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KEEPING A STORE: THE SOCIAL AND COMMERCIAL WORLDS OF JOHN
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By

Elizabeth Sherburn Demers

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ABSTRACT

KEEPING A STORE: THE SOCIAL AND COMMERCIAL WORLDS OF JOHN ASKIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GREAT LAKES, 1763-1796

By

Elizabeth Sherburn Demers

John Askin arrived in the Great Lakes in 1763 to work as a merchant in the lucrative transatlantic fur trade. By 1796, he had amassed significant personal wealth that included real estate, goods, and slaves. He also achieved social prominence and political influence both locally and within the larger fur trade milieu of the Great Lakes borderland. This dissertation reveals not only how Askin achieved such success in his lifetime, but uses Askin as a case study to examine how merchants used their social and political networks in the course of everyday business. Intermarriage with Indian women and kinship with Native groups were crucial strategies for fur trade success; so was slavery, both Indian and African, which British merchants commonly used to increase labor, capital, and social wealth. The carrying and supply trade, including agriculture, were also significant aspects of the trade. John Askin was a frontier type, whose wealth, influence, and power both created the unique characteristics of the Great Lakes borderland and ultimately helped bring about its demise at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

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Introduction and Historiography

In 1760, a twenty-one year old colonial from New Jersey stepped into a canoe and followed the British army down the St. Lawrence River during the campaign to conquer Canada. He took with him three boatloads of merchandise he hoped to trade for furs at western posts recently vacated by French soldiers and officials. Misfortune dogged his steps—his boats capsized between Quebec and Montreal, and he saved his life, “only by gaining the bottom of one of my boats, which lay among the rocky shelves, and on which I continued for some hours, and until I was kindly taken off, by one of the general’s aides-de-camp.”¹ His goods lost and unable to procure new at Montreal, he detoured to Albany to resupply. A long voyage down the Ottawa River and through Lake Huron followed until, finally, he reached Fort Michilimackinac at four o’clock in the afternoon. As he disembarked in the lengthening shadows, waves broke against the fort’s cedar pickets at the shoreline, and Alexander Henry, disguised as a Canadian, felt uneasy.

He had good reason. The Indians and interior French of the region had no quarrel with the Canadians who visited, but had not made a peace treaty with the English, with whom they were still at war. Henry had been hearing murmured threats for weeks along his journey. At the island of La Cloche in Lake Huron, he “bartered away some small articles among [the local Indians] and we remained upon friendly terms, till, discovering that I was an Englishman, they told my men, that the Indians, at Michilimackinac, would not fail to kill me.”² Consulting with his Canadian assistant, Campion, Henry “laid aside

¹ Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories, between the Years 1760-1776*, ed. James Bain (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1901), 3.

² Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 34.

my English clothes, and covered myself only with a cloth, passed about the middle; a shirt, hanging loose; a molton, or blanket coat; and a large, red milled worsted cap. The next thing was to smear my face and hands with dirt, and grease; and, this done, I took the place of one of my men, and, when Indians approached, used the paddle, with as much skill as I possessed.”³

So attired, Henry managed to maintain his disguise until he reached the fort, although he was nervous since, during a short stop on Mackinac Island, a Chippewa (Ojibwa) warrior “laughed and pointed me out to another.”⁴ He and Campion walked through the neat and tidy streets inside the pickets, past the church and the “tolerably commodious” houses, until they found one in which they could take shelter. Henry’s privacy, however, was short-lived. Some hours later, a contingent of Indians visited Henry and “with great show of civility” warned him to remove to Detroit, as at Michilimackinac, his life was in peril. But as Henry later recalled, “Though language, like this, could not but increase my uneasiness, it did not shake my determination, to remain with my property, and encounter the evils with which I was threatened: and my spirits were in some measure sustained by the sentiments of Campion, in this regard; for he declared his belief, that the Canadian inhabitants of the fort were more hostile than the Indians, as being jealous of English traders, who, like myself, were penetrating into the country.”⁵

Alexander Henry’s gamble ultimately paid off. Though he did face captivity, threats to his life, and other dangers, he and other British traders established themselves

³ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 34-35.

⁴ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 38.

⁵ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 39-40.

in the backcountry as would-be kings of the wilderness. To do so, they first had to immerse themselves in the mores of the Indians, métis, and Canadians who dictated not only the terms of the trade, but the very way of life in the Great Lakes, or Upper Country. Yet, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, these merchants and traders had not only learned to negotiate the fur trade, they left their indelible mark on its institutions and customs. Alexander Henry, John Askin, and other traders and merchants, went to Michilimackinac in the waning days of the Seven Years' war to take advantage of the transatlantic market for furs, stepping into the void left by the French defeat.

The Great Lakes fur trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the creation of French, Indian, and British traders, soldiers, merchants, chiefs, and administrators. The complex social, cultural, and political world they fashioned was one without foregone conclusions: white settlement and westward expansion were not inevitable results of European colonization; rather, for over 150 years, Indians dictated to whites not only the terms of exchange, but had a profound influence on the fur trade way of life itself, from villages, to war and diplomacy, and even to family and identity. Historians have alternately studied the Great Lakes fur trade from European and Native points of view to understand the loci of power in the trade, and its eventual decline. In this dissertation, I examine merchant John Askin as a case study to understand how, if the fur trade in the Great Lakes had been so powerful and influential, did the power of these merchants seem to diminish so rapidly after the American Revolutionary war? Askin is a compelling figure—he stands at the nexus of the French and Indian fur trade, the British takeover of the trade, and the American settlers who sought control over the Great Lakes region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Not only does Askin straddle

the different political forces at odds in the Great Lakes, but he also is at the geographic center of the conflict, with homes and stores in Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Sault Ste. Marie. Moreover, Askin is also at the center of the different cultural forces at work in the region—his first Indian wife and mixed race children, his second French wife and children, and his business and personal relationships with Indians, interior French, British, and Anglo-Americans, make him an ideal case study for the forces at work both within and without the trade. Askin is a familiar figure in the literature—the easy availability of his published papers has ensured his appearance in many books and articles about the region. Yet he has always been a minor character, cited in other works but rarely ever studied himself. Historiographically, he has fallen between the cracks of the *métis* who controlled the trade and compelled local imperial cooperation, like Madame La Framboise; imperial agents on the frontier like William Johnson; and wealthy and powerful Montreal and New York merchants such as James McGill or John Jacob Astor, whose wealth created nations. Because Askin was a man of immense regional influence and power in his time, he provides an excellent opportunity to understand how, and why, men of his ilk were able to manipulate their Native and white connections to influence the trade; and how, at the end of the eighteenth century, this influence began to slip away.

This dissertation stands at the nexus of several historiographic strands: history of the fur trade; regional and colonial history (specifically the history of the eighteenth-century trans-Appalachian West, encompassing the political and diplomatic histories of the British and French Empires); the history of slavery in North America, and the history

of borders and borderlands. These strands in turn all deal directly with the history of Native peoples and their relationships with Euro-American colonization and settlement.

Historiography of the Fur Trade

Fur trade historiography itself encompasses three competing strands—economic, social, and material culture/public history.

The economic history aspect of the fur trade is the oldest, and up until the 1990s, the most prevalent. As Laura Peers observes, “for many decades the fur trade was portrayed . . . as the introduction of European commerce and culture” in Native societies, which in turn “brought North America into a global market.”⁶ As Peter Cook likewise observes, the term “ ‘fur trade’ is often used as a kind of shorthand to describe economic exchanges over much of the continent—although the term tends to obscure the great variety of goods and services exchanged between First Nations and colonials.”⁷

This approach is also bound up in a “foundation of national history [that] emphasized the deeds of European men and downplayed the roles of Native peoples,” particularly of Canada, but also to a lesser extent of the United States.⁸ Harold Innis and W. J. Eccles are the fathers of the economic history of the fur trade and its foundations in

⁶ Laura Peers, “Fur Trade History, Native History, Public History: Communication and Miscommunication,” in *New Faces of the Fur Trade*, ed. Jo-Ann Fiske, Susan Sleeper-Smith, and William Wicken (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 103.

⁷ Peter Cook, “Symbolic and Material Exchange in Intercultural Diplomacy: The French and the Hodenosaunee in the Early Eighteenth Century,” in *New Faces of the Fur Trade* (see note 6) 75.

⁸ Peers, “Fur Trade History,” 104. See also Bethel Saler and Carolyn Podruchny, “Glass Curtains and Storied Landscapes: The Fur Trade, National Boundaries, and Historians,” in *Bridging National Borders*, ed. Andrew Graybill and Benjamin Johnson, (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

Canadian history.⁹ They were historians “for whom the transhistorical imperatives of market forces and technological improvement determined the political behaviour of Native groups. . . .”¹⁰ In their hands, and others who wrote histories of the Northwest Company and Hudson’s Bay Company, the Canadian expansion south and west occurred in an international framework of a staple economy that not only formed modern Canada, but gave Canadians some of their most cherished cultural symbols—the beaver and the voyageur.¹¹

Yet, in the last forty years, fur trade historiography has radically shifted toward social history, emphasizing the centrality and agency of Native peoples. Nevertheless, “economic relations and cultural accommodation remain an important theme in fur trade studies.”¹² Held roughly every five years, the North American Conference on the Fur Trade has been highly influential in this shift, providing a forum for historians not only to explore the new social history, but to place it in the larger context of fur trade, economic, national, and Native history generally.¹³ “State of the Field” essays ground several

⁹ See in particular, Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956); W. J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier, 1543-1760*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992); W. J. Eccles, “The Fur Trade and Eighteenth-Century Imperialism,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. (hereafter *WMQ*), 40, no. 3 (July 1983), 341-62; see also Michael Bliss, *Northern Enterprise: Five Centuries of Canadian Business* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990).

¹⁰ Cook, “Symbolic and Material Exchange,” 75-76.

¹¹ See, e.g. Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957); E.E. Rich, *Hudson’s Bay Company, 1660-1870* (New York: MacMillan, 1960); E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967); Peter C. Newman, *Company of Adventurers* (New York: Viking, 1985), among others.

¹² “Introduction,” *New Faces of the Fur Trade* (see note 6), 2.

¹³ See also Dale Lowell Morgan et al., eds., *Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1967); Malvina Bolus, ed., *People and Pelts: Selected Papers of the Second North American Fur Trade Conference* (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1972); Carol M. Judd and Arthur Ray, eds., *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference* (Toronto: University

volumes, but most particularly the Proceedings of the Third, Fifth, and Sixth meetings. In 1978, Sylvia Van Kirk heralded this shift with her talk on four influential dissertations, including her own, that put Indians and, specifically, Indian and métis women, at the center of fur trade studies.¹⁴ In 1994 Dean Anderson characterized this shift as a change in focus from a Euro-centric to a Native-centric approach to historical inquiry.¹⁵ And in the same volume, Canadian government historian Michael Payne questioned how the new social history of Native people in the fur trade was interpreted quite literally “on the ground” at national historic sites.¹⁶ Payne observed that the emphasis on fur trade historiography was shifting away from the economic to the material cultural interpretative aspects. In other words, the performance space of historical interpretation brought artifacts and objects into the forefront in a very visual representation of how traditional economic and nationalist fur trade historiography melded with the new social history. Five years later, in the sixth volume, *New Faces of the Fur Trade*, Laura Peers

of Toronto Press, 1980); Thomas C. Buckley, ed., *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1981* (St. Paul: North American Fur Trade Conference, 1984); Bruce Trigger et al., eds., “*Le Castor Fait Tout: Selected Papers of the Fifth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1985*” (Montreal: Lake St. Louis Historical Society, 1987); Louise Johnston, *Aboriginal People in the Fur Trade: Proceedings from the Eighth North American Fur Trade Conference, Akwesasne Mohawk Nation 2000* (Akwesasne Notes Publishing, 2001); Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Roles as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands South of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998). Note that the trend has shifted so solidly toward Native centrality of the fur trade that the proceedings were published by the Akwesasne nation. Volumes six and seven are cited elsewhere in this chapter.

¹⁴ See in particular Sylvia Van Kirk, “Fur Trade Social History: Some Recent Trends,” in *Old Trails and New Directions* (see note 13), 160-73.

¹⁵ Dean Anderson, “The Flow of European Trade Goods into Western Great Lakes Region, 1715-1760,” in *Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991*, ed. Jennifer S. H. Brown, W. J. Eccles, and Donald P. Heldman (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 53-54. It is interesting that Anderson, an archaeologist, wrote an article for this volume that encompasses all three aspects of fur trade historiography, in that examined the trade goods sent by Montreal merchants to the Great Lakes before 1760.

¹⁶ Michael Payne, “Fur Trade Social History and the Public Historian: Some Other Recent Trends,” in *Fur Trade Revisited* (see note 15), 481-94.

questioned Michael Payne's conclusions with an essay that melded both the material culture strand of fur trade historiography with the social history strand. Peers visited several interpretive sites such as Michilimackinac, to see just how material culture practitioners and historical interpreters were integrating the new social history. She found ultimately that while attempts to include Native perspectives were admirable, that too often interpretations of Native involvement continue to be somewhat marginalized and that more cooperation with local Indian groups is essential. Peers concluded that "in their contemporary operational struggles, these sites remind us that the fur trade is a nexus of contested histories that continue to affect the identities of and relationships between Native peoples and members of the dominant society."¹⁷

The primary trend in the new social history of the fur trade has been not just that of Indian agency, but of Indian and métis (or mixed-race) women in particular. These historians have shown convincingly that women were crucial actors in the fur trade—through marriage they made possible the kin relationships that were necessary for trading with Native peoples. Through their skills, they brought invaluable technical expertise to the daily running of the trade, for example, canoe making and agriculture. Moreover, in matrifocal societies they often dictated diplomacy, and the release of captives. And as daughters of Indians and wives of Europeans, they embodied—literally—the commingling of cultures that came to characterize the Great Lakes villages and the growing métis communities of the region. These women and their children were "negotiators of change," and they acted as interpreters, go-betweens, and both cultural

¹⁷ Peers, "Fur Trade History," 115. While this material culture strand of the fur trade is fascinating in both its interpretive and analytical aspects, as archaeologists, Parks Canada, and the National Parks Service, provide invaluable public history and research functions, it is not as central to the arguments of this dissertation. I do, however, cite archaeological material culture evidence in chapters three and four.

and diplomatic mediators between the white and Native worlds. I will revisit the roles of women in the fur trade in later chapters of the dissertation, in my discussions of Indian slavery and in the merchant John Askin's family life.

The groundbreaking work of Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* and Jennifer S.H. Brown's *Strangers in the Blood* revealed the central roles Indian women played in the fur trade, and brought ethnohistorical methods of inquiry into mainstream historical studies. Through kinship and gender studies, primarily, Van Kirk and Brown showed that fur traders would not have succeeded without access to Native groups and the establishment of backcountry families. The Native and métis women in these families were interpreters, and they solidified the family ties that made trade possible, bore children, and provided invaluable labor, such as mending and making canoes, horseshoes, and foodstuffs.¹⁸ Unlike the economic approach taken by previous historians, Van Kirk and Brown examined the way fur traders and their families actually lived, and how these social structures affected the trade itself. These books also paved the way for later works by Susan Sleeper-Smith, Carolyn Podruchny, Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, Tanis Thorne, and others, who have investigated not only questions of gender and Native agency not just in the fur trade, but in other colonial encounters in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as well.¹⁹

¹⁸ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

¹⁹ See Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006)—Podruchny is one of the few authors to deal with masculinity and gender in the fur trade; Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers: Indians, Métis, and Mining in the Western Great Lakes, 1737-1832* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Tanis C. Thorne, *The Many Hands of My Relations: French and Indians on the Lower Missouri* (Columbia: University of

By privileging Indian agency, social historians of the fur trade have shown that Indians were not passive recipients of European goods, desires, or attitudes. They dictated not only the terms of trade, but the social, cultural, and political milieus in which trade occurred. The literature on race (or perhaps more accurately, culture) and gender in the fur trade thus reflects another ethnohistorical trend in the early history of the trans-Appalachian west and in early North American history in general.²⁰

Political and Diplomatic History of the Great Lakes

In the historiography of empire in the Great Lakes region, the diplomatic and political strand seeks to understand how British, French, and Native peoples struggled

Missouri Press, 1996); Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985) among many others. One of the core components of this historiography is the idea of race-mixing or “becoming métis” in Peterson’s words.

²⁰ “Until the late 1940s, most Native American research was produced in Anthropology Departments Then, anthropologists and historians were brought together to provide expert testimony for cases before the Indian Claims Commission. The commission was created by an act of Congress in August 1946 to adjudicate land claims by Native American tribes. The resolution of these cases required preparation of in-depth reports concerning American Indian land use and tenure. Claims to title of the lands in question were evaluated based on the testimony of tribal members and on the research of anthropologists, archeologists, and historians. The complex litigation, involving more than 800 cases representing hundreds of millions of dollars, required the services of anthropologists to determine whether specific tribes occupied the lands in question. Because evidence of the contemporary practices and locations of the tribes was inadmissible, anthropologists turned to sources used by historians—the documentary record of Euro-Americans. . . . This process, viewing historical sources from the cultural context of the subject, became known as ethnohistory.

“In 1952, after several meetings, these historically minded anthropologists organized the American Indian Ethnohistoric Conference, later named the American Society for Ethnohistory, and launched a new journal titled *Ethnohistory*. Combining the fieldwork techniques of anthropology with the documentary research techniques of historians, ethnohistory was conceived as a method to [see Native peoples on their own terms]. Searching beyond Euro-American documentary texts, ethnohistorians collected and studied oral history, artifacts, maps, and other non-traditional sources to develop a new Indian-centered narrative. During the next twenty years the discipline of ethnohistory dramatically increased the quantity and quality of scholarship on Native American history. Ethnohistorians recognized that Indian history did not begin at the moment of white contact, and they began to build a pre-contact historical narrative. Instead of Indians being portrayed as helpless pawns of colonial policies, these scholars researched and documented successful strategies Native Americans used to manipulate and adapt to Colonial controls. Ethnohistory developed a narrative of cultural change—placing Indians at the center of the narrative and making them active agents rather than unwitting pawns of Euro-American imperialists,” cited with permission of the author, Shannon Smith Calitri, “These Were the Sioux Women: Mari Sandoz’ Respectful Portrayal of Gender Roles,” paper given at the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society Annual Conference, 23 March 2001; email communication from author, 30 June 2009.

with imperial ambitions, issues of settlement and conflict, warfare, trade, and ultimately displacement and westward expansion.

If the fur trade is the basis for a historiography of nationalism for Canada, this history is the basis for the historiography of nationalism for the creation of the United States, particularly in the hands of Francis Parkman, whose work suggested the superiority of Anglo-American Protestantism and American exceptionalism, thus clearing away space (quite literally in terms of the French and Indian War) for the inevitability of U.S. supremacy. Indians were part of the picture, but less as people with agency and more as pawns of imperial ambition.²¹

More recent work, echoing that of the ethnohistorians and fur trade historians, places Indians in the center of the story to create a historiography less focused on national outcomes. Material on the Ohio Valley, the Great Lakes, Illinois, and the Mississippi and Missouri regions reveal that Native peoples had much more control over the outcomes of European imperial ambitions than previously thought. Gregory Evans Dowd's *War Under Heaven*, for example, reexamines Pontiac's War as a wide-ranging geopolitical effort (from the northeast to upper south to midwest) to force the British empire to deal with Indians on their own terms in the post-1763 landscape. Michael McConnell's *A Country Between* likewise posits the Ohio Valley as a place where "Ohio Indians

²¹ See Francis Parkman, *France and England in North America* vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Library of America, 1983); Parkman, *The Oregon Trail/ The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (New York: Library of America, 1991). The Library of America editions are testament to Parkman's towering place in the historiography of early America and to the reading of his works as literature. The University of Nebraska Press has released several critical editions of Parkman's work under their Bison Books imprint, with contextualizing essays. Several biographies of Parkman exist; see most recently, Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Francis Parkman: Historian as Hero—The Formative Years* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

confronted the challenges of living between competing colonies and empires,” and where American expansion was not necessarily a foregone conclusion.²²

Colin Calloway’s *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark*, is a magisterial effort at reading American (in particular western) history as the history of Native Americans.²³ Calloway melds place and process, and moves south to north and west to east, rather than east to west, arguing that “Lewis and Clark did not bring the West into U. S. history, they brought the United States into the West.”²⁴ By seeing Europeans on the periphery of Native life, Calloway, like Dowd and McConnell, undercuts the idea of western progress or the inevitability of the American nation-state. As Calloway asserts, “Only by considering America as Indian country can we get a sufficiently long span of history to recognize that civilizations here have risen and fallen as have elsewhere in the world. . . . Europeans arrived late—truly in the early modern era—in the history of the Native American West.”²⁵

In 1991, Richard White’s groundbreaking study, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, moved Indians to the center of the picture and made Native politics, culture, and diplomacy a force to be

²² Michael McConnell, *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and Its Peoples, 1724-1774* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 3. Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, & the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). I deal with the historiography of Pontiac’s War in greater detail in Chapter Two. See also recent literature on the Fox Wars, including Brett Rushforth, “Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance,” *WMQ*, 63, no. 1 (January 2006), 53-80; R. David Edmunds and Joseph L. Peyser, *The Fox Wars: The Mesquakie Challenge to New France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). See also works by Colin Calloway, R. David Edmunds, and John Sugden on Native peoples in the Ohio Valley and trans-Appalachian West.

²³ Colin Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). See also Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁴ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 2.

²⁵ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 20.

reckoned with for the French and British agents of empire. White argued that the middle ground itself was a process of mutual misunderstandings by which Europeans and Indians thus created new meanings and ways of understanding. Because neither side was able to use force to compel the other—because neither side was strong enough to enforce its will on the other—this mutual accommodation and attempts at understanding (creative misreading, White calls it later) created the “middle ground” process that also described the “quite particular historical space” of the Upper Country, or western Great Lakes.²⁶

The Middle Ground continues to tower over the historiography of the Great Lakes region. It is a masterwork of diplomatic and political imperial history. Yet, in the years since its publication, it has (like all great works of historiography), acquired both critics and detractors who have examined more closely the assumptions White made about, for example, refugees, and the power of mediation to solve diplomatic problems. A special 2006 issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly* invited scholars to write about the *Middle Ground's* scholarly influence. Philip J. Deloria discussed the “portability” of the concept of the middle ground to describe all Indian and white relationships, and concluded that it really only works for the specific region that White discusses. Ultimately, for Deloria, “the *Middle Ground* puts Indian people at the center of a story in such a powerful way precisely because it takes new cultural production as a central focus.”²⁷

One of White’s central arguments is that the seventeenth-century Iroquois wars created a refugee “shatter zone” for Algonquin-speaking peoples, and that one of the ways they could consolidate and regain power was to reform as refugee communities and

²⁶ Richard White, “Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings,” *WMQ*, 63, no. 1 (January 2006), 9; White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁷ Philip J. Deloria, “What is the Middle Ground Anyway?” *WMQ* 63, no. 1 (January 2006), 22.

villages that in turn could negotiate and create alliances with the French against their enemies.²⁸ Heidi Bohaker's rebuttal suggests that kinship rather than refugee status was the glue that held people together during the turbulent seventeenth century. Because of the importance of marriage, which "created geographically diverse, widespread kinship networks through lateral alliances made principally by daughters and sisters," people displaced by violence and warfare were not disparate strangers. She writes, "Anishnaabe peoples did not find, as White suggests, a world of 'danger, strangeness, and horror.' They knew, from well-established patterns, where to move and with whom to stay. How, then, could people be refugees when they were surrounded by family?"²⁹

Moreover, "Brett Rushforth also questions White's idea of a negotiated Middle Ground," through his discussions of the way Algonquian peoples deliberately used Indian slavery to foment conflict between the French and the Foxes.³⁰ For Rushforth, conflict rather than mediation characterizes the middle ground, as Indians wielded the particular tools of power at their disposal—in this case Indian slaves—to compel the French toward a course of action. In these specific critiques, Indians take on more power and more of a central role, than even White, in his thesis of the equivalencies of power, afforded them.

Historiography of Indian Slavery

²⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 1-49.

²⁹ Heidi Bohaker, "Nindoodemag: "The Significance of Algonquian Kinship Networks in the Eastern Great Lakes Region, 1600-1701," *WMQ*, 63, no. 1, (January 2006), 47,43; see also Jon William Parmenter, "At the Woods' Edge: Iroquois Foreign Relations, 1727-1768," PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1999.

³⁰ Susan Sleeper-Smith, "The Middle Ground Revisited: Introduction," *WMQ* 63, no. 1 (January 2006), 7. See also Brett Rushforth, "Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance," *WMQ* 63, no. 1 (January 2006), 53-80.

A core of this dissertation is the role of slavery (Indian and to a somewhat lesser extent African) in the larger business, labor, and social networks of Askin and other Michilimackinac and Detroit merchants. I explore the relevance and historiography of Indian slavery in Chapter Two when I introduce Askin's slave and country wife, Manette, who had been a captive of the Odawas, and whom he had purchased from a French métis trader, and again in Chapters Three, Four, and Five to show how slavery fit into the daily life of the fur trade and into the landscapes of the Upper Country merchants.

Bancroft award winning histories of Indian slavery by James Brooks and Alan Gallay view Indian slavery as a Native practice that, in the hands of Europeans, upset the geopolitics of the Southwest and Southeast respectively.³¹ Slavery, long an element of indigenous warfare, became more brutal and all-encompassing when fueled by European demands for slaves, and their value as commodities of exchange and tokens of diplomacy. Likewise, Brett Rushforth shows that Indian slavery in New France was an essential part of diplomacy and negotiation between Native peoples and the French in the Upper Country.³² Slaves could be exchanged, for example, in peace deals that either returned captives to their homes, clans, and families, or resulted in the adoption of captives to "cover the dead"—to replace family members who had been killed in warfare or by other acts of aggression.

³¹ See James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1715* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002); see also Alan Gallay, ed., *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming).

³² Brett H. Rushforth, "Savage Bonds: Indian Slavery and Alliance in New France," PhD diss, University of California Davis, 2003.

Just as in fur trade historiography, this new historiography of Indian slavery brought Native peoples into the forefront as actors and agents, rather than as the passive victims described in older literature. Moreover, this historiography has brought renewed focus on Indian slavery as slavery itself, and not merely as captivity. Yet, the focus on the agency of Indian women in the fur trade has obscured, to some extent, the enslavement of Native women by Europeans. Recent works by Juliana Barr for the Southwest, and Carl Ekberg for the Illinois country has complicated our understanding of Native women, agency, and slavery by recognizing that Indian women sold as slaves were not necessarily viewed as relatives or as intermediaries between cultures, but as commodities with an inherent value as laborers, symbols of cultural capital, and as property.³³

Western History, and the “New Frontier” of Border Studies

By putting Indians at the center of the political and diplomatic histories of European expansion in eighteenth-century America, White and others put Native history at the center of American history generally, and of Western history in particular.

Colin Calloway, Juliana Barr, James Brooks, Alan Gallay, and others who write about Indians and Indian slavery in the context of borderlands have added an additional dimension to an understanding of Native history that exists outside the constraints of national foundation stories. Bethel Saler and Carolyn Podruchny have recently examined the historiography of the fur trade against the field of border studies to conclude that the

³³ Julianna Barr, “Commodifying Indian Women in the Borderlands,” in *The Best American History Essays 2007*, ed. Jacqueline Jones for the Organization of American Historians (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 13-46; Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Carl J. Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women: Native Slavery in the Illinois Country* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2007); William A. Starna and Ralph Watkins, “Northern Iroquoian Slavery,” *Ethnohistory* 38 no. 1 (Winter 1991), 34-57.

fur trade has been as wrapped up in national storytelling as much as any other branch of history. They write, “Because of its central narrative of cultural encounter, the fur trade brought together a diversity of people who imagined the geographic worlds they inhabited in distinct ways. These insights are important to the study of borderlands because they expose the fractured and contingent meanings of national borders—they did not exist in all circumstances for all people.”³⁴

The borderlands model is most commonly used to examine identity and power relations at the fringes of modern nation states. A borderland is thus more than the geographic proximity of disparate peoples, it is also “an image for the study of connections between cultures.”³⁵ In its depiction of the interactions and resulting identity or power concerns of local residents, the borderlands model can be a useful tool for the study of those frontiers in a pre-nation state context. Moreover, the roughly 150-year struggle for political and economic control of the Great Lakes reflects the competing interests of empires and Indians, whose political and social identities were grounded in language, religion, and ethnic difference.

However, the borderlands model presupposes two conflicting tensions. The first is the permeability of the border and the resulting blurring of ethnic and social boundaries. In this manifestation, people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds intermarry and create economic interdependence, perhaps creating a new social or ethnic identity in the process, such as the métis of nineteenth-century Manitoba, or the interior French and

³⁴ Saler and Podruchny, “Glass Curtains and Storied Landscapes.”

³⁵ Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, “Nation, State and Identity at International Borders,” in *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, ed. Wilson and Donnan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

Indian towns and villages of the eighteenth-century Great Lakes.³⁶ The second is increased differentiation based on power and belonging. The identification of someone as other “implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest.”³⁷ In short, one can argue that the middle ground of cultural accommodation and interpretation is a frontier (or borderlands) coping mechanism employed by people of different cultures.³⁸

A *border* is a geographic or arbitrary political line between two states, while a *borderland* is the area surrounding that line on both sides.³⁹ Today, the border in most North American borderlands discourse is that between the United States and Mexico, through Texas, California, and the Southwest. Critics and theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Scott Michaelsen, David Johnson, and Oscar Martinez have found a rich potential for creative energy, “politically exciting hybridity, intellectual creativity, and moral

³⁶ Jacqueline Peterson, “Prelude to Red River: A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Metis,” *Ethnohistory* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1978), 41-67.

³⁷ Frederick Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 15.

³⁸ The term “borderland” rose to prominence in Herbert E Bolton’s *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest*. Bolton chronicled colonial Spanish influence in regions that later became part of the United States, arguing that Spain’s legacy to U.S. development was as important as Britain’s. For Bolton, borderland is less a theoretical construct than a descriptive geography encompassing Florida, Louisiana, and the Southwest, areas that had been considered frontiers by adherents of Frederick Jackson Turner and other anglophile historians who viewed American history as an Anglo-American march from east to west. By showing that European settlement also moved west to east or south to north, Bolton challenged this notion. Because of his emphasis on Spanish prominence, however, Bolton failed to notice the influence of Indians in creating the distinctive cultures of the Spanish borderland regions, like many of his generation. Herbert E. Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands* Chronicles of America pt. 23 (n.p.: Kessinger Publishing, 2003).

³⁹ Paul Demers, “The Formation and Maintenance of the Canada-United States Border in the St. Mary’s River and Lake Huron Borderlands, 1780-1860,” PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2001, 5-8.

possibility” among the marginalized peoples at state peripheries.⁴⁰ By taking the borderland concept developed for the Mexican/U.S. border, one can examine a variety of borderland or frontier situations, since “the use of ‘borderland’ as an image for the study of connections between cultures” has become widespread.⁴¹

Anthropologists Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson posit that “borderlands are sites and symbols of power.” For them, the study of borders (by which they mean specifically the political borders between nation-states) offers an unparalleled opportunity “to identify and analyse the networks of politics, economics and society, which the individuals and groups in border regions to others, both inside and outside their own countries.”⁴² In other words, “by examining the ways in which individuals and groups interact with each other and among themselves in situations where identity is seemingly proscribed, as along political borders, we can better understand how societies work, both internally and in terms of external relationships. The study of borders is thus the study of power relations.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Scott Michaelsen and David Johnson, *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3. See also Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999); Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar, eds., *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1993); Recently, Canadian borderlands have also received critical attention. See, for example, Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴¹ Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

⁴² Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation, and State* (New York: Berg, 1999), 12.

⁴³ Wilson and Donnan, *Borders*, 17.

Identity and power are thus inextricably bound up in border relations. Because people at the peripheries, or borders, are often assumed to have less power than their counterparts at the “center,” symbols of power become very important in border or intercultural discourse. As Calloway observes, “French outposts in Indian country were generally only symbols of empire.”⁴⁴ At the same time, these forts or symbols became means by which Europeans attempted to assert power symbolically in physical or geographic space. Moreover, as Donnan and Wilson note, border cultures tend to emphasize “transient people and displaced communities” along with people who may hold power in their societies even though they live at the margins.⁴⁵ By positing Europeans as people who lived on the perimeter of Indian cultures, Colin Calloway also taps into this idea—Europeans in Native America are far from their own centers of power, and must learn to accommodate or work within Indian social and political cultures. He writes, “Indians are not ‘people in between’; Europeans were people on the edge.”⁴⁶

Border people are thus assumed—in many cases—to have less power than those who live at the center, both figuratively and literally. In addition to the transient and displaced, Wilson and Donnan posit three types of border people: 1) people who mix freely across borders as well as within their own cultures (such as John Askin), 2) people whose cross-border ethnic ties make them culturally different or unique (such as John Askin Jr.), and 3) people without ethnic relationships across the border.⁴⁷ Thus the

⁴⁴ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 245.

⁴⁵ Wilson and Donnan, *Borders*, 17.

⁴⁶ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 313.

⁴⁷ Wilson and Donnan, *Borders*, 14.

cultures in which border people live are marked by preoccupations with individual and group identity as they relate to the seats or centers of power. As theorist and historian Oscar Martinez observes, "borderlanders live in a unique human environment shaped by physical distance from central areas, and constant exposure to transnational processes."⁴⁸ Moreover, people living at the outskirts, not only of state control but of cultural "norms" as well may seem inherently more "dangerous."⁴⁹

Ethnicity is intimately connected with the idea of borders, within the ideology of modern nation-states. However, ethnic identity and political borders have never meshed perfectly, resulting in such tragedies as warfare, ethnic cleansing, and the creation of larger blocks of displaced persons, or refugees.⁵⁰ Yet, boundaries between social and ethnic groups clearly exist, complicating efforts to theorize borders, borderlands, and border identities. Certainly, the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley with its "Sixty Years' War" from 1754-1814—a time of constant conflict between multiple Indian groups and empires—resembles this description.⁵¹ To paraphrase Fredrik Barth, social boundaries may or may not "have territorial counterparts."⁵² Fundamentally, issues of ethnicity, identity, power, and community all combine to make the "borderlands" a volatile space of cultural production, disintegration, and interaction.

⁴⁸ Oscar J. Martinez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S. – Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), xvii-xviii.

⁴⁹ In response to this, states often position symbols of power at borders. Forts, checkpoints, guards, prisons, and other symbols/ manifestations of state control stand in stark and forbidding contrast with the supposed permeability of border cultures. Colin Calloway reflects this idea when he notes that "French outposts in Indian country were generally only symbols of empire, puny trading posts that operated on Indian sufferance," *One Vast Winter Count*, 245.

⁵⁰ See Donnan and Wilson, *Border Identities*, 10.

⁵¹ See David Curtis Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson, eds., *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754-1814* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001), xviii-xix.

⁵² Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 15.

Can a borderland exist where there is no modern political border? The central tenets of border theory are thus:

1. marginalized populations who live far from centers from centers of state power
2. varying degrees of permeability, which encompass the blurring of (or moving freely between) ethnic and social identities
3. a preoccupation with identity, both personal and social or cultural
4. a preoccupation with power and the symbols of power

Moreover, borderlands have been defined as sites of creativity and hybridity and geographic places where disparate cultures meet and interact—in other words, a possible “middle ground” if one takes Richard White’s formulation as strictly process rather than place.⁵³ Historians Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron have further contextualized the idea of borderlands, specifically between imperial and Native American interests. They posit that the “conflict over borderlands shaped the peculiar and contingent character of frontier relations,” and assert that the “shift from inter-imperial struggle to international coexistence turned borderlands into *bordered* lands.”⁵⁴

In many ways, then, borderlands are similar to frontiers, which can also be defined, according to historian David J. Weber, as “zones of interaction between two different cultures—as places where the cultures of the invader and of the invaded contend with one another and with their physical environment to produce a dynamic that is unique

⁵³ In addition, border theory has come to encompass the metaphorical borders of race, ethnicity, ability, etc. —those that are more properly identified as social boundaries. See Michaelson, *Border Theory*, 1-2. For Herbert E. Bolton, this occurred in a colonial context, while for Anzaldúa and other contemporary theorists, the term borderland has specific geopolitical and social meaning rooted in Chicana/o and mestizo identity.

⁵⁴ Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” in *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999), 816-17.

to time and place.”⁵⁵ For Weber, frontiers are sites of “contention for power and resources” rather than peaceful coexistence, as his reference to invaders and invaded suggest. He argues that two levels of contention exist in frontier zones—those that are internal to the invaded or indigenous people, and those that arise between invader and invaded or between people on opposite sides of the frontier.⁵⁶ This definition is very different from the traditional Turnerian emphasis, which argues for a frontier as a line of settlement that moved continually west, repeating itself as it moves and embodying the creation of American exceptionalism. Although as Calloway observes, the term “west” itself “does echo Turner in viewing the history of ‘the West’ as the history of the whole nation.”⁵⁷ The reality is more complex.

William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin argue for a return to a definition of frontier that incorporates Turner’s philosophy on process and self-repetition, while emphasizing the linkages between Old World culture hearths in new, local contexts.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 11.

⁵⁶ Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, 12, 13. He writes, “societies that face one another along frontiers”—the word “face” is indicative of a frontier line, however. See also Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).

⁵⁷ See Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?* ed. Richard W. Etulain (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999), 17-44. Colin Calloway notes that “terms like *West* and *frontier* can be seen as exerting ‘conceptual violence’ on Indian peoples” because of their inherent colonialism, *One Vast Winter Count*, 14.

⁵⁸ William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992) 6-9; see also Terry G. Jordan and Matti Kaupps, *The American Backwoods Frontier: An Ethnic and Ecological Interpretation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) for a discussion of culture hearths and their impacts on frontiers.

They define frontiers as “zones of fluid, ongoing conflict and opportunity” that in turn form the basis of distinctive regions.⁵⁹

Cronon, Miles and Gitlin posit a seven-stage process whereby frontiers transform into region: species-shifting, market-making, land-taking, boundary setting, state forming, and self-shaping, or identity creation.⁶⁰ Several of these stages also appear as elements of border formation and maintenance, namely boundary setting, state forming, and the conscious creation of distinct identities. Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin argue that boundary setting was in effect, “the very essence of frontier life.”⁶¹ Yet, unlike Barth, who suggests that ethnic and social boundaries inspired political boundaries, they assert that territorial boundaries defined the economic, political, and social boundaries that organized trade, power, and belonging. “Boundaries on the land,” they write, “are ultimately boundaries between people.”⁶²

If boundary setting characterized the frontiers, then in this model, state formation signaled the end of frontier dynamics since, “the extension of state power was the clearest possible indication of successful invasion and a retreating frontier.”⁶³ The growth of the state inspired in turn the creation of national, regional, and local identities, which their fashioners imbued with particular meaning. While this emphasis centers on the lifecycle

⁵⁹ Cronon et al., *Under an Open Sky*, 7.

⁶⁰ Cronon et al., *Under an Open Sky*, 11-18.

⁶¹ Cronon et al., *Under an Open Sky*, 15.

⁶² Cronon et al., *Under an Open Sky*, 16, 18. Richard White disagrees with this, noting, “where such boundaries started—where social worlds separated and merged—was a matter decided in the daily course of social action. What people did and did not do, whom they saw and whom they ignored, whom they praised and whom they censured revealed the boundaries,” *Middle Ground*, 451.

⁶³ Cronon et al., *Under an Open Sky*, 17.

of a frontier, these processes continued in the borderland regions at the periphery of state control.

Yet, frontiers are different than borders or borderlands because frontiers are transitory states—they have definite temporal dimensions as Weber and others suggest. Frontiers have a processual as well as a geographic dimension, as they measure “the relative degree of settlement and economic exploitation in a region,” but also exist in a milieu with little central authority and “few formal political structures.”⁶⁴ Moreover, like borders, frontiers exist at the peripheries of power, and they have the same transformative potential as the borderlands. However, “frontiers do not necessarily separate two or more nation-states,” as many cultures can coexist along frontiers.⁶⁵ Frontiers thus involve two or more socially or culturally distinct peoples who live on the fringes of power during a period of geographic, social, and political transition. As Philip Deloria observes, White’s concept of middle ground thus shares a commonality with the idea of frontier, which has “similarly been dogged by the slippage between geohistorical place and processual concept And yet I fear that in the end the middle ground is more inclined to function like frontier than it is like race/class/gender: an elusive metaphor.”⁶⁶

In the last ten years, historians have built on the ideas of border theorists in the southwest to construct a rich literature of Native Americans who live along the Canada-U.S. Border.⁶⁷ The artificial construction of this line, is, as Saler and Podruchny observe,

⁶⁴ Demers, “The Formation and Maintenance of the Canada-United States Border,” 7.

⁶⁵ Demers, “The Formation and Maintenance of the Canada-United States Border,” 7; see also Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, 13.

⁶⁶ Philip J. Deloria, “What is the Middle Ground, Anyway?” 21.

⁶⁷ See Sheila McManus, *The Line which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Tony Rees, *Arc of the Medicine*

also constructed in the historiography as much as it is constructed in geophysical space.⁶⁸

For these historians, the placement of the border obscures the historical experiences of Native groups for whom the border has had little historical meaning; moreover, by writing history in terms that transcend nationalism, we can better critique both historical place and historical process. While most of these studies examine the western plains, Alan Taylor's recent book, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderlands* focuses on the influence of the border in the northeast, specifically in upstate New York and Upper Canada, where the Iroquoian Six Nations struggled to retain their identity and clout in the new politics of the old landscape. Taylor "examines the making of twin borders that constituted the new United States: the boundaries between natives and Indians and between the British Empire and the American Republic."⁶⁹

Thesis

This study fits squarely into the social history trends of the fur trade and North American history. By examining Great Lakes merchants in terms of their work, labor, social, and economic networks, I seek to round out that story by understanding how the fur trade merchants structured not only their daily lives, but also how they perceived the Native,

Line: Mapping the World's Longest Undefended Border across the Western Plains (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008); Beth LeDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Sterling Evans, *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the 49th Parallel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). Note also the fact that the 8th North American Fur Trade Conference took place on the Akwesasne Mohawk reservation, which straddles the border between Ontario and New York.

⁶⁸ Saler and Podruchny, "Glass Curtains," 1.

⁶⁹ Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 7-8. Referencing Adelman and Aron, Taylor describes "the transition of one borderland—Iroquoia—into two Bordered Lands."

métis, and Anglo-American peoples with whom they lived and worked. Because John Askin and other merchants had to deal in a quite real way not only with imperial contests, but with the imposition of a border in what was essentially a middle ground of accommodation, I also reference borderlands studies to discuss this transition and its significance for Great Lakes traders after the American Revolution. In particular, I use Adelman and Aron's idea of borderland into bordered lands to show how this process influenced the lives and decisions of local fur trade merchants.

This dissertation further draws on Richard White's work on the middle ground as a site of mediation and contested power, and revisits his assertion that Americans made Indians inessential.⁷⁰ For White, the breakdown of the middle ground and the unique Indian/French/English world it created came with the end of the American Revolution.

He writes:

The real crisis and the final dissolution of this world came when Indians ceased to have the power to force whites onto the middle ground. Then the desire of whites to dictate the terms of accommodation could be given its head. As a consequence, the middle ground eroded. The American Republic succeeded in doing what the French and English empires could not do. Americans invented Indians and forced Indians to live with the consequences of this invention. It is the Americans' success that gives the book its circularity. Europeans met the other, invented a long-lasting and significant common world, but in the end reinvented the Indian as other. Ever since, we have seen the history of the colonial and early republican period through that prism of otherness.⁷¹

I do not disagree with his conclusions, but I also argue that the practices of these merchants also contributed to the demise of the middle ground even before 1796, especially in the shipping, supply, and agricultural side of the fur trade. By focusing on

⁷⁰ "The middle ground itself withered and died. The Americans arrived and dictated." White, *The Middle Ground*, 523.

⁷¹ White, *The Middle Ground*, xv.

this parallel side of the trade, this dissertation provides a valuable and unique contribution to fur trade studies. Not only were supplies, food, and shipping as important as the furs, they also helped establish a network of Anglo-Americans, interior French, and Native peoples who were distinct from the wintering partners and villages that dominate the recent historiography. As White asserts, if “in the Ohio Country, American settlers were the main agents of change [then] deeper in the *pays d’en haut* it was British trading companies that altered the land and its people.”⁷² Most of the fur trade historiography has centered on either the microeconomic level or on the Indian and métis village worlds of wintering *coureurs de bois*, their powerful wives, and their families. White, Dowd, and other historians of the region show how this accommodation was essential for diplomacy, warfare, and the larger policies that made possible peace and trade—policies largely dictated by Indians. For these writers, the middle ground is the language of power. It is also the language of diplomacy—of leaders, chiefs, kings, and soldiers. Yet, by looking at the Upper Country merchants/traders’ social world, we can see that while they lived within this larger middle ground milieu, their own records indicate that for them, building Anglo-American trade/social networks were as or more important than building Indian networks—socially, politically, and financially. If they thought about Indians, it was generally as employees or slaves or suppliers, particularly in the aspect of the trade that relied on shipping and agriculture. However, the imposition of the border after 1796 caused these merchants to try to cling to the middle ground world they had initially resisted in 1760. The irony is not only could Indians not “force whites onto the middle

⁷² White, *The Middle Ground*, 476.

ground,” but that whites couldn’t force other whites there, either.⁷³ Yet, the views of his critics also find credence in my analysis of Indian slavery in the life of the British fur trade, and in the British use of kinship and social networks to further their business and trade ambitions. My own work is indebted to White, but continues this critique of a “negotiated middle ground” by showing that, through their records and business practices, and creation of active networks, merchants like Askin were more eastward than westward focused, and thought less about their “middle ground” negotiations with Indians and more about accumulating wealth and status in Anglo-America even as they relied on Indians to produce the furs that made their lives possible. Moreover their efforts to spread agriculture, buy land, and expand the farms, mills, and other pastoral structures of the Upper Country reveals a trend toward Anglo-American settlement—albeit, settlement in support of the fur trade. My extensive discussions of slavery in the fur trade further taps into the historiography of Indian slavery by showing—not its geopolitical influence—but its pervasiveness in the fur trade’s domestic and economic arenas, and the ways in which, through slavery, traders marginalized some Indians. Heidi Bohaker notes that *The Middle Ground* is “an outstanding study of how European attitudes toward aboriginal peoples changed from 1650 to 1815: constructing aboriginal people as feared and exotic others, working with them as trading partners, spouses, and allies, and finally dismissing them and their cultural traditions as irrelevant relics of another era.”⁷⁴ Even as they lived with, intermarried, and traded with Indians, British fur traders already saw the Indians as “others.”

⁷³ White, *The Middle Ground*, xv.

⁷⁴ Bohaker, “Kinship Networks in the Great Lakes Region,” 51.

While Indians were still essential for the fur trade in the eighteenth century, merchants like John Askin at Michilimackinac and Detroit had been emphasizing their Anglo-American networks at least as much as—if not more than—their Native networks, as revealed in their correspondence and diaries. Reading what the fur traders said about Indians and slaves and where they privileged their attention can give us a broader understanding of how the middle ground functioned, and why it seemed to vanish so quickly. Even though the British needed to maintain the middle ground after 1760 as part of their imperial program, they never felt as easy in it as the French. As Alan Taylor observes, the new boundary line “threatened the fur trade and menaced Canada by inviting American traders and troops to the Great Lakes, on the very doorstep of the British colonies.”⁷⁵ Only when geo-politics interfered in their daily lives did Askin and others begin to cling to the middle ground as they interpreted it. Once kings of the trade, they became minor players on the border of national histories. By showing how the arbitrary imposition of the border affected these merchants on a personal, quotidian level, I show how they as individuals grappled with the demise of the middle ground or borderland world in which they lived and worked, and how, like the Indians with whom they were so intimately entwined, tried to hold on to its character in the face of political change. The border set up a dichotomy between empire and nation-state that the mode of accommodation could not survive.

