolia and Cathay, across the Asian wastes. Down the Nile from deep in Africa travelled Ethiopians bearing their lion and leopard skins. Arabian traders, having learned the law of the monsoon winds, crossed the Indian Ocean to bring prime pelts as well as spices and other riches from Hindustan and the Malay Archipelago to the Mediterranean.

Italy was the main center of the world's commerce in pelts, with the Romans reaching out not only for the far eastern trade in precious fur such as sable and ermine but into northern Europe, to Flanders and even into Scandinavia for beaver, otter and bear—and for more ermine. For ermine was becoming the garment of state wherever royalty held court, pure white ermine being held in highest esteem. Demand for this regal fur far exceeded the means of supply. Not until the Germanic

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