Organization

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Divided Ground*, 267.

Chapter One provides the historical backdrop for the dissertation, synthesizing current scholarship on the Indian and interior French world into which the British traders ventured in force after 1760. The Upper Country in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was, in fact, a borderland between seats of Indian power and marginalized Europeans, who existed at the edge of their empires even as they navigated an almost wholly Indian world. Chapter Two deals with the broader economic and political milieu of the eighteenth-century Great Lakes, including Pontiac's War and British efforts to force Indians into client status. I discuss Askin's entrée into the fur trade and his marriages both to Manette, his Indian slave, and his second wife, the daughter of an influential interior French fur trader, showing how his establishment of kinship ties are dictated by Indian attitudes toward gift-giving and family. In Chapter Three, I examine in detail Askin's agricultural and shipping ventures at Michilimackinac and Detroit, the importance of the agricultural end of the trade, its organization, and the ways in which its focus was as much Anglo-centric as Native-centric. In Chapter Four, I focus on Indian slavery as an element of the fur trade, showing how traders viewed Indian slaves as intimates, but primarily as commodities; and how African-American slaves were a small but integral part of the fur trade labor force in the Upper Country. Finally, in Chapter Five, I show how by the end of the eighteenth century, the Great Lakes borderland has become a "bordered land," influencing how merchants like Askin took advantage of the unique characteristics of borderlands to amass wealth and power, in what had once been a world connected, rather than separated, by water.

Chapter One: An Indian World

As Alexander Henry began to unpack his trade goods in his “neat and commodious” little house within the stockade, he received word that “the whole band of Chipeways, from the island of Michilimackinac, was arrived, with the intention of paying me a visit.” Unable to speak the language, Henry found in the fort an interpreter—a Frenchman married to an Ojibwa woman—who agreed to attend the meeting and translate. The interpreter, a Mr. Farley, warned that the Indians were likely to be hostile, even though the custom of the country required “that a stranger, on his arrival, should be waited upon, and welcomed, by the chiefs of the nation, who, on their part, always gave a small present, and always expected a large one.” Henry, appreciating the advice, readied his gifts, as well as a “small quantity of rum.”¹

The door opened and the chief of the Ojibwas, Mina’va’va’na’, bent his head and folded his tall frame into the dim room of Henry’s house, accompanied by sixty warriors, all carrying a “tomahawk in one hand, and scalping knife in the other.” They seated themselves without a word on the floor and lit their pipes, silently smoking while their leader and Farley seemed to make small talk, discussing the Englishman in their midst. The unfamiliar language danced softly past his ears. As the clouds of smoke rose, Henry waited anxiously, “enduring the tortures of suspense,” until at last, Mina’va’va’na’, wampum in hand, addressed him directly, saying that as an Englishman, Henry was an enemy of the Ojibwas, who were allied to the French. The French king was only sleeping, he said, and would come again to destroy the English interlopers.

“Englishman,” Mina’va’va’na’ continued, “our father, the king of France,

¹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 41, 42, 47.

employed our young men to make war upon your nation. In this warfare, many of them have been killed; and it is our custom to retaliate, until such time as the spirits of the slain are satisfied. But, the spirits of the slain are to be satisfied in either of two ways; the first is by the spilling of the blood of the nation by which they fell; the other, by covering the bodies of the dead, and thus allaying the resentment of their relations. This is done by making presents.”²

Henry sat quietly. It didn’t sound as if they planned to kill him, but the Ojibwa leader had more to say on the matter namely, that since Henry had come in peace and not war, the Ojibwas would consider him a friend, even though his nation was still at war with their own. They gave him a pipe to smoke, shook his hand, and asked for a drink of rum. It was now Henry’s turn to make good on the ceremony, by offering not just the cask of rum, but the presents he had prepared, smoking the pipe, and making a speech of friendship. Soon after, this good will was extended even further when an Ojibwa named Wa’wa’tam began to visit Henry’s house regularly, sometimes with his entire family, and often bringing presents. He informed Henry that, due to a vision he had received some time previously, the Great Spirit had instructed him to adopt Henry as his English brother. Henry responded, “I could do no otherwise than accept the present, and declare my willingness to have so good a man, as this appeared to be, for my friend and brother. I offered a present in return for that which I had received, and Wa’wa’tam accepted, and then, thanking me for the favour which he said that I had rendered him, he left me and soon after set out on his winter’s hunt.”³

² Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 44-45.

³ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 74.

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Yet, Henry was not out of the woods yet. Having satisfied the Ojibwas, he did not realize that he would also have to deal with the local Ottawas, who lived in the village of L'Arbre Croche, near the fort. Henry had busied himself with hiring traders and canoes to take goods to the west, when he found himself confronted with 200 unhappy Ottawa warriors. "Englishman," one of the chiefs began, "we were greatly pleased, believing that through your assistance, our wives and children would be enabled to pass another winter; but, what was our surprise, when, a few days ago, we were again informed, that the goods which, as we had expected, were intended for us were, on the eve of departure, for distant countries, of which some are inhabited by our enemies!"⁴ Having come to Michilimackinac and discovering that the rumors were indeed true, the Ottawas demanded merchandise and ammunition worth fifty beaver skins, to be given on credit, in return for their friendship. Without these, the Ottawas hinted, they would either take the goods by force or as Farley warned Henry, "put us, that night, to death." Henry, however, suspected the interpreter of being in league with the Ottawas, and arming himself, refused to capitulate. The threat, for the time, passed.

Alexander Henry's experiences at Michilimackinac illustrate the ways in which British merchants and traders first encountered the fur trade. Indians dictated not only the terms of exchange but determined the entire culture of the trade. In his first days at Michilimackinac, Henry had stepped into an Indian world in which gift giving, the calumet, and the creation of kin networks were the local institutions that allowed him access to trade. The Ojibwas, having given him permission to set up shop, sealed their relationship with him through the exchange of presents and the smoking of the calumet,

⁴ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 49.

while his adoption by Wa'wa'tam gave him a family whose ties of mutual dependence Henry would come to value highly. Henry also discovered that Michilimackinac itself was a diverse community, and that making friends with the Ojibwas did not automatically create for him an alliance with the Ottawas. All of these elements—gift giving, adoption, obligation, and negotiation—created the relationships that made trade possible.

In this chapter, I present a “narrative historiography” of the Great Lakes in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, synthesizing recent scholarship on the Indian world in which traders found themselves, and which they had to learn to negotiate successfully according to native cultures. By the time merchant John Askin died in 1815, he had amassed, lost, and reacquired a personal fortune that included land, multiple commercial ventures, Indian and African slaves, shipping, and livestock. His business and family ties connected him to powerful Native families in the Great Lakes, as well as to the most prominent members of the Montreal and New York fur trades, and the government of Upper Canada. It was the culmination of a career that began during the Seven Years' War, when he had arrived in North America with aspirations of keeping a shop, like his father in Scotland.

Men such as Askin served as the bridge between the French and Indian village cultures that were based on kinship and exchange, and Anglo-American settlement cultures based on land speculation, private property, and commercial capitalism. Yet, these traders did not operate out of a strictly European framework of behaviors or assumptions. Native peoples profoundly affected the terms of exchange under which the fur traders initially lived and operated. One hundred and fifty years of French occupation had not significantly changed the way Indians lived and worked; rather the French traders

had become absorbed into Native villages, customs, and families, becoming as Indian as their hosts in all but name. The British merchants, military officers, and traders who attempted to impose their will on the region found themselves in a foreign country. These backwoods entrepreneurs helped open the Lakes region for the nineteenth-century settlement frontier through their engagement with the local economy. Askin acted as a “negotiator of change,” using the fur trade as a catalyst for the commercial ventures that both linked and characterized the entire Great Lakes borderland, drawing together Indians, whites, slaves, Interior French, and Anglo-Americans.

An Indian World and a Middle Ground

While the Western Great Lakes region, or Upper Country, was clearly an Indian world, its contours have been shaped historiographically by Richard White’s *The Middle Ground*.⁵ White argued that Indian and European interaction in the Great Lakes was characterized by miscommunications and mutual misunderstandings, resulting in creative new modes of cultural exchange, practice, and meaning.⁶ In White’s view, the mutual European and Indian need for each other created a dynamic that privileged peaceful negotiation rather than violence, although clearly violent conflict often raged, alongside the middle ground’s tradition of negotiation. The middle ground has thus come to mean

⁵ White, *The Middle Ground*. See also Philip J. Deloria, “What is the Middle Ground, Anyway?” 15-22; Richard White, “Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings,” 9-14.

⁶ As historian Larry Nelson elaborates, “That these initial perceptions are often false is of little consequence, for out of these misunderstandings arise shared perceptions regarding the meaning of the encounter” Larry L. Nelson, “Cultural Mediation, Cultural, Exchange, and the Invention of the Ohio Frontier,” *Ohio History* 105 (Spring 1996), 74; “As members of both cultures interact, working relationship are established, and through these relationships a sense of common understanding emerges,” Nelson, “Cultural Mediation,” 75. See also Christopher L. Miller and George R. Hammell, “A New Perspective on Indian-White contact: Cultural Symbols and Colonial Trade,” *Journal of American History* 73 no. 2 (1986), 311-28.

not only the geographic space between clear Native or imperial boundaries, but is also the trope for understanding the social and political dynamics of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Great Lakes.

Indigenous peoples had lived in the Great Lakes region long before European contact.⁷ The Anishnabeg, or People of the Three Fires, were a loose alliance formed between the Ojibwas, who lived along the north shore of Lake Superior; the Odawas, who lived around Lake Huron and the eastern edge of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; and the Potawatomies, who lived further south and west in the northern lower Peninsula and along the eastern Lake Michigan shore, controlling the straits between Lakes Erie and Huron.⁸ These three groups lived along the waterways across the northwoods, including Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ontario.⁹ As Colin Calloway writes, “their world was centered on water and connected by canoes.”¹⁰ Although separated by geography and social organization, “the three nations were closely related in terms of language, beliefs, and history, and all three believed themselves to be descended from the

⁷ For additional material on Great Lakes Indians, see Emma Helen Blair, trans. and ed., *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes*, 2 vols. (1911; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Carolyn Gilman, *Where Two Worlds Meet: The Great Lakes Fur Trade* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1982); W. Vernon Kintz, *The Indians of the Western Great Lakes, 1615-1760* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965); Helen Hornbeck Tanner, ed., *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (1885, reprint: Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984).

⁸ Phil Bellfy, “Migration and the Unmaking of America,” *Journal of Ethnic History* 20 no. 3 (Spring 2001), 55; William James Newbigging, “The History of the French-Ottawa Alliance, 1613-1763,” PhD diss., University of Toronto (1996) 84; see also Charles C. Cleland, *Rites of Conquest: The History and Culture of Michigan’s Native Americans* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 86-87, 94-95, and 102 for precontact Anishnabeg geography.

⁹ Bellfy, “Migration and the Unmaking of America,” 9, 10.

¹⁰ Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 217.

ancient Anishinabeg who came to the Great Lakes hundreds of years before,” most likely from the east.¹¹

The Anishnabeg formed villages at strategic points in their territory, such as the straits between lakes, primarily to protect their resources from strangers. These villages were seasonally populated based on either agricultural production, fishing, or hunting and gathering. Anishnabeg groups utilized resources differently, based on region. While all participated in trade, Potawatomes primarily farmed, while Ojibwas relied on hunting and fishing. The Odawas engaged in agriculture, hunting, fishing, and manufacture.¹² Because their subsistence economies differed internally, the three groups were able to assist each other in lean years, when one element of the environment was unable to produce food. The alliance changed over time, but essentially, Potawatomi agriculture, Ojibwa hunting and fishing, and the mixed economy of the Odawas all helped support each other when resources failed. By the time of contact with the French, village sites at Sault Ste. Marie (Ojibwa), Detroit (Potawatomes until the early seventeenth century), Manitoulin Island, and then Michilimackinac (Odawas), secured Anishnabeg control over the freshwater gateways of the region.¹³

¹¹ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 341; for migration from east to west see Philip Bellfy, “Division and Unity, Dispersal and Permanence: The Anishnabeg of the Lake Huron Borderlands,” PhD diss., Michigan State University (1996), 41. “Related by kinship, language, and culture, the new communities which resulted from these processes became known to themselves and Europeans as “Anishinaabeg,” “Ojibwa,” or alternatively as Chippewa (in the United States) or Saulteaux (after Sault Ste. Marie, where they first met the French) (Schenck 1996; Rogers 1978, pp. 760-763),” Laura Peers and Jennifer S.H. Brown, “There is No End to Relationship among the Indians: Ojibwa Families and Kinship in Historical Perspective,” *History of the Family* 4 no. 4 (1999), 529-55, EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹² Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 46; see also 338: “Ottawa villages in the Michilimackinac region were larger and more permanent than the fishing stations of their Ojibwa neighbors, who lived to the north.” See also Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 107.

¹³ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” viii, 84, 159.

In addition to controlling access to resources, the Anishnabeg alliance served a military function both before contact and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the 1650s during the Iroquois wars, Anishnabeg peoples had fled west but gradually fought their way back east with French aid.¹⁴ Richard White identifies “a strip” of “refugee centers” on the western side of Lake Michigan and southern Lake Superior, where the Anishnabeg territories butted up against those of the Sioux.¹⁵ The lands between Lakes Huron and Michigan were, for all intents and purposes, unoccupied during the latter half of the seventeenth century, as the spread of European diseases and warfare threw disparate Indian peoples together in communities on the far side of the Lakes. Warfare and flight created the cultural mixing in the refugee villages that made up the middle ground.¹⁶ As anthropologist Charles C. Cleland observes:

As refugees, the *Anishnabeg* of lower Michigan found themselves in the company of families or individuals who belonged to other bands; strangers sought aid not as kin but as people whose dialect or language was understandable. . . . People began to come together out of the necessity of sustaining life. . . . *Anishnabeg* bands independent and self-sufficient before the appearance of Europeans were fragmented and dispersed, but the surviving individuals, families, and sometimes larger groups metamorphosed into the more inclusive social units that we now know as the Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Potawatomi tribes. . . .¹⁷

¹⁴ Bellfy, “Anishabeg of the Lake Huron Borderlands,” 73; Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 167, particularly against the Fox and the Chickasaws in the early eighteenth century. Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 339; See also Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 213-264; 334-35, 350-51; Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Richard White, *The Middle Ground*, 11. William Newbigging also challenges White’s conception of a middle ground, noting that “with the exception of the two small French forts and the few missions, the region changed little over the one hundred and fifty years of the French-Ottawa alliance.” In other words, he argues that White and others have overstated French influence in the region. Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 25.

¹⁶ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, map 2; Richard White, *The Middle Ground*, 11.

¹⁷ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 93.

White notes, “This clustering of diverse peoples . . . disrupted older notions of territory; geographical boundaries between refugees became difficult to maintain. Ethnic or local distinctions remained, but now villages of different groups bordered on each other, or previously separate groups mingled in a single village.”¹⁸

By 1701, the date both of the Great Peace of Montreal and the founding of French Detroit, the *pays d'en haut*—or Upper Country—was a world of such villages, each containing people of multiple races and ethnicities.¹⁹ White argued that these villages were composed of refugees who had fled the Iroquois wars centered around Lake Huron, and whose remnant bands joined with Anishnabeg groups further west—reforming themselves yet again along new social and cultural lines. This pastiche of refugees “came to be intimate neighbors and kinspeople” and, in so doing, utterly transformed tribal and political identities in the region.²⁰ Between 1640 and the end of the seventeenth century, Algonquin-speaking groups who fled westward, along with any Iroquoians they may have captured or adopted, created the ever-shifting ethnic and social makeup of the Upper Country’s villages and identity. The Odawas and Ojibwas had thus formed as distinct patrilineal bands out of the alliance of several smaller fragments or remnant groups.²¹

¹⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 11-14.

¹⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, xiv.

²⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 14. The cultural mixing on the middle ground was much more complex than just Anishnabeg and proto-Anishnabeg groups. White uses the term Algonquian as an umbrella term for the peoples of the region, while also specifically singling out Foxes, Sauks, Weas, Mascoutens, Potawatomes, Kickapoos, and Noquets, to name a few.

²¹ As Calloway observes, however, “the histories Indians preserved often gave a very different slant on things. Anishinabe history as passed down across the generations and committed to writing by Anishinabe authors in the nineteenth century places Anishinabe people center stage in the Great Lakes world before 1800, with Frenchmen and their actions very much peripheral to Indian-Indian relations,” Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 214.

White notes that the Algonquians “sought ties with strangers precisely because they feared outsiders.”²² In addition to the absorption of refugees and the reformation of social groups and alliances, Great Lakes Indian villages dealt simultaneously with a new class of strangers who sought not merely refuge, but riches. As White argues, the French allied the refugee centers of the Upper Country, their presence denoting a potentially volatile shift in power relations.²³ Although not present in very high numbers, French traders increased their visibility over time. Their marriages or alliances with particular families meant that those clans or villages had access to French goods, but also potentially to French guns and manpower. Moreover, the French likewise needed their Indian allies to help maintain peace, as warfare in the region disrupted commerce and destabilized fragile understandings. It proved to be a relationship of enduring social, political, and cultural significance, and it was maintained in spite of the tensions that ensued from the squashing together of such diverse peoples.²⁴

This need for additional warriors thus convinced the Anishnabeg to encourage the establishment of French trading settlements near extant village sites at Sault Ste. Marie and Michilimackinac, specifically, as well as points west. The Anishnabeg supported French posts at these locations “not because of the furs they processed, but rather because of the warriors they provided in times of war with the English.”²⁵ In a region characterized by movement, migration, and the construction of new villages and

²² White, *The Middle Ground*, 15, 22.

²³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 23, 29. The French and Indians had adapted so well together, partly to defend themselves against the Iroquois, 33.

²⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 14.

²⁵ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” ix, 2. The French-Ottawa relationship was thus primarily a military alliance.

group identities, French and Indian interaction thus found fertile soil in the cultural and social commingling of an already extant middle ground created by the migration streams of the Iroquois wars. By forming an additional alliance with the French (and after 1763 the British), the Anishnabeg improved their defensive positions against the Iroquois and other enemies, and increased their access not only to trade, but to European firearms and ammunition.²⁶ Like the older internal Anishnabeg alliance, the relationship with the French was mutually beneficial. The Odawas in particular wanted to control the flow of arms to western nations, while the French, who also wanted more control over fur, needed warriors to help them fight the Iroquois and the British. Indians additionally felt that moving the fur trade to the west gave them more control over the terms of exchange.²⁷

Thus, as historian William Newbigging notes, “when French explorers first arrived at Lake Huron in 1615, they were introduced into a system of trade and alliance which was already well established” among the Anishnabeg.²⁸ This established system, combined with the demographic imbalance caused during the seventeenth century Iroquois wars and the presence of French fur traders, allowed Indians to dictate the terms of exchange and lifestyle in the region.²⁹

Moreover, the paucity of French people meant that, unlike in British colonies, the region remained essentially Indian in culture and society. Frenchmen—and they were overwhelmingly men—lived like the Native peoples in whose villages they inhabited.

²⁶ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” ix.

²⁷ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 160, 146, 347, 167.

²⁸ Newbigging, “The History of the French-Ottawa Alliance, 1613-1763,” vii.

²⁹ Newbigging notes 5000 people living on the north shore of Lake Huron by 1200 ACE, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 47

“They ate an Ottawa diet, traveled in Ottawa canoes, wore Ottawa garments” and married Odawa women.³⁰ The dearth of Indian warriors from a half-century of conflict in the Iroquois wars encouraged intermarriage between male fur traders and Indian women. The Indians controlled access to the waterways, and the French depended on them for food and shelter. The men thus became absorbed into village life as kin rather than as strangers, allowing for the possibility of trade—in short, they became culturally Indian even though their names were French. As Calloway notes, “some two hundred *coureurs de bois* were living in Indian country by the end of the century. Most of these men were the sons of indentured servants and the underclass, and they seem to have taken to the freedom and egalitarian society they found.”³¹

Making relatives out of strangers (such as the French but also other Indian groups) was a way to make peace and quell tensions among themselves. To understand how the French and Indians, and later British traders like Askin, were able to forge kinship and trading ties, it is important to look at three overlapping components of middle ground interaction: gifts, marriage and kinship relations, and the integral role of cultural mediators.³²

Gifts, Reciprocation, and Exchange

³⁰ Newbigging, *History of the French-Ottawa Alliance*, 189, x, 102. See also Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

³¹ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 243, 213.

³² White, *The Middle Ground*, 18. The calumet ceremony was also a powerful tool for establishing peaceful relationships between strangers. See White 15, 20-22. Also see Tanis Thorne, *The Many Hands of My Relations*; Donald J. Blakeslee, “Origin and Spread of the Calumet Ceremony,” *American Antiquity* 46 (1981), 79-58.

The unexpected contours of village life gave new urgency to creating strong relationships between people who might otherwise be dangerous as strangers. Gift giving helped establish social ties and fictive kin relationships, and represented an acceptance of “the political messages and agreements that accompanied them.”³³ Gifts included material items such as beads, tools, or clothing, as well as food, and slaves.

In a world where warfare, refugees, disease, and natural resource failures were common, Indians, Europeans, and mixed-race peoples used gift-giving to shore up and especially, expand, their safety nets.³⁴ As Newbigging notes, “Gifts were given as symbols of goodwill when there were disagreements to be resolved. . . . Similarly, gifts were given at feasts held in honour of prisoner exchanges, peace treaties, or when parties of traders crossed through a region controlled by one nation or another.”³⁵ Anishnabeg and other Great Lakes peoples gave gifts to each other as a means to create, solidify, or repair social relationships, and as White observes, “gift exchanges, through the channels of reciprocity, created channels of mutual aid.”³⁶ Giving was especially important in seasons of want; feeding hungry relatives rather than hoarding ensured this reciprocity during both lean and fat years.³⁷ Family lay at the heart of exchange among the

³³ Cary Miller, “Gifts as Treaties: The Political Use of Received Gifts in Anishnaabeg Communities, 1820-1832” in *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 221; See also Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 223, and “Social relationships were affirmed by gifts,” 222, and the goal of the gift was to “expand social relations.”

³⁴ Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 222-23: “because of the precarious nature of life, Anishinaabeg people sought relationships of interdependency not only with neighboring communities but also with all categories of being that inhabited their world.”; White, *The Middle Ground*, 15.

³⁵ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 116.

³⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 15; “The exchange of trade goods for peltry was not the simple exchange process of a market economy but was embedded in the social dynamics of indigenous society,” Susan Sleeper-Smith, “ ‘Ignorant Bigots and Busy Rebels’: The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes,” in *Sixty Years’ War for the Great Lakes* (see Introduction, note 51), 147.

³⁷ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 57.

Anishnabeg, as “all social interaction is conditioned by kinship. the closer the kin relationship between people, the greater the reliance, and therefore, the implication of trust.”³⁸ Gifts between relatives, then, were more powerful and meaningful than gifts between strangers, and helped fueled the drive to create kinship ties where none had previously existed.³⁹ Ultimately, trade requires peace (a semblance of trust), and the act of trading—or giving and receiving gifts—was a way to create and maintain peaceful relations in uncertain times.⁴⁰

Gifts were thus not given between individuals per se, but between communities or other group entities represented by the individuals involved.⁴¹ In other words, a French trader who gave a gift of beads or cloth, for example, did so as a representative of the governor and the king, just as when an Ojibwa gave a gift, he or she did so on behalf of the family or clan.⁴² Acceptance or rejection of the gift denoted compliance or challenge. As anthropologist Marcel Mauss observes in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, gifts spawned “three obligations: to give, to receive, to reciprocate.”⁴³ Gifts thus also denoted inequalities in relationships. A giver stood in the position of power, while a receiver could find himself, if unable to reciprocate, in a

³⁸ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 55.

³⁹ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 56.

⁴⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 82; moreover, trade also possessed “an important military function,” Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 107.

⁴¹ Mauss, *The Gift*, 5: “It is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting parties are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another through their chiefs”; “the whole clan . . . contracts on behalf of all . . . through the person of its chief,” 6.

⁴² “When an individual or community accepted a gift, the conditions that accompanied it were also accepted.” Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 223.

⁴³ Mauss, *The Gift*, 39.

subservient position. He further notes, “To give is to show one’s superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, magister. To accept without giving in return or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (minister.)”⁴⁴

Gifts themselves were more than symbols—they were the physical manifestations of social relationships—“the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond, above all when it consists of food.”⁴⁵ Objects thus held their own meaning, and as ethnohistorian Cary Miller shows, “accepted gifts became physical reminders of the alliance itself, and recipients symbolically used them to show satisfaction or discontent with the results of current agreements and, on occasion, the need to renegotiate them.”⁴⁶ Dissatisfaction with a relationship was thus objectified in the physical presence of the gift, which was itself used to repair or renew the relationship. Likewise, the “rejection of gifts demonstrated rejection of the messages proposed at their distribution.”⁴⁷ Rejecting the gift also meant rejection of the relationships and social obligations therein.

Europeans needed to learn rapidly, that “gifts were, in one sense, the language of Anishinaabeg diplomacy, and failure to learn that language” resulted in failed diplomacy where “the language of gift exchange was comprised of complex symbols, metaphors, and linguistic cues developed over centuries to which Europeans had to conform to participate in Indian alliance systems.”⁴⁸ Ethnohistorian Peter Cook thus links gift exchange to Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, asserting, “By virtue of being

⁴⁴ Mauss, *The Gift*, 74; this dynamic also created situations where people tried to “outdo one another in generosity,” 19.

⁴⁵ Mauss, *The Gift*, 59.

⁴⁶ Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 221.

⁴⁷ Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 221.

⁴⁸ Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 232.

similarly disposed to (mis)recognize the exchange of gifts . . . Iroquoians and Algonkians were able to offer each other reasonably good symbolic and material guarantees on any investment of capital. That is, the recipient of a gift was disposed to acknowledge the giver's credit, or future claim."⁴⁹ In the fur trade, "the acceptance and use of trade goods signaled a beginning of the process of cultural change that was at the very heart of the invented frontier."⁵⁰ Gifts and trade thus became a central feature of peace negotiations on the middle ground. They were the core of the fur trade itself. Through gifts, people solidified friendship and alliances; thus, the French crown needed to give gifts to Indians even to make trade possible—a custom the British were forced to follow.

Marriage, Kinship, and Commerce

Kinship worked alongside exchange to strengthen ties of peace among disparate peoples. The formation and maintenance of kinship ties were reinforced by gift-giving as much as by marriage and children, and as Miller notes, "these exchanges created fictive kinship ties."⁵¹ Kinship denoted more than just blood or marital relations. It was the basis of Anishnabeg economic and social structure, the glue that adhered villages and made alliances possible. For fur traders, marriage into a particular family made them family. And family, ultimately, was the mechanism that opened the door for trade and the exchange of presents. As Miller observes, "if kinship could not be established, no social interaction, let alone trade, could take place, and the outsider would be treated as

⁴⁹ Cook, "Symbolic and Material Exchange in Intercultural Diplomacy," 89.

⁵⁰ Larry L. Nelson, "Cultural Mediation, Cultural Exchange, and the Invention of the Ohio Frontier," 78. See also Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 236-37.

⁵¹ Miller, "Gifts as Treaties," 223; see also Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 55.

potentially hostile to the individual or community. However, the extension of kinship ties, renewed and reinforced through gift exchange, was preferred.”⁵² Family brought with it not just new relationships or access to furs, but also obligations to kin and community that were now bonded by blood.⁵³

Because kinship was so essential, both sides took advantage of intermarriage. As Larry Nelson observes,

Kinship formed the fundamental basis of native culture. Many of the activities and relationships that made up village life as well as the trading partnerships and diplomatic allegiances that defined a band's place within the broader scope of native society were predicated upon familial affiliation. Marriage permitted Indians to extend political and economic ties to the white world and to carefully regulate the process through which Europeans became fully accepted, integrated, and participating members of Indian society.⁵⁴

Indians, thus, used marriage as a means to control the systems of exchange as well as their diplomatic and military relationships.

The traders also played important roles in their new families. Obligations went both ways, the husband offering his ability as a warrior as well as his resources in times of need.⁵⁵ As ethnohistorians Jennifer Brown and Laura Peers note, “Fur trader husbands were incorporated into Ojibwa families to varying degrees. The relationship between a

⁵² Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 223-24. See also John Philip Reid, *A Better Kind of Hatchet: Law, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Cherokee Nation* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1976).

⁵³ “Many fur traders chose to marry into the communities with whom they traded, recognizing that this intensified the obligation that communities held to their posts,” Miller, “Gifts as Treaties,” 223.

⁵⁴ Nelson, “Cultural Mediation, Cultural Exchange,” 88.

⁵⁵ “From a trader's perspective, an influential father-in-law was likely to bring in more furs from his band; from the Ojibwa perspective, marriage was a way to “[entangle] strangers in a series of kinship obligations. Relatives by marriage were expected not only to deal fairly, but to provide protection, hospitality, and sustenance in time of famine” (Peterson 1981, pp. 71, 88); for kinship relations in both long and short term partnerships see also Peers and Brown, “Ojibwa Families and Kinship in Historical Perspective,” EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

trader and his Ojibwa father-in-law might be negligible, if the trader did not understand his in-laws' expectations, or if he was moved to another post. It might also be warm.”⁵⁶

The contributions of women to fur trade society have been well documented, yet need to be acknowledged. Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown have respectively shown the vital role Indian women played in the trade, as wives and cultural mediators and through their labor.⁵⁷ Likewise, Susan Sleeper-Smith has shown how Indian women used Catholicism to formalize and solidify these kin networks through such institutions as Catholic marriage and godparenthood, thus extending Indian influence and control over the fur trade even further.

In the western Great Lakes region and Canadian northwest, French traders had had a long-standing tradition of securing access to trade through alliances with Native women. The Scottish traders who took over the Montreal-based trade after 1763 followed this custom, as did the British traders of the London-based Hudson's Bay Company, who had been trading in northern and western North America since the 1670s. Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country*, examines the relationships between the white traders of the Hudson's Bay Company and its rival, the Northwest Company, and their Native and *métis* country wives between the 1760s and 1870s. While the latter part of her book focuses on fur trade families after the 1821 merger of the two rivals, Brown also discusses the organization and familial culture of both companies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before economic and

⁵⁶ Peers and Brown, "Ojibwa Families and Kinship," EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

⁵⁷ For the centrality of women to the fur trade, see Peers and Brown, "Ojibwa Families and Kinship," EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

environmental conditions caused them to merge. While these organizational cultures were very different, wintering traders of both companies relied on unions with local Native women to further their success. In addition to the valuable networks that such alliances provided, women also performed crucial labor, interpretive skills, and companionship.⁵⁸ From the 1770s to 1821, “the wintering North Westers . . . learned that Indian women could be important in both building alliances and in helping traders survive.”⁵⁹ Many of these women were either the female relatives of locally important chiefs, who wished to secure their own fortunes through alliances with influential and higher-ranking traders. Some, however, were the mixed-race daughters of British and French men who had been based in the west for a number of years, and who had established backcountry families.⁶⁰ Because these country and (sometimes Catholic) marriages had such important social and economic rewards, they were eagerly sought after by individuals at all levels of local Indian and fur trade society.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 84. See also John Philip Reid, *Patterns of Vengeance: Crosscultural Homicide in the North American Fur Trade* (Pasadena: Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society, 1999); and John Philip Reid, *Contested Empire: Peter Skene Ogden and the Snake River Expeditions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 81.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 95-96. See also Jacqueline Peterson, “Prelude to Red River,” 41-67. Peterson suggests that in the Great Lakes, “until monopoly companies [such as the HBC or Northwest Company] successfully controlled the region, less frequent turnover among voyageurs and residence in agricultural communities appear to have created greater opportunities for stability,” 48. In other words, during the majority of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mixed families in the agricultural Indian villages in the Great Lakes showed greater stability than those families profiled by Brown and Van Kirk in their respective studies.

⁶¹ Women were also at the center of questions over religious identity in Indian communities. Susan Sleeper-Smith’s *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*, emphasizes Catholic kin networks as a crucial factor in the growth of fur trade families and the development of trade. Catholicism created family ties and obligations through baptism. This had profound consequences, particularly for women, who served repeatedly as godmothers to the children of French men and Indian women. Sleeper-Smith notes that “It was women whom the Jesuits recruited and trusted to become catechizers, instructors, and interpreters.” Women were perhaps more susceptible to conversion because of the opportunities that Catholicism allowed them to acquire status within their families and communities.

Status also played a significant role in determining the makeup of fur trade families in the eighteenth century. After 1763, British traders superseded the French at the upper levels of the trade. Brown suggests “that heads of posts were under greater Indian pressure to cement trade alliances by accepting offers of women than were the lower ranks of men, since they had greater control over the trade and access to trade goods.”⁶² Yet, *engages*, or the indentured servants of the fur trade, also desired women and often agreed to long term contracts on the understanding that they could maintain their domestic partnerships. This tension between bourgeois and *engagé* lent itself to manipulations by both sides, “using women as counters,” and providing opportunities for Indians to conduct business using women as the articles of exchange.⁶³

Pre-contact customs such as bride exchange and buying wives from enemies—practices that existed within the “larger atmosphere of violent conflict and captive seizure”⁶⁴—gradually transformed in the colonial milieu into an exchange of gifts and slaves that dealt heavily with women and children. During the eighteenth century, members of the Blackfoots, for example, who lived west of the Great Lakes in what is now the Dakotas and Manitoba, participated in a slave trade via French traders, who in turn brought their captives east through Michilimackinac and beyond. A three-to-one

Since some “women were brutally punished for marital infidelity” among the Illinois at time of contact, Catholic kin such as godparents and priests offered protection against unwanted marriages. An Illini woman named Marie Rouensa, for example, used Catholicism to strengthen her matrifocal authority by resisting a “country marriage” and insisting on a Christian union with her trader husband under the protection of the Church. She used French law and Catholic doctrine to amass sizeable property holdings in the fur trade, including by her death in 1725, “two African American married couples as well as an Indian woman slave. The three women probably planted and harvested oats, wheat, and maize. The male slaves were more likely to work in the fur trade, but they were also woodcutters, for there were nine tons of wood, cut and debarked, in the estate,” Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 21, 23, 31-32; see also White, *The Middle Ground*, 72-74.

⁶² Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 21.

⁶³ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 84-85.

⁶⁴ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 28.

ratio of women to men was normal in Blackfoot culture, and women had traditionally been “a form of and means to riches. Polygyny was associated with wealth, and a man with numerous wives gained from both their productive and reproductive capacities.”⁶⁵ The presence of fur traders who both wanted country wives as well as slaves to sell with their furs created a new opportunity for Blackfeet to use women as a source for wealth and alliances, and they were sometimes traded as commodities for wages, debts, and liquor.⁶⁶ Likewise, the Cree and Chipewyan traders who engaged in wife-exchange as a precontact custom, offered women to the Canadian-based traders to secure business relationships in the late 1700s.⁶⁷ This custom then passed on to the European bourgeois and *engagés*, who sometimes circulated their country wives and enslaved concubines amongst each other, as part of the ever-growing circle of gifts and kinship necessary for exchange.⁶⁸ Ethnohistorian Jacqueline Peterson notes that “until monopoly companies successfully controlled the [Great Lakes] region, less frequent turnover among voyageurs and residence in agricultural communities appear to have created greater opportunities for stability” in the eighteenth-century Great Lakes, unlike the high turnover noted by both Brown and Van Kirk in nineteenth-century western Canada.⁶⁹

Like Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk views the participation of Native and *métis* women as wives and domestic partners as an essential element of fur trade life and its economic

⁶⁵ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 88.

⁶⁶ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 84, 88.

⁶⁷ Brown, *Strangers in Blood* 83.

⁶⁸ Brown, *Strangers in Blood* 84.

⁶⁹ Peterson, “Prelude to Red River,” 48, 56: “Not until British and American monopoly companies engrossed the trade after 1800 and American troops exempt from community law had arrived, did prostitution and unlicensed cohabitation bedevil the stability of the Great Lakes trading community.”

expansion.⁷⁰ These unions were beneficial to both sides and helped create stability in a profession characterized by mobility and seasonal fluctuations. White men found both companionship and access to Native culture and resources. In addition, women brought much-needed skills and labor to these domestic arrangements.⁷¹ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were so essential to the fur trade that they functioned as entrées into the fur trade networks, but they also performed vital labor within the trade itself. They made moccasins, netted snowshoes, made pemmican, made mittens, caps, and leggings and “were expert needlewomen”; ultimately, “mixed blood women became renowned for their beautiful and intricate bead and quill work.”⁷² Fur trade women, particularly those of mixed race, were “in a position to take over the role of intermediary or liaison between Indian and white without becoming a source of conflict”; they were interpreters, they cleaned the forts in the spring, and they grew potatoes.⁷³ For women, marriage to a fur trader meant a potentially higher standard of living, better access to technology and a more comfortable life. As Van Kirk observes, “To become the wife of a fur trader offered the Indian woman the prospect of an alternative way of life that was easier physically and richer in material ways.”⁷⁴ Peterson does note as well that Indian and mixed-blood women were not seen as interchangeable on the part of European men, and that Indian women rather than *métis* were often valued for their specific skills.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 4.

⁷¹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 5, 13.

⁷² Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 110.

⁷³ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 110-11.

⁷⁴ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 6.

⁷⁵ Peterson, “Prelude to Red River,” 55.

Yet, marriage between a trader and an Indian or *métis* woman was more than a mere transaction between two individuals. In Native cultures, “a marital alliance created a reciprocal social bond which served to consolidate his economy with a stranger. Thus, through marriage, the trader was drawn into the Indians’ kinship circle.”⁷⁶ As Jacqueline Peterson writes, “Long before European traders employed intermarriage as a diplomatic device to ensure social cooperation, Indians were consolidating commercial and military alliances through intertribal marriage.”⁷⁷

Intermarriage was thus a precontact custom that became fundamental to the formation of the middle ground, with marriages providing access to the necessary trade networks based on kinship.⁷⁸ Because extensive intermarriage existed between the French and the Ojibwas, for example, and between Canadians (North American born French creoles) and Crees, these relationships created reciprocal social bonds, meaning that both partners and their families/cultural structures had responsibilities for each other, and also further contributed to the polyglot building of new modes of cultural/social meaning and the symbols and behavior of the middle ground.⁷⁹

Marriage was thus “both social and economic” and created “the conduit for cooperation between social groups.”⁸⁰ Moreover, marriage also intrinsically linked (was the perfect symbol for) gifts, kinship, and mediators in the persons of the women themselves. Cleland writes, wives were “precious gifts given from one family, band, or

⁷⁶ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 28-29. Van Kirk argues that, while prostitution did exist, these strong and stable unions were in fact the norm in fur trade society throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁷⁷ Peterson, “Prelude to Red River,” 55.

⁷⁸ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 4.

⁷⁹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 28-29.

⁸⁰ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 58.

clan, to another.”⁸¹ As gifts, these women were bound by the social and cultural meanings that surrounded gift-giving, even if they were willing participants in the exchange.⁸² Intermarriage created triple bonds in the person of the Indian woman as a gift, as wife/mother, and as mediator, interpreting and navigating between cultures, creating the new cultural/social keys at the heart of the middle ground. As Mauss notes “the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract . . . although in the final analysis [these gifts] are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare.”⁸³ The idea of the gift is complex, and bound up in notions of power and reciprocity.⁸⁴ For a chief, clan, or family head to give a female relative to a European trader was thus more than a simple act of exchange—it was, rather, an effort to bind that trader to him not only through kinship ties, but with the bonds of obligation and gratitude. By placing a future son-in-law in a subservient role, at least temporarily, the father ensured that reciprocal gifts took the form of tribute.

Gift-giving thus represented a related level of exchange inherent in the fur trade that had less to do with market forces than with political, diplomatic, or social relationships.⁸⁵ The exchange of gifts was an essential element of the relations between Indians and Europeans, transforming it from a purely market-driven endeavor on the European side into an activity in which Native people dictated the conditions of exchange. Gifts and marriage were closely related, and women, often a surplus in some Indian cultures, had

⁸¹ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 57.

⁸² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 5.

⁸³ Mauss, *The Gift*, 5.

⁸⁴ Mauss, *The Gift*, 74. Mauss asserts, “to give is to show one’s superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving more back is to become small, to fall lower.”

⁸⁵ Peter Cook, “Symbolic and Material Exchange in Intercultural Diplomacy,” 75.

increased value as their families and clan groups sought to pursue these economic, political, and social relationships through their daughters' marriages to the wintering traders of the north and east.

For the women who were thus "gifted," their roles as tokens of exchange became thus doubly important. Not only did they navigate the cultural differences between their birth and marital families, but they also held a large measure of responsibility for the success of the gifting process. As Mauss argues, power rests not merely in the process of exchange, but in the thing itself.⁸⁶ False gifts, such as poisoned food, were potentially dangerous to both sides, if such treachery were repaid in part or in full. Moreover, a false gift had serious repercussions, since "the pledge is not only a binding obligation, but also binds the honour [and] authority . . . of the one who hands it over."⁸⁷ As "precious gifts," wives represented the pinnacle of "exchange value" and demanded a reciprocal commitment on the part of her spouse—a commitment that resonated throughout her larger kinship ties.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Mauss, *The Gift*, 62.

⁸⁷ Mauss, *The Gift*, 62.

⁸⁸ Yet, because they had been gifts—that is, items of exchange—many European husbands thus saw their Indian wives as unfree people, an example of middle ground misinterpretation that would have profound consequences for some, though not all, Native fur trade wives. While captivity and slavery had definite gender and ethnic biases toward women and Indians, the cross-cultural nature of captivity allowed for regional variation. In New France, for example, white male Protestant captives from New England often found themselves enslaved by Catholic women landowners. William Henry Foster's *The Captors' Narrative: Catholic Women and their Puritan Men on the Early American Frontier* examines the acute need for male laborers in New France, particularly in households with an absent patriarch. As in the Southern colonies, land in New France was cheap, but labor was dear. Captured during Indian raids into New England, young Anglo-American men "replaced contract and indentured male labor in the domestic economy." As captives in the Montreal and Quebec slave markets they were "slaves fairly sold." They worked as personal servants and field workers, enabling French Canadian women to carry on with normal, everyday economic pursuits during times of war and in the face of chronic labor shortages. In Foster's view, the captivity and enslavement of Indians, and white males in particular, was a common strategy for alleviating labor shortages in New France, caused by demographic imbalance and warfare. William Henry Foster, *The Captors' Narrative: Catholic Women and Their Puritan Men on the Early American Frontier* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 142, 107, 129, 167.

Cultural Mediators

Gifts and marriage were both prominent examples of the ways in which these two disparate cultures sought a middle ground of common understanding and interaction, albeit with imperfect results. Yet, the concept of cultural mediation has in essence defined the relationships between Indians and Euro-Americans in fur trade historiography. As Daniel Richter notes, in the local village worlds far from imperial centers, “connections were frequently highly personal.”⁸⁹ This face-to-face milieu meant that:

As European powers dealt with native polities in colonial North America, adept brokers well connected to networks of political influence in local communities on both sides of the culture divide played essential roles in trading partnerships and military alliances. Without brokers’ communication skills and abilities to please diverse interest groups, peoples with vastly differing political structures, economic systems, and cultural beliefs could hardly talk to each other, much less work together.⁹⁰

White observes that “alliance chiefs” were such brokers, because they “represented their society to outsiders. They mediated disputes among allies and acted to focus the military power of the alliance against outside enemies.”⁹¹ These chiefs could be French or Indian, and exchange lay at the heart of their power.⁹² Moreover, the Iroquois wars had opened

⁸⁹ Daniel Richter, “Cultural Brokers and Intercultural Politics: New York-Iroquois Relations, 1664-1701,” *Journal of American History* vol 75, no. 1 (June 1988), 41.

⁹⁰ Richter, “Cultural Brokers,” 41.

⁹¹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 38.

⁹² White provides examples of these alliance chiefs: “Both the Sieur de Louvigny, a military officer who commanded the French expedition sent against the Fox, and Nicolas Perrot, a trader, were French chiefs despite the sizeable differences of their status within French society. As alliance chiefs, however, they, in

the door for traders to take a wider role as brokers and mediators between the two cultures. According to Peterson,

The first Canadians to migrate into the Great Lakes region after 1695 fatefully walked into a vacuum occasioned by the Iroquois blockade of the Montreal trade routes and the temporary dislocation and devastation of the Huron and Ottawa middlemen. Aggressively seizing a position of influence at Michilimackinac, Sault Ste. Marie, Green Bay, Prairie du Chien and elsewhere, they and their Métis children carved out a broker relationship between Central Algonkian and Siouan bands to the northwest and European society to the east, functioning primarily as traders, voyageurs and clerks who journeyed to and lived among their native clients.⁹³

effect, lost their French attributes of power: the ability to command. They acquired the Algonquian obligations of power: the obligation to mediate and to give goods to those in need," *The Middle Ground*, 38-39.

⁹³ Peterson, "Prelude to Red River," 54-55.

Because family was such an important construct in Native life (and for early modern Europeans), kin members often stood with traders and chiefs at the center of mediation, at least from a practical perspective. Cultural mediators were “go-betweens who linked the native and European worlds.”⁹⁴ Thus, many mediators were either husband or wife, or more likely, mixed-race children—people “whose experiences have bridged both cultures.”⁹⁵ Mediators lived on the ground as it were, and this intimate contact with both sides gave them the cultural caché necessary for political, social, economic, and military interaction.

Both men and women acted as mediators in colonial America. Clara Sue Kidwell observes:

There is an important Indian woman in virtually every major encounter between Europeans and Indians in the New World. As mistresses or wives, they counseled, translated, and guided white men who were entering new territory. While men made treaties and carried on negotiations and waged war, Indian women lived with white men, translated their words, and bore their children. Theirs was the more sustained and enduring contact with new cultural ways, and they gave their men an entrée into the cultures and communities of their own people. In this way, Indian women were the first important mediators of meaning between the cultures of two worlds.⁹⁶

As I have discussed, women’s work and their positions as wives put them in prime position to be mediators within households and villages; like men, their abilities to

⁹⁴ Larry L. Nelson, “Cultural Mediation, Cultural Exchange, and the Invention of the Ohio Frontier,” 73. He continues: “cultural mediators played a central role in a complex process of cultural exchange that took place throughout the Great Lakes frontier,” 74; “Although cultural encounters were occasionally marked by violence, more commonly the very fabric of everyday life instigated a peaceful process of cultural interaction. The Great Lakes frontier became an open, assimilative world of shifting relationships in constant evolution. In this world, political loyalties and cultural values were fluid, pragmatic, and uncertain. . . . Within this world, cultural mediators took on great importance,” 76; Cultural mediators “occupy a position of centrality” within a “socially complex environment” who are directly involved in commodity-flow, 76.

⁹⁵ Nelson, “Cultural Mediation, Cultural Exchange,” 75, 83.

⁹⁶ Clara Sue Kidwell, “Indian Women as Cultural Mediators,” *Ethnohistory* 39 no. 2 (1992), 97.

understand both sides allowed them political roles as well, in worlds which, as Daniel Richter suggests, imperial matters depended on the actions of local brokers, rather than on the words of governors or kings.⁹⁷

As important as Indian wives and their trader husbands were to negotiation, their mixed race children found themselves as true actors of the middle ground—people whose bodies quite literally represented Europe and America in one, and whose experiences in navigating between both cultures helped form the new cultural trope of the middle ground identified by Richard White; that is, the new cultural tropes that emerged out of mutual miscues and misunderstandings. In other words, growing up with both European and Indian parents gave these children more insights into each side of their lineages, while they themselves navigated identities that were more than the sum of both of their parents'. As Peterson notes,

The core denominator in Métis identity was not participation in the fur trading network per se, but the Métis intermediary stance between Indian and European societies. Thus, while tied to the 'occupation,' Métis magnified their symbolic role by serving as portage and ferry tenders, mail carriers, guides, interpreters, negotiators, barge and oarmen, officers and spies in Indian services, as well as tribal business agents and employees of missions and Indian agencies. In each case, they functioned not only as human carriers linking Indians and Europeans, but as buffers behind which the ethnic boundaries of antagonistic cultures remained relatively secure.⁹⁸

The fur trade thus reproduced within itself the essential dynamics of the middle ground, and created economic and social opportunities within its parameters. As historian R. David Edmunds observes, "many of these [Potawatomi] traders, especially the mixed-bloods, accumulated considerable capital. Moreover, they often served as cultural

⁹⁷ Richter, 41.

⁹⁸ Peterson, "Prelude to Red River," 55.

mediators, mediating disputes between their more traditional kinsmen” and Anglo-Americans.⁹⁹

Anishnabeg and métis approaches to family structure and mores regarding marriage, divorce, and lineage played a pivotal role in how these children of the middle ground came to be so effective in mediation. Anishnabeg families were patrilineal, although, this term oversimplifies the complex ways in which Great Lakes natives understood fatherhood and motherhood: a person might have multiple fathers and mothers based on how many brothers their father had, or how many sisters their mother possessed. Likewise, the children of all of these people became effectively siblings rather than cousins. As Cleland notes, this practice, “minimizes the possibility of children being orphaned and maximizes the number of close and cooperating kin in each generation.”¹⁰⁰

Because they were patrilineal, Anishnabeg families practiced exogamy, “trading” their daughters to other bands and thus “transforming unrelated people into in-laws.”¹⁰¹ The practice of taking Frenchmen as sons-in-law meant that daughters and their fur trader husbands often stayed with the wife’s father after marriage, raising their children within their mother’s band. As Laura Peers and Jennifer Brown have written about the Ojibwas particularly, “Since clan descent was patrilineal, and Europeans did not have clans, the children of these mixed marriages stood outside the Ojibwa clan system;” nevertheless, “children of Ojibwa women and fur traders often recognized their Native kin, spoke Ojibwa as well as French, English, or both, adapted Ojibwa beadwork designs, and

⁹⁹ R. David Edmunds, “Shells that Ring for Shadows on Her Face: Potawatomi Commerce in the Old Northwest,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 76, no. 3 (1993), 178.

¹⁰⁰ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 43. One’s fathers sisters, however, and one’s mother’s brothers, were not considered to be parents but rather potential in-laws; thus, the children of these aunts and uncles were marriageable.

¹⁰¹ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 43.

learned much of Ojibwa custom and belief.”¹⁰² Moreover, while many unions between Indian women and French men were stable, others were not. When parents separated, the children often remained with their mother’s Anishnabeg family, unless their fur trade fathers attempted to Europeanize them, as John Askin would do with his own mixed-race offspring.¹⁰³ The adult children of Native women and fur trade fathers thus stood at the nexus of cultures and ironically, at the juncture of empires. By belonging in two worlds, they possessed the unique ability not only to mediate disputes and move freely among complicated cultural tropes, but could also use their extensive kin networks on both sides to extend trade and alliances more broadly in Indian country.

Conclusion

This, then, was the landscape that John Askin, Alexander Henry, and other traders entered in 1760. All of these elements—gift-giving, intermarriage, and mediation, created not only the middle ground world described by Richard White, but represent a borderland in which disparate peoples created a unique social and cultural space through preoccupations with power and identity. However, the Anishnabeg who lived in the Great Lakes were not marginalized peoples on the edge—they lived at the center of power. The French *coureurs de bois*, priests, and soldiers were the ones living far from the seats of state power. The customs of intermarriage and gift giving, and the adoption of

¹⁰² Peers and Brown, “Ojibwa Families and Kinship,” EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁰³ For more on the education of fur trade sons in Europeanized settings and their subsequent possible loss of Native kin connections, see Peers and Brown, “Ojibwa Families and Kinship,” EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Catholicism gave rise to the kind of cultural hybridity that border theorists describe, especially in the absorption of Frenchmen into village worlds, the growth of a distinct métis population, and the subsequent rise of mediators who navigated and shaped French and Indian interaction. The Upper Country of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries thus meets most of the requirements to be considered a borderland: marginalized peoples (the French); varying degrees of permeability between French and Natives (intermarriage, kinship, and trade); the rise of a distinct ethnic class (the métis); a sense of border people as dangerous (the Indianization of the *coureurs de bois*); and the preoccupation with the symbols of power, namely gifts and reciprocity. In the next chapter, I show how British traders fit themselves into this borderland—uneasily at first, and then with more success, adopting the customs of gift-giving, intermarriage, and mediation all while reinterpreting these acts in different ways. The borderland, with its requirements of permeability allowed men like Askin to establish themselves as powerful people in this local milieu—once they learned to play by Native rules.

Chapter Two

Askin Enters the Fur Trade

During the spring of 1763, Alexander Henry, having recently returned from a visit to Sault Ste. Marie, where the waters of Lake Superior boiled over the rapids on their headlong rush through the river to Lake Huron, noticed that there seemed to be more Indians than usual clustered around the Michilimackinac pickets. Henry had been visiting with the Ojibwa Cadotte family at the Sault, helping to harvest maple syrup and catch fish in order to supply the garrison and the traders.

Several other traders had also recently returned from their wintering trips, and carried with them rumors of hostilities against the English, warning of a possible attack against the fort. When the French trader Laurent Ducharme, however, cautioned the fort commandant Major Etherington, the major threatened to send him and “the next person who should bring a story of the same kind” in leg irons to Detroit.¹

A few days later, on June 2, Henry’s adopted Chippewa brother, Wa’wa’tam, “came again to my house, in a temper of mind visibly melancholy and thoughtful. He told me, that he had just returned from his *wintering-ground*, and I asked after his health; but, without answering my question, he went on to say that he was very sorry to find me returned from the Sault; that he had intended to go to that place himself, immediately after his arrival at Michilimackinac; and that he wished me to go there, along with him and his family, the next morning.”² Wa’wa’tam continued that he’d heard the “noise of evil birds” and that many of the Indians who now camped near the fort had never visited

¹ Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 73.

² Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 74.

before. Henry declined the offer, but the next day, Wa'wa'tam came back, with presents of dried meat and promises of beaver at the Sault, cautioning again that the Indians at the fort intended to ask for liquor. Henry once more refused to heed the warning, using as his excuse that he did not yet speak the language well enough to comprehend all that his friend and brother was trying to tell him.

Henry's miscomprehension is symptomatic of the larger British misunderstandings of the territory they had recently conquered. Henry was about to witness Pontiac's war from an intensely personal angle, as a prisoner. The British army, on the other hand, triggered the hostilities known sometimes as Pontiac's rebellion, due to their initial unwillingness to accept the Indian and French middle ground on its own terms. This chapter first explains the most recent historiography on Pontiac's war and the British difficulties in establishing themselves in the region, then shows how John Askin and other traders successfully negotiated footholds into the fur trade as the foundations of their later financial and personal achievements.

By 1760, the Great Lakes remained an Indian world. The British viewed the fall of Quebec as their passport into the fur trade communities of the Great Lakes trade. The conquest of Canada was an opportunity for new ventures in the Upper Country, Ohio Valley, and other lands that had previously been a part of the French Empire. The absence of French military personnel and the lack of trade goods seemed to promise unlimited riches for those intrepid traders who could move quickly into the void left by their predecessors. English and Anglo-American traders "swarmed over the region."³ Yet, English traders faced difficult odds in establishing themselves in this newly

³ William R. Nester, *"Haughty Conquerors: "Amherst and the Great Indian Uprising of 1763* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), ix.

conquered territory, even though they had supplied the Albany trade with furs for more than a hundred years.

Enterprising traders who understood that trade occurred on Indian terms stood to reap rich rewards, and “the elimination of French forces and rumors of fortunes in furs and hides piled high at Canadian fur posts drew merchants and peddlers into the west.”⁴ British traders such as John Askin took advantage of the opportunities for personal gain. Not only did Askin establish himself in the Great Lakes trade, but he also became one of the region’s wealthiest and most influential residents, during a time of political and social upheaval. Through country marriage, Catholic marriage, servitude, the enslavement of indigenous and African American slaves, rum, agriculture, land speculation, and other strategies, Askin built a fur trade empire in microcosm, far beyond merely “keeping a shop.” His activities reveal the multiple ways in which traders both adapted and shaped the economic and social arrangements of the region. While Askin should not be considered representative of every merchant, his business and personal records nevertheless show the extent to which these strategies permeated the western Great Lakes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Askin entered a volatile borderland. A longstanding rivalry had existed between New York and New France over the fur trade in the trans-Appalachian west.⁵ Entrepreneurial British had made trading forays into the Ohio Valley throughout the mid-eighteenth century. Some Indian peoples had welcomed the expansion of trade, as British goods were of a superior quality than those of the French. Before the war, British traders

⁴ McConnell, *A Country Between*, 149.

⁵ McConnell, *A Country Between*, 16.

had been somewhat popular, because of these better, cheaper goods.⁶ The French, worried that they could lose their carefully built relationships, countered by focusing on other means of alliance building. As Greg Dowd writes, “Poorer manufacturing and, . . . a less effective merchant marine left the French scrambling for alternatives to trade as the foundation of Indian alliance. France found those alternatives in service and in war,” primarily in diplomacy, which involved gifts, promises of aid, and the brokering of peace throughout the Upper Country.⁷ Moreover, the French provided necessary services, such as blacksmiths and gunsmiths at its trading forts.⁸

For more than one hundred years, the Indians and French had created a diplomatic trading milieu based on longstanding kinship, gift giving, and service. As Dowd notes, it was a “face to face” society.⁹ The departure of the French upset a century of tradition and left an imbalance in that relationship. For Upper Country people, the end of the Seven Years’ War signaled an end to the status quo.¹⁰ Indians, interior French, and families of mixed race remained, yet the absence of the French empire and its emissaries meant that they no longer had access to trade goods and gifts, nor markets for their furs; nor did they retain the gifts that sealed alliances under the French model. Further, they now had to

⁶ Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 27; Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 36; White, *The Middle Ground*, 223-24, 119-22. Dowd notes also that the Anishnabeg did not have experience with the British except as enemies.

⁷ Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 27. Also, in Richard White’s model, diplomacy was essential for the maintenance of peace on the middle ground.

⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 122; Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 27.

⁹ Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 8. See also White, *The Middle Ground*, 315-16 for a discussion of the French and Algonquian village worlds that had to deal with “the emergence of a third village world”—that of the British backcountry settlements and the new British posts in the west. As White notes, even though it was “a heterogeneous mix of different peoples loosely linked by intermarriage and common loyalties. . . . this village world was white and British, and it was openly aggressive and expansionist.” 316.

¹⁰ See also White, *The Middle Ground*, 240: Ohio Valley Indians sought to purge the land of all imperial influence.

deal with an empire that had a very different approach to the fur trade, land use, and Indians in general.

British traders, in their turn, discovered that Indians who had previously welcomed cheap British goods, found themselves in sometimes hostile territory after the Seven Years' War. It was not a matter of seamlessly stepping into the role vacated by the French. The British were, first of all, reluctant to continue French commitments of diplomacy, gifts, and service, assuming that as conquerors there was no longer a need to woo Indians away from French alliances. Nor was it a question of the Indians replacing one imperial "father" with another. The war did not leave a power vacuum in its wake; rather, it left an absence of authority and, more significantly, an absence of trust—a breakdown of the acknowledgment that kinship, diplomatic, and other personal relationships created the conditions for peace in the Upper Country. According to Gregory Dowd, "trade, rather than being a way to wealth, was an avenue to . . . authority" in the region. The ability to make strong trading relationships were thus ultimately "a way to power," and more significantly, as Dowd continues, "a way to forge bonds to seal human relationships as a hedge against the perils of hunger and strife."¹¹

The intervening months following the French defeat were thus characterized by uneasiness, violence, and misunderstandings, which culminated in the chain of local rebellions known collectively as Pontiac's War. As Richard White observes, "In 1762, it seemed that the middle ground itself was about to crumble and cave in, leaving a cultural

¹¹ Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 11.

and political chasm yawning between Algonquian villagers and the agents of European empires.”¹²

One of the primary causes of conflict in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War was that the British, fundamentally, were not French. The differences were profound and extended far beyond issues of imperial administration, language, and politics. First, the British were Protestant, with a proud disregard for Catholicism—a problem since the interior French and many of the Indians were practicing, or were at least nominal, Catholics.¹³ Second, they did not understand how the Indians worked—how trade worked—in their newly conquered territories.¹⁴ Misguided British policy and a deliberate lack of understanding of Indian peoples—in particular a disregard for the customs of the village world of the west—also contributed to the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁵ Third, British military authorities like General Geoffrey Amherst, the British commander in North America, tried to subjugate the Indians by turning them into clients. As White notes, “General Amherst’s new vision of the *pays d’en haut* was a simple one: the British were conquerors; the Indians were subjects. It was a view that abolished the middle ground. The politics of villages no longer mattered. Only the politics of empire counted.”¹⁶ The British acted as “haughty conquerors,” and treated the Indians like subjugated peoples

¹² White, *The Middle Ground*, 268. White also points out several specific factors in the breakdown of the cultural mediation at the heart of the middle ground: the establishment and manning of British posts in the west, demands for prisoner release, horse thieves and the conflict between Native and imperial ideas of justice, and a lack of presents on the part of the British. 268. See also White, *The Middle Ground*, 259.

¹³ Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 3.

¹⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 248: “Initial British peace overtures to the Ohio Algonquians proceeded from a conviction that earlier British policies had failed and the British must now imitate the French.”

¹⁵ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 9.

¹⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 256.

rather than autonomous nations.¹⁷ Attempts to “cow” and punish the Native peoples, the elimination of presents in diplomacy, the persistent idea that the Indians conspired with the French against the British, the use of underhanded tactics such as smallpox-infected blankets, “bait and switch” trade goods, and a flood of rum all furthered the growth of strife and dissension.¹⁸

As Greg Dowd argues, authority and submission were thus the real causes of Pontiac’s rebellion, which at its heart represented a struggle for identity and status.¹⁹ If the elimination of the status quo created uneasiness and strife, it also presented an opportunity for Indians to redefine their status in regard to Europeans. The British had sought to recreate the terms of that trading relationship altogether by upending its kinship base and attempting to turn Indians into imperial subjects. The Indians, in turn, distrusted the British. Hoping to unnerve the British, they spread rumors of French return.²⁰ These rebellious villagers sought to manipulate the British and establish their own authority not just over trade, but in the fundamental question of their relationship with the empire.

There had, of course, always been tensions between Euro-Americans and Indian traders, especially in those areas traditionally known as frontiers, where the tentacles of empire coexisted between Indian and French villages. In his book, *A Country Between*,

¹⁷ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” viii.

¹⁸ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 9, 44. On rum see Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*; see also White, *The Middle Ground*, 265 “the burden of blame for the trade’s failure to pacify the Indians increasingly came to rest on rum.” On conspiracy, see Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 3, “The British leaders most involved in the war . . . took their standing as Protestants in the British service very seriously when it came to Catholics, the French, and Indians whom they suspected of . . . powerful conspiracy theories.”

¹⁹ Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 82.

²⁰ Gregory Evans Dowd, “The French King Wakes Up in Detroit: ‘Pontiac’s War’ in Rumor and History,” *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1990), 254-78. This tactic also served to inspire other Native groups to join the fight, and to procure better terms when dealing with Anglo-American traders. Ultimately, perhaps, such rumors would even inspire the French to return to North America.

historian Michael McConnell describes a “cultural frontier,” a “zone of imperial friction” throughout the Ohio Valley in the mid-eighteenth century as Protestant British settlement colonies, soldiers, traders, and administrators pushed up against Catholic French and Indian village culture and customs.²¹ This friction extended beyond the Ohio Valley, a central region that connected the Upper Country, the Great Lakes and Detroit, the Iroquois Confederacy, the Delawares, Choctaws, Cherokees, and others.

By 1745, French officials considered the encroachment of British trade to be a significant issue in Detroit and the Great Lakes. McConnell describes “wholesale native defections and the staggering decline of French influence west of Niagara.” He writes,

[1747] proved decisive as simmering resentment and occasional conflict exploded in a wave of Indian attacks on isolated posts and traders. Officers at Michilimackinac spoke of the “confusion that prevails among all the Nations of that post.” Such reports included a litany of attacks and losses: three traders killed Ottawas at Saginaw, two canoe loads of supplied ambushed on Lake Huron and eight men killed, another Canadian killed by Saulteurs (Ojibwas). The attacks spread west to the heretofore secure Illinois Country, and by early October Detroit was, its commander admitted, under siege.²²

In the Upper Country, traders “worked at the pleasure of powerful local headmen who made plain their contempt for the British.”²³ Violence against traders was common even before the war. McConnell notes that the inability to regulate traders in the Ohio Valley in the 1730s and 1740s contributed to the problem: “Although the flood of traders into the Ohio Country raised the competitive stakes for colonial participants, it had more serious repercussions for natives. By 1740 at least, the traders and border settlers had

²¹ McConnell, *A Country Between*, 2.

²² McConnell, *A Country Between*, 64-65.

²³ McConnell, *A Country Between*, 174.

joined Delaware and Shawnee hunters in killing so many deer that the natives began to fear for their livelihood and complained to provincial officials.”²⁴

After the fall of Quebec, things got worse in the Upper Country. Historian William R. Nester observes:

The French surrender worried all the tribes. Ironically, the reputation British traders had before the French and Indian War changed dramatically afterward. Indians eagerly sought British goods from the 1720s when Oswego was founded and traders began to circulate west of the Appalachians. The reason was that British goods were better made and lower priced than French goods. Throughout the war, the French had warned their allies that if the British won they would exploit and eventually exterminate the Indians. . . . Once the French surrendered, British traders took advantage of their new power to raise prices and insult native feelings.²⁵

By losing their reputation as traders of cheap, high-quality goods and trying to force the Indians into client status, the British put their fortunes, their lives, and even their imperial ambitions at stake. Although they did not realize it, they were the marginalized people in the Great Lakes borderland; it was the Indians who held the power, not the conquered French.

The Upper Country had become even more dangerous for British traders by 1761. That summer, both Alexander Henry and Henry Bostwick had to travel in disguise to Michilimackinac in order to trade.²⁶ Likewise, Richard White notes, “When in 1762 reports of traders having been killed by the Chippewas of Sault Sainte Marie reached

²⁴ Michael N. McConnell, *A Country Between*, 41-42.

²⁵ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 36.

²⁶ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 34-35; Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 50.

Thomas Gage, he was not surprised.”²⁷ It was not just the Upper Country that saw an increase in deadly acts; near Lakes Erie and Ontario, Senecas “gruesomely murdered two white men near Fort Niagara” in 1762.²⁸ In the face of such violence, Henry had to finagle even getting a pass to Michilimackinac: “No treaty of peace had yet been made, between the English and the Indians, which latter were in arms, under Pontiac, an Indian leader, of more than common celebrity, and General Gage was therefore strongly, and (as it became manifest) but too justly apprehensive, that both the property and the lives of His Majesty’s subjects would be very insecure in the Indian countries. But, he had already granted such permission to a Mr. Bostwick; and this I was able to employ, as an argument against his refusal, in respect to myself.”²⁹

This violence played an intrinsic part in Pontiac’s rebellion, a series of local conflicts that stretched between the Cherokees in the southeast to the Senecas in the north and the Anishnabeg in the west, a triangle that encompassed all the regions touching on the Ohio Valley and Detroit, the epicenters of the conflicts.³⁰

In 1763, rebellion erupted in the Upper Country beginning with Pontiac’s attack and siege of Detroit in April, and spread throughout the region.³¹ By summer, all of the

²⁷ White, *The Middle Ground*, 228, 265. See also White, 265 on consequences of the breakdown of the Middle Ground “When gain rather than ‘love’ ruled the trade, exchange remained chaotic. Theft, after all, procured gain as readily as trade. The British cheated and the Indians stole.”

²⁸ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 60.

²⁹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 12.

³⁰ As Richard White explains, “In British accounts, the various [warbelts]—Iroquois, Algonquian, and French—tend to merge into a single conspiracy, but the movements actually remained largely distinct. The [first conspiracy] linked the Senecas, Delawares, Shawnees, and Mingos. The second conspiracy revolved around Detroit. Canadian traders sponsored the third, although it intersected with the Indian attempts,” White, *The Middle Ground*, 277.

³¹ As McConnell writes, “Warfare came first not to the Ohio Country but the Great Lakes region. There elements of the ‘Three Fires’—the Ottawas, Potawatomis, and the Hurons—under the charismatic

British posts had fallen except the besieged Detroit, although Upper Country Indians were by no means unified in their support of the violence.³²

Richard White's description of the events is succinct and poetic:

Like a burning brand dragged through tinder, the war belts that runners carried from Detroit sparked other attacks in their wake. The Delawares and Shawnees sent a belt east from Pittsburgh to the Senecas around Niagara. And the Senecas, after years of urging the western Indians to follow them into a war with the British, found themselves urged to join an actual Algonquian revolt. In June, Ottawas, Chippewas, Wyandots, and Senecas took Presque Isle and Fort Le Boeuf. Other belts moved north and west. The Weas, the Miamis, the Saint Joseph Potawatomis, the Mingos at Venango—all heeded the war belts and seized the small British posts among them. The Michilimackinac Chippewas took the fort at the straits, but there the revolt halted. The Ottawas of Arbre Croche and Saint Ignace denounced the attack, redeemed the British prisoners, and escorted them to Montreal. Ottawa messengers from Detroit appeared at Fort Edward Augustus at Green Bay, but planning for the revolt had never extended that far, and the Menominees, Winnebagos, Sauks, Fox, and Iowas sent messages assuring the British of their friendship. They helped the small British garrison flee to Montreal.³³

While the rebellion was widespread, it was by no means universal. On 16 May, during the attack on Fort Sandusky on Lake Erie, Indians killed 15 soldiers and 12 traders.³⁴ On 2 June, a group of Chippewas attacked Michilimackinac. Merchant John Tracey was killed, while “traders Ezekiel Solomon, Henry Bostwick, and a recent arrival named Samuels were captured and interned in the fort.”³⁵ Alexander Henry eluded capture for a

leadership of Pontiac, attacked Detroit in early May, beginning a siege of that important post that lasted until October,” McConnell, *A Country Between*, 182.

³² For detailed accounts of Pontiac's War, see Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” and Dowd, *War Under Heaven*.

³³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 287. See also Nester 42-43, 58, White 302.

³⁴ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 86.

³⁵ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 96.

day, he was caught and held prisoner in the fort.³⁶ He was first traded to the Ottawas at L'Arbre Croche, who had not participated in the attack, and then back to a Chippewa family that had adopted him upon his arrival at the post. His Indian brother, Wawatam, had in fact tried to warn Henry in advance to leave Michlimackinac, but Henry had failed to understand. Henry lived with and traveled with Wawatam's family until 1764, when it was safe enough to leave.³⁷ The politics of the borderland were thus still very much in evidence. Henry as a British trader was completely dependent on his adoptive Indian relations for his survival—not just for sustenance, but for his very life. He did not negotiate his own trade to Wawatam's family; rather, Wawatam complained to the Chippewas that they treated his “brother” like a “slave.”³⁸ The sacredness of relationships in the Indian-dictated middle ground kept Henry safe. Moreover, by living with his Chippewa family, he forged lasting trade and personal relationships with Indians on their terms.

The siege of Detroit ended in October, but it took until 1765 for the aftershocks to die down. Pontiac's war had ensured the continuation of the old French and Indian middle ground centered in the British commitment to retain the area as a borderland between Anglo-American settlement and Indian Country via the Proclamation Line of 1763.³⁹

³⁶ “Father de Jaunay, the Jesuit priest, and Charles Langlade did all they could to soften Chippewa passions and ensure safety for the captives. Despite the Canadians' efforts, five of the prisoners would later be tortured to death,” Nester, *“Haughty Conquerors,”* 97.

³⁷ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 77-158.

³⁸ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 99-101.

³⁹ See Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 535, 538; White, *The Middle Ground*, 270; Francis Parkman, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). White, *The Middle Ground*, 288. See Nester,

Throughout the mid-1760s, traders continued to find themselves at the heart of the violence that rocked the Upper Country, Ohio Valley, and other parts of the newly conquered territories. As White observes, "First the Seven Years War and then Pontiac's Rebellion had decimated the ranks of experienced British traders."⁴⁰ On 12 May 1763 during the attack on Detroit, which did not fall as expected:

Hurons ambushed a five-bateau supply convoy led by [merchants] Abraham Chapman and William Rackman. They enticed the merchants to shore by claiming they had some deerskins to trade. The Huron released the Canadian boatmen but tortured Rackman to a hideous death and gave Chapman to the Potawatomi for a similar fate. Chapman was tied to a stake and the wood at his feet fired. He begged for a drink. A warrior handed him a bowl of scalding water. Chapman scalded his mouth when he sipped it and angrily threw it in the warrior's face. The Potawatomi were so astonished by this act that they declared him insane, untied, and adopted him.⁴¹

In the Ohio Valley, meanwhile, "bands of frontier bullies terrorized Indians and officials alike, and were especially virulent in squatter and legal frontier settlements in western Pennsylvania and Virginia."⁴² As Nester notes, "In early May 1766, criminals butchered five Shawnee on the Ohio River, stole their canoes, blankets, and fled downriver. The chiefs issued their bitter complaints to the commander and Indian agent at Fort Pitt."⁴³ He continues, "Indians robbed and sometimes murdered stray traders or hunters who ventured into their territory. Of course, most of those were trespassers who

"*Haughty Conquerors*," 74, for population of French, British, soldiers, and various Indian groups living at and near Detroit in 1763. The size of the garrison and surrounding villages made it difficult for a siege to have been effective. Not all Indians supported Pontiac. See also White, *The Middle Ground*, 273 for numbers of native peoples in Detroit in 1760.

⁴⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 317.

⁴¹ Nester, "*Haughty Conquerors*," 84.

⁴² Nester, "*Haughty Conquerors*," 235.

⁴³ Nester, "*Haughty Conquerors*," 249. See also page 250—juries would not punish murderers whether slave or free for their crimes against Indians.

entered Indian lands at their own risk. . . . On February 4, St. Joseph Potawotomi murdered two redcoats.”⁴⁴ The soldiers had evidently raped an Indian woman and the murders were in retaliation; however, the British refused to “address the murderers’ motive.”⁴⁵ Violence thus raged up and down the frontier on both sides.⁴⁶

Moreover, according to Nester, the British supported attacks between Indian groups as a way to deal with “tribes actually or potentially hostile to the colonies.”⁴⁷ He continues, “Cherokee war parties were useful in diverting what the British feared was another conspiracy budding among the northern Indians.”⁴⁸ A group of Creeks in turn “killed two traders and threatened to murder any others caught on their lands,” in retribution for the murder of Cherokees in Virginia.⁴⁹

Traders were not necessarily innocent victims of the violence and were often caught between expectations of presents and the continuation of British policies that placed a lower priority on gifts. Sir William Johnson, Indian superintendant in the north, was a crucial figure in the reestablishment of the middle ground.⁵⁰ As Richard White notes, “Johnson imitated the French system of gifts and medals, of officers and chiefs. He instituted a regular trade. He replaced French fathers with British fathers, but he failed to

⁴⁴ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 251-52.

⁴⁵ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 252. Nester contrasts this with the prosecution of a black slave at Detroit, who had “raped and murdered an Indian woman. When he learned of the crime, Lieutenant Colonel Campbell launched an investigation and had the slave arrested and charged with murder.”

⁴⁶ See also Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 263: “On January 10, four Delaware men and two women appeared at the home of Frederick Stump and his servant, John Ironcutter, on Middle Creek in Cumberland county. Stump invited them in and plied them with liquor. When the Indians were nearly senseless he took an axe and caved in the heads of five while his servant murdered the sixth.”

⁴⁷ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 254.

⁴⁸ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 255.

⁴⁹ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 255.

⁵⁰ For more on Johnson’s role in reestablishing peace and the Fort Stanwix Treaty, as well as the general reorganization of the West, see Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 219-220.

persuade the British government to bear the costs such an alliance demanded, nor could he quickly call into being the cultural and social middle ground on which the alliance must finally rest.”⁵¹ In 1766, “Gage sent orders to the superintendents to cut expenses.”⁵² Salaries for Indian agents, interpreters, blacksmiths, and traders were expensive and “diplomacy cost thousands of pounds more.”⁵³ Agents extended credit to the government by paying for gifts themselves and expected that the British government would reimburse them.⁵⁴ The government, in turn, suspected that agents like George Croghan and Robert Rogers, of Rogers’ Rangers and commandant of Fort Michilimackinac, were embezzling monies intended for diplomacy, presents, and payments.⁵⁵ As Nester explains,

As 1767 began, Johnson issued a set of very explicit trade regulations that he hoped would eliminate the abuses that fostered animosities and sometimes war. Those who wished to trade with the Indians were required first to get a license from the governor and post a bond. Traders had to show that license and their goods at every post they reached. Trading was only permitted at those posts under the watchful eyes of the local official. Prices, weights, and measures were fixed. Traders issued credit at their own risk and were forbidden to beat Indians or coerce payments. Anyone who violated the regulations would be prosecuted.⁵⁶

Nester continues, “Merchants protested that these newest regulations would destroy the fur trade. . . . In all, animosities worsened between the British and the Indians, with

⁵¹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 315.

⁵² Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 255.

⁵³ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 255.

⁵⁴ According to Nester, “As if salaries were not expensive enough, diplomacy cost thousands of pounds more. Croghan’s expenses alone were 8408 pounds for 1766. He, like other agents, often paid out of his own pocket and then awaited government compensation. The uncertainty of repayment only worsened a highly stressful job. Yet General Gage for one not only believed Croghan spent too much, but suggested that he may have diverted some funds to his own pocket,” “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 255.

⁵⁵ Nester, *Haughty Conquerors*,” 256-57. “The suspicions about Rogers would prove partly true and provoke fears of another Indian conspiracy.” 257.

⁵⁶ “Yet, those regulations did not go far enough to suit General Gage. He insisted that ‘the price of goods should be fixed for every part of the country . . . ,’” Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 257.

French intrigues, the unpunished crimes of British murderers, the greed of merchants and squatters, and the inability of the Indian agents and troops to quell those problems all contributing.”⁵⁷

Illegal trade was a massive problem in the Upper Country:

The attempts of Johnson and Gage to restrict and supervise the activities of British subjects in the West involved them in endless difficulties that very quickly brought Johnson’s entire system down. The traders, licensed by the governments of their particular provinces, chafed at restrictions confining their trade to the posts, particularly when French traders, who had moved across the Mississippi, continued to bring goods up from New Orleans and sell them in the villages of the upper Mississippi, Illinois, Wabash, and Ohio regions. Gage thought that the majority of furs trapped in the Illinois and Mississippi countries never reached British markets. They flowed downriver to New Orleans.

British traders, even as they used the French presence as an argument to free themselves from confinement to the posts, cooperated in this illegal trade. According to George Croghan, prominent British merchants provided the trade goods that allowed these French traders to subvert the system. The British already in Illinois country sold their furs to the French. . . . During 1767 both British and French traders openly flaunted the restrictions, and the commissaries and officers complained that they lacked sufficient legal power to do anything about it.⁵⁸

Neither side was thus able to force the other to their will. The British could not simply treat the Indians as subjects and clients, and the Indians were unable to remove the British or restore the French. Chippewa/Sauteur chief Minavavana went so far as to tell Alexander Henry in 1761, “Englishman, although you have conquered the French, you have not conquered us! We are not your slaves. These lakes, these woods and mountains were left to us by our ancestors. They are our inheritance and we part with them to

⁵⁷ Nester, “*Haughty Conquerors*,” 258.: “Unrest among the tribes worsened. Two Chippewa murdered a trader at Detroit. A war party of Ottawa and Chippewa murdered eleven traders on the Ohio River,” 258.

⁵⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 319.

none.”⁵⁹ Traders flaunted regulations. On both sides, violence occasionally exploded into violent rage. Without being able to compel Native peoples in the Upper Country, British traders and soldiers learned from the conflict that they needed to work with Indian peoples on a middle ground of interaction.⁶⁰ When the dust had settled, the British emerged from Pontiac’s War with a new appreciation for Indians and their way of doing things. As Calloway asserts, “The British recognized that peace in the West required extending royal protection to Indian country, fulfilling promises to protect Indian land, and regulating the activities of traders.”⁶¹ Because of Pontiac’s War, the British learned how to better work with Indians. According to White, Pontiac’s War allowed for the reassertion of the middle ground that was lost when the French departed.⁶²

For Richard White, however, the new alliance lacked the mediation that had been the heart of the old French-Indian alliance. The problem, he asserts, was the rise of a “third village world alongside those of the Algonquians and the French.”⁶³ As he continues, “this village world was white and British, and it was openly and aggressively expansionist.”⁶⁴ Moreover, White contrasts this third village world with the Indian Algonquian village world and with the French village world: “The French habitants of Kaskaskia, Detroit, Vincennes, Michilimackinac, and smaller settlements had by the 1760s drifted into a practical independence of their own, but they had earlier sustained

⁵⁹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 44-45, quoted in Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 347.

⁶⁰ White notes, “the British alliance was the French system reborn, but the British system was a Frankenstein monster. In its first years, it was only a soulless imitation of the old alliance; the missing soul was mediation,” *The Middle Ground*, 314.

⁶¹ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 354.

⁶² White, *The Middle Ground*, 270, 289-90.

⁶³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 315.

⁶⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 316.

the French empire rather than defied it. And they had created a common world with the Algonquians of the *pays d'en haut*. ”⁶⁵ It was into these confluences of village worlds and uneasy expectations that John Askin entered to make his fortune as a trader and merchant.

Askin Enters the Fur Trade at Michilimackinac

Trade had become a core of the Upper Country’s social organization over the previous century, with French and Indian families growing firmly established in its organization and maintenance. The interruption of the trade during the Seven Years’ War and the subsequent unrest had caused hardship for Indians and interior French, however, and they were eager for its resumption. In the context of Native fears about their place in the empire, the British had no social entrée that would allow them access to the longstanding relationships developed by the Indians and interior French who lived near the upper lakes.⁶⁶ Even so, they were keen to share in Montreal’s wealth and the rich fur stocks in the Great Lakes and Canadian West.

Yet, because the British traders did not have kin status with the fur trading families, their knowledge of trade protocols and their access to goods and networks were necessarily limited. When John Askin, whose Upper Country connections included Robert Rogers, commandant of Detroit, arrived at L’Arbre Croche in the early 1760s, an Odawa town and Jesuit mission adjacent to Michilimackinac, he must have found himself

⁶⁵ White, *The Middle Ground*, 316.

⁶⁶ The British also had anxiety about Native identity in the Empire, unsure whether or not Indian peoples were actually qualified to be “subjects.” See Dowd, *War under Heaven*, 174-75; for Native anxiety about British rule, see Dowd, *War under Heaven*, op cit.

in the position of outsider, but he quickly realized that the key to wealth was the establishment of kin ties with local Indians, as described in Chapter One..

In 1793, Askin sketched out the bare bones of his autobiography in a letter to a long-lost relation:

I was Born at Aughnacloy in the North of Ireland in 1739 that my Father was a Shop Keeper in that Town his name James & my Mother name Alice Rea, that I had two Brothers the Elder named William & the Youngest Robert, as also two Sisters the Elder named Mary & the youngest Named Sarah, (who its possible may be Mrs Campbell) That I came to this Country in 1758 and most of my time since have been in Trade first at Albany near New York where I Kept a Shop & since that at a placie called Michilimackinac & for these last thirteen years past here. I married in 1772 & have a large Family some of my Daughters [are] Married one of which to an Officer of ye Royal Artillery at Woolwich near London a Liut Maderith what makes me perticulize him is that should Widow Campbell prove to by my Sister my Daughter would be most happy to see her. I have also many other particular friends in London a Mr. Issac Todd [and] a Mr Willm Robertson both may be found at Messrs Phyn Ellis & Englis [traders, solicitors, suppliers] in London, any Letter delivered them for me I will Receive for certain, I observe you spell your name Erskine whereas my Father & myself have wrote ours Askin yet I learn my Grand father Spelt his as you do. . . . My Family tho unknown to you beg leave to assure [you] of their Esteem.⁶⁷

There is little surviving evidence of Askin's early life in Ireland, beyond what he provides above. Born in what is now Northern Ireland, this son of a shopkeeper emigrated to North America in 1758 at the age of 21. The Askins may have been related to John Erskine, 23rd Earl of Mar, who fled to Ireland from Scotland in the early eighteenth century for his part in an unsuccessful revolt against the Crown.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ John Askin to John Erskine, 1 July 1793, in *The John Askin Papers*, ed. Milo M. Quaife, 2 vols. (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928-31), 1:477-78 (hereafter *AP*).

⁶⁸ David R. Farrell, "John Askin," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* vol. 5 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 37, (hereafter *DCB*).

John Askin first settled in Albany where he supplied the British Army in the Seven Years' War as a sutler—a civilian provisioner. With the fall of New France, Askin decided to try his luck in the western fur trade and moved to the Mackinac straits. He formed a partnership with Robert Rogers, but mounting debts forced them into bankruptcy with their Albany creditors.⁶⁹ Rogers was an impressive figure in the British Army, famous for his military exploits as head of Roger's Rangers, a division still celebrated for its innovative guerilla tactics. Rogers, moreover, had enough clout to get himself appointed commandant of Michilimackinac despite widespread, highly believable rumors of scandal and corruption. Askin had thus allied himself early with a powerful, though controversial British military figure in North America, an association that probably continued to open doors for him, despite the taint of financial underhandedness and potential ruin.

Rogers had returned to England and left Askin to surrender all of the company's property, as well as his own, to extricate himself from bankruptcy. Having escaped from this disastrous partnership by 1771, Askin was free to expand his trading activities at the Straits of Mackinac where ultimately (before permanently moving to Detroit during the American Revolution) he acquired a store, a farm three miles outside the fort, a house "in the suburbs," as Askin designated the village growing up outside the walls of the fort, and a farm at the nearby Odawa village of L'Arbre Croche. He also served as the deputy commissary and barrack master of the fort during the 1770s.⁷⁰ He acquired and owned

⁶⁹ *AP* 1:43; see also David A. Armour, *The Merchants of Albany, New York, 1686-1760* (New York: Garland, 1986). For more on Robert Rogers at Michilimackinac, see Peter Marshall, "The Michilimackinac Misfortunes of Commissary Roberts," in *The Fur Trade Revisited*, (see Introduction note 15), 285-98; Dowd, *War under Heaven*; and Nester, "Haughty Conquerors."

⁷⁰ John Vattas to Askin, July 1774, *AP* 1:49.

several vessels above and below Sault Ste. Marie, which were essential to his trading and supply ventures, and he continued to explore new business opportunities from land speculation, to sawmills, to new trading partnerships until the end of his life in 1815.

Yet, while it modestly celebrates his personal and financial success, Askin's autobiographical letter makes no mention of his early association with an enslaved Indian woman who was the mother of his three eldest children—the woman whose kin ties permitted Askin entry into the fur trade itself. The documentary record is unclear on Askin's purchase of, and relationship with Manette (or Monette), although there is evidence he probably bought her from René Bourassa, an influential Michilimackinac trader.⁷¹ Records of how much Askin paid for her or in what currency have been lost, and very little is known about her identity, except that she seems to have been a member of the Odawa community at L'Arbre Croche.⁷² Manette bore Askin three children: John Jr., born early in 1762, Catherine, born late the same year, and Madelaine, born in 1764. In 1766, Askin manumitted Manette, at which point she disappeared from the historical record.

Manette's status as slave or captive did not diminish the importance of her kinship connections or ability to serve as a mediator. In chapter one I described how contemporary historiography recognizes kinship as a cornerstone of Native American social organization. As Laura Peers and Jennifer S. H. Brown attest, "Kinship terms . . .

⁷¹ This was most likely René Bourassa, prominent northwest trader whose daughter, Charlotte, married Charles Langlade, a commandant of Michilimackinac and prominent soldier during the Seven Years' War. His daughter, Charlotte, was married to Charles Langlade, the prominent métis trader and soldier. See Michael A. McDonnell, "Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade: Warrior, Soldier, and Intercultural 'Window' on the Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes," in *Sixty Years' War*, (see Introduction note 51), 88.

⁷² David A. Armour and Keith R. Widder, *At the Crossroads: Michilimackinac during the American Revolution* (Mackinac Island, Mich.: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1978), 35.

provided a map of relationships for all Anishinaabeg who might meet one another, and a guide for their interactions. Honorifics conferring kinship status were also readily applied to outsiders who appeared to deserve them.”⁷³ As with Native peoples, “Canadian *seigneurs* and peasants alike drew the same meaning and security from kinship alliance that the Indians did.”⁷⁴ Moreover, years of intermarriage had created a large mixed population in the region, and “absorption of incoming Europeans was equally important to Métis solidarity and influence.”⁷⁵

A captive, by virtue of adoption, counted as a relative, and as Peers and Brown further note, “All members of an Ojibwa community were defined as various kinds of relatives both before and after an individual got married.”⁷⁶ Moreover, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, captivity, Indian slavery, and adoption increased in previously unfathomable ways. The Beaver Wars, and subsequent Iroquois mourning wars, the increased trade in women and children from conflicts further west (as noted in chapter one), and the war captives displaced during the Seven Years’ War and its attendant conflicts all created living tides of captives and adoptees moving throughout the

⁷³ Peers and Brown, ““There is no End to Relationship among the Indians’: Ojibwa Families and Kinship in Historical Perspective,” <http://0-search.epnet.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=3112551>

⁷⁴ Peterson, “Prelude to Red River,” 55.

⁷⁵ Peterson, “Prelude to Red River,” 57. Those who returned to the fur trade country commonly identified more with its growing Métis population, consisting largely of descendants of Canadian traders and Native women, than with Indian groups. Alternatively, different branches of the same family might radiate in different directions. Those who settled in what later became western Canada might become Métis, as that identity was recognized there. More southerly branches, in what became the United States, retained an Ojibwa identity, in part because “Métis” did not become an established category in American usage (Schenk, 1997, cited in Peterson and Brown, 1985).

⁷⁶ “All Ojibwa, and the powerful beings to whom they appealed, were potentially kin, and the Ojibwa relied on the help of all their relations to survive. Beginning in the 1600s, first contacts with Europeans gave promise of extending this relational universe in new ways. The next three centuries, however, brought a complex and potent mix of benefits, challenges, innovations, and disasters,” Peers and Brown, ““There is no End to Relationship among the Indians,’” <http://0-search.epnet.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=3112551>

transappalachian west. As Calloway notes, “by the end of the first decade of the eighteenth century, the French were actively encouraging [Illinois Indians’ raids across the Mississippi] and selling the captives to the English Purchasing Indian slaves or accepting them as gifts allowed the French to cement alliances with the Indians who provided the slaves as well as to obtain and exploit captive human labor.”⁷⁷

There were serious diplomatic consequences to this new demographic crisis, as the British tried to use the exchange and return of captives to establish a North American *pax britannia*. In many Native communities, women customarily made decisions as to the fate of war captives, whether they were adopted into their own families to cover the dead, be ransomed, or were killed in revenge for the death of a family member. As Gregory Evans Dowd writes, by asking for the return of captives, “British officers were demanding that Indian women relinquish both family members and a key social power.”⁷⁸ These attempts to return captives in exchange for peace further threatened to destabilize an already tense situation.

Yet, there was an upside to all this human mobility and captivity. Even as women seemed to be losing ground in Native villages (or feared that they were), new opportunities arose for them in the increasingly mixed villages of the Upper Country. According to Richard White, “The presence of British traders and captives in the Algonquian villages proved essential to the creation of a new middle ground. These people gained access to Algonquian culture largely through Algonquian women. As

⁷⁷ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 316. Europeans saw Indians “trading other Indians as slaves,” and thus interpreted it according to their own ideas of slavery and unfreedom, Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 114.

⁷⁸ Dowd, *War under Heaven*, 87; The loss of power among women was a significant source of Native discontent according to Dowd—he continues, “Indian women were losing influence over public affairs, and Indian societies were losing authority over intercultural sexual relations.”

traders, mothers, and lovers, and as arbiters of prisoners' fates, women both mediated between two worlds and created people with a foot in each."⁷⁹ Women, thus, played crucial roles in the maintenance and evolution of the fur trade and of social and political organization. As Manette's example shows, even enslaved women embodied significant roles in the transition from French to British imperial relationships in the region.

In recent years, the historiography on Indian slavery in North America—once rather sparse—has blossomed. Recent regional studies of the Southwest, southeast, New England, and New France point to the prominence of Indian slavery in the early years of European colonization, throughout North America, although local variation contributed extensively to the social and political reorganization both of Indian and white communities. Before the 1990s, most historians examined North American Indian slavery in contrast with more blatantly exploitive labor systems, such as the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Spanish and Portuguese empires and New World plantation slavery.⁸⁰

During the eighteenth century, slavery had been part of larger social patterns that included family and village life, and also operated within a commercial framework that relied on a mix of slave, indentured, and free labor. Captives, Indian slaves, African American slaves, day-laborers, and indentured servants or *engagés*, all rubbed elbows in

⁷⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 324.

⁸⁰ Bartolomé de Las Casas' denunciation of Spanish atrocities against Indians in the sixteenth century first depicted the proprietary attitude that Europeans had over Native lands and labor. In addition to outright murder and execution, Las Casas described the harsh conditions under which enslaved Indians died in droves laboring in mines and fields for the Iberian conquerors. The *encomienda*, a feudalesque system in which Indians were tied to the lands on which they had lived, further spread conditions of coerced labor in the agricultural areas of the Spanish colonies. The *encomienda* thus effectively enslaved Indians while preserving the legal fiction that they were free. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. Nigel Griffin and intro. Anthony Pagden (London, New York: Penguin, 1992).

homes, canoes, ships, and in the forest. Scholars have grappled with creating clear distinctions between captive and slave in Native societies, as a way to classify or differentiate between states or degrees of captivity.

Recently, Jill Lepore notes that in sixteenth-century documents the terms captive, servant, and slave “were sometimes used interchangeably.” She defines a captive as “someone who has been kidnapped and held by force, usually temporarily,” while “a servant is someone required (often by force) to work for another in exchange for housing food, and occasionally wages.” In contrast, she defines a slave as “a permanent unpaid servant, whose children inherit that status.”⁸¹ Ethnohistorians William A. Starna and Ralph Watkins, however, believe that because historians tend to view “nonindigenous New World slavery systems” as the norm, our ability to understand the nuances of indigenous slavery has been clouded. They argue that captivity in northern Iroquoian culture is essentially slavery, especially if examined in the context of indigenous slavery systems in other parts of the world, based on kinship, or “authority and subordination.” In other words, “captivity in warfare and kidnapping constituted a first step toward enslavement” among Native peoples.⁸² James Brooks, in his *Captives and Cousins*, also draws on indigenous models to discuss slavery among Natives and whites in the Southwest, on the New Mexico frontier. For Brooks, “indigenous and colonial practices joined to form a ‘slave system’ in which victims symbolized social wealth, performed services for their master, and produced, material goods under the threat of violence.”⁸³ Slavery was rooted in the captivity and exchange practices by which both Indian and

⁸¹ Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philips’ War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 135.

⁸² Starna and Watkins, “Northern Iroquoian Slavery,” 35, 36, 40.

⁸³ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 31.

white men maintained social standing, wealth, and honor. The adoption and/or intermarriage between the women and children slaves and their captors created complicated kinship ties among whites and Indians, feeding a system of raiding and ownership based in unfreedom but having as much in common with Native cultures as Atlantic chattel slavery.

Yet, while the Spanish experience of slavery and enforced Indian labor influenced their interactions with Indians in the New Mexico borderlands, James Brooks shows that slavery in this region was as defined both by indigenous beliefs and customs as well as Spanish practice. For Brooks, Indian slavery was inextricably bound up in the rituals of masculine honor, shame, and status in which both Spaniards and Southwest Indian men participated. Less a part of Atlantic world traditions of chattel slavery, the Southwest borderlands were characterized by the cultural and social exchanges of “horses, sheep, guns, . . . buffalo hides [and] women and children.”⁸⁴ The capture and enslavement of women and children, who often became kin to their captors, “proved crucial to borderland political and cultural economies that used human beings in far-reaching social and economic exchange.”⁸⁵ As Brooks argues, while these women served as cultural mediators, “their captures and exchanges violated the masculine cultures of honor and social integrity of the victimized group and inspired the raids and reprisals” that came to characterize the region.⁸⁶ Both Spanish and Indian men engaged in violence and the taking of captives both as an expression of masculine power and to increase what Brooks

⁸⁴ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 40.

⁸⁵ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 39.

⁸⁶ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 40.

terms “social wealth.”⁸⁷ Gender, kinship, and violence all spun together in a system whereby women and children held a unique place as assimilable symbols of wealth and status among Plains Indian peoples, who “had multiple social locations into which captives could be incorporated, not the least of which was as adoptive sons and daughters”; likewise, Europeans had models by which enslaved children could become godchildren or particularly esteemed servants.⁸⁸ As Brooks notes, “Although captives often assimilated through institutions of kinship, they seldom shed completely their alien stigma As these captives became cousins through Native American and Spanish New Mexican kinship structures, they too became agents of conflict, conciliation, and cultural redefinition.”⁸⁹ As relatives, thus, captives formed a crucial social and economic link in colonial regional development. Brooks thus shows the central role that captives and slaves played in the social framework of the colonial Southwest borderlands.

In *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*, Alan Gallay argues that the trade in Indian slaves (as part of the larger flow of commodities in the English Atlantic world), was at the geopolitical center of the rise of English power in the colonial Southeast. He writes, “the drive to control Indian labor—which extended to every nook and cranny of the South—was inextricably connected to the growth of the plantations and the trade in Indian slaves was at the center of the English empire’s development in the American South. The trade in Indian slaves was the

⁸⁷ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 31.

⁸⁸ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 6; see also 16-17.

⁸⁹ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 31.

most important factor affecting the South in the period 1670 to 1715; its impact was felt from Arkansas to the Carolinas and south to the Florida Keys.”⁹⁰

Moreover, this slave trade was the primary cause of the restructuring of Native ethnic, tribal, and social identity in the South. As Gallay observes, before contact, “in Native American societies, ownership of individuals was more a matter of status for the owner and a statement of debasement and ‘otherness’ for the slave than it was a means to obtain economic rewards from unfree labor.”⁹¹ With the advent of English colonial expansion “capturing other Native Americans was a way to obtain European trade goods.”⁹² The English not only encouraged this from an economic standpoint, but both sides used the exchange of slaves to solidify alliances, weaken enemies, or, in the case of raiding France’s Indian allies for captives, a way of disempowering imperial competition in the South.⁹³

Throughout North America, then, Indian slavery played a pivotal role in the creation of colonial societies and in Native efforts to retain power and influence over European and Native allies. And it is here that we return to the three village worlds of the Upper Country, described by Richard White. Among the Anishnabeg, and interior French and mixed peoples, the presence of Indian captives and British captives and the need to created kinship relationships among all these disparate peoples as a precondition for peace, meant that captivity created a window for the establishment of the British fur trade

⁹⁰ Gallay, *Indian Slave Trade*, 7. It should be noted that while Gallay talks about the prevalence of women and children as captives, his primary focus is the geopolitical reformation of the region; he pays less attention to the role of traders, women, or other individuals as mediators and cultural brokers.

⁹¹ Gallay, *Indian Slave Trade*, 8.

⁹² Gallay, *Indian Slave Trade*, 8.

⁹³ Gallay, *Indian Slave Trade*, 127-28.

in a post-Seven Years' War recreation of the Middle Ground. Unable to conquer the Anishnabeg or the other Indian groups in the trans-Appalachian West, the British needed to become part of their world.

Indeed, John Askin could not have created a successful a life without these kinship ties. In 1772 Askin married Archange Barthe. She was the daughter of prosperous Detroit merchant Charles Barthe, and brought to the union a new kin and commercial network that included Barthe, his sons, and their Indian connections as well. This was a common practice for men who had, on first arrival, secured alliances with Native women. As Jacqueline Peterson observes, "After the trader had secured the trust of her band, however, he might seek a permanent marital alliance with a prominent métis or a French creole woman of a Great Lakes trading family. The second wife ordinarily assumed responsibility for the education and rearing of her husband's other children as well as her own."⁹⁴ The original Indian wife or mistress often returned to her father's household according to Anishnabeg kinship relations. As Laura Peers and Jennifer Brown note, "A woman retained her father's clan for life, while her children belonged to her husband's clan. Clan ties overlaid immediate and regional kinship networks, situating the individual within the broadest possible web of relatives."⁹⁵ There is evidence that the French also followed this custom. The métis trader Charles Langlade "first had a liaison with Angelique, reported to be a *panis* or Indian slave with the Ottawas in the later 1740s They had a son, also names Charles, who was sent to the College de Montréal to be

⁹⁴ Peterson, "Prelude to Red River," 58. "Similarly, Métis sons were more likely, at least for the first marriage, to wed native women, rather than Métis in order to reinforce kin ties and to propagate sons with easy access to the local bands. Conversely, Métis daughters generally married other Métis or, if member of the elite, incoming Euroamericans, thus integrating potentially disruptive and competitive strangers. The result was a growing core population of Métis at the fur trade settlements."

⁹⁵ Peers and Brown, "There is no End to Relationship among the Indians", <http://0-search.epnet.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=3112551>

educated Langlade then formally married Charlotte Ambrosine Bourrassa” in 1742.⁹⁶ Moreover, one did not need not necessarily need to marry to establish kinship ties for the trade. Alexander Henry found himself adopted by the Chippewa Wawatam. He had nearly forgotten about the ceremony or even Wawatam himself, until the profundity of this kinship connection became clear during his captivity following the attack on Michilimackinac, when the relationship saved his life.⁹⁷

Askin’s marriage to Archange Barthes took place when his two oldest children were around ten years old, and his youngest was eight. Born at L’Arbre Croche in or near 1762, John Jr. was Askin’s oldest child. Perhaps at the time of his marriage or before, his father had sent John Jr. to his trading associates, to be educated, a practice that seems to have been common among the interior French as well.⁹⁸ In 1774, the young Askin was in Schenectady, living with the Ellices of the trading firm Phyn and Ellice, and learning the business in addition to his letters. As Robert Ellice reassured the boy’s father, “you many depend that all manner of Care shall be taken of you Son, and put to one of the best Schools in Schenectady, &c. &c.”⁹⁹ Within six months, Askin Jr. seems to have left New York for Montreal, as Phyn and Ellice wrote his father in January 1775, “we have heard nothing from Mr. Todd respecting your Son.”¹⁰⁰ In 1778, Askin Sr. asked James Sterling to send John Jr. back as, “I shall be very glad to see my Boy here, however I don’t know

⁹⁶ McDonnell, “Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade,” 88.

⁹⁷ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 73-74.

⁹⁸ Theresa M. Schenck, “The Cadottes: Five Generations of Fur Traders on Lake Superior,” in *The Fur Trade Revisited*, (see Introduction note 15), 194.

⁹⁹ R. Ellice to John Askin, 13 August 1774, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, Merchants, at Schenectady, NY, 1767-1776, vol. III, 152-53. Buffalo Historical Society, (hereafter BHS), *Micro. Pub.*, No. 1, transcription in Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Mackinaw City, Mich., Askin, John—Affairs, Detroit, card II.

¹⁰⁰ 3 January 1775, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice vol. III, 172, BHS, transcription at Colonial Michilimackinaw Archives, Askin—Business Affairs/Quebec Acts, card II.

if I shall send him back so soon.”¹⁰¹ John Jr. would have been about sixteen years old, and ready to enter business with his father, who planned to take advantage of his son’s knowledge of Indian languages, his apprenticeship with the New York and Montreal merchants, and his métis connections. Indeed, Askin Jr. later married a Native woman and lived in Mackinac, where he became a successful fur trader and mediator in his own right.

That same year, 1778, Askin also noted the return of his oldest daughter to the family circle. Askin wrote to a friend, “I don’t remember if I mentioned to you that I had a Daughter came up from Montreal last year, where she has been for several [years] past in the Nunnery. She was Married this Winter to Capt Robertson, a Match which pleases me well . . . [I hope] perhaps to be a grand father next year.”¹⁰² Catherine Askin, known to her family as Kitty, married first William Robertson, the captain of one of Askin’s vessels, and second Robert Hamilton, the founder of Queenston, Ontario. Askin seems to have been truly excited both by his daughter’s marriage and by the opportunity of being a grandfather. His letters reveal his desire to see his children, particularly his first three, establish themselves in society according to interior French custom, and they show Askin’s conscious decisions to expand his network of family and commerce through fortuitous connections, i.e., the type of fictive kin networks that were socially and economically linked in the Great Lakes. Never one to miss an opportunity, Askin laid the groundwork well in advance for other advantageous connections as, still flush with Kitty’s good news, Askin wrote his friend Sampson Fleming, “I sincerely wish you much joy of your Boy, perhaps he may one Day become my Son in law, I have Girls worth

¹⁰¹ Askin to James Sterling, 8 May 1778, *AP*, 1:80.

¹⁰² Askin to John Hay, 27 April 1778, *AP*, 1:67-68.

looking at.”¹⁰³ Askin’s correspondence also reveals that he furnished Kitty with a wedding dress as well as other sundries—he wrote to Isaac Todd and James McGill in Montreal, “an acct of some things for Kitty with directions at Bottom, please send a Seperate acct of them.”¹⁰⁴ Madeleine Askin, born in 1764 and the youngest of Manette’s three children with John Askin, also lived in Montreal for some time during her youth.¹⁰⁵

Throughout his life, Askin worked tirelessly to expand, strengthen, and combine his familial, business, and political ties through the marriages of his many children. Yet, as Richard White, observes, the British were unable to duplicate exactly the “the common world with the Algonquians of the *pays d’en haut*” that the French had created. The British village world “was a heterogenous mix of different peoples loosely linked by intermarriage and common loyalties. But this village world was white and British and it was openly and aggressively expansionist.”¹⁰⁶ The British traders needed kinship ties with Indians, but they also utilized any tool trading tool they felt would give them an edge; in particular they renewed the trade in alcohol for which the Indians had a high demand and which had fallen off after the French retreat.¹⁰⁷ As Great Lakes anthropologist Charles E. Cleland observed, “Without the family connections of the French traders or knowledge of Indian customs, the English were often brutal in their dealings and especially in the use of intoxicants in the trade.”¹⁰⁸ They also did their best

¹⁰³ Askin to Sampson Fleming, 28 April 1778, *AP*, 1:79.

¹⁰⁴ Askin to Todd & McGill, 8 May 1778, *AP*, 1: 85.

¹⁰⁵ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 35-38.

¹⁰⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 315-16.

¹⁰⁷ The French had also used alcohol in trade, specifically brandy, and legalized its trade with the Indians in 1675, Claiborne A. Skinner, *The Upper Countr: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁰⁸ Charles E. Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 132.

to hijack the loyalties of experienced Hudson's Bay Company men further north, direct competitors to the English traders from New York and Montreal. This was made somewhat easier by the French departure from the west, as "in 1763, Montreal-based traders challenged the century-old monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company by pushing west into Indian country rather than waiting for Indian traders to bring pelts into the posts around the bay."¹⁰⁹

A 1772 Hudson's Bay Company letter from Andrew Graham, master at York Fort, to the Governor and Committee of the Company in London mentioned Askin's trading activities in connection with competition from the nascent Northwest Company based at Montreal and working out of Michilimackinac. Askin and his compatriots, Graham wrote, "all have much influence over the Natives. Particularly Corry & Erskine, the latter formerly was a great Fur trader above Albany Town, where he became Bankrupt, & afterwards came to Canada where he carries on a large Trade, not less than 500 packs of Furs annually, when mustered from all Parts." Askin, or Erskine, also hoped to lure HBC servants into his employ, "not because they want their Service, but because they draw the Natives."¹¹⁰ Alcohol was also a draw for voyageurs and backcountry traders. It was used as a motivator and as a reward for hard work.¹¹¹

By attracting these seasoned HBC back-country men into his service Askin hoped to take advantage of their established connections with Indian families. Men who had lived a number of years in the West most likely had Indian wives and children with

¹⁰⁹ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 356.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Graham to Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, 26 August 1772, in *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, ed. W. Stewart Wallace (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), 40-41, 42.

¹¹¹ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 149-50, 181.

whom they lived and traded. These marriages were encouraged by Indians, who viewed such a binding alliance with a trader as assurance of security and prestige.¹¹² Hudson's Bay Company servants as well as officers kept country wives, and Askin seems to have valued the economic potential in these relationships, both as a way to compete with HBC men as well as strengthen his own trading power, influence, and networks.¹¹³

Moreover, like his British trading counterparts, Askin relied on the use of strong liquor to encourage and sustain his trading networks, as Graham notes, "I am of the opinion [the Indians] will obey me, if Erskine's New England rum does not prevail."¹¹⁴ The French had long utilized brandy in trade, and the incoming British traders, with ready access to West Indian rum via Atlantic and imperial channels, were ready to step into the breach left by the French government in their surrender. However, the British Indian Department had tried to regulate the flow of spirits into the northwest via price controls and supply restriction, a policy completely ignored by those traders such as Askin who competed aggressively for command of the northwest trade.¹¹⁵ According to Cleland, "the use of 'strong water' . . . reached unprecedented proportions during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The traders justified its use by citing sharp competition between traders and Indian demand. In rum they had found the perfect trade good: cheap, addictive, and immediately consumed."¹¹⁶ This ready supply of rum incited violence and disorder both for traders and Indians, with profound and lasting consequences. Askin's

¹¹² Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 29, 42, 47.

¹¹³ Askin wintered at Cedar Lake, west of Grand Portage and Lake Winnipeg, during 1774, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 42.

¹¹⁴ Andrew Graham to Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, 26 August 1772, in *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 40-41, 42.

¹¹⁵ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 131-32.

¹¹⁶ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 132.

liberal use of rum, referred to by Graham as a potentially disrupting influence over HBC trading relationships and Indian allies, marked him as an aggressive and ambitious trader in a dangerous era.

A shrewd businessman, John Askin thus utilized several strategies for the growth and development of his affairs in the Great Lakes. He lured valuable men with experience and Native connections into his employ, he seems to have had a reputation for the liberal use of rum as a trade good, and he established kin relationships with an Odawa slave, using his connections with her family and clan as well as with his own *métis* children to strengthen his influence and connections. Manette's status as a slave would have had no impediment to the development of these ties, but rather would have strengthened his relations with local Indians. As part of a complex system of gift and trade exchange, female slaves represented the community's desire to establish links with the new masters of Michilimackinac.¹¹⁷ Certainly, the French government's lack of interest in going back to war for the reclamation of Canada, and the perceived British victory in Pontiac's War indicated that the British were in the Upper Country to stay. Moreover, they represented a buffer against the American settlers who clamored for lands beyond the Proclamation line, and who already had a well-established foothold in the Ohio Valley. Interior French and Indians, who had developed complex trading customs and lifeways over the previous century, sought to maintain the essence of these relationships and behaviors in forging tentative ties with the British. In 1763, the Great Lakes borderland was intact, even though it had been shaken by Pontiac's rebellion and the actions of indiscriminate traders who did not yet know how to adopt Indian rules of behavior to their own businesses.

¹¹⁷ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 82.

Indians still dictated the terms of exchange and the relationships that made trade possible, while the British, like the French before them, lived on the edges of Native power. In the next chapter, I show that, having established himself as an integral actor in the borderland, Askin began to focus on his non-Native networks for the core of his business and personal expansion.

Chapter Three

Agriculture, Shipping, and Crafts at Michilimackinac

Throughout the eighteenth century, Michilimackinac was the hub of the fur trade in the northwest. During the French period of occupation, Native traders came in to the fort to trade; the British later reversed this trend, preferring to take their trade goods farther west in order to subvert the Hudson's Bay Company, with which they were often in direct competition. The tradition of bringing furs into the post resulted in the annual Rendezvous, which Peter Pond described as the high point of the year, for socializing, carousing, hiring labor, and spending, as the five to six hundred traders amused "themselves in Good Company at Billards Drinking fresh Punch Wine & Eney thing thay Please to Call for while the Mo[re] valgear Ware fiteing Each other feasting was Much attended to Dansing at Nite."¹ Spring canoes from Montreal, which could carry up to five tons, brought only enough in the way of provisions to refuel at Michilimackinac, preferring to save valuable canoe space for trade goods destined for the people who lived west of Lake Winnipeg. Canoe traffic was heavy on the main runs during high season, and labor was often scarce, with masters often hoping to hire crews at Michilimackinac, Detroit and other posts in the backcountry.² With this high demand for labor and the need to resupply, "corn to fuel the canoe brigades was as much a part of the fur trade as furs."³

¹ Quoted in Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 166. See also Sleeper-Smith, "The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes," 154.

² Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 111-112; Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 218.

³ Peers, "Fur Trade History," 101. The distance from Montreal to Michilimackinac was 600 miles, and "a trip to the Upper Country required an ascent of nearly 600 feet in as many miles," Skinner, *The Upper Country*, 37-39. After Michilimackinac it was another 600 miles to the Illiniwek to the southwest, and 500 miles across Lake Superior to Kaministigoya. Carolyn Podruchny notes that it took a month and a half to

The getting, growing, and transport of food to traders, stores, and other posts was thus a crucial element of the fur trade, and an area in which English traders, who had difficulty penetrating the long-established kin networks of the Upper Country, were able to excel.⁴

In chapter three, I examine John Askin's agricultural diary from the years 1774-75, just before the outbreak of the Revolutionary war, as well as his shipping records from the late 1770s, to show the central place of food, shipping, and labor in his operations.⁵ These documents reveal a trend toward a more Anglo-centric focus in the supply end of the trade, even though traders continued to buy corn from Native farmers into the first decades of the nineteenth century. The fur trade relied on Indians and Indian networks, but the British merchants were able to create parallel networks that relied more heavily on Anglo-Americans, Interior French, and slaves. The diary delineates the seasonal nature of work at the fur trade posts, but more significantly, it shows how Askin used farming, shipping, and trading to forge a central position in the local economy. Moreover, the Great Lakes borderland included Indians, métis, Interior French, British traders, and slaves. This multicultural world had all the elements of a borderland—people of multiple ethnicities who both lived within and blurred cultural/ethnic lines, a concern with the symbols of power and identity, and perhaps most significantly, a local power broker who used all the creative hybridity, accommodation, and other elements of the middle ground to expand his influence to the imperial stage. John Askin expanded his

two and a half months to get from Montreal to Grand Portage, but only half that to return, *Making the Voyageur World*, 101.

⁴ Sleeper-Smith, "The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes," 154. She also notes that the "the English proved far more successful in opening the trade of the Canadian Northwest, which was unencumbered by established kin networks," and are the areas that Van Kirk and Brown studied so effectively.

⁵ Askin also kept an agricultural diary in Detroit, but the entries are primarily descriptions of the weather, MS Askin J., D5, 9 March- 23 June 1790, Burton Historic Collection, Detroit Public Library.

trade in furs into an enterprise that encompassed every aspect of Upper Country life and was a microcosm of the borderland itself, showing its transformation from a French and Indian village world into one where Anglo-Americans became increasingly influential. Because, as Carolyn Podruchny notes, “the fur trade became the central economic enterprise in the colony of New France and remained important until the first quarter of the nineteenth century,” Askin’s role at Michilimackinac cannot be overstated.⁶

Michilimackinac before Askin

In creating his Upper Country fur trade empire, Askin built upon the trade, labor, and kinship networks established over the previous century by Indians and French. He tapped into existing social networks that dictated every aspect of daily life.

When the British arrived to take formal command of Michilimackinac in 1761 they found a thriving community consisting of the French fortifications and town and the Odawa village at L’Arbre Croche, as well as the seasonal influx of French and Indian traders from the interior—as many as 1000 people.⁷ Alexander Henry, one of the earliest British traders to venture into the Upper Country, observed that “within the stockade are thirty houses, neat in their appearance, and tolerable commodious; and a church in which mass is celebrated by a Jesuit missionary. The number of families may be nearly equal to that of the houses; and their subsistence is derived from the Indian traders who assemble here in their voyages to and from Montreal. Michilimackinac is the place of deposit and

⁶ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 21.

⁷ “As many as 100 soldiers, French, and Métis may have lived at Michilimackinac in the 1740s. Along with the Ottawa town nearby, the total population came to perhaps 1000 people. In summer, this number periodically swelled as voyageurs stopped in to trade or deliver supplies, obtain provisions and tobacco, and slake thirsts . . .,” Skinner, *The Upper Country*, 147.

point of departure between the upper countries and the lower. Here the outfits are prepared . . . and here the returns in furs are collected and embarked for Montreal.”⁸ Michilimackinac’s pre-Conquest population seems not to have ventured far outside the wooden palisades.⁹

By 1764 however, the fragile peace after the Seven Years’ War and Pontiac’s War assured the resumption of trade, and with it the continued expansion of the settlement at the straits of Mackinac. As Keith Widder writes, “the fur trade proved to be the common denominator that linked all groups of people residing and Michilimackinac and in the western Great Lakes region before and during the American Revolution. Indian, métis, and French-Canadian families depended upon a stable trade in order to make their livings. British and French-Canadian traders although bitter rivals, had to have peaceful relations between Indian nations throughout the region for their businesses to prosper.”¹⁰ Perched on the south shore of the straits, the fort hugged the water and drew its lifeblood not only from the trade in furs and canoes, but the trade in fish and corn as well. Constant sedentary habitation since the late seventeenth century had long depopulated the surrounding game, and depleted the soil. Odawas, Ojibwas, Potawatomies and others grew corn and related crops around the Great Lakes and brought this surplus north not only for the maintenance and supply of the town, but of the trading canoes.¹¹

⁸ Alexander Henry, quoted in Elizabeth M. Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac, 1715-1781: The Clergy and the Traders*, Archaeological Completion Report Series, Number 9 (Mackinac Island, Mich.: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1985), 38.

⁹ For a succinct discussion of the French founding of Michilimackinac in the late 17th century, see Skinner, *The Upper Country*, 47-51.

¹⁰ Widder, “Effects of the American Revolution on Fur-Trade Society at Michilimackinac,” in *The Fur Trade Revisited*, (see Introduction note 15), 302.

¹¹ Great Lakes peoples had been cultivating corn since about A.D. 900, and was the major field crop in the pre-contact era. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 97-98, 113014.

Even though it was a “small island of Europeans surrounded and visited by large Native populations,” since 1730, the fort had attracted ever-increasing numbers of traders with their wives and households, including children, servants, and slaves.¹²

Michilimackinac had become the primary entrepôt for the northwestern fur trade by the time of the British conquest of Canada. Because of the recent unrest from the war and Pontiac’s Rebellion, the British stationed a greater number of soldiers there than their French counterparts had previously.¹³ This allowed less room inside the fort for traders’ housing. Archaeologists have found evidence of “a large, well-planned community, purposefully laid out by survey, not unlike the settlement within the fort proper” outside the walls.¹⁴ Planners built row houses like those inside the fort, and evidently moved some of the fort’s housing beyond the pickets. The external village was “a regular system of parallel lanes and streets [with] buildings running along them, running south from the shore at about a 45-degree angle [northwest to southwest].”¹⁵ Before the Seven Years’ War, the French had remained behind the flimsy palisade. Yet, during the British period, most traders and interior French lived outside the fort’s walls, in a rapidly growing arc of “suburbs.”¹⁶ The Odawas who had attacked Michilimackinac during Pontiac’s War in 1763 had targeted British troops and traders, sparing the large French community with

¹² Peers, “Fur Trade History,” 106.

¹³ See Skinner, *The Upper Country*, 146-48 for information on French life at Michilimackinac.

¹⁴ Donald P. Heldman and Roger T. Grange Jr., *Excavations at Fort Michilimackinac: 1978-1979 The Rue de la Babillarde*, Archaeological Completion Report Series, no. 3 (Mackinac Island State Park Commission, Mackinac Island, Mich., 1981), 46-47.

¹⁵ Heldman and Grange, *Rue de la Babillarde*, 46-47. Heldman and Grange note that most of the village lies underneath modern Mackinaw City.

¹⁶ Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac*, 37.

whom they had no quarrel.¹⁷ By the 1770s, for the British traders to move outside the walls must have signified a growing sense of safety. Even very wealthy and powerful residents of the fort lived outside the palisade, and built elaborate houses. John Askin wrote his in-law Commodore Grant at Detroit in 1778, that “I have even began to make a tolerable good House two Story high, however if the war ends soon, perhaps I may not finish it in the manner I intended.”¹⁸

The British seemed intent on living more lavishly than their French predecessors. In the 1760s, newly arriving British traders and soldiers bought houses from their French counterparts. Ezekiel Solomon and his business partner Levy purchased theirs from the Parant family some time in the 1760s. By 1769, Solomon and Levy were seasonal residents only, returning to Montreal to winter.¹⁹ The house was rebuilt at some point during the British occupation, to include more rooms than previously. Yet, even though the British period is generally associated archaeologically with higher status items than during French occupation, the Solomon-Levy/Parant house is “distinguished by a lack of high-status artifacts.”²⁰ According to archaeologist Jill Halchin, if the house was “owned by someone of wealth, it could have been rented to somebody poorer,” since the traders only used it seasonally as a “transshipment point for fur trading.”²¹

¹⁷ Cleland, *Rites of Conquest*, 138.

¹⁸ Helman and Grange, *Rue de la Babillarde*, 45; Askin had been entertaining the idea of moving to Detroit for some time, Askin to Commodore Grant at Detroit, 28 April 1778, *AP*, 1:78.

¹⁹ Jill Y. Halchin, *Excavations at Fort Michilimackinac, 1983-1985: House C of the Southeast Row House, The Solomon-Levy-Parant House*, Archaeological Completion Report Series, no. 11 (Mackinac Island, Mich.: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1985), 59.

²⁰ Halchin, *House C of the Southeast Row House*, 58-59.

²¹ Halchin, *House C of the Southeast Row House*, 58-59, 102.

Signs of increased status from the French to the British period encompassed dietary changes, characterized most noticeably by an increase in domestic animals and a shift to a more European diet.²² Documentary evidence suggests that the French at Michilimackinac lived primarily on whitefish, which they bought from the Indians. Lotbinière noted that “they only [took] the trouble of going to the edge of the lake, as if going to the market, to get their supplies of corn and fish when the Indians” brought it.²³ Residents during the French period purchased much of their food from local Native groups who traded fish and grain for material goods and brandy. Diet, however, changed for the wealthier French residents and the clergy, who began to eat more mammals and fewer fish after 1761. A local crop, squash, remained a dietary staple throughout the British period, and Indians continued to play an important role in provisioning the fort.²⁴

The British also continued to purchase corn from the Odawas at L’Arbre Croche as well as from other people around the Lakes, for their own use and to supply the canoemen. Alexander Henry observed, “The village of L’Arbe Croche supplies, as I have said, the maize, or *Indian corn*, with which the canoes are victualled. This species of grain is prepared for use, by boiling it in a strong like after which the husk may be easily removed; and it is next mashed and dried. Int this state, it is soft and friable, like rice. The

²² Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac*, 2. Scott argues that a direct relationship exists between social status and domesticated animals.

²³ Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac*, 34-35.

²⁴ Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac*, iv, 56, 78; see also Skinner, *The Upper Country*, since the traders got all their food from the Ottawas, “The traders did little farming or gardening at the post, one visitor sniffed as ‘it would cost them too much effort to procure these good things for themselves. They prefer strolling around the fort’s parade ground, from morn till night, with a pipe in their mouth and a tobacco pouch on their left arm, rather than take the lesast pain to make themselves more comfortable,’ ” 147-48.

allowance, for each man, on the voyage, is a quart a day.”²⁵ The French residents also bought wildfowl whenever possible.²⁶

The British brought more extensive cultivation to the fort. Ultimately, changes in lifestyle at Michilimackinac show an increased reliance on domestic animals rather than fish for the British and wealthier French residents, as well as a continued use of local agricultural and Native resources. Dietary changes added livestock management to crop and garden production. This shift from a primarily Indian lifestyle to one that was more European in tone would have had a profound impact on the domestic lives of traders and their families. The analysis of diet has implications on daily life in the upper Great Lakes, as “the French at Michilimackinac were less dependent on imported foods and more dependent on local resources than were the French at eighteenth-century settlements to the east in New France,”²⁷ and even at Detroit. Changes in diet indicate a change in food production techniques, and thus a change in the day-to-day activities. French traders who lived at the straits before 1730 ate a primarily aboriginal diet.

After the 1730 rebuilding of the fort, the French began to keep livestock. The inhabitants allowed their domestic animals to roam free in the forests during the summer, but penned them during the harsher winter months, rounding up the pigs and cattle in the fall and caring for them from October through April. These responsibilities increased during the British period, as fishing decreased. Corn and potatoes remained dietary

²⁵ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 54. Henry notes also that maize is expensive: “forty livres a bushel,” 55.

²⁶ Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac*, 39, 40.

²⁷ John F. M. Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards of the Southeast Row House, Fort Michilimackinac, Michigan*, Archaeological Completion Report Series, no. 16 (Mackinac Island, Mich.: Mackinac State Historic Parks, 1998), 164; for a discussion of “wet” dishes (like bowls) and ceramic assemblages, see Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 79; for the transition from fish to meat, see Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 167.

staples, however. The land surrounding the Straits of Mackinac best suited the type of agriculture practiced by local Indians, and was not as conducive to traditional English pastoralism. These patterns—the limited growth of husbandry, along with the long-term cultivation of corn, beans, and squash by the Anishnabeg—shaped Askin’s 1770 agricultural efforts in support of the fur trade.

Agriculture

From his farm at Three Mile Pond, so-named because of its distance from the fort, Askin “supplied Michilimackinac with domesticated animals and vegetables from both the farm . . . [as well as the] gardens [he] had at the fort. Thus, at least by 1774, Askin’s farm played an important role as a farm-to-market supplier for the British soldiers, traders, merchants, and their families at the fort.”²⁸ While Askin continued to trade and ship furs, it was his ability to supply the interior traders that solidified his pivotal role in the local economy—and what made him central to the Great Lakes fur trade.

As the community grew in and around the fort, and as the northwest trade with its Indian traders and armies of *voyageurs* increased, Askin’s diary shows the central importance of food and provisioning to Upper Country life. Getting and shipping food was one of the biggest problems in the Upper Country, and the posts and laborers depended on a reliable source. He cast his net wide, as he reported to his friend and associate James McGill in Montreal:

I certainly am or ought to be a judge of the Provisions necessary to carry on the trade of this place, & I know that when four Vessells arrived here in the Spring, loaded with Corn & Flour mostly, there was not too much, nor hardly ever any left, the trade is now increased, therefore at least the same Quantities of

²⁸ Scott, *French Subsistence at Fort Michilimackinac*, 41.

Provisions wanted to Support it. I want 1000 Bushels of Corn myself & 30 thousand of Flour, who only furnish a few of the Traders.²⁹

If the need for corn was prodigious, as this letter indicates, so was the necessity of getting provisions to where they needed to be. He soon became a crucial actor in the transportation networks that supplied the Great Lakes and Northwest. Agricultural endeavors were an integral component of this venture. Just as French traders had done previously, the British at the posts in the Great Lakes relied primarily on Native supplies of corn and other grains primarily from established Indian agricultural villages in the St. Joseph and Grand River valleys, but as part of this supply chain, Askin tried to grow his own food in addition to buying it from Native farmers around the lakes.³⁰

In 1774 John Askin sought and was granted permission “to enclose from three to five Acres of Ground near a Spot call’d the three Miles pond and to bild thereon a House with such other Conveniences as He from Time to Time may judge necessary.”³¹ The acquisition of this farm allowed Askin to “lay the groundwork for what was to become for him a lucrative commercial venture at the Straits of Mackinac.”³² Not only did Askin own and farm land at Three Mile Pond, but he also co-owned a farm adjacent to the Jesuit Mission at L’Arbre Croche, an Odawa town twenty miles southwest of Michilimackinac, on the Lake Michigan shore.³³ Askin owned several active properties outside the fort,

²⁹ Askin to James McGill, Frobisher, Charles Patterson, et al., 28 April 1778, *AP*, 1:77.

³⁰ See Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, op cit.

³¹ Vattas to Askin, *AP*, 1:49-50.

³² Heldman, *Archaeological Investigations at French Farm Lake*, 6.

³³ Claiborne Skinner notes that L’Arbre Croche was founded by the Ottawas who, having previously supplied Michilimackinac, wanted to move to “more fertile” land; the French, panicking, made a compromise that they would help the Ottawas clear fields at L’Arbre Croche in order to keep their necessary supplies from the Natives flowing. *The Upper Country*, 149.

including a farm at Cheboygan, where, “the Chief was a neighbor to John Askin and John Baptiste Barthe who owned a couple of dwellings occupied by a Negro and a panis [Indian] slave.”³⁴ In 1776, Askin owned a number of properties and houses, including: a farm near Detroit that had houses and orchards; two farms at Grosse Pointe, also near Detroit; a house purchased from a Mr. Derivien; Mr. Bourassa’s former house, stables, and barns at Michilimackinac; a bake house; a house and lot outside the Michilimackinac walls, where he actually lived; a large vault or cellar outside of the fort; a house and farm near the fort; a smith’s shop; a house at Cheboygan river; stages for drying corn; half a store house at fort Erie; and 2 large kettles in a furnace at the waterside. He estimated the total value of his real property at 1068 pounds New York Currency; real estate was a source of wealth in times of peace.³⁵

Askin captured the rhythms of daily civilian life at Michilimackinac in his diary, the primary focus of which was the growing or finding of food. The diary reveals three primary preoccupations—the nature of seasonal work, the problem of labor, and the connection between agriculture, shipping, and trade. It records sowing, harvesting, and husbandry at the Three Mile Pond farm and at his grounds at the fort, the movements of traders and boats, and the activities of his servants and slaves. The diary also shows the

³⁴ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 134; see J. B. Barthe Invoice Book, 1778-1780, 13 September 1779, Jean Baptiste Barthe Papers, Burton Collection, Detroit Public Library. Installing slaves as managers and workers on his outlying properties allowed Askin to increase his productivity and diversify his business interests, Askin memoranda, 16 August 1766, BHC, cited in Heldman, *Archaeological Investigations at French Farm Lake*, 6-7.

³⁵ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 209; Claiborne Skinner notes that Rene Bourassa was “a new sort of merchant, different from the old Métis families.” He was from the St. Laurence Valley, and though he had traded in the Upper Country, he never became a real part of it. Skinner writes, “Perhaps the richest trader in the village, he owned a number of slaves and sent his daughter Charlotte off to school at Quebec. Unlike most of the old families he had no special ties to the Indians. They seemed, in fact, to have disliked him. Enterprising, brave enough, he nevertheless stood apart from the old model of the fur trader. He never entered the Indian world, but sought only his fortune there,” *The Upper Country*, 148.

diversity of his cultivation. It begins on 16 April 1774, with the report that the ice on the lake had begun to break up “a little.” Three days later Askin “sett the first potatoes” and on 20 April, he “began to harrow my Ground at the farm,” and later sowed peas. Askin’s commercial and agricultural interests were completely dependent on the weather. Spring signaled not only the resumption of navigation, but the new growing season. In addition to peas, Askin sowed buckwheat at the farm on 27 April, and parsnips, potatoes, and oats on, as well as onions, beans, squash, and cucumbers. According to Carolyn Podruchny, these were all very common garden crops at western fur trade posts, and provided variety in traders’ diets.³⁶ The fields thus included the traditional local crops of squash and beans, but also European varieties. On 2 May, Askin plowed but snow and a hard freeze put a damper on his planting. When the weather cleared, Askin continued to plow and set potatoes. By 23 May, he began to plant Indian corn and by the end of the month, last of the potatoes, peas, beans, clover, and rye grass went into the ground. Askin did not write again until 19 July when he “began to Cutt Hay.”

The crops Askin sowed were a variety of garden vegetables, corn, and fodder for livestock, namely the clover, rye grass, and hay. He does not mention in the diary whether or not these crops were intended to be purely for subsistence or for the trade, but were more than likely a combination thereof. What is evident, however, is that Askin was trying to grow foodstuffs on his own, in an effort to augment or supplement what he needed to buy from Indians. Clearly, this one farm would not have been able to support the thousand-odd people who relied on the fur trade supply network, but with the need to

³⁶ 28 April, 29 April 1774, AP, 1:77. Podruchny notes, “the most common produce seems to be potatoes and turnips, but men also cultivated onions, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, parsnips, and beets, using seeds brought from Canada” *Making the Voyageur World*, 240. These plantings actually occurred several months before he gained permission to establish the farm at Three Miles Pond.

provision the canoes dashing back and forth from Montreal and Grand Portage and stock the fort for winter, having his own farms would have given Askin an advantage as he would not have had to purchase absolutely everything. Any food not needed for his own use could be traded or sold, or used thus to create credit or alleviate debt, as I discuss further in Chapter Four. Moreover, this diary describes his activities at just one farm; Askin owned several.

He was more reticent about his harvest than his spring plantings. On 6 November 1774 Askin reported that the water rose 3.5 feet, with a strong southwest wind, followed by four inches of snow. Of the storm, Askin noted, “no Such thing as this Ever happened here in my time which is now ten years.”³⁷ On 8 and 14 November Askin dug potatoes, and on 13 November, Captain Robertson, his future son-in-law, began patterns for a petiauger, or dugout canoe, and that he went to the woods to get the necessary timber the next day. 30 November, the last entry for 1774, Askin picked his cabbages, presumably burying them in the garden turf for storage during the cold winter months.

With the growing season at an end and the lakes closed to traffic, Askin’s winter diary focused on animal husbandry. On 7 January 1775, he bred his black sow and on 12 January he noted that Captain Cornwall’s sow had bred. The first hen laid and on 13 January, Captain Robertson commenced building his petiauger. In February and March, the livestock started to give birth. The ewes began their spring lambing ritual on 24 February. On 4 March a cow calved at Three Miles Pond, and on 15 March another cow calved “at the farm in the Woods.” Happily, Askin observed that the weather held, “& Grass almost Every place.” The year 1775 seems to have had an earlier spring, as by 26

³⁷ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:53.

March, the lake became clear of ice and ready for boats, but by 1 April, Askin wrote that the weather had turned uncommonly cold and that his cows had been outdoors for near a fortnight. By 7 April the first canoes began to arrive, and Askin noted the presence of geese and pigeons in the sky. On 8 April the red sow birthed seven pigs, a few days later the white sow produced one pig, and on 13 April the black sow pigged. Pigeons were plentiful in the air, and one presumes, on the tables. On 8 May, Askin noted that “the first Herring [were] caught today.”

Because this is an agricultural diary, Askin does not mention the merry dances, bowls of punch, or other Michilimackinac winter amusements that appear elsewhere in his letters. Livestock is important because not only is it food, it is money. The winter of 1774-75 seemed to be one of plenty, with an abundance of baby animals, which, if they lived, could eventually be eaten or sold. Moreover, while hunting and fishing continued to be important sources of food—Askin mentions specifically geese, pigeons, and herring—domestic animal protein had become a significant part of Upper Country diets, at least at Michilimackinac—further evidence of a trend toward the Europeanization of daily life.

On 1 May 1775, Askin also sowed clover, peas, turnips, and parsnips, noting that he sowed the turnip seed “in drills 2 foot apart with dung in the trench under the Seeds.”³⁸ On 2 May he sowed parsley, beets, onions, lettuce, and barley; On 3 May, Askin sowed more garden crops and set shallots and beans, while the small black sow produced six pigs. Clearly, by the mid-1770s, agriculture and supply had become more of an obsession for him. May’s diary entries are punctuated by the rhythms of farm and fort

³⁸ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:55.

life. Sows pigged, cows calved, potatoes, lettuce, carrots, turnips, parsnips, cabbage, peas, and buckwheat went into the ground, and ships—most notably the *Chippewa*—arrived from Detroit and departed again four or five days later, newly loaded. Friday, 26 May, Askin reported “a Shower of hail as big as my finger.”³⁹ The diary is again silent during the busiest trading and shipping season, from 22 June through 29 August, on which date Askin writes a short treatise on farming at Michilimackinac, which seems mostly to be notes to himself about the successes and failures of the first two seasons, with instructions for next year: “Thro bracking when Green, rotten hay or any such Stuff on land where pease & Buck wheat have been, plow it in the Month of Sepr Harrow it in the Spring & Plant Potatoes with ye Plow without any more dunging.”⁴⁰ And, “New Ground twice plowed I think best for Pease.” He also experimented with several different ways of planting potatoes—with dung, without dung, cut in pieces, and whole. On 3 November Askin noted that he sent for whitefish from Sault Ste. Marie, from the Indians. On 18 November, the black sow had seven pigs. Askin finished plowing, and the 1774 diary then fell silent.⁴¹

Like other agricultural diaries, Askin’s diary reflects a fascination with agricultural labor, detail, and experimentation with different crops, which remained with him his entire life. In addition to the seasonal nature of agricultural work, from planting in the spring, to harvesting in the fall, and the breeding of animals over the winter, the diary also addresses issues of labor. Hiring servants or *engagés* was common in the

³⁹ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:56.

⁴⁰ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:57.

⁴¹ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 42:

Upper Country and was a long-standing tradition in the trade. While these men were not paddling canoes they worked for their masters doing other tasks.

Servants were thus crucial to the trade. As Carolyn Podruchny explains in her treatise on voyageur labor, *Making the Voyageur World*, Michilimackinac and Detroit were places where bourgeois and merchants hired labor to go further in the interior; therefore, men were available at the interior posts to hire, and were a ready, if perhaps seasonal, labor pool. She writes, “The bourgeois and clerks often shared their servants with one another in order best to distribute the labor.”⁴² On 18 May Askin planted pumpkins and squashes at Three Miles Pond, and on 22 May he hired an *engagé*, Clutiez, from 27 August 1774, the date he would be freed from his present master, until 1 June 1775, for the sum of 250 livres in peltry and equipment.

Masters, i.e., “bourgeois, did not participate in the vigorous round of activities that kept the post functioning smoothly, such as constructing and maintaining houses; building furniture, sleighs, and canoes; gathering fire wood; hunting; and preparing food.”⁴³ Voyageurs thus handled the bulk of the work—they not only were responsible for carpentry and food production, but they made tools, barrels, and did the planting and harvesting, as well as cleaned the forts—“A year-round chore.”⁴⁴ As Podruchny writes, “In areas where the soil was fertile and the growing season reasonably long, traders planted gardens to supplement their diets Men began the gardens by clearing land in

⁴² Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 135, 112. Voyageurs contracts were typical of other indentured servitude contracts in that they stressed a certain period of time, and provided for food and clothing.

⁴³ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 148.

⁴⁴ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 215-17.

early spring, planting in the late spring, weeding throughout the summer, and harvesting in the fall.”⁴⁵

On 8 May 1774 Askin hired a man named Chabotte, just until the arrival of the North West Company’s canoes from Grand Portage, for one hundred pounds in peltry or two hundred pounds in Montreal currency in addition to one pair of trousers, a shirt, and a pair of leggings. Chabotte “oblige himself during sd time to work faithfull whither on a Voyage or Otherwise Employed.”⁴⁶ Askin clearly needed to hire more labor to help out on the farm, in his household, and, in the case of Chabotte, as a general laborer to work both on the boats or elsewhere as needed. Throughout the spring, Askin continued to hire *engagés*, taking on Peter Ord on 18 April for 7/s per week. On 12 January 1775, Ganniez, presumably another of Askin’s *engagés*, began to make kegs.

Moreover, voyageurs were not the only people who could be engaged in service. On 3 May 1774, he hired a soldier’s wife, Elizabeth Staniford, to do all of his family’s washing. Soldiers’ wives had long participated in the seasonal labor force through such agreements, and thus helped support their families by taking on work. From planting, to laundry, to shipping, Askin required the use of hired men and women, whether as *engages*, as day laborers, or for domestic tasks, the worst and most labor-intensive of which was laundry.

In addition to servants and slaves (whom I will discuss later in this chapter and in Chapter Four), Askin recorded the comings and goings of various French and métis with whom he did business. Men who had wintered in the backcountry emerged from the woods loaded down with packs of pelts, while fresh supplies began moving up and down

⁴⁵ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 239-40.

⁴⁶ “Diary of John Askin at Michilimackinac,” *AP*, 1:51.

the waterways. In May the traders began to arrive at the fort. On 15 May “a Canoe of Mr. St. Pierres arrived from Milwaukee with Corn.”⁴⁷ On the same day, Mr. Ainsse, a trader and interpreter arrived at Michilimackinac where he lived with his wife’s people, “the Ottaways.” On 1 May 1775, traders Sans Chagrin and Chabouilley arrived in Michilimackinac from the Grand River. And on 10 May 1775 Askin noted that “Mr. Cadotts Brother in Law an Indian arrived to day.”⁴⁸ The coming together of all these people—French and Indian traders, servants, and others—during the summer meant more than a big party. Summer was the most frenetic time of year, and Askin was busy honoring the contracts he held to supply the traders of the North West and other companies with both victuals and imported goods, and to make sure that corn and furs traveled quickly and safely among the posts.

Askin’s diary shows that while Michilimackinac was a community still dependent on Indian corn, merchants had begun to take some responsibility for their own subsistence.⁴⁹ The traders, voyageurs, and other residents of the fort, however, still

⁴⁷ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:52. Since the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701, Odawa and Potawatomi women along the Lake Michigan shore and further south had rapidly expanded their agricultural production. Often using French techniques and tools, such as the French plow shear known as *en bardeau*, Indian women at L’Arbre Croche and Fort St. Joseph created an agricultural surplus that supported the French and British military and civilian posts throughout the western Great Lakes. Askin himself owned a farm at L’Arbre Croche, the Odawa village on the Lake Michigan shore, southwest of the fort. Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 76-77.

⁴⁸ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:52. Cadot was an Ojibwa trader in the Upper Country, who was well-connected with the Natives as well as the Northwest Company men and the British military. See Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 17, 40, 130, 136, 180, 192. For a short history of the Cadotte family, see Theresa Schenck, “The Cadottes,” 189-98.

⁴⁹ Archaeological investigations offer additional clues to Askin’s farming enterprise. An eighteenth-century British period farm site at what is now termed French Farm Lake is probably the original site of the farm and house that Askin mentions in his 1774-1775 Mackinac diary. As Michilimackinac archaeologist Donald P. Heldman wrote, “By the 1770s, in fact, Askin had accumulated enough wealth personally to finance the construction and operation of a flotilla of merchant sloops from Michilimackinac and St. Mary’s (Sault Ste. Marie) to serve numerous settlements on the western Great Lakes, including Detroit to the south and Grand Portage at the western end of Lake Superior. To maintain this widespread commerce, Askin also owned and operated two trading houses in the region, one at Michilimackinac where he himself

needed the Anishnabeg in fundamental ways. Without their Indian relatives and networks they would obviously not have had furs to trade. The diary also shows that Askin was still trading with the Indians for corn and whitefish from places like Milwaukee and Sault Ste. Marie, even as he was attempting to grow his own crops at various farms around the lower Michigan peninsula. However, the shift to a more European diet, coupled with an increase in husbandry and Askin's attempts to grow local produce, does reveal a tendency toward more hands on control over food and provisioning.

Michilimackinac was thus truly a borderland where people of disparate and sometimes even multiple identities worked together—sometimes peaceably and sometimes not—in pursuit of the common goal, the trade in furs. Yet even though Askin rarely mentions Indians in his diary and correspondence, they are ubiquitous in the trade. Men with French names, like the aforementioned Cadotte, identified themselves as Ojibwa or French depending on the circumstances. Moreover, Askin's attempts at cultivation were not necessarily a conscious effort to displace Indians from the trade; rather, his farms were another piece of the borderland mosaic. By attempting to grow his

lived, and the other at St. Mary's. Growth and prosperity depended then, as now, upon increasing capital investment and increasing goods and services. Askin was, therefore, interested in broadening his economic base. It comes as no surprise, then, that he received title in 1773 to a farm adjacent to French Farm Lake, as an historic document reveals.

"The economic documents of Askin's commercial activities contain two overriding themes. First, and not unlike other traders of the day, Askin imported commodities from eastern Canada, Europe, and from countries as distant from the wilderness of the Upper Great Lakes as China. Second, the documents refer to a large percentage of agricultural products raised locally by Askin at Michilimackinac and at his two farms nearby. The symbiotic relationship between imports and domestic products explains in good part the prosperity, however, short-lived, that John Askin enjoyed at the Straits of Mackinac," Heldman, *Archaeological Investigations at French Farm Lake*, 6-7, 14-15, 34. Heldman also suggests that the site at French Farm Lake, while it is likely Askin's farm, cannot definitively be identified as such. Another potential owner of the farm is Joseph Louis Ainse, who was born at Michilimackinac in 1744, but who "evidently did not accumulate great amounts of wealth as a trader and Indian interpreter," making it unlikely that he owned the farm. Although, "It is concluded that 20EM57 is the site of a late British colonial farm, dating between 1774 and 1780, and that it probably is the archaeological remain of John Askin's farm," *Archaeological Investigations at French Farm Lake*, 35, 69. Moreover, the importation of high-status ceramics and other items shows that men of Askin's stature began living in a more European fashion, in an area where Native and métis cultures had long held sway.

own foodstuffs, Askin replicated both European and Native farmlife in the region, and participated thus in the mutual attempts at understanding and accommodation of the middle ground. His farms fit squarely into a borderland pattern where Indian, interior French, and British fort farms coexisted in the same system.

Craftwork at Michilimackinac

Indian lifeways and traditions, however, continued to be essential to fur trade life. Before 1760, food production and the fur trade were not the only seasonal activities at Michilimackinac. Interpretations of Indian pottery sherds and worked stone found within the fort walls indicate a high incidence of French and Native interaction with the fort's homes and structures than during the British period of occupation. These artifacts were either "deposited on the site immediately prior to the construction of the original stockade," or they were "a part of some activity contemporary with European interaction," as their presence in European context suggests.⁵⁰ The presence of Indians in French households may explain the presence of these uniquely Native artifacts.⁵¹

The high incidence of copper, wire, and other scrap metal in house lots and yards owned by the traders René Bourassa and the Douaire brothers may be evidence of craft industries, indicating that traders manufactured some of their own trade goods on site,

⁵⁰ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 86.

⁵¹ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 104. It is unlikely that voyageurs would have been involved in the production of these Native creations, primarily because they were too busy doing other things. Carolyn Podruchny identifies the "four main areas" of work as: "post construction and maintenance, and artisan craftwork, such as blacksmithing, coopering, and carpentry." These artisan crafts are clearly European in nature. The other three areas of work are "trading with Aboriginal peoples," the "quest for food," and carrying mail and supplies, *Making the Voyageur World*, 205.

perhaps with the assistance of Indian family members or slaves.⁵² Archaeologist John F. M. Whitaker notes, “Copper kettles could have been cut up and the metal used to fashion new items, such as kettle patches of tinkling cones and brass arrowheads for use in the fur trade.”⁵³ The majority of craft artifacts were brass and copper scraps. Like their French predecessors, British traders seem to have cut up and reused copper kettles for new items, “such as kettle patches of tinkling cones and brass arrowheads for use in the fur trade. Evidence for such reuse was also found at other eighteenth-century British and French colonial sites.”⁵⁴ Outside of craft artifacts, the majority of Native American artifacts found were “fragments of containers such as clay pots and birch bark containers.”⁵⁵ Because of the often intimate relationships between Native women and French men in the fur trade, the artifacts may have been left in the yards by visiting families of country wives, or other Native relatives.

Labor in Anishnabeg terms was not just about getting things done, but was another manifestation of the relationships between people (and other beings) and among the community. As Jennifer Brown and Laura Peers note, “all members of an Ojibwa community were defined as various kinds of relatives.”⁵⁶ This meant even gods, animals, and other entities. They assert that, “all Ojibwa, and the powerful beings to whom they

⁵² Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 115, 120, 125, 139, 144, 169.

⁵³ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 139.

⁵⁴ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 139.

⁵⁵ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 119. Whitaker speculates that while it is impossible to know who used these items, it is not outside the realm of possibility that they are from the colonial era, and that both Europeans and Native Americans used them, 119, 144.

⁵⁶ Peers and Brown, “Ojibwa Families and Kinship in Historical Perspective,” EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

appealed, were potentially kin, and the Ojibwa relied on the help of all their relations to survive.”⁵⁷

The Odawa economy was thus more complex than the mere gathering and exchange of furs.⁵⁸ Animals were essential to Anishnabeg spiritual life, but also to survival and manufacture. As William Newbigging observes, “Ottawas also used the bones, antlers, and shells of their prey to make tools and weapons, and they used the hides for clothing. Ottawa women cut and notched antlers to make harpoons for fishing. They fashioned bones into fish hooks, knives, weaving shuttles, projectile points, leather and birch bark punches, and scrapers. Women used the shell, bone, and antlers to make beads, combs, bracelets and other decorative items.”⁵⁹ In addition to objects or tools made from animals, women constructed canoes, wove mats and baskets, and made tobacco pouches.⁶⁰ The bulk of the Native American and craft-related artifacts date from the second half of the French occupation of Michilimackinac, 1730-1761, thus coinciding with the fort’s increased prosperity.⁶¹

Moreover, archaeological investigations found evidence for blacksmithing, sheet and other metal crafts not mentioned in the documentary record, the making of lead shot (inside the house owned by the Parants and then later by the traders Solomon and Levy), and the carving of stone Micmac pipes, also in the Parant/Solomon and Levy dwelling.

⁵⁷ Peers and Brown, “Ojibwa Families and Kinship in Historical Perspective,” EbscoHost: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.unl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=A000485505.01&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵⁸ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 81.

⁵⁹ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 59.

⁶⁰ Newbigging, “History of the French-Ottawa Alliance,” 56, 79.

⁶¹ Whitaker indicates “it seems more likely that Native Americans were associated with Yard B, and possibly Yard C, and that this association was not documented in the historical record. Since many of the Native American artifacts are fragments of containers such as clay pots and birch bark containers, it is also possible that the European residents used these themselves,” 119.

While evidence for bone-craft is scarce, “bone tools found within the fort may be evidence for the presence of Native American women as wives, mistresses, servants, or slaves” as bone-working was a Native technology.⁶² Canoe, moccasin, and snowshoe production, as well as coopering and textile production were also common. Food produced within craft industries included “baked goods, maple sugar, lye hominy, and spruce beer.”⁶³

“Craft industries,” Michilimackinac archaeologist Lynn Morand asserts, “were an integral part of daily life at Michilimackinac, involving almost every inhabitant through participation, supervision and consumption.”⁶⁴ These included voyageurs, women, and Indians.

Evidence for craft activities declined after 1763.⁶⁵ Archaeological evidence suggests that fewer craft activities took place in the officers’ and soldiers’ houses, due to the preponderance of military artifacts found there. Traders, conversely, seemed to have used more kitchen, trade, building, and sewing materials in their homes.⁶⁶ This has implications for the ways in which labor may have been used in different households, Yet, even though more military personnel lived and worked at Michilimackinac, the

⁶² Lynn L. Morand, *Craft Industries at Fort Michilimackinac, 1715-1781*, Archaeological Completion Report Series 15 (Mackinac Island, Mich.: Mackinac State Historic Parks, 1994), 77-78.

⁶³ Morand, *Craft Industries at Fort Michilimackinac*, 79.

⁶⁴ Morand, *Craft Industries at Fort Michilimackinac*, 79.

⁶⁵ “It is possible that Solomon and Levy had Ottawa women working for them making trade goods from bone, although it is not known if they also lived in the house,” Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 34.

⁶⁶ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 72-73,

presence of seed beads indicates that fur trading continued to be the prime commercial activity of the fort's residents.⁶⁷

Archaeologist John F. M. Whitaker believed that “yards historically documented to be associated with Native American activity would have higher than expected frequencies of such artifacts. Certain residents of the Southeast Row House owned Native American slaves or employed Native American women for household tasks or for specialized activities such as the production of trade goods.”⁶⁸ Slaves or servants may thus have been involved in a cottage craft industry as most of the craft refuse was found outside rather than inside the house; thus, “some sort of trade activity was occurring in the yard,” in addition to sewing and other clothing-related activity.⁶⁹ More Indian artifacts were found in 1730s-1761, while fewer were found in the 1770s, indicating that French traders relied more heavily on local technology than did the British.

The archaeological evidence for Native craft output in the French houses at Michilimackinac thus shows the long reach of Anishnabeg customs in fort life, at least to

⁶⁷ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 75.

⁶⁸ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 104. Whitaker attempts to analyze the meaning of the sherds of prehistoric pottery and worked stone objects found in the yards at the southeastern row house. He notes “Disagreement exists on the cultural and chronological placement of these Indian artifacts and most had been redeposited and thus were out of context. Previously, Moreau Maxwell had decided that most of this aboriginal material was probably deposited on the site immediately prior to the construction of the original French stockade. It is possible, however, that the presence of Indian artifacts was due to colonial behavior, such as ownership of Indian slaves, to Indians coming into the fort to trade, or to the collection of Indian artifacts by Europeans. Based on the artifact catalogue sheets which were used in analyses for this thesis, there were quite a few Indian artifacts found in context, indicating that they were a part of some activity contemporary with European occupation,” 86.

⁶⁹ Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 115. Whitaker notes that the presence and absence of Native American artifacts in these yards does not necessarily negate the hypothesis that more artifacts existed contemporaneously in yards where Native Americans were known to have lived and worked. Because the artifacts analyzed were taken from colonial contexts, “it seems more likely that Native Americans were associated with Yard B, and possibly with Yard C, and that this association was not documented in the historical record. Since many of the Native American artifacts are fragments of containers such as clay pots and birch bark containers, it is also possible that the European residents used these themselves. The question of who used these artifacts remains to be answered,” Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 119.

the last third of the 18th century. The gradual decline of the artifact assemblage after the 1760s indicates that while the old ways were slow to change, change they did, as Askin and other traders began to bring in more European goods to their Upper Country homes. The presence of these artifacts also indicates the continued strength of Native and European relationships, and the roles of women as wives, servants, slaves, or in some combination thereof, in fort households—a situation I will discuss further in Chapter Four. Ultimately, the decline in evidence for Native craft industries at Michilimackinac is further indirect evidence for a fort culture that was more European in focus than during the French period of occupation.

The Carrying Trade in the Great Lakes

Askin's diary also offers opportunities to examine work and labor in the carrying trade at Michimilimackinac—the major fur trade entrepot of the Upper Lakes, and the gateway to the western fur regions. The labor pool was made up of merchants, fur traders, voyageurs, freemen, women, Indians, and either Indian or African slaves.

The flurry of spring planting and hiring gave way to a summer filled with transit. Askin was preoccupied with moving foodstuffs, furs, and other goods not only from village to village in the Lakes, but to and from both Montreal and New York. At the end of April the ice on the lakes began to break up. Not only did the weather become mild enough for planting, but for shipping as well. April 29, 1774 was also the day that the first Indians arrived in a canoe. The water must have been clear enough of ice for the delicate birch-bark crafts to navigate, and heralded the start of the trading season. Askin noted that on 24 April, the “little Vessel the *Captain De Peyster* was taken out of the

Fort,” and that he hired La Boneau from Mr. Campau for the remainder of his servitude, for three pounds per month.⁷⁰ On 1 May 1775, the schooner *Captain De Peyster* left Michilimackinac for Sault Ste. Marie, the gateway to Lake Superior.

By July the transport of furs, trade goods, rum, and foodstuffs was in full swing. Askin’s ship, the *Archange*, sailed from Michilimackinac on 21 July, although Askin did not specify her cargo it most likely contained furs bound for Montreal or New York, and then London. On 26 July, one of Askin’s other vessels, the *Angelica*, arrived carrying liquor and other unnamed goods. She left Michilimackinac again on 28 July. On 3 August, Askin’s brother-in-law Jean Baptiste Barthe arrived from the Grand Portage. On 4 August, the *Gloster* arrived at Michilimackinac bearing rum, hogs’ lard, books, lime, tar, and turpentine. She sailed for Detroit again on 7 August. The following day, the *Archange* was back, and Askin left for Detroit on 31 August to visit friends and pursue business.⁷¹ He noted on 23 August 1774, a few days before he left, that he reaped some oats and that the *Dunmore* arrived in Michilimackinac on 25 August. The diary falls silent during his trip to Detroit, until 21 October when he noted that the *Archange* had arrived again from Detroit, the same day that Askin himself returned home, presumably aboard his own ship.

As the voyageurs moved further west in the late eighteenth century, enterprising Upper Country merchants like John Askin seized new opportunities to expand their business in order to meet the needs of wintering partners, voyageurs, and western Indian groups. These groups required metropolitan trade goods, grain and other foodstuffs, housewares, weapons, needles and cloth, and many other kinds of equipment for their

⁷⁰ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:55.

⁷¹ Askin, “Diary,” *AP*, 1:53.

sojourns, whether these were permanent stays or merely seasonal. The shipping of these goods was an expensive, elaborate endeavor that required strong organizational skills, good contacts, reputation, capital, and labor. During the 1770s, Askin owned at least ten *bateaux* at different times, including the sloop *Welcome*.⁷² As he once wrote to an associate, “We must never disappoint people in the matter of shipping goods.”⁷³ He used a combination of slave and voyageur labor to move corn, goods, and other supplies through the Lakes, from Michilimackinac to Milwaukee and Green Bay, and from Sault Ste. Marie to Grand Portage and the West. He also sent boats and cargoes regularly to Detroit.

His African slaves were prominent on these missions, augmented by Native Americans and *engagés* who were skilled sailors. The primary duties of these men were loading and unloading cargoes, and sailing or piloting the vessels. This was dangerous work, however. On 28 April 1775, Askin wrote, “This Evening About 6 O’Clock my man Toon was Drowned out of a small Canoe coming from the Vessell.” Toon was found the next morning, as Askin noted, “near the Stern of the Vessell,” the *Captain de Peyster*. This is Toon’s only appearance in Askin’s extant records.

Askin routinely sent his slaves Pomp, Jupiter Wendell, and Charles, and his *engagés* McDonald and “the Indian” on voyages up and down the Lakes.⁷⁴ Askin’s correspondence from the 1770s is filled with instructions to his business associates on his workers’ pay, provisioning, and schedules, as well as information about their skills. He

⁷² Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 64.

⁷³ Askin to Jean-Baptiste Barthe, 8 June 1778, *AP*, 1:118.

⁷⁴ “The Indian” may or may not be the same person as “Sauvage,” which may have been a French Canadian nickname, perhaps indicating *metis* background. Askin’s diary entry of 30 September notes “Sauvage Went on Board the *Archange*,” and it is most likely that these were two separate people.

wrote to his brother-in-law Jean-Baptiste Barthe, who ran Askin's store at Sault Ste.

Marie,

It is absolutely necessary that you put on board the *De Peyster* one-half of each man's merchandise. See, too, that Mr. McDonald gets off as soon as possible. Pomp, and another man whom you will engage, will go in her.

The other half of each man's merchandise you will load in the *Mackinac* if you can get her ready now. If not, send her back here for another cargo, and by the time she is to return to the Sault there will be plenty of people to load her.

The Indian has done well. He is a good man if one could only understand what he says. Mr. McDonald is trustworthy, somewhat overbearing, but we must be patient and remember that men are scarce just now. It seemed best to give McDonald and the Indian each a quarter of a pint of rum per day while on the voyage, and half that quantity to Pomp. The whole will not amount to much and will be an incentive to good work besides keeping them from helping themselves from the cargo. I have given all three their provisions, and rum, up to June 1, and have paid them their wages for the same time. After that you will take care of them, and pay them, allowing for their victuals from the cargo.

I am sending you all I can get of what you asked and when I have the other articles will send them too. I beg you not to detain McDonald to help load the other vessel, nor to change the Indian to the *De Peyster* as I have promised him he is not to be changed and one must keep one's word with everybody. . ."⁷⁵

The letter, which specifies how traders' merchandise was to be shipped, provides fascinating details as to the differing status of servants and slaves who were employed in the same positions, and to the unsupervised nature of their work. Of the three men on this particular voyage, the two *engagés* receive particular mention. Although Askin described McDonald as a less than ideal employee, his note that "men are scarce just now" indicates the potential attraction of slavery to merchants who continually faced seasonal labor shortages. Askin hoped that an allowance in rum would make happier workers and discourage theft. Pompey only received half the amount of rum, even though he did the same work. Because rum and spirits were often used as reward and motivation, this may have been a ploy to get more work out of the hired hands. Askin took pains to note that

⁷⁵ Askin to J-B Barthe, 18 May 1778, *AP*, 1:92.

the men received their wages and rum ration prior to the voyage, so that they would be unable to receive the same amount again at the end. Finally, by making an effort to keep his word to his men, Askin participated in a rhetoric of business ethics that may have been more for Barthe's benefit than for the men. By promising to keep his word to everyone, Askin hoped both to inspire loyalty on the part of his workers and confidence on the part of his associates.

Yet, even though Pomp received a lower rum ration than the hired men, evidence suggests that Askin valued him highly. Askin noted to Barthe, "We must find a man to go in Pomp's place after this first voyage. I cannot do without him. Of all my men I have no one now. Another is sick."⁷⁶ Askin's 1776 inventory records Pomp's value as one hundred pounds sterling—a considerable asset indeed.⁷⁷ Wages also seem to have been dictated partly by race and status. Among Askin's *engagés* in 1778, McDonald received 1170 livres per year, while "the Indian" received 900 livres per year, in addition to their provisions and rum rations.⁷⁸ Although Askin doesn't specify, the Indian seems to be a regular and trusted employee. While many Natives did work in the fur trade as laborers and not just as trappers, "labor of this sort was fluid and informal. Aboriginal people moved in and out of jobs to suit their personal provisioning and economic strategies. Their decisions of when and where to work were often determined by environmental factors, such as the abundance of animals in the area around the forts."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Askin to J-B Barthe, 18 May 1778, *AP*, 1:94.

⁷⁷ See Askin Inventory 1776, Appendix 2 in Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 209.

⁷⁸ Askin to J-B Barthe, 6 June 1778, *AP* 1:112-14.

⁷⁹ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 217-18.

Askin's labor needs may have been compounded after 1775 by the outbreak of rebellion in the thirteen colonies. The war did not interrupt trade, but it caused anxiety for the merchants in the Upper Country, as "fears of rebel mischief and the British army's demand for provisions frequently interfered with the flow of merchants' goods."⁸⁰ Even with the threat of hostilities and active engagement in the Illinois country, corn, wheat, and flour dominated the cargoes that Askin shipped around the Upper Country. In 1778 Askin noted that he had had two thousand pounds of flour from the king's storehouse made into bread to avoid spoilage. He noted, "I hope the good news now come from Canada with the appearance of a fine Crop will remove all Obstacles, my own famely consists of about 20 persons always, none of which I asure you is accustomed to live without bread nor ever Shall as far as in my power lies to prevent it, & I realy should think it very hard even to be put on the footing of the Inhabitants of Detroit, many of which seldom eat Bread."⁸¹ Michilimackinac thus seems to have had greater access than Detroit to the grain stocks purchased from Indian villages in the western Great Lakes. Certainly, Upper Country residents were much dependent on the boats that plied their trade up and down the lakes and river systems, moving both east to west and west to east. Indeed, as Askin suggests, access to bread and flour meant the difference between food and want.

On 6 June 1778, Askin sent his employee Lavoine out in the *Archange* to pick up his flour shipment at Detroit, as well as his order of rum for trading. He continues, "My clerk, Lorty, left Lachine in April last with five boats. I have plenty of corn but cannot send you more than 80 minots of lye hominy, and shall fill the boat with other things—

⁸⁰ Widder, "Effects of the American Revolution on Fur-Trade Society at Michilimackinac," 304.

⁸¹ Askin to Fleming, 4 June 1778, *AP*, 1:105.

ashes, a kettle, and such like.”⁸² In addition to the flour and rum, he notes that he is able to sell sugar and gum for 20 sols per pound. In the same letter, he outlines plans for sending his son-in-law to investigate sites for a new trading venture and store at French river, thus continuing to expand throughout the Lakes.⁸³

Askin’s adult male slaves spent their summers continually on the water, loading and unloading cargoes of grain, rum, canoes, special orders from Montreal that had to be picked up in Detroit, and anything else that Askin and his associates decided to sell or carry. Ethnohistorian Bruce White notes that canoes could carry anything from cloth, to ammunition, to fine china and other sundries in addition to food.⁸⁴ Time was of the essence because of the short summers—the lakes would become impassable in November, and the posts frozen in for winter—and Askin fretted about meeting contracts and obligations, “I hope that the *Mackinac* has got up, for as soon as the *Archange* arrives I shall send her with her load to you and I want a vessel all ready above the Sault to receive it as we cannot lose a minute without great wrong to the gentlemen whom I have agreed to supply.”⁸⁵ Askin purchased corn from Indians at Milwaukee, for resale to the Northwest Company and at Michilimackinac, and used his ships and men to retrieve the grain. He sent “a Vessell to Millwakee in search of Corn. I have 150 Bushells already there & hope for more. I have about 20 there & I shall send a Batteaux to Detroit that will bring me at lest 120 Bushells . . .”⁸⁶ The Milwaukee connection was crucial for Askin’s

⁸² Askin to J-B Barthe, 6 June 1778, *AP*, 1:112-14.

⁸³ Askin to J-B Barthe, 6 June 1778, *AP*, 1:112-14.

⁸⁴ Bruce White, “Balancing the Books: Trader Profits in the British Lake Superior Fur Trade,” in *The Fur Trade Revisited*, (see Introduction note 15), 181.

⁸⁵ Askin to J-B Barthe, 18 June 1778, *AP*, 1:119.

⁸⁶ Askin to McGill, Frobisher, and Patterson, et al., *AP*, 1:75.

commitments. When his contact there, Old François, intended to relocate to Detroit, Askin immediately planned to replace him with one of his brothers-in-law, either Lavoine or Louison Barthe.⁸⁷

The short summer season required the boats to be out, manned, and loaded from late April until October. Manpower shortages were common, as Askin observed to Jean-Baptiste Barthe,

My Dear Brother: Since I wrote you by Mr. McBeath's vessel neither the *Archange* nor the *Angelica* have come in, so that I cannot say whether I shall send your men to Detroit or back to you. I have engaged Big Charlie to go as guide with Mr. Bennet to the Grand Portage. After that he is to sail with Mr. McDonald in the *De Peyster* until Mr. Bennet is ready to return, about the end of August. He is a man who knows the lake, and a good sailor besides. If you let him have anything in advance, let me know. I am to pay him 21 pounds wages up to Sept. 1, also a shirt, a pair of leggings, and a brayet [pants-like item, popular with Indians and French Canadians]. Of that I shall pay him 200 livres for going with Mr. Bennett to the Grand Portage and back as guide. The rest I shall charge to your account for the time he is working on the vessel. If it happens that Mr. Bennett needs 4 or 5 barrels of rum let him have it and I shall return it to you from here.

The Indians set out for Montreal today. I do not suppose there are left three barrels of rum in the place, besides what I have, which is not much.

I have decided to open a place at French River this year. It will facilitate the transport of my goods from Montreal by the Grand River.⁸⁸

Moreover, Askin's slaves and *engagés* seem to have acted with little supervision beyond what Askin and his associates specified in their correspondence on issues such as wages, destinations, and time frames. They were an integral part of the process and their autonomy indicates a high level of skill and knowledge of the region. It also shows the

⁸⁷ Askin to Todd and McGill, 23 June 1778, *AP*, 1: 143.

⁸⁸ Askin to J-B Barthe, 29 May 1778, *AP* 1:103; see also Askin to Frobisher, *AP*, 1:109-110. Big Charlie was probably not the same as Charles, the African slave listed in Askin's 1776 inventory, whom Askin valued at one hundred pounds. This letter is also interesting in that it shows Askin expanding his personal empire to open a store at French River in order to have more control over the transport of goods from Montreal.

extent to which Askin relied on loyal subordinates, and their importance to his ventures. In June 1778, Askin wrote his brother-in-law that he was sending the Indian out to him with “the vessel. I am sending you his receipt for everything on board, with the mark of each piece, and advise you to give him time to arrange it all on the beach before you check up and sign any receipt for the cargo. If anything is missing he must pay for it.”⁸⁹ Here, the Indian set out alone, but Askin guarded against theft through an inventory of the goods. The Indian becomes financially responsible for the cargo. Askin continued, “I loaned the Indian an anchor and a cable for the vessel going up. Please return them to me the first opportunity. They belong to the big boat and I cannot use it without them.”⁹⁰

The letters to Jean-Baptiste Barthe are particularly rich in information on shipping costs, cargoes, and the skills, use, and provisioning of the labor force. Askin seems to have relied on his associates to help cover wages and provisions at least in the short term—biscuits and rum were common fare for the sailors. Sailing was a particularly desirable skill, and slaves who were unskilled were often sold, as Askin informed Barthe, “The Indian passed Capt. Robertson by tacking. I never saw a small vessel sail so close to the wind. I sold your panis to Lavoine for 750 livres. He is too stupid to make a sailor or to be any good whatever.”⁹¹ The juxtaposition of these seemingly unrelated sentences in the letter underscores the importance of shipping to Askin’s concerns, and skilled sailors or craftsmen were quite valuable. When he required the services of the enslaved Jupiter Wendell at home, he “engaged a man to go with the Indian in place of Jupiter whom I

⁸⁹ Askin to J-B Barthe, 8 June 1778, *AP*, 1:118.

⁹⁰ Askin to J-B Barthe, 8 June 1778, *AP*, 1:118.

⁹¹ Askin to J-B Barthe, 8 June 1778, *AP*, 1:119; traders used many forms of currency in Great Lakes commerce, from livres to York to dollars to packs of beaver, depending on what was convenient.

shall send to you in the canoe.”⁹² By selling the aforementioned *panis* to his kinsman Lavoine, Askin also protected his brother-in-law’s assets, while keeping business concerns within his ever-broadening network of family and close associates.

During winter and down times, men who ordinarily worked on the water had other tasks, as Askin wrote to Barthe, “Since the Indian left and even before, Charlie [has been hunting] your mare every day but has not found her.”⁹³ Still, men with particular skills were not always available at the Upper posts when needed. When it came time to build his house, Askin was forced to send to Montreal for a carpenter.⁹⁴ Good men were always hard to find, and merchants kept a close eye on their contracts. Askin’s exasperation with the dearth of *engagés* bubbled forth in his correspondence:

I have had a thousand difficulties too in finding somebody to get your merchandise ready. I am keeping Caliez and sending Robideau north You must tell me how much he owes you, for how long he is engaged, and how much you pay him a year.”

It is true that I have engaged Mr. Nodisne for three years, also another clerk, and besides them I expect Mr. Lorty in soon.

I find it will be better to put Baptiste with Mr. McDonald instead of with Mr. Brulon, and I shall send Pomp back to you. I have not thought it well to send Louison out with Brulon as he had the impudence to strike him. Chalou behaved himself on the last voyage. Lavoine is out at present but as the *Archange* is on her way up from Detroit I shall send her to you with a load of flour and rum.⁹⁵

The lack of men also forced Askin to hire additional men for loading and unloading. An M. Campau held the contract for LaBoneau’s labor, hiring him out at Askin’s request.

⁹² Askin to J-B Barthe, 8 June 1778, *AP*, 1:119.

⁹³ Askin to J-B Barthe, 13 June 1778, *AP*, 1:122-24

⁹⁴ “I shall want a House Carpenter very much, I wish you could hire one for me at any Rate Inclosed is an acct of some things for kitty with directions at Bottom, please send a Separate Acct of them,” Askin to Todd and McGill, 8 May 1778, *AP*, 1:85-85.

⁹⁵ “Robideau appears in Barthe’s ledger as an engage. Sept. 6 1777 he contracted to serve for one year at a wage of 500 livres. Soon after this the engagement was extended to cover the two succeeding years,” Askin to J-B Barthe, 13 June 1778, *AP*, 1:122-24.

Peter Ord, hired in 1774, also helped Pomp load rum and other staples on and off the vessels.⁹⁶

In 1778, Askin was forced to send one of his *engagés* to Montreal to stand trial for the murder of another of his men.⁹⁷ Desertion was common especially when men were sent to the Canadian northwest for the season, and Askin made mention of that fact in a general discussion of labor problems, “Robideau has deserted though I am quite sure he is hiding somewhere. He is afraid of having to go north. Messrs. Holmes & Grant promised to send you a good carpenter for me provided you could let them have a man in his place for the north. If you have one I will give him a thousand francs. There is a sailor too that these gentlemen would send you if you could find a man in his place, and Robideau I might have exchanged for him.”⁹⁸ Yet, running away or illegally hiring oneself out had consequences—at least one servant, Hyacinthe Oui, was sued for prematurely abandoning his contracted master’s service.⁹⁹

An analysis of Askin’s shipping ventures reveals two crucial elements of the Great Lakes trade. First, successful men relied on an ever-widening network of family and personal relationships to conduct business. The Askin circle thus included not only the Odawas at L’Arbre Croche, from whom he bought grain and where he owned an active farm, but other Algonquins at Milwaukee on whose grain he relied, and the Cadotte family and other Ojibwas from Sault Ste. Marie. It also included his male in-laws

⁹⁶ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 40.

⁹⁷ “I here inclose you a Bill of Sale or what may answer for such, of one L. Blanc who goes the country Prisoner to take his trial he quarreled with another of my men who died soon after,” Askin to Todd and McGill, 8 May 1778, *AP*, 1:84.

⁹⁸ Askin to J-B Barthe, 21 June 1778, *AP*, 1:141.

⁹⁹ See *AP*, 1:204, 199-200.

in Detroit and throughout the Upper Lakes, through the union with his lawful wife, Marie Archange Barthe. In addition, the marriage of his daughters to skilled and prominent men such as Captain Robertson, Catherine's husband, allowed him to expand his business associates and influence even further. Upon Kitty's marriage to Robertson, Askin revealed to Todd and McGill his hopes that the marriage would keep his new son-in-law on the Lakes for an extended period of time.¹⁰⁰

Second, commerce on the lakes relied on a mixed labor system that included slavery as a means to counteract labor shortages due to a limited supply of *engagés* during the busy summer season. Askin and other merchants often used black slaves for those jobs connected to shipping and cargo, drawing on the long tradition of African seamanship, both free and slave, which had flourished in the Atlantic world. Black sailors were very common in the eighteenth century, as freemen and as slaves. New World slavery by its very mechanics had its roots in the maritime tradition of the middle passage.¹⁰¹ In coastal Africa, the Caribbean, the Chesapeake, and the Carolinas, both slave and free black sailors commanded and worked aboard all manner of watercraft. As historian W. Jeffrey Bolster notes, "Slaves were drawn increasingly into the maritime labor market of the northern colonies during the middle of the war-torn eighteenth-century, when seamen often were in short supply."¹⁰² Certainly, this may have been the case in the Great Lakes, where labor had always been in short supply. The port of New York, where merchant Hayman Levy procured slaves for the Great Lakes fur trading firm

¹⁰⁰ Askin to Todd and McGill, 14 June 1778, *AP*, 1:128.

¹⁰¹ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* 2d ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 153.

¹⁰² W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 26; see also 19, 50, 58, 132.

of Phyn and Ellice and for others in the Upper Lakes, would have been a fertile ground for finding experienced seamen for the inland carrying trade. The presence of so many black seamen around the world meant that the opportunities for communication and cooperation between even far-flung black communities was extraordinary, a situation that also facilitated flight and concealment.

Conclusion

Askin's shipping and agricultural ventures show an increasing diversity between purely Native networks and alliances and those leaning more on Anglo-American relationships. His bateaux were manned by motley crews of Indians, French and métis voyageurs, and African Americans. Instead of just canoes, he also sailed schooners and sloops between the forts in the upper lakes. His primary business connections, at least as revealed in his letters, were with the old Upper Country French families, such as his wife's, as well as the Scottish merchants of Montreal and New York. When Askin mentions Indians at all during the correspondence from these years, it is only as individuals and never Indians as a group. Moreover, many of the people whom later scholars and writers have clearly identified as Indians, such as the Cadottes, Bourrassas, or his wife's family, the Barthes, Askin refers to by French names—again, they are individuals and not representatives of any groups per se, reflecting less concern with group identity and a great importance on personal, one-on-one connections. Askin's records also reveal new information about how merchants used slave labor as part of this diverse fur trade economy. The diary juxtaposes all these elements—agriculture, shipping, slavery, and hired labor, to present a picture of an integrated borderland where permeability rather than exclusion is the rule. This is the middle ground in action. Yet

while Richard White focused on a middle ground of politics and diplomacy, Askin's records reveal a middle ground of commerce and daily life—a borderland where the pursuit of the trade created a dynamic of cross-cultural relationships as a matter of course—blacks, whites, Indians, mixed-race people, unfree laborers, Catholics, and Protestants mixed routinely. However, this high degree of permeability did not indicate a lack of stratification. Backcountry traders were mostly French or métis; Indians trapped and traded furs, and grew corn; métis people were guides, middling traders, or ran stores at remote posts; the British merchants sat at the top, using their connections to run the ever more lucrative carrying and supply aspect of the trade, offering credit and dictating terms to the people at the farther end of the chain. As Askin's diary shows, this meant also that they were in a good position to expand their Anglo-American institutions and networks in terms of farming, shipping to other traders both in the west and east, and incorporating African-American slavery into their mixed-labor pool. While these did not supplant Indian networks, they certainly grew alongside to become as influential in their own right. In the next chapter, I examine fur trade slavery more thoroughly, showing how Indian slavery in particular remained a potent social and economic force, even though the overall numbers of slaves were small. Yet, this was not Indian slavery as Native people, nor even the Interior French had practiced it. For British fur trade merchants, slaves represented another opportunity for capital.

Chapter Four

Slavery at Michilimackinac

John Askin's life was interwoven with slavery because of the fur trade and his country marriage with his Indian slave Manette, and through his use of slaves as a part of his labor force in the fur trade. Askin and other Anglo-American Great Lakes merchants incorporated slaves into their labor and relationship networks from the Seven Years' War to the end of the eighteenth century. Indian slavery, an accepted part of Upper Country life since before contact, remained a resilient feature of the Anglo-American fur trade, as did the increasing, albeit limited desire for African American slaves. Yet, as this chapter shows, Indians no longer dictated the terms of slavery, if in fact they ever had, once these slaves left their hands—the Spanish and French colonists who bought Indian slaves often saw them in very different terms than did their original Native captors.

There is evidence, too, that slavery among Indian peoples was less benevolent than the idea of captivity conveys, although it varied based on circumstances or particular group. Alexander Henry observed that “The [Assiniboin] treat with great cruelty their slaves. As an example, one of the principal chiefs, whose tent was near that which we occupied had a female slave, of about twenty years of age. I saw her always on the outside of the door of the tent, exposed to the severest cold; and having asked the reason, I was told, that *she was a slave*.” Adopted by her Assiniboin captors to cover the loss of a brother and a son, she was not treated like family: “The wretched woman fed and slept with the dogs, scrambling with them for the bones which were thrown out of the tent. When her master was within, she was never permitted to enter; at all seasons, the children amused themselves with impunity in tormenting her, thrusting lighted sticks into her face;

and if she succeeded in warding off these outrages, she was violently beaten.” Moreover, even in cases among Henry’s own adopted people, the Chippewas, “where a female slave is so adopted and married, I never knew her to lose the degrading appellation of *wa’kan’*, *a slave*. ”¹

In a borderland, the use of slaves points to a further marginalization of some groups—in this case, race was not the deciding factor, but captivity itself, which when captives were sold, translated into slavery. Yet, for Askin and other traders who had had slave country wives, Indian slavery was not necessarily dictated by Indian networks or relationships. Men who had enslaved Indian wives or children might consider them slave or free, sell them, manumit them, or acknowledge them. In the Great Lakes borderland, slavery itself was a permeable and mutable institution. These Upper Country merchants saw slaves both as intimate partners, as doorways to fur trade riches, and as chattel. In addition to Indian slaves, the British also desired African American slaves, as domestics, as skilled craftsmen, and as laborers in shipping and transport. They thus participated in a parallel slave trade that went in opposite directions—Indian slaves headed east, while African American slaves went west. Ultimately, for British traders, slavery was exploitative, familial, and economic, all at the same time.

Indian Slavery in French Homes before 1763

Indian slavery during the French occupation of Michlimackinac was a regular and accepted feature of life. Claiborne Skinner notes that, “most of the traders had one or two

¹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 312-13, see also 278, for a description from a slave of the Assiniboins who felt herself not harshly treated.

Indian slaves as servants and these also married and produced families,” sometimes with whites or with other Indian slaves.²

Slavery had been interwoven in the fabric of Michilimackinac society throughout the French period, which can be seen clearly in the case of the Parant family, who were prominent French and Indian fur traders. They are one example of domestic slave owners who lived at the post before 1763. Around 1726, voyageur Pierre Parant and his métis wife Marianne Chaboillez became permanent, year-round residents at Fort Michilimackinac and lived in a set of row houses in the southeast corner within the fort walls.³ The Parant family, their children, and their two Indian slaves lived in the house until the early to mid-1760s when they sold the dwelling to English fur traders Solomon and Levy, who were temporary, seasonal residents of the post.

Marianne Chaboillez bore twelve children between 1729 and 1749, six boys and six girls.⁴ The earliest record of their status as slaveholders dates from 1755, with the

² Skinner, *The Upper Country*, 146. Among the French, the Code Noir was supposed to regulate slavery—it was more effective in Louisiana and other colonies where slavery was more widespread and institutionalized. Skinner writes, “the document was a strange combination of savage repression, prudery, piety, and pity. Under it, slaves who rebelled or assaulted a White were to be executed. Yet, they must also be baptized and raised Catholic. Bondsmen could not be forced to work on Sundays, feast days, or other holidays, nor could they be forced to marry against their will The Code also punished concubinage with heavy fines, and demanded that the woman and issue be confiscated if the relationship was adulterous, but ordered the offending man to marry his mistress and legitimize his children if he were single,” *The Upper Country*, 120. Because the *pays d'en haut*, was an Indian world, where Native peoples dictated the terms of exchange and where slavery was entrenched, enforcement was sporadic.

³ See Halchin, *Excavations at Fort Michilimackinac, 1983-1985*, 36, 160; Whitaker, *The Functions of Four Colonial Yards*, 26, 117, 119.

⁴ There may also have been a thirteenth child, although most scholars put the number at twelve. The godmother of the second youngest daughter, Thérèse, was identified as Marie Françoise, a daughter of Pierre Parant. Yet, Marie Françoise does not appear as the name of any of Marianne Chaboillez's children baptized at Michilimackinac. Either she was born and baptized before the family moved to the straits, or the priest wrote the incorrect name of one of Marianne's older daughters, perhaps Marie Anne (baptized in 1736). An additional possibility, because Marie Françoise is identified as Pierre Parant's daughter, is that she may have been a daughter born to Pierre Parant and another woman before his marriage to Marianne Chaboillez. However, there is no evidence to support this supposition. See “Register of Baptisms of the Mission of St. Ignace de Michilimackinac (hereafter Mackinac Baptisms), 6 January 1744, *Collections of*

baptism of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old *panis* boy named Pierre-François, described by the Jesuit priest, Father Lefranc, as “an adult . . . sufficiently instructed and well disposed.”⁵ His godparents were Pierre Monbron, whose *panise* Charlotte (age fourteen or fifteen and also identified as an adult) was baptized at the same time, and Marianne Chaboillez.⁶ By acting as her slave’s godmother, Marianne Chaboillez was acting in concert with customs in New France and the Upper Country and enfolded the young man into another layer of kin relationships and accountability, on both sides. As godmother, Marianne was responsible not only for Pierre-François’ new name and his education, but also for his well-being. By entering this Catholic kin network, Pierre-François placed himself under the aegis not only of his godparents, but of the priests at the mission as well. Perhaps most significantly, baptism meant that Pierre-François joined Marianne Chaboillez’s greater Anishnabeg family, and was effectively “adopted” into her clan or tribe.

As Susan Sleeper-Smith describes the powerful *métis* families of the region, “Female members—especially of the Barthe, Bourassa, Chaboyez, Chevalier, La Framboise, and Langlade families—appear frequently in baptismal registers of the Western Great Lakes. These women were godmothers to each other’s children and grandchildren, and their surnames span generations.”⁷ It is important to note that the French families of Michilimackinac, St. Joseph, La Baie, and other upper country posts were part of the greater indigenous and *métis* communities spread throughout the region.

the State Historical Society of Wisconsin 21 vols. (Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1888-1911), 19:16 (hereafter *WHC*).

⁵ 30 March 1755, *WHC*, 19:39-40.

⁶ Charlotte’s godparents were Louis Gervais and Ciele Cousin et Monbron, *WHC*, 19:39-40.

⁷ Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade,” *Ethnohistory* 47:2 (Spring 2000), 424-25.

They had Indian as well as French names, and their Catholicism only strengthened their networks. Thus, “by the mid-eighteenth century, an identifiable Catholic kin network had evolved that was comparable with and often parallel to that of indigenous society.”⁸

In 1755, Marianne Chaboillez may have had seven children under the age of fifteen, with four of these under the age of ten. It is not known how many of her older children had left home, were married, or still used her home as their residence when at Michilimackinac. Without the older children to help with domestic chores, Marianne may have felt that she needed additional labor in such areas as food production and household maintenance. Since fish was a primary staple at Michilimackinac, it is likely that Pierre-François spent much of his time fishing, hunting for small game, or working in the Parant’s garden. He may also have been responsible for the repair of equipment related to these activities.

While it is entirely possible that Pierre-François may have been employed domestically, as was typical for enslaved Native American women and children, he may also have worked with Pierre Parant in some aspects of the *voyageur* trade. Certainly, *panis* did contract with traders as canoemen on trading voyages, although there is no record that Pierre-François did so. He also may have been responsible for food preparation, hunting, portaging, and assisting the fur trade clerk. If he remained at the fort, repairing equipment, hauling, cleaning furs and hides, and other sundry tasks may have been his daily activity.

⁸ Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism,” 424. She suggests also that “métis communities eventually evolved from these Catholic kin networks . . . at important fur trade posts like Michilimackinac and Green Bay,” 432.

It is also not known how long Pierre-François lived with the Parant family, or if they sold him when they quitted their Michilimackinac house in the 1760s. He may have lived in the Parant household for a number of years before his baptism. The priest's indication that he was instructed and well-disposed to baptism may be evidence for a significant sojourn with the Parants before this time; or, perhaps he may have been raised in a Native Catholic household. It also indicates that, rather than going out into the trading lands with Pierre, he had spent his time at the Fort with Marianne. Since she had agreed to instruct another slave as well, then it is likely that she may also have spent this time with Pierre-François as he worked with her around the house, or in the evenings.

We know even less about the other slave the Parants owned, a young Native woman who was both baptized and buried in 1762 at the age of twelve. Her godparents were Sieur Michel Boyer and again, Marianne Chaboillez, who agreed to instruct the girl before her death. Like Pierre-François, the baptism record is the only evidence of the girl's life. The date, 1762, seems significant in terms of the Parant family's labor needs at this stage of the life cycle, and also in terms of the political and social situation at Michilimackinac. By this time, most of Marianne's children were adults and had probably left home. Her youngest child, Angelique, was around thirteen years old. Even though her household was smaller, Marianne's domestic labor needs would have remained high, especially in terms of food preparation and laundry. Having a young woman in the house to help gather wood, cook, clean, wash, and tend the garden would have alleviated some of the labor that presumably Marianne's children had performed.⁹

⁹ See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1991), for the need for additional domestic help after the children have left home.

Sponsoring a slave child for baptism meant more than just labor or spiritual salvation, however—it was a means by which Marianne Chaboillez could both expand and consolidate her position in the fur trade. As Sleeper-Smith asserts, “Baptism and marriage provided the means through which this diverse and real fictive kin network could be continually expanded. Marital and baptism records suggest that these networks, created by Catholicism, facilitated access to peltry while simultaneously allowing these women to negotiate for themselves positions of prominence and power.”¹⁰ By taking Indian slave children into her home, Chaboillez could potentially increase her influence through the growth of her kin network, and solve immediate labor problems as well.

In frontier communities, the ability to move comfortably both among Indian and European peoples was an essential component of fur trade life. In addition to the cross-cultural mixing that naturally occurred via intermarriage and the raising of *métis* offspring, both captivity and adoption also offered opportunities for Indian and white children to gain language skills and cultural familiarity. The presence of baptized *panis* children in French homes before 1763 may indicate that a process similar to Indian captivity and slavery occurred in the fort itself. By providing *panis* slaves to the residents of Michilimackinac, straits Indians at once operated in the local exchange economy (including slaves among other commodities such as corn, furs, and canoes) and participated in a process of acculturation. By selling these Native captives to the French rather than keeping them for themselves, Indian families may have recognized an opportunity for the education of future cultural brokers.

¹⁰ Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism,” 424. She further notes that “Men who married into these networks became prominent fur trade figures.”

The Parants are only one example of the type of domestic, internal slaveholding that characterized Michilimackinac before 1763. The Jesuits on Michilimackinac also held slaves, who worked for them in a variety of tasks, including blacksmithing, food production, and religious work. Christian slaves served as witnesses to the baptisms and burials of other Christian slaves, and helped with religious instruction, masses, and burying the dead. Whether they owned slaves or not, however, the people of the fort took an active interest in the religious education of the community's slaves by serving as godparents. Charlotte Bourassa, for example, the daughter of René Bourassa and wife of Charles Langlade, sponsored the baptisms of nine slaves. Her mother, Catherine de Lérige, sponsored five Indian slaves, and Marianne Chaboillez sponsored seven.¹¹

Over seventy of the fort's French Catholic and *métis* residents became godparents during this thirty-year period, and many of these were wealthy and influential traders who themselves owned slaves. This stands in sharp contrast to the decades following 1763, when only sixteen of the fort residents sponsored Indian slaves for baptism. Of these, all had French names and many were identified as voyageurs. Charlotte Bourassa, who seems to have made a huge commitment to baptism before 1763, sponsored only one slave after the British takeover.¹²

¹¹ Again, these are the families that Sleeper-Smith identifies as the most powerful in the Michilimackinac fur trade—the number of baptisms they sponsor offers further evidence for the use of baptism as a tool for expanding kin networks throughout the Great Lakes; it also underscores the interrelated nature of the fur trade families in the *métis* communities.

¹² There were 83 total slave baptisms, and counting parents, makes a total of 92 slaves noted in the Michilimackinac baptism records. See “Mackinac Baptisms,” *WHC*, 19. In contrast to the baptism records for free French and Indian residents, those for slaves rarely acknowledge a particular tribal or ethnic identity and indicate status through the terms “slave,” “panis,” “panis slave,” “negro,” or “negress.” Free blacks were designated as such. The ethnicity of only five slaves is mentioned—one Fox and four Sioux.

However, Michilimackinac's baptism records indicate that a significant shift in the practice of Indian enslavement in white or French homes did occur, both in numbers of Indian slaves and in their positions within households and families after 1763. Between 1731 and 1763, seventy-three slaves were baptized at the fort. Many of these were children, and of them, twenty-three had slave parents who were specifically mentioned. The priests listed only six of these slaves as African American. After 1763, only nine slaves appear in the baptism records and of these all had at least one parent, and in one case two, for a total of ten slave parents and nineteen slaves altogether between 1763 and 1821. These totals suggest two distinct although not necessarily mutually exclusive possibilities: first, that the number of slaves entering the fort dropped significantly after the British arrived, indicating that the British simply did not own as many Indian slaves as their French predecessors; second, that Indian slaves occupied very different social positions in fort households after the Conquest. Even if the fall in baptisms can be attributed to the lack of a priest to perform them, Sleeper-Smith suggests that indigenous and métis Catholic kin networks get stronger in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rather than weaker.¹³ It is not thus that Catholicism loses its power among métis families, but perhaps that slaves are no longer being purchased, adopted, or baptized in as many numbers by the post's interior French families. It is more likely, as I explore later, that they are purchased by Askin and other local British merchants primarily for domestic labor and resale. Because the kin networks of the fur trade were established between the Interior French and Anishnabeg long before the English arrived, once newcomers gained entry into the trade through the kinship of

¹³ Sleeper-Smith, "Women, Kin, and Catholicism," 438.

slavery, then established themselves in the agriculture and supply part of the trade, their opportunities for additional kin networks in the region may have decreased.¹⁴

Slavery at Michilimackinac after 1763

Yet, even with fewer baptisms recorded, slavery persisted throughout the British period. Slaves made up a significant portion of John Askin's household. He owned a total of twenty-five Indian and African American slaves throughout his life, making him one of the Upper Country's largest slaveholders during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Mackinac slaves included Manette (freed in 1766); Jupiter (purchased 1775); Pompey (purchased same); a *mûlatresse* (sold to Detroit notary Philip Dejean in 1778); a *panise* given to the Odawa to redeem the son of another trader named Patterson; and an African man named Charles whom Askin may have occasionally referred to as "Big Charlie." The majority of Askin's African slaves were men, and these men generally worked in his shipping and hauling concerns. As shown in Chapter Three, they loaded cargo, were experienced sailors, and commanded a relative degree of freedom of movement, as Askin often sent them on loosely supervised voyages. African slaves may have been preferable for this kind of work for a variety of reasons, including possible experience as sailors in the Atlantic economy, their almost complete removal from a sizeable black community. The African and Native women worked as cooks and domestics in Askin's home.

¹⁴ "The English proved far more successful in opening the trade of the Canadian Northwest, which was unencumbered by established kin networks," Sleeper-Smith, "The American Revolution in the Great Lakes," 154.

While the majority of Askin's black slaves were adult men, most of the Indian slaves were women and children. This is explained partly by the indigenous custom of only taking women and children as prisoners (and killing the men), and by Anglo-American attitudes about the division of labor. Likewise, more Native American women were enslaved than men because of the economic/trade value of women to western Native groups, as well as the higher availability of women and children as captives. British colonists, however, preferred African slaves on plantations and in industry to be male, because they felt that younger male slaves could work harder and longer than women. Thus, the demographic imbalance in places like the Caribbean and lower South resulted from an excess of male slaves vs. female slaves purchased. In places such as the Chesapeake, importation of fewer male slaves and a plantation/slave society that was less segregated and deadly resulted in a more equal sex ratio. In northern colonies, however, urban slaves had more opportunities to build communities. Yet, the relative isolation of rural slaves and the sex and racial imbalance between enslaved African men and Native women resulted in a mixed-race slave society in the North. The fur trade's intimate slavery with its mixed race families seems to have frustrated such generalizations. For example, a fur trade family—such as John Askin's—may have consisted of the Euro-American trader, and a Native slave/wife, and their children; in addition, the same household may have included other enslaved *panises*, or male laborers, as well as their children. Moreover, once the enslaved country wife was either freed, died, or sold, the second, legitimate wife would have raised her husband's older children as well as her own.

These familial arrangements were often quite complex, involving country wives, *métis* children, legitimate French or *métis* wives, business associates, and the long reach of clan affiliation and personal obligation. In 1778, Askin wrote a letter to Charles Patterson, a prominent Great Lakes fur trader then at Montreal, in which he took Patterson to task for selling his own mixed-race son as a slave to the Odawas:

Your friends in this quarter have thought themselves very happy to have a dance once a week & entertain their Company with a dish of Tea & humble Grogg during the last winter, whilst you at London could have all your wants & wishes Supplied, as well as your wanton wishes.

A propos now we are on the Subject, there is a Boy here who was sold to the Ottawas, that every body but yourself says is yours, he suffered much the poor child with them. I have at length been able to get him from them on promise of giving an Indian Woman Slave in his Stead—he's at your service if you want him, if not I shall take good care of him untill he is able to earn his Bread without Assistance.¹⁵

This letter reveals the extent to which slavery was embedded in the domestic and economic relationships of the eighteenth-century Great Lakes. Askin did not object to Patterson's having fathered the boy. Askin objected, rather, to the fact that the boy had been sold into slavery, under which he received poor treatment. On this level, an Indian slave is family.

He proposed to redeem the boy by trading an "Indian Woman Slave" from his own household in exchange for Patterson's son, and reminded him that "every body but yourself says [the boy] is yours." The community's acknowledgment of the boy as Patterson's son indicates that the relationship was well-known. Askin seems surprised by the boy's status as an Odawa slave, but his surprise and disapproval may have been a rhetorical device designed to send a very clear message to Patterson. If slaves could be

¹⁵ John Askin to Charles Patterson at Montreal, 17 June 1778, *AP*, 1:135,.

considered as gifts in terms of reciprocal exchange between Indians and whites, then the Odawas offer to sell Patterson's son to Askin may have represented a shift in allegiances between the traders, or an attempt by Askin to bind not only Patterson closer to him, but the Odawas from whom he received the boy. Indian slaves were thus also gifts.

While the letter suggests that the sale of a trader's child into slavery was outside of the community norm, it also illuminates at least one of the ways in which slaves may have changed hands between whites and Indians. In this case, the exchange of a male child for a female adult suggests that labor needs were not at the core of Indian slavery, but rather the bonds that could be established between both sides through the nature of the exchange. By "rescuing" Patterson's son, Askin may have been able to assert both moral authority (suggested by the phrase "every body but yourself") as well as the rights of a creditor through the payment of the adult slave. Yet, the tone of the letter is also somewhat tender, through the use of such phrases as "the poor child," and "I shall take good care of him." Indeed, by noting that it was difficult to procure the boy's release, Askin further demonstrates both his friendship as well as his efforts. In the climate of eighteenth-century business, however, friendship or friendly gestures came with strings attached. Askin's letter thus serves two purposes: 1) to alert Patterson to Askin's awareness of his child's status and 2) to demonstrate both Askin's friendship to Patterson and to assert a certain implied moral authority over the latter's conduct. Moreover, Askin may have felt moral qualms about Patterson's abandonment of his son to slavery, since he himself had chosen to raise his own métis children by Manette as free people. There was no specific law in the Upper Country that dictated that children of slaves were automatically enslaved—traders followed the custom of the country, which meant that

the free or enslaved status of their children was at their sole discretion.¹⁶ Indian slaves were also chattel. It was up to the community or the individual to enforce the norms, and as this letter shows, those norms varied greatly in the Great Lakes.

The letter reveals multilayered levels of interaction between all the parties concerned: 1) between Askin and the Odawas, 2) between Askin and Patterson, 3) between Askin and the boy, 4) between Patterson and his son, 5) between the Odawas and the boy, and 6) between Patterson and the Odawas. Askin's ability to negotiate with the Odawas through the reciprocal exchange of one slave for another—in this case an adult woman for a child—shows his familiarity with Great Lakes exchange practices.

Certainly, the relationship between Patterson and his son was one of estrangement and outright denial. Askin is somewhat vague in his letter as to how the boy became enslaved in the first place. The phrase, "there is a Boy here who was sold to the Ottawas" indicates either that Patterson did not know the fate of his son or that he knew and was either directly responsible or did not care. These particular Odawas, in fact, may have enslaved Patterson's son in order to send him a very clear and direct message about the trader's relationship with their clan group, perhaps to compensate for unpaid debts or trade goods or as an attempt to bind Patterson—an influential trader in his own right—more closely to them. This latter interpretation is supported by Askin's significant and lengthy efforts to obtain custody of the child.

Ultimately, Askin's letter suggests that even among whites, as between whites and Indians, Indian slavery on the Great Lakes borderlands was complicated by ideas of chattel and labor but even more so by the ties of obligation that resulted through the

¹⁶ D.W. (David) Smith to Askin, 25 June 1793, *AP*, 1:476-77.

medium of the reciprocal gift, and the resulting obligations and honors conferred when slaves became members of long-established households or clans on either side of the cultural divide.

For Askin, his country wife Manette seems to have been the only slave to have occupied the gray area between chattel and kin. Having manumitted her, and most likely sent her back to her Odawa family at L'Arbre Croche, he then treated their children as free. Yet the rest of his slaves he valued as property. The dates of Askin's slaves, Manette excepted, show that he held the bulk of them during the period in which he was married to Marie Archange Barthe, part of the powerful and influential Catholic and métis fur trading family. His marriage to Archange, which not coincidentally paralleled the expansion of the shipping and agricultural aspects of his business, may have inspired him to keep a more elaborate household. Askin lived well beyond his means, which contributed to his lifelong indebtedness. In addition, Archange would have needed additional domestic help, as her young family increased and her status in the community rose. For the Askins, slavery may have been a way to meet diverse labor needs, maintain status, and retain capital in movable property.

For Great Lakes French and British residents (who owned more and pricier material goods and who controlled the means of production), slavery was more than a means of meeting domestic labor needs, it was an intimate institution that existed within the familial sphere. As an illustration of this point, one of Askin's younger daughters, Archange Meredith, routinely asked her parents to remember her to the servants and other family members, in her letters home after her marriage. The young Archange's prayers underscore the close proximity in which the family and servants lived. Indeed, Askin's

comment that his family included twenty people at any one time indicates the chaotic and crowded nature of his household.¹⁷ Archange Askin raised and taught her husband's children in addition to her own growing brood. She and her *panise* spent the majority of their time in food preparation, childrearing, and sewing and mending, with seasonal tasks such as carding wool, spinning, knitting, and soapmaking to fill the gaps.¹⁸ Moreover, as part of the larger Catholic kin and métis communities spread throughout the Great Lakes' villages and fur trade forts, Archange would have instructed both her children and her slaves in Catholicism, thus making all of them potential actors in local and regional trading and kinship networks.

Even though it was not uncommon in households, as a commodity, slavery never had the economic impact of beaver, raccoon, or deerskin, but it was often a profitable sideline. In the 1730s and 1740s, French traders sent nearly sixty slaves a year out of the west, to the markets in Montreal. As W. J. Eccles notes, "most of them appear to have been Panis . . . but many were Sioux, captured by the Ottawa and Cree tribes of the north."¹⁹ La Vérendrye, who actively advocated trading in slaves while he was commander of the far western posts, in what is now Manitoba, reminded his critics of the value of slaves to the crown, when he asked "should no account be taken of the great number of persons to whom this enterprise means a living, of the slaves that are obtained for the country, and the furs . . . ?"²⁰ Indeed, slavery had the potential for tidy profits, if

¹⁷ Askin to Fleming, 4 June 1778, *AP* 1:105.

¹⁸ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 35-38.

¹⁹ Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier*, 149.

²⁰ *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Vérendrye and his Sons, with Correspondences between the Governors of Canada and the French Court, Touching the Search for the Western Sea*, ed. Lawrence J. Burpee (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1927), 451-52.

not the vast sums possible in furs. The average price for Indian slaves in the eighteenth century in Montreal was 400 livres, yet prices ranged anywhere from 120 to 750 livres. African slaves, on the other hand, had a market value of approximately twice that of a Native slave. Eighteenth-century average market cost for black slaves was 900 livres and prices ranged from 200 to 2400 livres, with young men generally commanding higher prices.²¹ The purchase of a slave thus amounted to a sizeable investment of capital and resources.

Askin's records do not indicate that he carried on an extensive trade in human cargo, however. Rather, slavery seems to have fit into a larger pattern of social and commercial negotiation that took into account his own labor needs as well as his relationship with local Indians and fellow traders. In May 1778, Askin wrote to one of his contacts at Green Bay, one Beausoleil, requesting, "J'aurai besoin de deux jolies Pannisses de 9 à 16 Ans. Ayez la Bonté d'en parler à ces Messieurs de m'en procurer deux"—"I shall need two pretty panis girls of from 9 to 16 years of age. Please speak to these gentlemen to get them for me."²² Askin did not record his intentions in procuring these two girls, whether he intended to keep them as part of his own household or sell them to another trader. The specification that they be pretty suggests perhaps that he may have intended to sell them, or even to marry them to some of his servants or slaves. The following month, Askin sold an African American domestic to Philippe Dejean in

²¹ Marcel Trudel, *L'esclavage au Canada Français: Histoire et conditions de l'esclavage* (Québec: Les Presses universitaires Laval, 1960), 116-19. Trudel also notes that one African was roughly equivalent to two *panis*, and that among the pool of Indian slaves, those designated as *panis* tended to fetch higher prices; thus, the widescale adoption of the term *panis* to designate any Indian slave, may have stemmed from a conscious deception in order to maximize profits from slaving. See Trudel, *l'esclavage au Canada français*, 66.

²² Askin to Beausoleil, at Michilimackinac, 18 May 1778, *AP*, 1:96-98.

Detroit, noting “my family is too numerous to keep her in my house & at present we want Bread more than Cooks.”²³ Perhaps the addition of the two young *panis* girls into his household made the older woman superfluous, although the phrase, “we want Bread more than Cooks” indicates that the sale of slaves generated ready capital for supplies and other necessities.

Askin was not the only trader to deal in slaves. In 1769, Isaac Todd, one of the founders of the North West Company, wrote a letter to William Edgar of the Detroit firm Rankin and Edgar, to send him a receipt for “a Paunee girl named Mano which I purchased from Grosbeck Cuyler and Glin, last year.” Mano (probably the French Manon) had evidently lived with the trader Groesbeck for four years. Todd had hoped to sell Mano back to Groesbeck, “but he [had] not a farthing in the world.”²⁴ This letter suggests that Groesbeck may have sold Mano to Todd in order to cover debts, but hoped unsuccessfully to buy her back for the £40 that Todd had paid. Indeed, even after making the purchase, Todd allowed Mano to continue to live in Groesbeck’s household as a favor to the other trader. Groesbeck’s decision to go “down the country,” or downriver to Montreal or Albany, however, necessitated Mano’s sale in Detroit. Groesbeck, in fact, had the charge of transporting Mano to Detroit, and the receipt given was for insurance “for fear of accidents” along the way, either drowning or escape. Todd notes in the letter that he “could often have sold her here for the same,” but did not, out of respect for Groesbeck. Although Todd does not explicitly confirm that Mano may have been a

²³ “I was favoured with yours of the 24th May last, the Mulatoo Woman shall be disposed off agreeable to your desire so soon as Monsr Cerré or Monsr Degrosolier arrives; my family is too numerous to keep her in my own house & at present we want Bread more than Cooks. I have put her at Mr. Mumforton’s at present,” Askin to Philippe Dejean, 4 June 1778, *AP*, 1:105-106

²⁴ Isaac Todd to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, 21 August 1769, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, T13, National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC).

country wife or other relation, perhaps a daughter, of Groesbeck's, the fact that she continued to live in his house after being sold to Todd, and that Todd was unwilling to sell her to anyone else other than Groesbeck, does suggest a more intimate relationship. Regardless, unable to buy her back, Groesbeck allowed Todd to sell Mano at Detroit, and carried her there himself. Todd's instructions to Edgar further indicate that the latter was to "dispose of her to best advantage [as] she is a fine girl . . . [who] understands French and English."²⁵

Todd's extraordinary efforts in regards to Mano's placement with Groesbeck reveals the degree to which Indian slavery was deeply embedded in the culture and economy of the British Great Lakes trade. On one level, Todd and Edgar certainly regarded her as chattel—Todd had assigned a specific value—£40—to her person, indicating by his statement that he "could often have sold her for the same" price that this was not merely a sentimental figure but fair market value.

Yet, all the parties to the transaction clearly understood that Mano's relationship with Groesbeck transcended that of mere master and slave. Mano had lived with Groesbeck in his house for four years. The letter does not reveal how he obtained her; however, his extreme reluctance to part with her is reflected in Todd's remarkable generosity in arranging for her retention in his home. Only Groesbeck's hopeless indebtedness evidently induced him to part with her, and by escorting her to Detroit himself, he was able to ensure her future protection to the best of his abilities.

As in the French period, Indian slaves during British sovereignty thus occupied a social position in some English traders' homes that were more akin to Native practices of

²⁵ Isaac Todd to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, 21 August 1769, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, T13, NAC.

enslavement and adoption, or marriage *à la façon du pays*. Although baptism ceased to be a marker whereby Indian slaves became more integrated into their French families, Todd's letter clearly reveals the retention of interior customs and a regional culture regarding Indian slavery among British traders like Askin and Groesbeck, who had established relationships with Indian women. Moreover, these relationships were recognized, sanctioned, and encouraged by their fellow traders who, as Todd's letter to Edgar suggests, understood the importance of such connections, as well as their emotional pull.

On the one hand, the letter presages the Hudson's Bay Company practice of handing over one's Native wife to an incoming trader upon removal down country, as Jennifer Brown notes was sometimes the case in the Canadian northwest during the early decades of the nineteenth century.²⁶ However, the fact of the sale reveals an extraordinary transition in Indian slavery practices in the Great Lakes trade, namely, the advent of the marketplace into an older system of enslavement defined by relationships and obligations—kinship. By selling Mano to cover his debts, albeit reluctantly, Groesbeck shows the extent to which the British traders brought the Atlantic marketplace with them to the Great Lakes trade. Groesbeck thus participated in two formerly distinct slavery practices, one informed by interior culture and the other by currency and debt. For Groesbeck, Mano may have been an important and extremely valued member of his household, but also ultimately became, by virtue of her valuation and sale, a chattel slave as well. Anglo-American concepts of slavery thus won out, in this instance.

²⁶ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 108.

In the postscript attached to the letter concerning Mano, Todd further informed Edgar “there is Some fine Slaves Expected in a few Days . . . when I will Try and get a Good one for you & Send him in the Vessell with the . . . other things for you.”²⁷ The Mano incident was not an isolated case, but was part of a movement of slaves as property from west to east, via traders and their firms, regardless of whether or not those slaves had been members of traders’ families. The phrase “some fine slaves expected” meant that slaves were probably not an incidental occurrence in Upper Country trade, but were eagerly sought by traders as commodities for sale. The fact that the traders knew when slaves were arriving and referenced shipping them alongside “other things” shows the ordinariness of the Indian slave trade within the larger British Upper Country fur trade world.

By 1769 then, traders had begun to see Indian slaves through multiple facets: first, as country wives or intimate partners, as children, or as other related members of one’s house or clan; and second, as chattel, sometimes even in the same instance, as Mano’s case reveals. Further, Todd’s insistence that he would find a good male slave for Edgar, as evidenced by the pronoun “him” shows this dual nature of Indian slavery as well as differing expectations regarding male and female slaves. Todd’s instructions to Edgar regarding Mano were to “Dispose of her to best advantage.” Yet, he also promised Edgar a male slave to be sent with some “other things” in a vessel headed downriver. Clearly, the as yet unpurchased male slave and Mano had different role’s in Edgar’s organization, dictated possibly by gender. In contrast, the male slave seems to have been viewed by

²⁷ Postscript appears in Isaac Todd to Gentlement, Edgar. William Letterbook, 1760-1769, BHC. Transcript in Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Mackinac State Historic Parks, Petersen Center Library, Mackinaw City, Michigan (hereafter CMA).

both parties primarily as chattel, unlike Mano whose status as “property” seemed secondary to her relationship with Groesbeck, except for the fact that he ultimately sold her.

The prevalence of chattel slavery in the trade is evident in the orders for slaves that traders sometimes sent to their counterparts at either end of the canoe route. In September of 1769, Todd again wrote Rankin and Edgar, “McGill and My own Canoe is Set off for Montreal 5 Days agoe, Shall Reffer you to the Bearer for News of this Metropeleus, he Takes with him 6 [Slaves] he [received] from Finley they [were] such [starved] Misarable Looking Creatures I [would] have nothing to Say to them, he [paid] Deer for them tho its to be in Corn—there has not one Slave Come in Such as you wanted being all Children.”²⁸ Todd was thus also unable to procure for Edgar the adult male slave he requested. Again, the dual nature of Great Lakes Indian slavery seems to have frustrated the traders in this instance. As children, Finley’s six slaves were part of this older tradition of the enslavement and adoption of youths; however, by noting that these children were not the slaves that Edgar expected, Todd shows that expectations of slaves as chattel and as laborers were beginning to be entrenched in British traders’ notions of slavery and its customs and practices. Certainly, these children were not the “fine slaves expected” by Todd and his associates.

Yet, sex or age alone did not determine whether traders regarded Indian slaves as chattel. A week after posting this letter to Edgar concerning the *panise* Mano, Isaac Todd again turned his correspondence to the slave trade, informing the firm of Dobie and Frobisher, “As Mr. Thomas Finchley is indebted to you Twenty Seven Pounds 10/ York

²⁸ Isaac Todd to Gentlemen, Edgar, William. Letterbook, 1760-1769, 8 September 1769, pp. 227-30, BHC. Transcript in CMA.

Currency for the Balance of an [account] you will please to pay yourselves the Same out of the proceeds of a panis slave named Charlotte which we have Sent to your address under the Care of Mr. Dowe and the Remainder you will pass to our Credit on [account] of the Corn and Flour you are to deliver us here the next Spring.”²⁹ Slavery thus performed an economic function in Upper Country life. The sale of Charlotte for an unspecified sum covered Finchley’s debts, but also helped pay for the next season’s shipment of grain.

This practice of selling slaves for grain or cash rather than furs illustrates the growing prominence of the corn and carrying trades that supported the northwestern traders, a diversification of economic resources in which John Askin would make his fortune. Indeed, slavery and grain are linked in the Upper Country, in the same ways that grain and furs or other goods are linked. In this sense, slaves, seemingly a sideline to the larger fur industry, became another component of the fur trade’s business model.

On 17 June 1769, Merchants Richard Dobie and Benjamin Frobisher wrote to the firm of Rankin and Edgar, “we sent the last fall to your place a panis Slave to the address of Mr. Thomas Finchley, who informs us that he Sold him to you for Forty pounds York Currency, payable this Spring in Corn or Flour, the former article at present begins to be Scarce here, and as we shall soon have a great number of men on our hands, we shall be in great need of it.”³⁰ On 9 August 1769, Dobie and Frobisher again broached the matter to Rankin and Edgar, “[we] are surprised that Mr. Finchley should refer us to you for the payment of the panis Slave; however your information is Sufficient for Us to drop our

²⁹ Isaac Todd, Dobie & Frobisher to Rankin & Edgar, Detroit, Edgar, William, 27 August 1769, Letterbook, 1760-1769 BHC.

³⁰ Richard Dobie and Benjamin Frobisher to Rankin and Edgar, Edgar, William, 17 June 1769, Letterbook, 1760-1769, pp. 197-199, BHC. Transcript in CMA, Trade—Michilimackinac, card II.

Demand against you on that head.”³¹ Evidently, the sale (or exchange of debts) of the male slave was to have elicited a shipment of grain from Detroit to Michilimackinac. As the middleman, Finchley seems to have specialized in brokering slaves between traders and firms, although as the above correspondence reveals, with sometimes imperfect results. The fact that Rankin and Edgar were absolved of covering the debt of forty pounds may have meant the loss of a shipment of corn before the advent of winter made navigation impossible. Their inability to cover the cost of the grain through remuneration for the slave meant that Dobie and Frobisher would have needed to go into debt, in lieu of finding other slaves to sell, or other sources of income.

While the British interpreted the meaning of slavery and the status of slaves in multiple ways, local Indians continued to work within the older social context of gifts and reciprocity. The sale of slaves for grain has broader connotations as well, within the context of the trade. By selling captive children to the British traders, allied Indian peoples participated in a longstanding practice of barter that wedded gift-giving, kinship, and reciprocity with the newer realities of the market. For the British traders, however, the exchange or sale of Indian slaves meant not just opportunities for kinship and obligation, but new ways to capitalize or finance the supplies necessary for the maintenance and growth of the trade. Local customs thus worked in synergy with the broader economic demands of the Atlantic economy.

Upper Country traders also seem to have regarded the sale of slaves as opportunities to liquidate assets. In 1770, trader William Maxwell wrote William Edgar from Michilimackinac, “I have since sent you a fine young Pawnee to sell for me—do

³¹ Dobie and Frobisher to Rankin and Edgar, Edgar, William. Letterbook, 1760-1769, pp. 220-21, BHC. Transcript in CMA.

not sell her for less than £30 and as much more as you can; if you cannot sell her directly and you have no use for her give her to some good woman for victuals. I expect to get leave to come down next summer and I may possible take her down the country with me, but sell her if you can.”³² By sending the young *panise* to William Edgar, Maxwell hoped to take advantage of Detroit’s larger community and need for household domestic labor. Yet, his specification that she be sold for not less than £30, reveals not only her market value in his eyes, but his willingness to wait for the right price. Rather than have her be idle during the period of sale, Maxwell felt it better to have her employed in domestic work rather than take a lower price for her. Moreover, his comment that he might take her down country with him to sell her himself, shows his commitment to the price and value rather than the sale.

Yet as with Groesbeck and Mano, Maxwell’s insistence on the right price and the right placement—even temporarily—suggests a solicitude beyond the marketplace. His request that she be given to “some good woman” merely for her keep, coupled with his possible plans to take her downriver himself in the summer indicated the trader’s concern for her welfare even more, perhaps, than his concern for her value.³³ Yet by insisting that she not be sold for less than £30, Maxwell may also have attempted to ensure the girl’s future, reasoning perhaps that a man willing to pay the right price would take good care of her.

Regardless of any intimate relationship that may have existed between Maxwell and the young *panise*, the Michilimackinac trader found himself making a similar appeal

³² William Maxwell to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, 25 September 1770, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, M115, NAC. Punctuation added for clarity.

³³ The comment “give her to some good woman for victuals” might also indicate a trade of the female slave’s domestic labors for meals or board.

eight years later. In 1778, Maxwell again wrote Edgar, “I send you a little Pawnee wench to sell this winter she is between Charles Morrison and me we have had her a year therefore she is past danger of their first sickness, sell her for 27 or 28 pounds or a little less rather than keep her more if you can get it. You may call her by what name you please she passed by the name of Muchetyweeass.”³⁴ The phrase, “she is between Charles Morrison and me” indicates shared ownership or investment, and it is possible that Muchetyweeass lived in either dwelling at different times. The reference to her “first sickness” indicates that captives from the interior, like captives from Africa, may have undergone a seasoning process that exposed them to European and colonial disease environments, which in the Great Lakes would have included smallpox, colds, and influenza-like viruses. The fact that she had survived her first year in captivity made her more attractive, in Maxwell’s eyes, to potential buyers.

Yet, in this letter, Maxwell holds less firmly to his price than he did in the 1770 missive. Instead of being willing to have the enslaved *panise* live and work in someone’s household until the desired price was reached, Maxwell instead suggested an approximate figure, but indicated the sale was more important than the price. The phrase, “call her by what name you please” further indicates that Maxwell and Morrison viewed the girl more as a commodity for sale rather than as a valued member of the family. Moreover, the retention of an Indian name shows that she was not baptized during her tenure at Michilimackinac, further evidence for the idea that the British did not follow the pre-Conquest tradition of baptizing Indian slaves. This represents an additional shift away from a French and Indian model of interior slavery in which baptism forged fictive

³⁴ William Maxwell to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, 24 August 1778, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, M119, NAC.

kinships between masters and slaves. By 1774, the British found the Upper Country's inclusion into the Quebec Act, which specified Catholicism as Quebec's official religion, to be a disturbing and somewhat unwelcome political trend, even though many traders had Catholic wives and families.³⁵

In both letters, Maxwell couples his directions for the sale of the young women with requests for livestock and new clothes, indicating a possible economic relationship between an Indian slave trade and the purchase of oxen in particular, or other supplies. Maxwell wrote "[I] was glad I did not find the Ox in my letter for that was all I would have had for him, for several people here found an ox in their letters but none in the vessel."³⁶ Likewise in 1778, he begged "Send me a good Ox if you can get a passage for him apply to Lieut. Archbold as I am not sure of coming down I would like to have something to eat this winter if he is poor he will not have time to mend this fall."³⁷ Indeed, Maxwell desired not just any ox, but one possessed of good health and vigor.

The juxtaposition of the slaves with the oxen, coupled with Maxwell's insistence on a price of approximately £30 for each slave suggests a more than passing relationship between the use of Indian slaves as capital for supplies. The link to clothing is perhaps more tenuous, although in each letter Maxwell encloses a caribou skin to be made into breeches. In the 1778 letter, he also sends his measurements, adjuring his friend to supply some new breeches—"Do not like nankeen nor stocking very well, but send me

³⁵ In a letter to Rankin and Edgar, Isaac Todd expressed his frustration with the Quebec Act and noted, "Among other things contained in the Act, I am sorry to tell you that English Laws in abolished and we are to have the Laws of Canada or [blank] in their stead and that the Roman Catholick Religion is the Established Religion for the Province, the English settled here are much alarmed," 26 August 1774, RG 36 vol. 9; MG19 A1 Vol. 3. NAC.

³⁶ Maxwell to Edgar, 25 September 1770.

³⁷ Maxwell to Edgar, 27 August 1778.

something or other.” A week later he wrote Edgar again that he would “send nor more carraboo skins for they all get broken to pieces.”³⁸

Indian slaves thus seem to have provided a means by which some traders obtained needed supplies, not through direct barter but through agreed upon purchase. With the exception of Finley’s six sickly enslaved children, however, the brokering of an Indian slave seems to have required a considerable investment in time and resources. Mano had lived with Groesbeck for over four years before unassailable debts to Todd and others forced him to sell her, albeit quite reluctantly as was Todd in parting with his friend’s property. Maxwell did not mention how long he may have owned the *panise* girl he instructed Edgar to sell in 1770, but in 1778 he noted that Muchetyweeass had lived with Charles Morison and himself for over a year. He does not allude in his letter to what duties she may have performed or her life with him, yet archaeological investigations at Michilimackinac have suggested additional domestic possibilities.

While traders and Native peoples absorbed and refocused aspects of Indian slavery in the Great Lakes after 1763, African slaves and free blacks became a growing presence in the region. People of African descent had long lived among French and Indian families at Detroit and Michilimackinac. Indeed among the seventy-three slaves baptized at Michilimackinac before 1763, three were listed as black. Of these, all three were male. One was the son of an African American woman who belonged to a Marin Urtubise or Hurtubise, a trader killed by Sioux. The other two were young men of approximately twenty years old. On 6 January 1744 Charles, the slave of the fort commandant Louis Coulon de Villiers de Vercheres, requested baptism noting that he

³⁸ Maxwell to Edgar, 27 August 1778,

could not remember if he had received the sacrament previously.³⁹ Eighteen years later in April 1762, Jesuit Pierre du Jaunay wrote, “I solemnly baptized a young negro about twenty years old, belonging to this mission since the day before yesterday, sufficiently instructed to even serve at the holy mass following the baptism, at which mass he made his first communion. He took the name of pierre in holy Baptism.”⁴⁰ The very brief clues in the baptism records suggest that the infant’s mother possibly, but most certainly the two young men, had arrived in Michilimackinac via Montreal. Both Charles and Pierre had received previous Catholic instruction, Pierre so much so that, even though he had only belonged to the mission for two days, he was ready to assist the priests with their sacraments. Both men also lived under the authority of prominent members of the Michilimackinac community—a post commandant and the Jesuit priests. Little is known of Marin Hurtubise, but the very small numbers of African slaves and their association with high status individuals suggests that while slavery was an accepted and regular element of fort life, black slaves were somewhat rare during the French period.

Likewise, the Detroit censuses between 1710 And 1762 reveal between thirty-three and forty-two slaves in the community, but do not differentiate between Indian and African slaves. However, the Canadian historian Marcel Trudel counted approximately fifteen black slaves in the town before 1763. African American slaves reached Detroit via many directions—as captives both of raids and warfare in the Anglo-American settlement line to the south and east, from Montreal, and from Albany, New York City, and the greater Atlantic. Detroit had a close relationship with Michilimackinac before and after the Seven Years’ War, due in part to the seasonal migrations of Anishbeg, Huron and

³⁹ Mackinac Baptisms, 6 January 1744, *WHC*, 19:11.

⁴⁰ Mackinac Baptisms, 10 April 1762, *WHC*, 19:64

other Native peoples, as well as to the role both towns played as a fur trade entrepôt and fortification that served Indians, traders, and other residents of the Upper Country and Ohio Valley. People traveled constantly between the two posts. Thus, African slaves who appeared on the Detroit census could possibly have been part of the mobile village of traders and laborers who worked the canoes, boats, and forts of the western Lakes region. Moreover, the merchants who traded in African and Indian slaves traded extensively at both Detroit and Michilimackinac, as well as other western fur trade posts.

A shortage in free and contract laborers made African slavery an attractive option for securing men to work in Great Lakes shipping in particular, as well as an additional means to secure easily liquidated capital. It was the merchants of the British fur trade who recognized the great potential for chattel slavery in their business. With Indian slaves available, traders purchased black slaves, even as they sold Indians. The desire to secure African slaves appears to have evolved from the different roles of Indian and African slaves. First, the majority of Indian slaves were women and children. As such, they worked as domestics in traders' homes, or were sold to procure such necessities as livestock and grain for voyageurs and wintering partners. Second, while domestic and essentially feminine tasks such as "making moccasins and netting snowshoes" were crucial to the fur trade's success, traders also required significant labor in the transport of furs, grain, and other goods throughout the lakes.⁴¹

The trade in African and Indian slaves was not direct, i.e., merchants did not exchange one for the other. Rather, they bought and sold slaves with goods or with money depending on what was more valuable. A ready market for corn in the Great

⁴¹ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 80-82.

Lakes meant that grain was the currency of choice in that region, measured in York currency. When traders bought slaves from New York, they also measured their worth in York currency.

The Detroit slave trade was thus linked to both the Upper Country and to New York, Montreal, and the Atlantic economy. Facing west we see Detroit merchants who trade with those located in Schenectady, New York, James Phyn and Alexander Ellice did extensive business with Detroit's English and French fur traders, including John Porteous, James Sterling, Alexander Grant, and John Askin, and acted as middlemen between the Upper Country and the eastern merchants who supplied trade goods and other necessities for life on the frontier.⁴² Based in New York, the firm of Phyn and Ellice was in direct competition with merchants and outfitters operating out of Montreal and the Saint Lawrence River system. The firm was connected to the Upper Country via the Niagara portage and the Lower Lakes, and to London and the greater Atlantic through the port of New York. Furs moved west to east, with Phyn and Ellice selling direct to London, and importing British-made goods, tobacco, and vast quantities of rum from east to west.

The numbers of slaves may not have been high, but Great Lakes merchants ordered slaves from eastern suppliers the way they ordered trade goods. In July 1769, Phyn and Ellice wrote Hayman Levy, their man in New York City, "If you have wampum, pipes and moons, you may send 'em by first opportunity, and we'll make a trial of them

⁴² For more information on Phyn and Ellice, see R. H. Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice, and Company of Schenectady," in *Contributions to Canadian Economics* vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1932), 7-41.

at Detroit this winter.”⁴³ And in their postscript the trading partners adjured, “Do not fail to purchase the blacks by first opportunity, as the person for whom they are, has contracted to deliver them at Detroit early in the fall.”⁴⁴

The buyer was presumably James Sterling, one of their representatives in Detroit who outfitted lesser traders from that post. The following month the Schenectady-based Phyn and Ellice wrote Sterling that they had “tried all in our power to procure the Wenches & Neg. lad but its impossible to get any near your terms. No green Negroes are now brot. in to this province we can purchase a Neg. from £80 to £90 & wenches from £60 to £70—if such will be acceptable advise & you shall have them in the spring & perhaps [under] if we can meet with Yankies in ye Winter.”⁴⁵ As slave brokers, Phyn and Ellice attempted to carry out specific instructions regarding types of slaves desired—in this case young men and women—at a low price. Unfortunately, Sterling’s terms seemingly did not meet market rate. Moreover, the phrase, “no green Negroes are now brot. Into this province” raises several questions.

First, what did the word “green” mean to the men who used it in their correspondence? Second, did Sterling or other traders specify “green Negroes” in their requests? And third, was there a relationship between “greenness” and price, perhaps indicated by the letter? Later that fall, Phyn and Ellice requested of Mr. Hayman Levy in December of 1769 that they wished to have ready by March, “A Spindle & all the Work

⁴³ Phyn & Ellice to H. Levy, 7 July 1769, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, Merchants at Schenectady, New York, 1767-1776, quoted in Norman McRae, “Blacks in Detroit, 1736-1833: The Search for Freedom and Community and Its Implications for Educators,” PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1982, p. 57.

⁴⁴ Phyn & Ellice, quoted in McRae, “Blacks in Detroit,” 57.

⁴⁵ Phyn & Ellice to James Sterling, 23 August 1769, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, Merchants, at Schenectady, New York, 1767-1776, vol. I, 201, Buffalo Historical Society, (hereafter BHS), *Microfilm Publication* no. 1; transcript in CMA.

compleat for a Saw Mill, & a set of compleat Bolting cloaths all intended for Detroit, We will at same time want 70 of Wampum, 8 Dozn. Black Balls if you can get them made, 300 lb. of Nails agreeable to the [patern] Mr. Phyn left with you last Summer, A Green Negro lad abt. £45 & Mr. Porteous says you promised to procure him a Mould for casting 12 or more Fuzill Balls at a time.”⁴⁶ Curiously, Ellice did not specify age or any other desirable qualifications for the “green Negro lad” other than the price. Greenness may have meant merely unskilled, but probably referred to slaves who were newly arrived in North America either from Africa or the Caribbean. In addition to lack of skill it may have also meant an unfamiliarity with colonial language or customs, thus representing less of a flight risk. Indeed, “green” Africans seem to have been the preference among Detroit’s Upper Country traders. Cost seems to be the most likely factor, as price shows up in the correspondence on slave brokering far more than other factors such as desired skills or intended use. Green slaves seem to have been at once cheaper, but less paradoxically less available in New York as the phrase “no green Negroes are now brot. Into this province” suggests. Certainly, Phyn and Ellice’s New York City contact Hayman Levy had been unable to procure them, leaving Phyn and Ellice in the hopes of meeting with Yankees over the winter. Yankees, or New Englanders, were certainly no strangers to slaveholding.

The acquisition of African slaves for the Great Lakes fur trade seems to have been a fairly complicated and time-consuming process. A year after assuring Sterling that “no green Negroes” were to be had, Phyn and Ellice wrote to Levy in August 1770, “We have received two negro boys; the oldest will do for Mr. Sterling at Detroit, and is entered in

⁴⁶ Phyn & Ellice to Hayman Levy, 23 December 1769, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, Merchants, vol. I, 254.

our Order book. But we are entirely at a loss what to do with that fat-gutted boy, having orders for none such for any of our correspondents, and we don't by any means want him for ourselves. Pray are not bills of sale necessary with these African gentlemen?"⁴⁷

Sterling thus seems to have had no need for children, as only the oldest boy was to be sent on. As middlemen, Phyn and Ellice were stuck with the second boy Levy had sent, even though they had nowhere to place him. Moreover, their irritation with Levy suggests that they were unable to send the boy back to him, as there were irregularities in his purchase.

The following spring, March 1771, Phyn and Ellice decided to cast their net a little wider and wrote to an associate named Wharton, a carpenter on his way to Philadelphia, to "purchase two negro lads from fifteen to twenty years, for about fifty pounds New York currency, each. They must be stout and sound, but we are indifferent about their qualifications, as they are for a Frenchman at Detroit."⁴⁸ The traders with whom Phyn and Ellice worked thus seem to have preferred to spend under £50 pounds, and wanted men who were neither too young nor too old for heavy labor, as the desired ages indicate. This letter also indicates a relative lack of effort on the part of Phyn and Ellice for the "Frenchman at Detroit," in direct contrast to the care with which the firm took in filling Sterling's order. The desired price was the same, yet the suppliers seem careless vis-à-vis the French outfitter's specific requests, if any. It also shows, however, that while Phyn and Ellice may have taken less care with their French contacts, that like their British counterparts, these men took full advantage of the availability of slave labor for their trade. For example, in spring of 1775, Phyn and Ellice wrote to Alexander and

⁴⁷ Phyn & Ellice to Hayman Levy, 13 August 1770, quoted in McRae, "Blacks in Detroit," 57.

⁴⁸ Phyn & Ellice to Carpenter Wharton, 22 March 1771, quoted in McRae, "Blacks in Detroit," 58.

William Macomb, more associates in Detroit, “A Negro for you is here, but having hurt his foot in Jumping from the Sloop into the Canoe, we do not know if he can go by this Opportunity.”⁴⁹ Another April 1775 missive to Hayman Levy in New York notes, “we are favoured with yours of the 13th and 19th with a Negro who is Forwarded to Detroit and an Invoice of Leather which is not yet come over.”⁵⁰ Clearly, the Phyn & Ellice supplied African slaves to the Upper Country during the late 1760s and early 1770s, before hostilities interrupted their trade.⁵¹

In addition to price and age, sex was another common factor in the Phyn and Ellice correspondence on slavery. Besides seeking young men at a discount, traders also often specifically requested African American women, as wives for their black male slaves and to work as domestics. On 6 June 1771, the firm wrote John Porteous, another prominent Detroit merchant and outfitter, “We have contracted with a New England Gentleman for some green Negroes to be deliv. here the 1st of Augt. when your wench will be forwarded together with a Negro Boy in case she may some time hereafter choose a Husband we apprehend he will be usefull to you or advantageous abt. the Sloop or you can dispose of him as you find best, the price £50 each.”⁵² In 1774, Phyn and Ellice wrote to John Porteous at Detroit “we will also procure a Wench for Mr. Cassity.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Phyn & Ellice to Alexander and William Macomb, 19 April 1775, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, vol. III, 194-95. The Macomb brothers were extremely successful Scottish fur trade merchants; Macomb County, north of Detroit, is named for them.

⁵⁰ Phyn & Ellice to Levy, 24 April 1775, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, vol. III, 197.

⁵¹ See Fleming, “Phyn, Ellice, and Company of Schenectady.”

⁵² Phyn & Ellice to John Porteous, 6 June 1771, Letterbooks of Phyn and Ellice, vol. I, 434.

⁵³ Phyn & Ellice, 8 January 1774, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, vol. III. 35-38.

African slaves did not travel simply from east to west through the Atlantic ports, however, but also reached the Upper Country via traders acting in the interior. In the same letter that Michilimackinac-based outfitter William Maxwell had arranged for the sale of the *panis* girl Muchetyweeass, he also informed merchant William Edgar that a Mr. Hansen had

sent here a negro wench with a fine child about 15 or 16 months old with a French man to be sold for nothing less than £120, he has full power to sell her for that or leave her with your letter in presence of Mr. Todd, to see if it would give us any insight but it did not. I would have been glad to have sent her to you if I could I have her at my house and if you could send me any security that will indemnify me. I will try to send her by next trip; the man will try to sell her and he is indebted on his own account. I believe they will give him his price to get part of it into their hands but I will keep her out if I can, she is a fine wench sews and does all house work, speaks good English and French.⁵⁴

The price specified for the woman and her child in this letter was over twice that which Sterling, Phyn, and Ellice had hoped to purchase young, “green,” male slaves; moreover, Maxwell refused to send her on without insurance against her significant monetary value. Additionally, he tried to sell Muchetyweeass for roughly 30 pounds or less, but hoped to realize four times that amount for the African American woman and her child together, perhaps because black slaves were rarer, healthier, or more valuable. Maxwell did not specify the child’s sex. The French man mentioned was an escort, sent to transport the two slaves to Michilimackinac from an unspecified point of origin, although Maxwell indicated that the Frenchman’s debts were incentive for him to take good care of the woman and child, and also to find a good price for them. Maxwell’s request for indemnification was designed to protect him in case of accident or escape

⁵⁴ William Maxwell to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, 24 August 1778, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, M119, NAC.

during the journey from Michimilackinac to Detroit—travel by water was always dangerous. Finally, by specifying the enslaved woman’s skills in sewing and languages, Maxwell indicated her worth to the multilingual Detroit market, and quite possibly revealed why the traders set her value so high. In addition to the three slaves, Maxwell also mentioned real estate and livestock deals in the same letter.

Maxwell’s juxtaposition of slaves with other forms of property underscores the material dimension of slavery in the Great Lakes, particularly the enslavement of Africans and African creoles. The fact that this document dealt with both African American and Native slaves, both of whom were also women, illuminates that both women were for sale, although the traders assigned them drastically different values. Maxwell doesn’t specify whether or not Muchetyweeass had any specific domestic skills, merely noting that “she is past danger of their first sickness.” Rather than waiting for insurance, Maxwell sent the *panise* along with his letter. Both women moreover seem to have lived in traders’ houses as slaves commonly did in northern and frontier communities. Additionally, the tone of the letter suggests a rather careless attitude toward Muchetyweeass, but deep concern over the other woman’s fate, suggesting more of a preoccupation with slaves as *meubles* or moveable property, rather than as integral actors in Indian kin and commercial networks. By 1778, then, the letter indicates that at least in some Great Lakes traders viewed both African and Indian slaves quite firmly as chattel.

The presence of the black woman and her child was evidently big news in the community, and more than one trader was interested and involved in the sale. As the powerful and influential North West Company merchant Isaac Todd wrote Edgar, “I have sealed my letter to you and forgot to mention that Hansen has sent in here a very fine

Negro wench and child about 15 months old under the care of a French man with orders to sell her for \$900 in peltry or goods which is equal to £120 York with orders if he cannot sell her for this to deliver her to Mr. Maxwell, I have spoke to Maxwell to strive and get her put into your hands which he will very willingly do to serve you, I am convinced in preference to any other but as he has been obliged to give the French man a receipt for her he does not know how to act so as to serve you and indemnify himself.”⁵⁵ Todd’s specification of goods or capital (curiously noted by different forms of currency), reveals the complex barter and exchange systems of Upper Country commerce, in which slaves often played a role, to be traded for either livestock, goods, or equivalent in cash value.

A few days later, Maxwell wrote Edgar again that he was sending “the Wench and child but there has been some difficulty added since I wrote you last which Sollomon was the cause of. The Wench and child was limited by Mr. Hansen at a £120, in case she would not sell for that the man had orders to take her back or to leave her with one of his friends or with me as there was none proper. She would have been left with me as there was none here would give that price only Solomon at length thought to pass off some broken assortments of goods and possibly pay some old debts bought her and came in to receive her but I stuck to my integrity and as I had possession kept it but I think I cannot be safe to let her go far less than the hundred and twenty pounds as it is offered for her and I think you will be a gainer to have her at that rather than want her and I am of opinion she and the child will sell within £10 of the price limited, do with her as you think best, very possibly Hansen will be here next spring in that case he will settle it easy

⁵⁵ Isaac Todd to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, no date, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, T25a, RG 9, file 3-16, NAC.

as Temajin. . . . I must say so far in the wench's favor that for anything I know she has behaved very well here."⁵⁶ Solomon's attempt to purchase the woman and her child was unsuccessful because he was unable to produce goods comparable to the asking price. By preferring to violate an agreement with Solomon rather than sell the two slaves for less than agreed on by Hansen, Todd, and Edgar, Maxwell gave further evidence for the comparative rarity of a highly-skilled African American domestic in the province, and thus her desirability on the market; indeed, she was priced out of the local market much to the frustration of Maxwell and his associates.

Slaves, Indian and African American, were part of the complex web of debt and obligation that suffused the fur trade. In September, 1789, Detroit merchant William Macomb in Detroit sent to Charles Morrison at Michilimackinac, "two negroes a woman and a man the property of Mr. Alexis Masonville" also of Detroit. He instructed Morrison to sell the two for £200 New York Currency. But, if Morrison was unable to sell the pair, Macomb instructed him "to send them to the Illinois by the first opportunity to Madam Cere with the inclosed letter." Moreover, if they could not be sold, Macomb specified that Morrison was to "give them unto any one for their provisions & cloths until next spring when the trader will be going & coming to that country." In other words, in the absence of a sale, Morrison was to recoup the slaves' upkeep by leasing them out, as it were, for their costs. Macomb noted that "I cannot say much in their favor as to honesty, more particularly of the woman she is very handy & very good cook, the man is a very smart active fellow & by no means a bad slave – I hope you may be able to dispose of them at your place & remit me the money they sale- I do not wish they should be dispose

⁵⁶ William Maxwell to William Edgar, Michilimackinac, 27 August 1778, William Edgar Papers, 1760-1812, MG19 A1 vol. 3, M120, NAC.

of to any person doubtfull or on a longer credit than the first of June next.” Clearly, these were slaves Macomb valued for their skills, and he hoped to gain not only a good price for them, but place them with someone who could be counted on to be good for the money, if their sale was delayed.⁵⁷

The following month, Macomb wrote Morrison again on the subject of the two African American slaves, chiding him for not accepting an offer from Mr. Ainsse, a trader and interpreter at Mackinac. “If Mr. Ceré has not yet passed your place I beg you will accept of it and send the £100—this note of hand for the remainder down by Mr. Laughton.”⁵⁸ On 16 October 1789, Charles Morrison replied to Macomb that he had indeed sold the two slaves to Ainsse, and in return enclosed promissory notes from two men, WJB and Laframboise, the latter an Ottawa/métis trader, totaling £100. Laframboise’s note promised an additional £1500. “I hope,” Morrison wrote, “the enclosed obligation will be acceptable to you.”⁵⁹

Nine different people were thus involved in the sale of the man and the woman: the two slaves themselves; Maisonville, who apparently owned them; Macomb, who sent them to Michilimackinac for sale; Morrison, who brokered the sale; Ainsse, who purchased them for apparently half of what Macomb hoped to get; Madame Ceré from Illinois, who was to take the slaves if no buyers could be found; the elusive WJB, and Laframboise, the traders whose promissory notes guaranteed the funds for the sale itself.

⁵⁷ “William Macomb re: Sale of Two Negro Slaves”, MS/Macomb Family 1789 Aug. 17, BHC. In the same letter Macomb asks Morrison to send him a “very good carabooskin” still with its hair, along with payment.

⁵⁸ Wm. Macomb, Sale of Two Negro Slaves,” MS/Macomb Family 22 September 1789, BHC. While the original reads £1000, it is most likely £100, per the letter following from Morrison to Macomb, dated 16 October 1789.

⁵⁹ Charles Morrison to William Macomb, Sale of Two Negro Slaves,” 16 October 1789, MS/Macomb Family BHC. Morrison also noted no “carabooskins” to be had at Michilimackinac that year.

To decode this further, one might posit that Maisonville owed Macomb at least £200, since that was the original amount Macomb hoped to get from their sale. Macomb in turn entrusted Morrison as his agent (and who received a butt of flour in return for “the trouble . . . taken with the negroes”)⁶⁰. Morrison then sold the two slaves to Ainsse, for half the amount desired; yet, rather than paying for the slaves with his own money or assets, Ainsse secured promissory notes from the two other traders, who must have owed him. Thus, the sale of the slaves reveal the extent to which networks of debt and obligation connected the traders of the region, regardless of their identities as French, Indian, métis, English, American, or African.

While the sale of slaves to cover debts was common practice among the fur traders of the Upper Country, the number of people and the complexity of this particular transaction may have been unusual. Charles Morrison, in a letter dated 27 June 1800, some four years after William Macomb’s death, wrote to Joseph Ainsse again on the matter, “you request that I would send you a certificate of having sold you in ’89 two Negroes, a man and a woman, which sale I certainly did make to you—you will observe that in the month of Aug ’89, the late Mr. William Macomb of Detroit sent me the two negroes as the property of Mr. Alexis Maisonville of the same place with orders to me for the dispersal of them here [Michilimackinac] for £900 New York Currency And as I never heard anything more from him on that matter I supposed it to be settled long ago.”⁶¹

Regardless of their monetary value or their value as moveable property, slaves—particularly black men—were highly valued in the dangerous and taxing labor of the

⁶⁰ Wm. Macomb, *Sale of Two Negro Slaves*, 22 September 1789, MS/Macomb Family, BHC.

⁶¹ Morrison to Ainsse, 27 June 1800, MS/Macomb Family R2:1796, BHC.

trade itself, particularly in the movement of furs and goods through the inland waterways. To meet this acute but seasonal labor needs, merchants, outfitters, and other traders relied on a labor structure that combined both slave and free labor, with men on both sides of the divide often working side by side in the same activities. As in the Chesapeake and in the northern British colonies, slavery and servitude thus existed side-by-side in the Upper Country as merchants, suppliers, and *voyageurs* required a certain degree of flexibility in their work force. However, this mixed-labor system was not without its difficulties, particularly in the realm of hiring out. Askin noted,

I have this day promoted a very necessary Ordinance which is, that no person can hire an Engagé without seeing a proper discharge from his former Master or a Certificate from the Commanding Officer why he has none, & what strengthens this is all the Merchants having Signed it & invested the Authority to make such aggressor pay 1000 pounds with the power of afterwards suing for it, there is something more to prevent carrying from any place persons in Debt who are not hired, the like is to take place at the Portage, so that I hope things will soon be on a better footing.⁶²

Engagés often tried to escape debt or a bad position by illegally hiring on with a new master before their terms had expired. Moreover, another decree asserted that no African or *panis* slaves could be hired without the slaveholder's consent.⁶³ The presence of ordinances indicates that the hiring out of both slaves and *engagés* was the norm, but that the traders and officers felt that the practice and resultant confusion over property and wage responsibility had gotten away from their control.

In August of 1774 Phyn and Ellice wrote Hayman Levy, "we lately wrote to Messrs. Buchannans, for 2 Able Men Servants, from 20 to 30 Years old, that have three or four Years to serve, if they have not sent them, pray endeavour to get them by first

⁶² Askin to Benjamin Frobisher, 15 June 1778, *AP*, 1:134-35.

⁶³ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 125.

Opportunity one at any rate or two if Convenient, as they are intended for Detroit this Fall.”⁶⁴ The eastern merchants also provided servants for the Upper Country, in addition to slaves. As the census data for Detroit in the 1760s and 1770s shows, the demand for servants and slaves was about equal, with some property owners preferring one over the other, and some men utilizing both.

However, the western fur trade also occasionally suffered from a surfeit of labor as the Schenectady merchants informed their New York agent, “As to Servants we are sensible you have had trouble enough about them and we are sorry some that came here in Expectation of Employment have been disappointed, however as we have now Contracted for all our Buildings we will not have Occasion for any of those Artificers unless you have already engaged them.”⁶⁵ As the letter reveals, this excess labor was caused not only by the seasonal nature of fur trade work, but also by its contractual nature as well. As in all frontier or borderland towns, the processes of resource extraction, land clearing, and building required intensive labor at first, but these tasks accomplished, traders, farmers, and other entrepreneurs soon found their labor needs to be somewhat different.

Conclusion

While slavery in the Great Lakes was never as widespread as in other parts of the British empire, or even as widespread as in the Illinois country (linked to New Orleans via the Mississippi), the records of the merchants who trafficked in the region show that it was an integral part of their business. In this chapter, I have shown how Anglo-American

⁶⁴ Phyn & Ellice to Levy, 19 August 1774, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, vol. III, 120-21.

⁶⁵ Phyn & Ellice to Levy, 4 August 1774, Letterbooks of Phyn & Ellice, vol. III, 110-111.

traders entered into the Upper Country exchange practices based in Indian slavery and captivity. They formed sexual, romantic, and domestic relationships with female slaves, which often resulted in mixed-race offspring—just as their French predecessors had. Unlike the French traders and their families, however, the baptism records indicate that large métis communities did not continue to grow at the same rate, although these communities did not die out and both Native and métis people remained essential actors and cultural brokers within the fur trade itself.⁶⁶ Yet, an analysis of the way British traders understood and implemented slavery in the fur trade complicates the conclusion that the Great Lakes remained an Indian world. These English and Scottish merchants, based out of Montreal, New York, Detroit, and Michlimackinac may have understood that Indian slaves were part of the relational structure of the fur trade itself—that buying, marrying, and fathering children with Indian slaves tied one to that slave’s family through kinship and gifts. But by recasting slaves—both Indian and African—as laborers, by treating them as goods, and by counting their worth in exchange for grain or for currency and as capital to ease debts, these merchants also created a shift from a slavery rooted in Native understanding to a slavery that more closely resembled its counterparts in the Anglo-American colonial world. At the same time, they participated in a long-standing custom of the Great Lakes borderland—Indian slavery—while reinterpreting this custom to suit their own needs. In some cases, as with Askin and other traders who took Indian wives and raised free, mixed-race children, this resulted in the kind of permeability that characterized the region before 1760. However, even traders who moved comfortably

⁶⁶ See Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism”—Native women such as Madeleine LaFramboise who were or had been married to English and French traders remained very powerful through the first two decades of the 19th century.

within an indigenous practice of slavery that required recognition of kin, gifts, and reciprocity, also were comfortable treating slaves as chattel. These merchants were thus true border people, who had the ability to mix freely with other groups when need be, yet could draw firm lines around their own identities. In the next chapter, I discuss how the imposition of a political border into the Great Lakes transformed it into a bordered land, and created profound changes for the flexible, mutable border people who had once lived in the center of the fur trade universe.

Chapter Five

Askin at Detroit

William Macomb knew that he was dying. It was the spring of 1796, and the 45 year old fur trader and member of Parliament in Upper Canada had been plagued by illness off and on—in 1789, he had written Michilimackimac trader Charles Morrison that he was “just recovering after a very sever fit of sickness that confines me five days to my Bed.”¹ But this time, he knew his number was nearly up. On the 11th of April, he dictated and signed his will. Macomb’s life, though short, had been a remarkable example of what a young man of ambition could do for himself in the North American fur trade.

Like John Askin, Macomb had been born in Northern Ireland around 1751, and migrated mid-century to America, going into business with his older brother Alexander. The Macombs purchased the deed to Grosse Ile, in the Detroit River, by Indian grant, and began to outfit traders. Upon his death, on 16 April 1789, his will recorded over £60,000 of assets and debts owed the estate, considerable real estate holdings, and moveable property that included 26 slaves, as well as luxury goods, tools, and “all my utensils of husbandry.”² The fur trade had made him a wealthy man.

Macomb’s three minor sons, John, William, and David, inherited his real estate, including three different farms near the Detroit River, boasting a total of thirteen acres of frontage, not including farm frontage he held from Indian grants; he gave the boys three islands to play with: little Hog Island, and Grosse Ile, and Stony Island—the latter two from Indian grants; four separate houses inside the fort; and undeveloped lands in Ohio,

¹ Macomb to Morrison, 22 September 1789, MS/Macomb Family, BHC.

² Will of William Macomb, MS/Macomb Family 1796, BHC.

the shares of which were held by his company, Pfister & Macomb. To his wife Sarah, William left all his moveable property, including his slaves and his cattle and extensive livestock, his tools, and his carriages. He left her his beloved books, including *Cook's Voyage*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, *The Rambler*, *Fordyce's Sermons*, Gibbon's *Roman Empire*, and the collected works of Jonathan Swift. He also left her the copper fish kettle, a barrel of powder, a pair of saddle bags, and a hive of bees. Macomb ordered that his cash be divided into 19 shares and, giving three of them to Sarah, he split the rest of them equally between his three sons and five daughters.

In the Upper Country, 1796 was an auspicious year to die. Jay's Treaty officially solidified the informally-treated border between Canada and the United States, but the Macomb brothers had already long ago chosen sides. After the Revolution, Alexander removed the remainder of his household and possessions to New York, to become a land speculator. William remained in Detroit and pursued a political career, and became a member of parliament in Upper Canada. They continued to do business together over the porous and as yet tenuous border, but like John Askin, William Macomb had cast his lot with the British empire.

In 1780, John Askin shifted his household and his commercial home base from Michilimackinac to Detroit. The American Revolution, Jay's Treaty of 1796, and subsequent border delineation through the heart of the Great Lakes created turmoil for the Indians and traders who relied on the supply chains from Montreal and Albany. Over the course of thirteen years, the lakes and rivers that were the highways of the trade became,

at least theoretically, barriers to commerce.³ Yet between 1783, when the Peace of Paris nominally gave Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Mackinac Island to the United States, and the 1796 Jay's Treaty, which enforced the border, the fur traders and the British military continued to occupy the posts they had held since 1760. Askin was never busier. From new fur trade ventures to sawmills, agricultural expansion, shipping, and now land speculation, Askin had his finger in every pot. Rather than discouraging his commercial ambitions, the looming threat of the border seems to have had the opposite effect.

In this chapter I examine this frenetic expansion to show how Askin's business ventures after the war both support and undermine the power of the middle ground. I also discuss slavery in Askin's family and in Detroit generally, revealing the ways in which slavery in the fur trade began to change at the end of the eighteenth century. The new political border had surprisingly profound effects on Askin and on slavery. The Great Lakes region transformed from what had been throughout the eighteenth-century a fur trade center, into a borderland, farther removed from seats of power.⁴ As Montreal merchant and North Wester Benjamin Frobisher wrote to a member of the Council of Quebec, "The Gentlemen who are engaged in [the fur trade in Upper Canada] have ever since the year 1776, carried it on under all the disadvantages inseparable from the state of War . . . they have everything to fear from the line of Boundary to be fixed in that Quarter, unwilling, however, to relinquish a Business in which they have so long

³ Not right away, however. In 1783, 101 canoes launched from Montreal: "Of these only twenty-six were specifically destined for the Lake Superior Region," Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 188.

⁴ "Benjamin Frobisher to Adam Mabane, 19 April 1784," in *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 67-69; "Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher to General Haldimand, 4 October 1784," in *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 73.

persevered.”⁵ Once entrepôts for the western trade, Detroit and Michilimackinac soon faded into hinterland obscurity. The North West Company and Hudson’s Bay Company focused on the Canadian Northwest, while John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company eventually took over the Michilimackinac trade and attempted to exploit the rich fur grounds of the American west.⁶ In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which the delineation of the border had profound consequences for slaves, citizens, and others in what had formerly been known as the Upper Country.

During the half century between the British conquest of Canada and the War of 1812, the Great Lakes region’s economic and social transition from a middle ground as described by Richard White, to an Anglo-American settlement frontier, wreaked subtle but profound changes on the relationships between slavery, labor, and society. Moreover, newly-minted Americans also put pressure on a region they sought to claim as their own, following their victory in the War for Independence. By the end of the century, several stages of Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin’s frontier process had come and gone: the retreat of the beaver and its extractive industry to the west, the creation of markets not only at the primary Euro-American posts but at villages, forts and settlements around the Great Lakes as well, and the establishment of firm political borders between colonial Britain and the United States all signified the latter stages of frontier dynamics. Once a mix of Indian and European cultures, the Great Lakes region became, by the end of the century, a borderland between competing visions of Anglo-American political ideologies.

Askin leaves Michilimackinac

⁵ “Benj. Frobisher to Adam Mabane,” 67.

⁶ See James P. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

Even though Montreal fell to the Americans in 1775, trading passes allowed merchants to continue to ship goods to the Upper Country.⁷ With the St. Lawrence open to commerce, “the American Revolution failed to disrupt the trade. Instead, the market for furs and foodstuffs remained stable and even expanded.”⁸ Askin and the Michilimackinac commandant, Major Arent De Peyster, had developed a close friendship and Askin subsequently enjoyed the benefits of this patronage, shipping goods to traders around the lakes in spite of the hostilities, the commandeering of his ships for official business, and shortages of flour and other supplies. After Major Patrick Sinclair replaced De Peyster in October 1779, the latter having removed to the garrison at Detroit, Askin rapidly fell out of favor with the new commandant, who went so far as to have Askin’s son-in-law Captain Robertson arrested for interfering with the war effort. Sinclair seized some of Askin’s ships, *Mackinac*, *De Peyster*, and *Archangel* for the army’s use.⁹ He also accused Askin of pilfering from the King’s stores, removed the pickets at his store at Sault Ste. Marie, and prevented Askin either from trading or from leaving the fort. Finally, in late 1780, Askin—with help from some well-placed friends, was able to shift

⁷ “Simon McTavish to William Edgar, merchant, Detroit” Michilimackinac, 9 June 1776, in *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 49; Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 52. For an excellent discussion of Michilimackinac during the American Revolution and John Askin’s commercial ventures during the war, see Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*; see also Sleeper-Smith, “The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes,” 145-165; Keith R. Widder, “Effects of the American Revolution on Fur-Trade Society at Michilimackinac,” in *The Fur Trade Revisited* (see Introduction note 51), 299-316.

⁸ Sleeper-Smith, “The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes,” 159.

⁹ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 141.

his household and join his wife and family, who had moved to Detroit some months earlier.¹⁰

Yet Askin had been making plans to relocate his family for some time, and wrote Alexander Henry as early as 1778 that he was “building a new house at the Fort & I intend to make use of it until the present war is at an end & then I shall change my Quarters, but where to I know not as yet.”¹¹ Detroit was a natural choice—it was a larger settlement with close ties to Michilimackinac, Montreal, and Albany, it had a long history of agriculture (Askin had purchased flour and butter and other supplies from Detroit for years), and it was also the home of his wife’s Interior French family, the Barthes. Moving his household must have taken considerable effort. The 1776 and 1778 inventories show not only extensive household goods including books, china, cooking tools, furnishings, clothing, pistols, tools, livestock, writing equipment, carriage equipment, ships, over a dozen houses and buildings, and slaves. They also reveal the boggling variety of merchandise he supplied to and among traders, Indians, and military posts: cloth, sewing equipment, food, rum, tools, gunpowder, weapons, candles—anything one could want.¹² Food stuffs included apples, sugar, butter, pork, chocolate, green tea, beans, honey, prunes and raisins, salt, molasses, vinegar, Madeira, ale, mustard, corn, and coffee.

As one historian has observed, “Agriculture, shipping, and the fur trade were . . . the most important” economic activities at Detroit, followed by bakers, saddle makers,

¹⁰ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 153. Sinclair, moreover, was in the process of building a new fort on Mackinac Island, which would necessitate the removal of the garrison, stores, traders, and villagers from Michilimackinac anyway.

¹¹ Askin to Alexander Henry, 23 June 1778, *AP*, 1:145.

¹² “The John Askin Inventories,” 1776 and 1778, reprinted in Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 209-236. Original 1776 inventory is in the Public Archives of Canada MG 19, A3; 1778 inventory is in the John Askin Papers, Archives of Ontario.

silversmiths, and millers, all to meet local and regional needs.¹³ As Susan Sleeper-Smith has noted, “historians rarely emphasize the role that agricultural produce played in the fur trade, but there were both local and export markets for chickens, cattle, oxen, and horses. Traders shipped boatloads of corn, *makuks* [Ojibwa birch bark cooking and storage containers] and barrels of maple sugar, as well as furs, to Michilimackinac, Detroit, and St. Louis; eighteenth-century traders were brokers of foodstuffs and furs.”¹⁴ Upon moving to Detroit, Askin built on the agricultural and shipping enterprises he began at Michilimackinac.

Since the seventeenth century, traders in the Great Lakes had purchased much of their food from local Indians, since “valuable canoe space transported trade goods from Montreal; they rarely carried an extensive food supply or such bulky items as snowshoes. Western posts had a settled agricultural appearance with extensive acreage under cultivation, usually controlled by the matrifocal households of Native women. Oxen were used to plow the fields and to draw French carts that carried hay for dairy and beef cattle. There were chickens, pigs, and even fruit orchards that supplemented more traditional sources of food.”¹⁵ Askin’s farming ventures at Michilimackinac and later at Detroit did not supplant Native grain, but rather augmented it, and created new opportunities for expansion. His efforts at farming show also that traders, merchants, and *engages* were all involved in providing foodstuffs to the forts, to supplement what they could buy from

¹³ David R. Farrell, “Detroit 1783-1796: The Last Stages of the British Fur Trade in the Old Northwest,” PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 1968, 249.

¹⁴ Sleeper-Smith, “The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes,” 151. For a discussion and inventories of the goods British traders shipped to the Lakes, see Bruce M. White, “Balancing the Books,” 175-92; and for the French period, see Dean L. Anderson, “The Flow of European Trade Goods in the Western Great Lakes Region,” 93-116.

¹⁵ Sleeper-Smith, “The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes,” 150.

Indians, and to vary their diets with vegetables and animal protein. It was a far cry from the early days of French habitation at Michilimackinac and the steady diet of Indian corn, wild game, and whitefish.

Farming at Detroit in the Eighteenth Century

Detroit had been an agricultural community since its birth. In 1701, two related events—the founding of Detroit and the signing of the Great Peace of Montreal between the Iroquoians and the allied French and Algonquians—signaled a shift in the diplomatic and social negotiations of the *pays d'en haut*. Although former Michilimackinac commandant Antoine Laumet de La Mothe Cadillac had personal ambition as the basis for his proposal for a fort at the narrows between Lakes Erie and Huron, the eventual establishment of Fort Pontchartrain had long-reaching effects.

In addition to its value as a fur trading post, which was intended to thwart illegal trade through the straits of Mackinac, Cadillac envisioned Detroit as a permanent military and agricultural outpost of New France.¹⁶ By locating the new settlement between the upper and lower Lakes, the French hoped to check the westward ambitions of the British fur traders at Albany, who had made increasingly bold forays into the Ohio valley and Great Lakes in search of beaver, raccoon, and deerskins. Moreover, Detroit was potentially in a position to help supply Iroquoian as well as Algonquian peoples and thus

¹⁶ Frank Boles, “A History of Detroit: 1701-1737,” in “I Arrived at Detroit: A Presentation of the Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University,” <http://www.lib.cmich.edu/clarke/detroit/history.htm>. Evidence for Michilimackinac as hotbed of illicit trading is in Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 25 September 1702, *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* (Lansing, Mich.: Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1904) 33:145-46 (hereafter referred to as *MPHC*). Cadillac noted that Michilimackinac was a magnet for deserters and rogue traders, in addition to serving as an “emporium” for the tribes on the Upper Lakes.

discourage a British and Iroquoian alliance.¹⁷ To further his own financial ambitions, Cadillac hoped to lure many of the region's Native American groups to settle permanently at Detroit so that he would have a ready-made base for trading French goods, including brandy. Odawa, Potawatomi, Ojibwa, and Huron villages soon relocated to the new post, along with Miami and Fox groups, and Cadillac called Detroit, "the Paris of America."¹⁸ However, the close proximity of longstanding rivals exacerbated tensions among Indian groups and destabilized peace in the West. The Foxes and Miamis, who hoped to take advantage of Detroit's trade potential, soon found themselves in conflict with France's more established allies, the Odawas, who in turn hoped to reduce local competitors for French goods.

Cadillac chose Detroit for its strategic location between Albany, the Ohio valley, and the upper Lakes, as well as for the richness of its natural resources. In 1679, the Recollet Father Louis Hennepin had sailed through the Erie strait, noticing the wealth of fruit and game, as well as the "fine open plains" on both sides of the river.¹⁹ Cadillac likewise cited the temperate climate, abundant wild fruit, game, quarries, wood, anchorages, and fertile soil as inducements for France to sponsor a settler community.²⁰ In short, Cadillac, as had others before him, described the intended site for Fort Pontchartrain as a paradise.

¹⁷ Gilles Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701: French-Native Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 99-100, 105-106.

¹⁸ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 322.

¹⁹ Quoted in Brian Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis: Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 13.

²⁰ Account of Detroit [20 Sept. 1701], *MPHC* 33:131-32; Antoine Laumet de la Mothe Cadillac to Louis Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain, 133-51.

Cadillac's 1702 map of Detroit shows the location of the French fortified outpost on the river as well as the neighboring Odawa and Loups (or Mahican) villages north of the fort, and the Huron village to the south. Fort Pontchartrain is depicted as a square fortification, with rectangular structures inside the walls. The Indian villages were surrounded by circular stockades that enclosed six to seven tents each.²¹ Cadillac's more detailed plan of the fort itself shows twenty-one structures, including church buildings, military housing and structures, stores, and several miscellaneous houses. His correspondence reveals that subsistence agriculture was an important element of the settlement's design from the very beginning, even though the 1702 map does not show any of the cleared lands or fields. In his letter to Pontchartrain the same year, Cadillac noted that wheat sown in October of 1701 had been reaped in July of 1702. Settlers had also planted twelve *arpents* of corn in May 1702, and that in addition to a mill, "all the soldiers have their own gardens." The Hurons had likewise cleared two hundred *arpents* and the Odawas had "made some very fine fields of Indian corn," while the Mahican refugees from New England grew wheat. Cadillac observed, "within the space of one league, there are four forts and four hundred men bearing arms with their families, besides the garrison."²²

The settlement at Detroit was to serve an additional purpose, as its founder noted, "By means of this post the licentiousness of the French with the savage women is practically abolished."²³ Luring more families and women for the soldiers to marry would ideally control the latter group's "indecentcy." Moreover, "It would be absolutely

²¹ Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis*, 22-23.

²² Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 137. An *arpent* is about 63 ¼ yards long.

²³ Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 143.

necessary also to allow the soldiers and Canadians to marry the savage maidens when they have been instructed in the French language which they will learn all the more eagerly . . . because they always prefer a Frenchman for a husband.”²⁴ Cadillac proposed these marriages to strengthen the alliances between the French soldiers and settlers and the local tribes, whose corn, trade, and defensive potentials he had hoped to exploit. Little documentary evidence exists to suggest that any marriages or alliances that arose between the French and Indians at Detroit alleviated tensions whatsoever. Instead, as more Native groups arrived to share the French Governor, Onontio’s bounty, petty conflicts and annoyances threatened the relative peace and stability of the settlement.

This volatility and change characterized the location and peopling of the Native villages that surrounded Fort Pontchartrain. In 1703, *saulteurs* and Mississaugas established an Ojibwa village upriver, north of Lake St. Clair. The same year, Miamis, who had previously absorbed groups of Mahican refugees from the east, relocated to Detroit where they subsumed the 1701-02 Loups village. In 1706, the Odawas moved their town to a new location on the south shore of the Detroit River following a confrontation with the Miamis, who also seized upon the occasion to relocate south to the Maumee River, near Toledo. Violent incidents plagued the Detroit settlements, as disparate groups struggled to get along in a small space. In 1703, a Huron set fire to a barn and seriously damaged the French fort, which was also attacked in the 1706 conflict that resulted in the departure of the Odawas and Miamis.²⁵

²⁴ Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 18 October 1700, Ernest J. LaJeunesse, *The Windsor Border Region: Canada’s Southernmost Frontier*, Publications of the Champlain Society Ontario Series, vol. 4 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1960), 15-16.

²⁵ Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis*, 22, 25.

Not only were Native Americans disappointed by Cadillac's failure to keep the peace, but the French administration at Quebec found extensive fault with Detroit's founder as well. In 1707, Cadillac listed 120 French houses, 270 French settlers, large numbers of cattle, and a combined population of 1200 Indians in the surrounding forts.²⁶ Unconvinced, in 1708, Pontchartrain sent François Clairambault d'Aigremont to investigate the true state of affairs at the post. D'Aigremont found that Cadillac was universally hated by all the French and Native inhabitants and that his depictions of a "paradise" and thriving settlement were grossly exaggerated. Rather than the well-drained and fertile soils that Cadillac described, d'Aigremont found marshes, sand, and clay, with little drainage nor value for long-term agriculture. All the pigs were dead, except for those belonging to Cadillac, and only three milk cows still produced. The wild game had been hunted out in the area surrounding the fort, causing the French and Native settlers to travel far afield to hunt. In addition to charges of extortion against Cadillac, the report includes valuable information as to the state of the settlement before the Fox Wars. D'Aigremont noted that 353 *arpents* were under cultivation by 1708, and that 157 of these belonged to Cadillac while the 63 other inhabitants shared 46 cleared *arpents* between them. The Hurons had 150 *arpents* of cleared land. Only 29 of the French owned land, and d'Aigremont complained that, besides the officers, everyone else at the post engaged in trade rather than agriculture. Moreover, the traders were seasonal rather than permanent migrants at the post. Perhaps most damning, however, was the charge that as Cadillac supplied only brandy, powder and lead to the Indians, they traded with the English for any other goods they hoped to acquire. Fort Pontchartrain, rather than

²⁶ Cadillac, 1 October 1707, *MPHC* 33:340; Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis*, 19.

checking British trading in the Ohio valley, seems perhaps to have encouraged it. In short, the French investigator found that the lack of resources and low morale made Detroit more of a burden than a benefit for France's North American empire.²⁷

By far, the most labor-intensive endeavor at the Detroit was the fur trade. This enterprise required strong backs to paddle canoes, portage and load cargo, in addition to cooking, hunting, trapping, and setting up camp while traveling. The birch bark canoes weighed up to 3000 pounds fully loaded and carried anywhere from two to eight men. Repair and maintenance of canoes, sails, and other canoe equipment required additional labor as canoes only lasted from four to six years.²⁸ The fur trade also had its own internal hierarchy, from the top merchants in Montreal through the outfitters who supplied the voyages, all the way down to the lowly *voyageur*, who contracted either by the year or by the voyage. Additionally, illegal traders known as *coureurs de bois* carried on their own negotiations in the back country, further supplying furs to the bulging Montreal warehouses. In both the French and British periods, slaves of varying ages would have accompanied the local traders as paddlers, or made repairs on canoe equipment, snowshoes, traps, and fishing tackle at home.

Like the fur trade, Upper Country agriculture also demanded both seasonal and year-round labor. Cadillac had contracted with four Canadian farmers in 1703 to work Detroit for one year, for the sum of four hundred livres.²⁹ These and later settlers at Detroit grew corn, wheat, and peas, and raised pigs, poultry (including pigeons), and

²⁷ D'Aigremont to Pontchartrain, 14 November 1708, *MPHC* 33:424, 441-445.

²⁸ Timothy J. Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain at Detroit: A Guide to the Daily Lives of Fur Trade and Military Personnel, Settlers, and Missionaries at French Posts*, 2 vols. (Ossineke, Mich.: Silver Fox Enterprises, 2001), 1: 63-64.

²⁹ Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain*, 1:482.

cattle. They processed grease made from deer, bear, moose, or livestock. They produced dairy goods, cider, and beer, and made biscuit for trading voyages.³⁰ Generally, the houses inside the fort had a small garden adjacent, and larger gardens existed outside the fort walls where the denizens raised cabbages, herbs, aromatic vegetables, and other foodstuffs.

The cleared fields resembled the ribbon farms of the St. Lawrence valley, and were laid out in long, narrow strips of land so that everyone could have frontage on the river. Workers used hoes, pickaxes, and spades to prepare soil and plant gardens and small fields, and in larger cleared fields where stumps remained. They sowed the grain by hand, then harrowed and pushed the seeds down into the dirt. Weeding was done by hand.³¹

Harvest time depended on the crop. Winter wheat was harvested in June, while spring-planted wheat ripened in the fall. Following French tradition, women sickled the grain and bound it into sheaves, after which it was carried to the barns, where threshing occurred, during the winter. Women and children separated the wheat from the chaff in winnowing baskets, and used the leftover straw for fodder or bedding. Hay, millet, and clover were harvested in June. First, workers scythed the grain, then raked and pitchforked it into piles. Peas were sickled then left to dry in the fields and were finally taken to the barn, where they were threshed in early winter. Corn, likewise, dried in the fields in shocks, then was shelled and perhaps ground, if needed for flour. Cabbages were cut, then buried in the gardens all winter, to be dug when needed. Moreover, woodcutting was required all year long, for hearth and smithy fires. Inside the house, slaves and others

³⁰ Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain*, 1:105-111.

³¹ Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain*, 1:478-80.

sewed, knitted, cooked, cleaned, and did laundry, the latter generally only twice per year.³² Food preparation was extremely labor intensive, and women who could afford it probably found having slaves alleviated their burdens.

Because responsibility for agriculture had generally fallen on women in Native societies, female slaves probably worked the fields at the French posts as well, perhaps alongside the French and Canadian farmers, as well as in the fields at the Indian villages on either side of the river. Certainly children helped weed, gather, and process grain, fed and tended livestock, and probably helped in the kitchen and king's gardens. Farmers thus were able to take advantage of female, male, and child slaves to perform both interior and exterior tasks related to all stages of food production. These strenuous activities explain why wealthier farmers either owned or shared a few slaves both for agricultural and domestic year-round labor.

The French also did not farm in a vacuum at Detroit; their Huron, Potawatomi and Odawa neighbors all grew corn, wheat, and other foodstuffs, more successfully even than the French, who often supplemented their own production by buying from the Indians or shipping food from Montreal. The Huron mission farm, for example, grew wheat, oats, peans, corn, onions, chives, and garlic.³³ Settlers more often had to purchase grain from Native growers during times of conflicts, when French barns and fields, lying outside the walls, were vulnerable to fires and other damage.

Detroit in its first decades thus witnessed the establishment of small farms, as well as a continued commitment to the fur trade, all under the shadow and very real dangers of war in a borderland community. The Fox Wars in the early eighteenth-century, French

³² Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain*, 1:480-82.

³³ Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain*, 1:482.

and Indian conflicts with the Chickasaws farther south down the Mississippi, and British incursions into the Ohio Valley kept the region somewhat unsettled. There was a continual need to rebuild the fort's pickets in addition to clearing land, planting, harvesting, constructing buildings, and maintaining the fur trade itself.

In 1749, French officials decided that a larger agricultural community at Detroit would strengthen defenses and help stabilize the region. The forty-five new settlers who accepted land on the south shore of the Detroit River, established ribbon farms near the Huron and Odawa villages.

Detroit thus saw significant population and cultivation growth between 1701 and 1763. Fort Pontchartrain had always had aspirations of being something more than a trade center. Years of administrative neglect during the 1712-1740s Fox Wars gave way to a renewed commitment by colonial officials, to encourage agricultural expansion and permanent settlement in the Erie Straits. The four villages that made up Detroit thus formed a multicultural populace who relied on each other for crops, trading partners, worship, protection occasionally, and slaves. Yet, while the Native peoples of the region tended to inhabit their Detroit villages seasonally, the commitment to agriculture and the development of the ribbon farms on the part of the interior French caused Fort Pontchartrain to resemble the Laurentian settlements far more than the typical fur trade post of the *pays d'en haut*.³⁴ John Askin thus moved to a thriving agricultural community that had longstanding relationships and networks throughout the Great Lakes. He had traded with the Detroit merchants for twenty years, and as his correspondence shows, they were as much a part of his community as the merchants at Michilimackinac or

³⁴ "Detroit was a well-established agricultural and commercial center by the outbreak of the Seven Years' War," Brian Dunnigan, "Fortress Detroit, 1701-1826," *Sixty Years' War*, (see Introduction note 51), 167.

Montreal. These conditions, as well as the presence of his in-laws and his old friend Major Arent de Peyster, made Detroit an ideal site for his relocation, despite the still unsettled political and military situation in 1780.

Askin's New Ventures

In 1786, Askin purchased approximately a large property on the banks of the Huron River, south of Detroit, from a Moravian group who subsequently relocated first to the Cuyahoga and then to the Thames River area in Upper Canada, near present-day London. The Moravians—missionaries and Christianized Indians—had been displaced by the American Revolution and anti-Indian sentiment in Pennsylvania, despite the fact that they were pacifists and were not involved in partisan fighting. Having first secured permission from the British military to settle there, the Moravians set up camp in a high, well-drained area, full of trees and fresh water, farther than eight miles south of Detroit, so as not to encroach on lands belonging to Detroit merchants³⁵ On their arrival in 1782, they had approached Askin with letters of credit drawn upon Montreal merchant Richard Dobie, and forged a long-standing relationship with him, selling corn and other produce in exchange for goods.³⁶

The town site the Moravians chose had once been occupied by other Native peoples. One of their leaders, David Zeisberger, observed in his diary that, “We found many traces that a long time ago an Indian town must have stood on this place, for we

³⁵ 21 July 1782, David Zeisberger, “Diary of David Zeisberger: a Moravian missionary among the Indians of Ohio” ed. Eugene Frederick Bliss (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1885), 104.

³⁶ 16 October 1782, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 117.

saw many holes in the ground, which were now indeed filled up, but quite recognizable, in which the Indians have even now the custom of keeping their corn and other property. We could also quite plainly see the little hills, where corn had been planted, but where now is a dense wood of trees two to six feet in diameter.”³⁷

The Moravians, however, in an echo of the tensions among Native groups that helped spark the Fox Wars more than half a century earlier, incurred the wrath of the local Chippewa Indians who, because there had been shortages and famine, felt that the newcomers—Christian and agricultural—were using resources that belonged to them. After three years, Askin and Major Ancrum, then commandant of Detroit, decided to buy the land and move the Moravians elsewhere. Zeisberger notes:

The major came, with a couple of officers and Mr. Askin, in their sleighs. We had prepared for them a separate house and room, and furnished them as well as we could. They looked about our town to-day, visited in the Indian houses and took notice of every thing, examined a part of our fields, and especially the country, which was the main object of their visit. Our town and its situation and the whole neighborhood pleased them exceedingly well. They have not thought of finding such high and dry land here, and the work we have done here in three and a half years was a wonder to them. The major and Mr. Askin, each of whom had a grant from the king of 2000 acres, wished to have it taken up here for them and to pay us and our Indians for our improvements and work what was fair and right.³⁸

Askin offered the Moravians \$400 for their land and “improvements,” which the Moravians shared “we whites one half and the Indian brethren the other.”³⁹ He also personally took it upon himself to arrange their transportation first to Cuyahoga and then

³⁷ July 23 1782, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 105.

³⁸ 4 March 1786, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 262.

³⁹ 6 March 1786, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 262.

later to “New Salem,” their settlement on the Thames River in Upper Canada.⁴⁰ He helped them get established there, by giving them \$200 in credit, “which was a real and substantial help in our extremist need, when we were in the wilderness, remote from Indian and white settlements, so that thereby, though it was not quite sufficient, we were put in a position to be able to plant somewhat and outwardly to get along.”⁴¹

Askin maintained a close relationship with the displaced Moravians, who became one of Detroit’s “largest suppliers of agricultural products,” including corn, wheat, sugar, and honey, even after they relocated.⁴² Indeed, he had helped settle them in their new home, sending food and other provisions for them as they encountered difficulties on their voyage.⁴³ He also helped another Moravian community on the Miami River in 1787, sending them corn when they were starving, even though as David Zeisberger wrote, ““business is so bad there [Detroit] that nearly all the merchants become bankrupt.”⁴⁴

To work his new holding, Askin contracted with a man named John Cornwall “to work Constantly at Raissing of & Gathering of Indian Corn during this Ensueing Spring & Summer when Necessary.”⁴⁵ Askin agreed to furnish Cornwall with two men, in addition to Cornwall’s own *engagé*, to work the corn. Along with the men, Askin let Cornwall have the use of a “Horse & Cow & Plow Irons Untill the fall for the purpose of

⁴⁰ 23 April 1786, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 267.

⁴¹ 19 August 1788, Zeisberger, *Diary*, 436. The Moravians clearly did not feel that Indian towns constituted “wilderness.”

⁴² Farrell, “Detroit, 1783-1796,” 233; 26 October 1788, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 353; see also *Diary*, 265, 300, 451; Zeisberger also notes that other French residents of Detroit came to trade with them as well.

⁴³ See “Voyage of the Moravians to Ohio,” *AP*, 1:245-47.

⁴⁴ 27 June 1787, Zeisberger, “Diary,” 353.

⁴⁵ Contract between John Askin and John Cornwall, 11 April 1786, *AP*, 1:234.

working at said Corn.”⁴⁶ Askin then agreed to split the ensuing harvest with Cornwall two-thirds to one-third, taking the larger share. He also let Cornwall and his men use one of the houses with a garden that was built by the Moravians, as part of his compensation.

In June, Cornwall wrote Askin that he had no more use for the hired men until “the burds begin to eate Corne,” noting that Askin could “send them about any business you Chuse or Discharge them . . . perhaps you mite set them sawing some plank or board.”⁴⁷ In addition to releasing his assistants, Cornwall also asked Askin for blue cloth for a pair of Indian leggings, although it is unclear if the garment was intended for himself, a servant, or perhaps even a slave, as a man identified as Cornwall, an associate of another man named Miller, had owned a male slave in 1782.⁴⁸ Regardless, Cornwall delivered corn and potatoes to Askin in October of 1786.⁴⁹ While Sleeper-Smith notes that even at the end of the eighteenth century, agriculture continued to be women’s work for Native farming communities, here Askin ignores that trend, installing male employees as tenants and hired hands to do the farming.⁵⁰

Yet, the history of the Moravian farm is more complicated. The Moravians, though absent, continued to hear disquieting rumors about the Ojibwas’ anger with them ostensibly for selling their land and their town to white people. Yet, they decided to ignore the rumors as they had heard that “the Chippewas inhabit our houses in our town and have planted there. . . . Mr. Askin had nothing further to say in the matter, so that it is

⁴⁶ Contract between John Askin and John Cornwall, *AP*, 1:234.

⁴⁷ Cornwall to Askin, 24 June 1786, *AP*, 1:59.

⁴⁸ Cornwall to Askin, 24 June 1786, *AP*, 1:239; Trudel, *Dictionnaire des esclaves*, 306.

⁴⁹ Cornwall to Askin, 18 October 1786, *AP*, 1:263.

⁵⁰ “The processing of furs and the control over agricultural resources remained a female responsibility,” Sleeper-Smith, “The American Revolution in the Western Great Lakes,” 150.

to be hoped we have nothing to fear from the Chippewas, since they have our towns and fields in their own possession.”⁵¹ It is interesting that after the Moravians’ removal, the Ojibwas claimed the land. Originally, the Moravians had understood that the local French population would inhabit it, as soon after Askin and the Moravians came to terms, “two Frenchmen came to look at the place, sent by Askin and the Governor, for in the future they will live here, each one renting a plantation together with a house. As we hear, our place will remain a town, and those who come here will live together, in this way all our houses being used.”⁵² Either Askin settled different peoples on the land, or he played several groups off each other—the reason is unclear, and the documents, unfortunately, do not specify. The fact that competing groups were supposedly working the Moravian town suggests either the mutability of identity (was Cornwall Ojibwa? Or were the new French tenants also Indians?), or that in true middle ground fashion, the French, Ojibwas, and Moravians, and possibly Anglo-American tenants, were accommodating each other, through Askin’s mediation—the Moravians by agreeing to relocate, yet also by staying in the chain of trade that linked multiple groups in the region. The fact that the Moravian town was to continue to be a “community” indicates also that Indians and whites did perhaps share the land, as while the Chippewas objected to the Moravian Indians, they did not ask that the few white residents also leave.⁵³

While Detroit had need of imported grain to feed its growing population, Askin also poised himself to take advantage of the high demand for corn and flour and

⁵¹ 10 November 1786, Zeisberger, *Diary*, 377; see also Zeisberger, 375.

⁵² 21 March 1786, Zeisberger, *Diary*, 263.

⁵³ See Zeisberger, *Diary*.

contracted with other fur trade firms to supply them with these necessities.⁵⁴ In 1793, Askin and William Robertson contracted to supply grain to the garrisons at Detroit and Michilimackinac.⁵⁵ In 1800, Askin wanted to contract with the British government to furnish beef to the garrison stationed at Malden, a fortification on the south shore of the Detroit river, downriver from Sandwich.⁵⁶ He must have been building his herd for quite some time, since, as he wrote to William Robertson in 1793, he already owned a large stock of cattle, mostly of his own rearing.⁵⁷

In addition to grain and livestock, Askin also investigated the market for hemp in 1801, as he asked his associate Robert Nichol, at Queenston, “what is the proper soil for Hemp . . . how & when plowed & prepared; when to be sown & Ever Other Information to the culture thereof & also provide & point out to me how I can get seed.”⁵⁸ The letter was signed, “in haste.” Seven years later, hemp and other large-scale cultivation seems to have been still only a dream for Askin, as his son Charles wrote, “I am much afraid that flour or grain will never bear transporting from Detroit to Montreal; therefore the farmers will be obliged at last to turn their attention to something else; at present I know nothing which has any appearance of answering so well as hemp; but the preparation of it for manufacturing, requires so much labour that I believe it prevents people from cultivating it where labour is dear.”⁵⁹ In addition to the scarcity of labor, Charles noted that neither

⁵⁴ Farrell, “Detroit, 1783-1796,” 234.

⁵⁵ Farrell, “Detroit, 1783-1796,” 234.

⁵⁶ Askin to Isaac Todd, 17 October 1800, *AP*, 2:318.

⁵⁷ Askin to William Robertson, 24 June 1793, *AP*, 1:475.

⁵⁸ Askin to Robert Nichol, 8 August 1801, *AP*, 2:354.

⁵⁹ Charles Askin to Askin, 25 February 1808, *AP*, 2:596.

the English nor Canadian farmers seemed to have the proper knowledge or experience to make hemp a successful crop in the region.

Askin thus worked at creating positive relationships with multiple groups of people, from the Moravian missionaries and Indians, to local French, English, Ojibwas, and even Americans, as I shall describe later. He bought corn from everyone, and used credit to solidify both goodwill and obligation. He was a “cultural broker,” but he was also definitely a “negotiator of change.” His relationship with the Moravians is indicative of borderland relationships and tensions. By helping out a community marginalized and displaced by political violence, Askin solidified his position as a local headman, or person of power and influence who was comfortable on all sides of the conflict. The Moravians’ situation also reflects the jockeying for territory and position that can occur in borderlands, as well as the transgressions of social boundaries—in other words, the conflict between the Chippewas and the Moravians existed between people who were not necessarily at war with each other, but found themselves unable to occupy the same territorial space because of their disparate identities. To put in David Weber’s frontier formulation, the Chippewas and Moravians were at odds because of “contention for power and resources.”⁶⁰

As a cultural mediator in the borderland, Askin was committed to his contracts with the Moravians, the British military, and other local merchants and farmers. The core of his business, however, continued to be with the Montreal and Detroit merchants who outfitted the fur trade, supplied its capital, and handled the imports and exports of trade goods and furs across the Atlantic. In the 1770s, several of these traders banded together

⁶⁰ See Introduction, 18-20.

to form the North West Company, to compete more effectively with the Hudson's Bay Company in the Canadian Northwest, where the wintering partners and traders were ever more concentrated.⁶¹ Michilimackinac had been of course, not the final destination for the canoes that plied between Montreal and Winnipeg, and points farther west, but merely a half-way point for resupply. The British fort had moved to Mackinac Island, and with the border placement, it was going to have to move again. The Northwesters eventually made their winter headquarters at Grand Portage, at the western end of Lake Superior.

While Askin himself was not a part of the North West Company, he did carry on extensive trade with the partners for corn, foodstuffs, and goods. Yet, he continued to keep his hand in the fur end of the trade as well, albeit not as a wintering trader. The border was potentially a hindrance for the Northwesters and other British companies who wanted to trade south and west of Detroit. In 1786, Askin organized the Miami Company, along with other prominent Detroit businessmen including, Leith and Shepherd; James Abbott; Angus McIntosh; Meldrum and Park; and Sharp and Wallace.⁶² This was an American-based fur trade company, with agents at Vincennes and other Upper Country towns that were now part of the United States. Askin was the company's director, and contracted with the traders who ventured in the the Maumee and Wabash river drainages,

⁶¹ W. Stewart Wallace notes that references to the North Westers existed as early as 1776, but that the partnership was not formalized until 1780. The shareholders were: Todd & McGill, the Frobisher brothers, McGill & Paterson, McTavish & Company, Holmes & Grant, Wadden & Company, Ross & Company, and Oakes & Company. By 1783, the shareholders had been winnowed to Simon McTavish, the Frobishers, George McBeath, Robert Grant, Patrick Small, Nicholas Montour, Peter Pond, and William Holmes; see Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 5-8.

⁶² A group of Detroit fur trade merchants Leith, Jamieson and Company, and Forsyth, Richardson and Company, formed "The New North West Company" in 1798, to compete with the North West Company. They later became part of Simon McTavish's rival XY Company, which was eventually absorbed into the North West in 1804. Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 16-17.

in northern Ohio and Indiana respectively.⁶³ By 1789, the Miami Company was defunct; its shareholders divided the traders' debts among themselves for collection, and they appointed Askin as attorney to handle the company's considerable outstanding obligations and assets. Askin's own share in the Miami Company was valued at £10,000 in 1786, a fact that James McGill was quick to point out when he was trying to collect payment on Askin's debts to the firm of Todd and McGill.⁶⁴ Richard White argues that the Miami Company was part of a larger effort to consolidate the fur trade, begun at Michilimackinac with a failed "general store" concept that served only to annoy the Indians. The Miami Company failed because:

without the leadership and control exerted by powerful Montreal traders, the companies of the *pays d'en haut* turned out to be feeble and fragile. In 1792, however, leading merchants in Detroit—Todd, McGill, and Company; Forsyth, Richardson, and Company; Alexander Henry and Company; and Grant, Campion, and Company—did link up with the powerful Montreal houses. They agreed to use the services of McTavish, Frobisher, and Company and McTavis, Fraser, and Company to import their trade goods and sell their furs in London. Since these two companies were the real powers within the North West Company, the Detroit trade, in a sense, became allied to that huge concern. This partial consolidation, however, struggled to control a Detroit fur trade in decline. American competition and declining numbers of furbearers were part of the problem, but particularly between 1789 and 1794 the fur trade suffered from war, which restricted the hunt, and from American expeditions and raids that hurt traders as well as Indians.⁶⁵

While white argues that the failure of the Miami Company resulted from a lack of support on the part of the Montreal merchants, it is possible, rather, that the attempt to form the company shows an effort on the part of the Upper Country merchants to attempt

⁶³ *AP*, 1:275n. 67.

⁶⁴ James McGill to Askin, 20 December 1786, *AP*, 1:275. Todd and McGill were also involved.

⁶⁵ White, *The Middle Ground*, 481.

to prolong the middle ground customs so characteristic of the eighteenth-century Great Lakes borderland, in the face of that borderland's demise. The failure of the Miami Company also indicates that the presence of the border had an ominous effect on trade in the region, as did the concomitant violence in the Ohio and Wabash River Valleys.

In 1792, Askin partnered with George Meldrum and William Park to build a windmill and a ship, in order to expand both his carrying and lumber trades.⁶⁶ By 1799, Askin had sawyers whom he contracted to work at Malden, upriver from Detroit, on the Canadian side of the river.⁶⁷ Moreover, in 1799, Askin offered to supply "Sixty or Seventy Thousands of Excellent Bricks and well burnt, in the course of next Summer, for Eight dollars Per thousand If received at my Brick Kilns at the River Rouge; or for ten dollars Per thousand delivered on the Public wharf or water Side at Detroit."⁶⁸ Askin hired out tools that he owned, when they were not in use. He wrote Thomas Welch in April of 1799 to return the tools that he had hired to him, as a newly-hired workman would need them instead. Askin told Welch that if he still needed tools he should appeal to John Askin Jr., who also owned blacksmith tools and would hire them out.⁶⁹

Malden was on the Canadian side of the Detroit River, and it is here that we begin to see Askin hedge his bets on the border issue. In addition to continuing to pursue fur trading and other ventures on the American side, he also begins to amass properties on either side of the border, in advance of its enforcement.

⁶⁶ Agreement between Askin and Meldrum & Park, 30 November 1792, *AP*, 1:449-52.

⁶⁷ William Harffy to Askin, 9 December 1799, *AP*, 2:269-70.

⁶⁸ "Proposal for Supplying Bricks in Detroit," 15 March 1799, *AP*, 2:196-97.

⁶⁹ Askin to Thomas Welch, 16 April 1799, *AP*, 2:203.

Land Speculation

Of all his business schemes, Askin's forays into land speculation were his most exuberant—so much so that in 1786, James McGill informed him that the £8000 that Askin owned in real property was excessive: “It is much more than we have—it is more than any man in business should keep from the circulation of his Trade and in the part of the Country where yours is placed the tenure of it is but uncertain—these Causes should induce you to part with at least one-half of it as soon as possible, not only as a relief to yourself & your Friends, but as a means of affording you the more time to attend to your mercantile pursuits.”⁷⁰ Not only did Askin have too much of his wealth tied up in land, McGill warned, but the uncertain political situation regarding the placement of the border following the U.S. victory made real estate holdings on the north shore of the Detroit River risky at best. Moreover, the large landholdings could be sold to pay his creditors, and they seemed to be getting in the way of his regular business, i.e., shipping and supplies.

McGill was right. In 1796, when the United States finally gained control of Detroit, Askin set himself to dispose of the following property:

“a Large Dwelling House in the Town of Detroit with the Yard & out-Houses hereunto belonging and for which his lowest Price is 2000 pounds N.Y. Cur.; a Farm joining to the Kings Common 2 Acres in Width & 80 deep on which are several Houses rented out, besides Store House, Stabling, Garden, Orchard, Barn &c; a Large spare lot of ground on which is a Shop Country House bed room, Store House & Stabling all in one; a Tract of Land on Each side of the River aux Huron where the Old Moravian Town was containing 50 Acres by 40 on Each side of the river in all 4000 Acres the Improvements on which cost mr A. 420 Dollars to the Moravian Ministers Exclusive of what he Afterwards made himself & only About 6 miles up the river where large boats can go would make a fine Place for a Farmer on a large Scale; a Tract of Land 33 Acres in front by 120 deep within 2 ½ miles of Town on which are several Houses & a Wind Mill a good road to it & the finest situation in the Country Medow Ground & Pasturage for 2000 Head of Cattle,

⁷⁰ Todd and McGill to Askin, 20 December 1786, *AP*, 1:275-76.

having the Detroit river & Entrance of the river rouge for Boundaries on two sides; a Great many farms of Land on the river au razin some larger, & some smaller, Improvements on some & on others more; a Tract of Land on the Streights leading from Lake Sinclair to Lake Huron on the left Hand side goin up Adjoining to Messrs. Meldrum & Parks Containing in front 25 Acres & 150 deep, the Bell river cuts it, said to be very fine Land & for which I have a Warrentee Deed. A Vessell of Burthen may lay herself along the Bank in front or Even go into the Bell River; Several other Tracts of Land both on this & other side of this river; Some Indian Tracts Exclusive of those in which I hold a share, And of which Appears in the Map at the River aux Huron on the South side of Lake Erie Under the Name of Gabrial Huno which costs me a larte Sum of Money—a Small Vessell can go some Way up that river and I'm told no better Land can be meet with. I have Authorized Mr. Isaac Todd of Montreal to dispose of it which if he does not do before June next at which time he is to be here is will Also be for Sale.”⁷¹

Askin was a zealous collector of real property. His reputation for using his Native contacts for the purposes of gaining more land reached the ears of Joseph Brant, the Iroquois British military war hero, who wrote, “I am sorry to find by repeated informations during the winter from Detroit that Mr. Askin and some other Merchants have been seducing several Indians to make over the lands to them—last summer they began to set this agoing to Waynes treaty. They have now engaged in a company to get from some of the Chippewas all the Wyndott and Mingo country from Kaihage upwards. . . . It is certainly very hard for poor Indians, that what Wayne left them these fellows with their rum will endeavour to strip them of and Mr. Askin has expressed himself in such a manner, as shows he would make no scruple to endeavour to excite a war among the different nations to answer his selfish purposes.”⁷² Brant, however, may have had ulterior motives in accusing Askin of hoodwinking the Indians out of their land, since he was the organizer of the Western Confederacy, an organization of fourteen Great Lakes

⁷¹ “Land Holdings of John Askin,” 25 February 1796, *AP*, 2:16-17.

⁷² Joseph Brant to D. W. Smith, 3 April 1796, quoted in John Clarke, “The Activity of an Early Canadian Land Speculator in Essex County, Ontario: Would the Real John Askin Please Stand Up?” *Canadian Papers in Rural History* vol. 3 (Gananoque, Ont.: Langdale Press, 1982), 89-90.

and Ohio Valley Indian nations who opposed U.S. expansion into the region after the Revolutionary War.⁷³

Yet even as Brant was accusing Askin of bilking the Indians south of the border out of their lands, Askin was advocating for the Ojibwas at the Sault, with whom (via the Cadotte family and others) he had had a long relationship. John Askin Jr., by then a trader at Mackinac Island, “publicly vowed to uphold Native territorial claims and engendered the belief among the Ojibwa that Britain would also uphold those rights.”⁷⁴

Askin’s expansive business ventures resulted in deep indebtedness, which he solved somewhat by selling Todd and McGill the bulk of his lands in Michigan and Upper Canada. Historian John Clarke has noted that, “because of the general shortage of capital,” merchants like Askin were “in a good position to acquire large [land] holdings”⁷⁵ in Canada. Clarke also reveals that Askin used his power as a local magistrate to acquire land, and “in this capacity he could purchase certificates of location from those whose only purpose in acquiring them was to sell them.”⁷⁶ Askin used “his wide circle of friends” to sell lands to, and used landholdings to get out from under his debt.⁷⁷

⁷³ See Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995) ; see also Taylor, *The Divided Ground*.

⁷⁴ Janet E. Chute, “Ojibwa Leadership during the Fur Trade Era at Sault Ste. Marie,” in *New Faces of the Fur Trade*, (see Introduction note 6), 161-62; *AP*, 1:550, op cit.

⁷⁵ Clarke, “The Activity of an Early Canadian Land Speculator,” 91.

⁷⁶ Clarke, “The Activity of an Early Canadian Land Speculator,” 92.

⁷⁷ Clarke, “The Activity of an Early Canadian Land Speculator,” 92. Clarke’s analysis of Askin’s land schemes concludes: “In summary, Askin’s function appears to have been to assemble the land, to have, with the aid of his friends, his actions sanctioned so that the land could pass to patent, and finally to surrender most of it to Todd and McGill to whom he acted as a land agent on occasion. This is not to suggest that John Askin was the paid minion of Todd and McGill. While most of his land ultimately ended

Askin also aggressively pursued traders who owed him money. Trader Antoine Renaud was killed by the Kickapoos on 24 May 1789. At his death, he owed Askin a “considerable sum.” His estate consisted of “two mulatto boys, slaves, about eighteen years of age, and scarcely anything else.”⁷⁸ However, this poor accounting of Renaud’s estate was refuted in a letter from William McIntosh to John Askin, in which the slaves were judged to be much more valuable than Renaud’s heirs claimed. As McIntosh noted,

I have obtained judgment against the Sister of Renaud your Debtor, she inherited of her brother. On his death his sister’s Husband who is now dead obtained the admn from an unauthorized Court formerly at this Place, and took possession of his Effects. He had two valuable Slaves besides a considerable parcel of Pelleteries which he was conducting to Detroit, I presume for you. I believe Vigo acted then for you. The Slaves were vendued and Vigo and Col. Hamtramck purchased them much below their value. The Sister who is ignorant has assured me of this . . .⁷⁹

Askin was often determined in pursuit of monies or labor owed him. In 1799, he attempted to intimidate Louis Derineau with the following letter, enclosed in another strongly worded missive addressed to the captain on Derineau’s vessel:

It is in vain for you to endeavour to escape me whether at Michilimackinack, St. Mary’s, or the grand portage, I will have you taken, unless you give bail to Stand trial, or agree to the following conditions. That is to say, you, and the rest of the Crew, Sign a Note which I send for that purpose, that you will in the Course of this summer, pay me 40 pounds New York Currency, with the costs & Charges I have been at in prosecuting you to the present time, which are however very trifling as yet, but that will no longer be the case, if I am obliged to bring you from any of the above mentioned places. I could have had you taken in the Winter, and this Spring by Sam who worked with you, but I would not have any of my People deputized for that purpose, though often proposed to me by the

up in the hands of Todd and McGill, this was because of Askin’s indebtedness in areas other than land dealing,” 97.

⁷⁸ Antoine Gamelin to Askin, 3 June 1789, *AP*, 1:318-21; See Gamelin to Askin, 60n. 320, which says “A different picture of Renaud’s estate that the one presented in this document is given in a letter of William McIntosh to Askin, June 15, 1801. It describes the two slaves as valuable, and as having been sold, one to Francis Vigo and one to Colonel Hamtramck, much below their value. It states, also, that Renaud died possessed of a considerable quantity of peltries and 400 acres of land.”

⁷⁹ William McIntosh to Askin 15 June 1801, *AP*, 2:344-47.

Sherriff, but now you have left the Country I am Justifiable in employing any Man I choose, and Surely you cannot Know who I may employ, and be on your guard against every Stranger; therefore there is no Safety for you unless you give Security for Standing trial, or agree to the foregoing Conditions. I am willing to take the Captain of the Vessell's word for your appearance, as I mean to injure neither you or the Service you are in. I only Seek a Small recompence for a great injury you have done me, and that, I am determined to have. I have requested Mr. Barthe to go on Board and take the proposed Security which If you do not comply with, will be the last offer of the kind you ever will have of me.”⁸⁰

Askin's own indebtedness no doubt made him sensitive to collecting those debts owed to him, and often acted against his inferiors with harsh language and measures. When William Smith was jailed for a \$500 Debt to Askin, he implored the latter, “I mean Either to Lis't as a Soldier or take the Benefit of the Act for I am not Able to Support myself here in Prison I have suffered a Long time over the River in the prison and have expended all my property”⁸¹ Askin in turn replied, “I have sued you for a debt, goods furnished & never paid for, and not Damages, and if you do not make me some payment our of your wages, I will not set you at liberty & perhaps you may find yourself mistaken both as to being a Soldier or getting the benefit of the act.”⁸²

Debt was an integral part of the fur trade. Merchants encouraged traders to go into debt. Likewise, traders encouraged the Indians in the use of credit, resulting in significant debt up and down the chain. Alexander Henry observed during his first winter as a trader in the northwest that he had to “purchase goods at this post, at twelve months' credit” to be paid back in peltry the following year. In turn, he notes “we fell in with Indians, of whom I purchased provisions. One party agreed to accompany me, to hunt for me, on

⁸⁰ Askin to Derineau, 30 May 1799, *AP*, 2:213.

⁸¹ William Smith to Askin, 29 June 1801, *AP*, 2:348.

⁸² Smith to Askin, 29 June 1801, *AP*, 2:349.

condition of being supplied with necessities on credit.”⁸³ Charles Grant deplored the status of credit and debt in a letter to General Frederick Haldimand in 1780, complaining that “the Upper Country Trade is chiefly carried on by men of low circumstances, destitute of every means to pay their debts when their trade fails.”⁸⁴ Debt was a way by which “masters tried to exert control over the workforce,” as Askin’s attempts to collect so colorfully illustrate.⁸⁵ The looming presence of the border may have put more teeth in Askin’s threat to recover monies. Askin let his debtors know in no uncertain terms that they would be unable to hide regardless of where they fled.

Slavery in the Great Lakes Borderland

Just as the border began to affect the fur trade, it also had a significant influence on the practice of slavery, sometimes in surprising ways. The American Revolution and subsequent decision to designate Detroit and Michilimackinac as United States rather than British territories had significant repercussions not just for the Upper Country’s businessmen and residents, but also for slaves, and the ways in which slavery was conceived of by local, territorial, and provincial governments.

In 1760 when the French surrendered Detroit to Major Robert Rogers and his Rangers during the Seven Years’ War, the town’s farmers and traders lay firmly established along both the north and south shores of the Detroit River, their farms and housed nestled in between the fort and the Huron, Potawatomi, and Odawa villages. The

⁸³ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada*, 184, 186.

⁸⁴ “Report from Charles Grant to General Haldimand on the Fur Trade, April 24, 1780,” in *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 63.

⁸⁵ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 163. Yet as Bruce White argues, “there is some evidence that a certain amount of unpaid credit was expected, forgiven by traders who got their profit from other exchanges,” “Balancing the Books,” 185.

1762 census shows a non-Native population of 318 heads of household, primarily men, 416 children, 71 hired men, and 65 slaves. The numbers of women are estimated at 174.⁸⁶ Slaves thus made up approximately 7 percent of Detroit's pre-1760 population.

⁸⁶ See 1762 Census in *Michigan Censuses 1710-1830, under the French, British, and Americans*, ed. Donna Valley Russell (Detroit, Mich.: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, Inc., 1982), 19-25. Russell extrapolated the figures for women to men as a ratio of 3:4, according to models provided by other censuses. The figures cited are Russell's calculations, and she also makes adjustments for double-counting of hired men and farmers to arrive at a population total of 900-950 residents in 1762. The census is divided geographically, by individual properties. However, the census numbers reveal patterns of slaveholding and labor use among Detroit's 318 heads of household or property owners. Out of 16 households on the north shore from the fort south to the Potawatomi village, 8 property owners held slaves, and 11 people had *engagés*. Of this second group, roughly half had hired help, but no slaves, and only two people with slaves boasted no *engagés* at the time of the census. These two people had only one slave each. Only two people held neither slaves nor *engagés*, indicating that in this neighborhood, most people relied on some form of additional labor external to their own families. Of the fifteen slaves listed for this area, five belonged to one man, Zacharias Cicotte, described as "rich" by the census taker. Most slaveholders here owned only one slave, one man owned three slaves, and one man owned two slaves. Farmers who relied on hired help tended toward one *engagé*, although three households utilized the labor of two hired hands. Properties averaged 2.4 cultivated *arpents*, with no individual owning less than two *arpents*. The total number of slaves for this neighborhood was 15, with 12 *engagés*.

From the fort northeast to Grosse Pointe on the north shore, sixty-six landowners worked an average of 1.75 *arpents* each, with the help of twenty-three slaves and twenty-six *engagés*. Claude Jean Gouin was the largest slaveholder, again with five slaves on this property, and 1 hired man. Almost half of the residents of this area were identified in the census as "poor," indicating that the neighborhood was less established than that to the south of the fort on the river's north shore. Seven residents had slaves, but no hired help, and eighteen people had *engagés* but not slaves. Only five people out of twelve total slaveholders utilized both slaves and *engagés* on their properties, with generally more slaves than hired help. Only two people had two or more *engagés*, and only seven people had more than two slaves. Clearly, the pattern northeast of the fort was for small-scale labor in a developing neighborhood.

On the south shore, in the area between the Odawa and Huron villages, only four out of eighteen landowners held 6 slaves. Eight *engagés* also lived in the neighborhood, although only three people utilized hired help but not slaves. Four people were "poor" and two people were "rich." Again, this was a recently developed area.

From the Odawa village to the River Canard, only one out of the twenty-six landowners held slaves, although thirteen people had hired help. Thirteen landowners qualified as "poor," and no one was lucky enough to earn the designation "rich." Out of the poor, five people hired *engagés*. The slaveholder, Louis Gervais, owned two slaves in 1762. Five out of the landowners in the neighborhood had been born in France, indicating that this was again a more recently settled section of the community.

On the Canard River itself, seventeen landowners worked plots with the help of four *engagés* total, and no slaves. Eleven people were noted as "poor," and two people had been born in France.

Families with no known house numbered sixteen, and none of these claimed any slaves or hired hands.

Of people with lots in the fort itself, ten out of seventy-four properties were associated with eleven total slaves. Ten *engagés* also lived on fort properties. People who lived in the fort tended to either own other properties, be associated with the military, or worked in the fur trade. Twenty-nine lot-owners owned other lots either within the fort, or farms in the vicinity. Eight lot-owners were in Montreal at the time of the census, and eighteen had gone "to the country"—in other words, they had gone trading in Indian country. Seven lot-owners were rich and eight were poor.

The census data shows that the numbers of slaves and hired people were nearly equal, with hired men outnumbering slaves by only six individuals. Because the census was divided by neighborhood, it is possible to see that slaveholding was more prominent in certain areas than others; for example, older areas tended to have more slaves and hired men than newly settled places. Moreover, several landowners tended to own more than one property, making completely accurate counts of slaves and *engagés* on individual properties nearly impossible.

Indeed, farmers appear to have been the primary slaveholders in Detroit at this time, with slave labor seemingly linked to the domestic and agricultural necessities of farm work. Established, wealthier farmers were more likely to own slaves than farmers with more modest incomes, who relied primarily on hired help, although many people with one or two slaves also took advantage of hired men as well. The south shore, on the site of what is now Windsor, Ontario, was settled later by French and Canadian farmers than the north shore. The south shore farmers thus tended to own fewer slaves than their more-established counterparts across the river. Farmers who owned properties on the north shore also occasionally owned supplementary lands on the south shore, thus increasing their real property assets.

The 1768 census reveals a non-Native population of 298 men, 255 women, 142 young men and women, 524 children, 93 servants, and 85 slaves, or approximately 1400 residents. Slaves thus comprised about 6 percent of Detroit's total population. Of these slaves, 46 were male, and 39 were female, revealing an almost even gender ratio. Within

The final neighborhood, identified as the suburb of Ste. Rosalie, claimed twelve landowners, but only one slave, belonging to Jacques Dupéron *dit* Bâby. Three others held contracts for four hired men or servants, and six people carried the designation "poor."

four years, the number of slaves in Detroit had increased by twenty, although because of population growth, the percentage of slaves to residents decreased by one percent. In 1762, out of 318 families or properties counted, 36 (eleven and a half percent) were associated with slaves. Sixty-eight out of 275, or twenty-five percent, of property-owning entities in 1779, including individuals and trading firms, owned slaves. While the numbers of slaves grew only by about twenty individuals, the percentage of slaveholders more than doubled even as the number of male heads of households fell. Slavery thus remained a small but constant and growing presence over the first decade of British rule in Detroit.

They may have been a small presence, but they were a visible one. As well as being an integral part of the trade in terms of labor, slaves also provided a useful source of capital when merchants and traders needed to liquid assets quickly, although Askin seems reluctant to have resorted to this measure except in circumstance of dire need. He occasionally relied on the capital he had invested in his slaves to rid himself of pressing obligations, as he wrote to James Fraser, in 1807, "I have neither Money nor Bills I proposed and still do selling my Negro named Ben in Order to pay you, & for that purpose offered him to Mr May, of if you will purchase him I will give him at a low Rate."⁸⁷ In 1800, Askin's carriage, a caleche, was seized for arrears.⁸⁸ When times were not so tough, however, Askin, or at least his wife, preferred to keep their slaves in the family. In 1800, Askin wrote to James Macklem, "Mrs Askin is not disposed to part with the Negro."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Askin to James Fraser, 3 November 1807, *AP*, 2:581-82

⁸⁸ Walter Roe to Askin, 11 March, 1800, *AP*, 2:278.

⁸⁹ Askin to James Macklem, 18 September 1800, *AP*, 2:315.

Askin had other interactions with slaves and slavery outside of his household. In addition to his position as prominent Detroit River businessman, he also acted as a justice of the peace during the 1790s. As such, he had to adjudicate in disputes involving slaves. In 1792, Michel Houde swore a complaint in front of Askin against an Indian slave. Houde said that a *panis* named François, who formerly belonged to Hypolyte Campau, had robbed him of two bed covers, two shirts, and some other things. When Houde, accompanied by one Charles Lespérance, went to the *panis*' hut to reclaim his property, the *panis* was armed with a knife, leading Houde to "demand redress according to the law" to recover his property.⁹⁰

In contrast with his Mackinac diaries and letters, Askin's Detroit correspondence does not mention slaves in conjunction with his business interests nearly as often. The fact that Askin owned more *panis* slaves than Africans may account for this disparity, especially if the bulk of these *panis* were either children or domestics. Askin seems rather to have contracted his labor to a greater extent. Cornwall's tenancy and the hired men who grew and shipped the grain to Askin seem to fit an emerging pattern in Askin's organizational structure. Askin relied heavily on a mixed labor system that included both hired labor and slavery. Servants contracted for more than physical work. In 1795, Robert Nichol indentured himself to John Askin for three years, beginning in 18 Sept. 1795, as a clerk, keeping account books as well as Askin's secrets, for 50 pounds New York currency per year, plus sufficient diet, washing, and lodging, for a period of three years.⁹¹

⁹⁰ "Complaint against Indian Slave," 3 January 1792, *AP*, 1:399-401. It is also at this time, he begins to be identified in the documents as "esquire."

⁹¹ "Indenture of Robert Nichol," 18 September 1795, *AP*, 1:567.

By 1800, the price of fur trade *engagés* had become almost prohibitively expensive, especially with the XY Company competing out of Detroit for labor and resources. Alexander Henry cautioned John Askin, “I observe what you say respecting hiring young men for three or four years. The opposition to N West has raised the price so very high that I dont think they can be got without giving much more than they may be got for at Detroit boys asked me seven & eight hundred livers, and would engage only for one year.”⁹² In 1806, Askin, still attempting to find cheap labor wrote his old friend Isaac Todd:

I beg you will endeavour to procure me a Frenchman pretty old and without a Family to do the Work about the House. He should be carefull honest & sober, which I would prefer to hard Work. Care of Cattle and small Jobs about the House & Thrashing when he has nothing else to do, is all will be required of him. You or my Good Friend Mr. Henry I think must know of some one of that description he shall be well used & paid. However as he will not be put to hard Work I suppose he cannot ask very high Wages. If he was married and had no Children I would have both him & his Wife. I will speak to Mr Pattinson to give [him] a passage in his Boats when they come, & the earlier the better.⁹³

Perhaps this high cost of indentured servants caused people to think more about acquiring slaves (or perhaps the growing legal restrictions against slavery contributed to the high cost of labor). Regardless, in addition to his tenants and hired laborers at his mills and farms, Askin also held the bulk of his slaves after he relocated to Detroit.⁹⁴ These include: Claire (panise); Robert (Claire’s son, panis, born 1784); an unnamed Panise who died in 1785; Marie (panise, mother of the following); Sara (panise, Marie’s

⁹² Henry to Askin, 18 January 1800, *AP*, 2:274.

⁹³ Askin to Isaac Todd, 6 March 1806, *AP*, 2:509-10.

⁹⁴ This information does not come from a specific inventory but from the data on slaveholding compiled by Marcel Trudel, *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français* (Québec: Éditions Hurtubise, 1990), 271. Trudel notes that in the 1782 Detroit Census Askin owned 4 male and 2 female slaves, but in the 1796 census he owned 3 male slaves, one female slave, and three black children.

daughter, 1785); Joseph (panis, Marie's son, born 1787); Samuel (panis, Marie's son, born 1796); Suzanne (panise, mother of the following) Charlotte (panise, born 1786); Joseph (panis, born 1789); Thomas (panis, born 1790); Suzanne (*mûlatresse*, born 1792); Jean (panis, had a child in 1790—perhaps Thomas?); Josiah Cutan (carpenter, hanged 1792); an unnamed Panis who died in 1797 (perhaps one of the children?); Marie, *métisse*; and her daughter Thérèse (born 1799); an unnamed *négresse* and her son Gilbert, born in 1800; and finally Emmanuel, an African American who died in 1800 at age 55. In total, Askin owned fourteen *panis* and four African slaves while residing in Detroit and on the south shore, but not all at the same time. This high concentration of *panis* slaves in his household marks a change from his Michilimackinac slaveholding pattern, where he owned more African than Native slaves. Noticeably, Jupiter and Pompey disappeared from Askin's papers after his move, indicating that he may have either freed or sold them, or that they may have even died.⁹⁵

William Macomb's will gives additional clues to the slaveholding patterns of Detroit's wealthier merchants. In 1789 when he died, Macomb owned 26 slaves—ten men, six women, and eight children. What is interesting here is that the Macomb slaves appear in the will in family units. Lizette is identified as “wife to Scipio,” and Charlotte appears as “wife to Jerry & her two children.” Values for the women are calculated with their children, so if a woman had children, their values were not listed separately. The exception to this is Betta, age 9, and Phyllis, age 7, who appear separately without parents, and who received values of £50 and £40 respectively. Since the other children on the inventory are listed with their parents, one can make the assumption that Betta and

⁹⁵ Trudel, *Dictionnaire des esclaves*, 271.

Phyllis did not belong, biologically, to any of the adults on the list. Children added to the value of a female slave. For example, Lizette, wife to Scipio, had no children and received a value of £80, as did Fanny, who was neither married nor had children. On the other hand, Charlotte, Jerry's wife, had two children and was valued at £100, while Bet, who had three children (but no husband mentioned), was valued at £135. Valuing mothers and children together indicates that Macomb intended that they be sold together, as a family, and in fact, this is what eventually happened. On 20 September 1796, Alexander Macomb purchased from his sister-in-law Sarah, a "Negro Woman named Bet and her three boys, Sam Isaac & Charles," for the amount valued in the estate, £135, as well as "a Negro girl named Betta," for £50.⁹⁶ Sarah may have wanted to sell her slaves fairly quickly after her husband's death, as changing laws in both Upper Canada and the Old Northwest attempted to abolish slavery in those districts. Selling slaves to Alexander Macomb in New York, where slavery remained legal, was a way both to protect her assets while also enriching her brother in law, though the slaves' potential resale value in New York state. It also created more value by identifying the children as having a slave mother, thus preserving or increasing the owners' assets.

Without the record of these sales, it is difficult to guess the ethnicity of Macomb's slaves. However, they were probably all or mostly African American, even though they are not identified as such in the actual probate inventory. Another bill of sale after Macomb's death notes that Sarah Macomb sold "a Negro man named Ben," and "a Negro man named Guy," both for £100 each, to Robert Kennedy, supports the supposition that most of Macomb's slaves were black.

⁹⁶ "Estimation of the Slaves of the Late William Macomb," MS/Macomb Family 1796, BHC.

Askin and Macomb thus both held large numbers of slaves in Detroit, indicating concerns with status on the one hand, but also revealing significant moveable property assets that could be easily sold to cover debt or convert into cash, as did Sarah Macomb. Why did Macomb prefer more African American slaves, and Askin have more Indian slaves during this period in their lives? One reason is that Macomb was wealthier and could afford the more valuable black slaves.

Another may have been that Askin's business concerns also shift more to agriculture, land speculation, and his continuing contracts with the North Westers and other traders to supply their canoes and ships with grain and other sundries. He mentions transport less in his documents, although as his contracts with the British military at Malden and his other ventures indicate, it was still a major factor in his concerns. McGill's admonishment about tying too much capital up in land is also indicative of this, as McGill had warned that by owning so much land, Askin was taking resources away from his primary business, which was trade, provisions, and shipping. Another reason may be that as the border question became more urgent, the governments of Upper Canada and the United States begin to legislate slavery in a region where previously both law and enforcement had been weak to nonexistent.

The end of the Revolution had indeed created the potential for drastic new changes in the Detroit region, with the establishment of the Northwest Territories on the American side, and Upper Canada on the British side.⁹⁷ Slavery legislation was hotly debated on both sides. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 set a precedent in the fledgling

⁹⁷ Eric Hinderaker, "Liberty and Power in the Old Northwest, 1763-1800," *Sixty Years' War*, (see Introduction note 51), 236; E. Jane Errington, "Reluctant Warriors: British North Americans and the War of 1812," *Sixty Years' War*, (see Introduction note 51), 329. Errington suggests that "being Upper Canadian meant being anti-American."

United States by limiting the spread of slavery into the newly created territories. In 1793, Upper Canada voted to abolish slavery in a limited fashion: those who were already slaves would remain enslaved, and their existing minor children would be held in bondage until age twenty-one. This may have been another reason why Sarah Macomb chose to inventory and sell slave mother with minor children as a single, valued unit. One of the law's new proposals, however, stipulated that children of slave mothers and free fathers would automatically be enslaved according to their mother's condition. Because this had never been a legal precedent in the Upper Country, it threatened custom. The Upper Country's French traders who had enslaved Native country wives had decided for themselves the status of their children. Some, like John Askin, had free children whom they raised in European fashion; some had free children who, when their mothers were manumitted went to live in Native communities; and some, like Charles Patterson, chose to sell their children or to retain them as their slaves. By suddenly trying to legislate slavery as a function of racial or cultural identity, provincial and territorial governments began to draw a connection between citizenship, the growth of the state, and slavery. As David Smith, a legislator in Upper Canada, wrote Askin,

"We have made no law to free the Slaves. All those who have been brought into the Province or purchased under any authority legally exercised, are Slaves to all intents & purposes, & are secured as Property by a certain act of Parliament. They are determined however to have a bill about Slaves, part of which I think is well enough, part most iniquitous! I wash my hands of it. A free man who is married to a Slave, his heir is declared by this act to be a slave. Fye, fye. The Laws of God & man cannot authorize it."⁹⁸

Many African Americans in Detroit in the late eighteenth century had been brought there either from the St. Lawrence or New York ports, or as victims of British

⁹⁸ David Smith to Askin, 25 June 1793, *AP*, 1:476.

raids into American slave settlements in Kentucky and elsewhere.⁹⁹ Wartime slave raiding was not, however, the sole means of procuring African either labor or property for Detroit. The saga of the slave Josiah or Joseph Cutten, shows how black slaves from New England found themselves on the Great Lakes frontier. In 1785, Elijah Cooper of Wiliamstown or Boston in Mass., farmer and shoemaker, Sold Josiah Cutten (“a certain Negro-Man, of the Age of Twenty-Two Years or thereabouts, called Josiah Cutten”) for 32 pounds, 10 shillings and one gray horse, to John Turner, a Montreal merchant, on 18 February 1785.¹⁰⁰ A month later, John Turner sold him to David Rankin, Montreal Merchant, for 50 pounds, Josiah Cutten, age 22, on 29 March, 1785.¹⁰¹ Some time during the next two years, Cutten passed into the hands of William St. Clair & Co. of Detroit, who then sold Cutten, now age 24, to Thomas Duggan of Detroit, for 120 pounds New York currency, payable in Indian Corn & Flour.¹⁰² Duggan then traded Cutten for a nine acre farm at the Thames River on 28 March 1791.¹⁰³

In 1792, Arthur McCormick sold his half-interest in Josiah Cutten, “now in Prison for Felony” to John Askin for 50 pounds New York currency; McCormick’s receipt for Cutten specified that the latter was in prison for stealing, and that Askin would receive a

⁹⁹ Farrell, “Detroit 1783-1796,” 227. As Farrell also notes, “These raids were led by whites who thus became slave owners. Captain Henry Bird of the Indian Department claimed in 1782 the ‘wench Esther’ whom he acquired on a raid into Kentucky ‘whereby the inhabitants and defenders agreed to give up their blacks . . . on condition their persons should be safely conducted to Detroit,’” William R. Riddell, *Old Provincial Tales of Upper Canada* (Toronto: n.p., 1920), 13, quoted in Farrell, “Detroit 1783-1796,” 538n. 227.

¹⁰⁰ “Bill of Sale of Josiah Cutten,” 18 February 1785, *AP*, 1:284-85.

¹⁰¹ “Bill of Sale of Josiah Cutten,” 29 March 1785, *AP*, 1:285-86.

¹⁰² Elijah Cooper gave J. Turner \$31 to be paid to the Negro occasionally, paid to him 6 April 1785—notarized by Beek, “Bill of Sale of Josiah Cutten,” 13 January 1787, endorsed 6 April 1785, by J.B. Beek, notary, *AP* 1:287. The postdated endorsement in Beek’s handwriting suggests that the payment may have been in dispute at the time of the 1787 sale, but had in fact taken place in 1785 as originally agreed.

¹⁰³ “Bill of Sale of Josiah Cutten,” 13 January 1787, *AP*, 1:285-86.

reimbursement of his investment if Cutten were sentenced to death.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Cutten was eventually found guilty of the theft and hanged shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁵ The seemingly large numbers of transactions involving Cutten's person indicate that as a carpenter, his skills were greatly in demand. Before his death, the Detroit traders also treated Cutten as an investment—his worth increased steadily with every sale until he was traded for a farm. Even in prison, he commanded a price of 50 pounds for just half his person. Slavery may not have been widespread, but Cutten's history indicates that it was a valued element of the fur trade economy.

Other slaves also found themselves in trouble with the law. Between 1774–1776, Ann Wiley, a black slave, and Jean Coutencineau were tried for the theft and arson of the Abbott and Finchley warehouse in Detroit. Although the trial was shrouded in controversy because the perpetrators were not sent to Montreal but tried in Detroit, which did not have a criminal court. Coutencineau was ultimately executed. Wiley was offered a pardon, in exchange for acting as executioner.

Less criminal instances of resistance also occurred: Joseph Campau's slave Crow made a habit of climbing the church steeple and not coming down, to Campau's vexation. Running away was common, and in 1813 John Askin Jr., then living at Michilimackinac, wrote to his son Jean Baptiste:

¹⁰⁴ "Sale of Joseph Cotton," 16 May 1762, *AP*, 1:410-11.

¹⁰⁵ "In 1791, before the court of *Oyer and Terminer and General Goal Delivery* in the District of Hesse, Powell heard the case of a Negro man Cutten [one of Askin's slaves]. Cutten was accused of robbery, having been charged with stealing furs and rum from the storehouse of Jacques Campau," Farrell, "Detroit 1783-1796," 111. Farrell also quotes Powell's warning to Cutten: "This crime is so much more atrocious and alarming to society, as it is committed at night, when the world is at repose and that it cannot be guarded against without the same precautions which are used against the wild beasts of the forest who like you, go prowling about at night for their prey." Farrell's note reveals that "Cutten was a carpenter and a carpenter's tool was found at the storehouse where it was used to pry open the door" "Cutten was found guilty and was hanged" the Province paid two pounds for the execution, all quoted in Farrell, "Detroit 1783-1796," 111.

My negro wench Madelaine absconded two days ago & I am just informed that Capt Bullock has taken her into his service (if so) he must be a d-m-n Scoundrel & is beginning similar tricks that Dawson did I can hardly credit the Report, for I cannot think that any man but Dawson would have been guilty of the like. I am sorry the sudden departure of his [illegible] is such that I cannot get full proof of his having acted so, for were I certain that he has concealed her after I told him that she was my Slave & shewed him the Act whereby it is expressly mentioned that all those born before 1793 are slaves, I would report him. Time will illucidate all things. Dont say any thing on this head to any one until you hear from me again.”¹⁰⁶

Askin Jr. expresses frustration on several levels—first with Madeleine, for running away; second, with the Captain Bullock for taking her into his service, and third, with the Upper Canada legislation that assures that all slaves born or enslaved before 1793 will remain slaves, even though slavery was simultaneously abolished in the province. Askin, who lived on the American side, is trying to apply an Upper Canada law, whereas Madeleine and Captain Bullock seem to have colluded into declaring her free, by agreeing to an indenture.

In 1798, John Askin Jr.’s wife, Madelaine, wrote her father-in-law from River Raisin in southeast Michigan, “I have given notice to several people that if they see your negro, to arrest him and take him to you, and I told them what reward you would give. They promised to do it with pleasure.”¹⁰⁷ In 1801, “Mr. Barths Pawney Man has been brought before Mr. François Baby for having Assaulted and Beat J. B. Nadau. Mr Baby from Indisposition not being able to act has desired me to acquaint you with the Circumstance and Judging that Mr. Barths property must be much exposed in the absence

¹⁰⁶ John Askin Jr. to Jean-Baptiste Askin, 26 October 1813, *AP*, 2:772. J-B Askin was at St. David’s or River Thames. See *AP*, 2:47n. 772: “the allusion is to the act for the restriction of slavery passed by the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada in 1793. It was a compromise measure, which did not interfere with property in slaves existing prior to the passage of the act, but provided that children born to enslaved mothers subsequent thereto should become free upon attaining the age of twenty-five.”

¹⁰⁷ Madelaine Askin to Askin, 4 March 1798, *AP*, 2:133.

of his Man wishes to know whether you & Mr. Barth will be security for his appearance at the next General Quarter Sessions.”¹⁰⁸

Moreover, the number of African American slaves appearing in the records increased throughout the British period of occupation and the early American era. As African slaves increased, so did members of a free black class. The most famous free blacks in the Upper Country were the fur traders, Du Sable (the founder and “first white man” of Chicago), and the Bonga family, former slaves who became fur traders and successful tavern and commercial enterprises at Mackinac Island. However, other more anonymous people lived and worked in the region. Charlotte Moses, for example, “a Mulatto or pawnee girl of Detroit,” indentured herself to John Askin for a term of three years, in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter.¹⁰⁹ A woman known as Black Diana had a “Kitchen Fire place [that] wants repairs”, according to a 1791 hearth inspection

¹⁰⁸ William Hand to Askin, 14 September 1801, *AP*, 2:357-58.

¹⁰⁹ “Indenture of Charlotte Moses, 25 July 1808,” *AP*, 2:607: “This Indenture made at Detroit in the Territory of Michigan this twenty-fifth day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eight Between Charlotte Moses a mulatto or pawnee Girl of Detroit now of the one part and John Askin Esquire of Straben in upper Canada of the other part Witnessst that the said Charlotte for the consideration hereafter mentioned and which on the part and behalf of the said John Askin his Executors Administrators and assigns shall be observed fulfilled and Kept hath put placed and bound herselfe and by these presents Doth put place and bind herself to the said John Askin his Executors Administrators and assigns as his Covenant servant to serve for the Term of three years from the first Day of November next insueing the date hereof during all which time the said Charlotte her Said Master shall well and truly observe and obey. She shall not at any time absent herselfe from his said service. She Shall do him no injury or knowingly suffer any to be done by others but in all things shall behave herselfe as a good and faithfull servant ought and is obliged to do. In consideration whereof the said John Askin for himself his Executors [and] Administrators Doth covnant promis and agree that at the Expiration of the said Term of three years upon condition that the said Charlotte shall behave herselfe as a good and faithfull servant ought and is obliged to Do he will liberate and discharge hir from bondage and from his said service giving unto hir hir freedom and liberty “the said John Askin will also find and provide the said Charlotte with good and sufficient diet and cloathing during the continuance of her Servitude. In testimony whereof the parties to these presents have hereunto interchangeably Set their hand and affixed their seals at Detroit aforesaid the day month and year first above written “Signed sealed & Deld in presence of Charlotte Moses, her mark X”

report for the town of Detroit.¹¹⁰ These brief references reveal the early inhabitants of Detroit's free black community.

The presence of a new political border cutting through the previously cohesive Detroit river and the upper country, had far-reaching consequences on the political, social, and economic development of the Great Lakes, as well as the local manifestation of slavery as an institution.

James May, another of Askin's business associates, asked him to return a runaway slave to the Detroit side of the border:

My Daughter informs me that yesterday she found my Negro Nobbin at Pikes Creek and brot him with her as far as your House and there left him (he being apprehensive that I would whip him on his arrival) I have sent Mr Maclosky for him and have to request that you will have the goodness to use your influence in persuading him to return to his duty and to behave himself better in future in that case I will pledge myself not to lay the wait of my finger on him.¹¹¹

The presence of the border created new opportunities for runaway slaves to hide themselves within what had once been a more-or-less unified community. James May went on to warn Askin about potential trouble brewing among Askin's slaves:

I have one particular piece of advice to give you but must request you will not make it known we have a bad set of people about us and as I have been informed means of [have] been used to persuade your Boy, George, to leave you. My information derives from his Mother, whom he consulted on that subject. The old Woman appeared very Angry with him, and reprimanded [him] very severely, for proposing such an Idea to her, and ordered him immediately to go home and never again to entertain such a thought, if he did whe would inform you of his intention. I merely give you this information, in order that you may keep a good look out after him and prevent him if possible from crossing over on this side the River."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ "Report on Defective Chimneys," 20 September 1791, *AP*, 2:391.

¹¹¹ James May to Askin, 2 August 1807, *AP*, 2:561-63.

¹¹² May to Askin, *AP*, 2:561-63.

The border thus created a political barrier to the custom of slave families “visiting” in different households, and turned what had once been a short-term and somewhat tolerated form of resistance into an overt act of defiance. Moreover, May had previously sanctioned George’s visit to his mother, as it offered her comfort after the death of her husband in a shipwreck:

The arrival of the Sloop (*Good Intent*) on Saturday last from Presque Isle, and no accounts of the schooner *Harlequin*, having been seen or heard of confirms me in opinion that her and the Crew are totally lost. The stroke is a very severe one for me, the effects of which I shall feel for a long time; perhaps the rest of my days. The loss of my Negro man, will probably be the cause of my loseing the negro woman, who ever since the misfortune happened, has been delirious and is now very Ill, in bed; being now deprived of two of the best servants, in this country, my situation is very distressing, unless you will condescend to let your Boy George, remain with me until I can have time to look about for a servant, his Mother is very anxious to have him stay with her, & says it will be the only comfort she has in this world now she has lost her Husband, to have her son with her should you be inclined to part with him, I would purchase [him], but cannot undertake to give a great price nor to promise you the Money down, but will endeavour to give you the worth of him some way or other.”¹¹³

Askin must have refused May’s less than generous financial offer, perhaps thus prompting George’s attempted defection to the U.S. side.

Askin’s nephew Alexander Grant also recorded incidents of slave unrest in his mother’s home, and the formation of a maroon community in Ohio:

It is intirely out of poor dear Mrs Grant ever to leave Gross Point while such a numerous family as she has with part of the slaves very ungratefull and turbulent, An herself never relieved from the helme, had a long speale of it. And if she, dear Soul lives her lot never to quit it.

Even Johnny who is much interested and alert, cannot do any thing without consulting Mrs Grant except kissing his Wife, & Mr Duff and Phillis has been for this week past perplexed and Troubled very much with a Cursed negroe wench they bought some time Agoe from Captn Elliott. She and a Negro man are both in Goal here for theft and information of a great number of vagarents hovering about here to bring off as many negros as they can And as I am told

¹¹³ May to Askin, 21 September 1801, *AP*, 2:358-59.

forming a Town on the other side of Sandusky. At present there is forty Black men there. There was no body from Detroit yesterday at the Launch.¹¹⁴

By warning Askin that George intended to flee, perhaps to join the newly formed outlaw community at Sandusky, indicated a growing unease about slavery among the white, slaveholding population. The presence of the border combined with newly restrictive, although perhaps not terribly enforceable, laws and attitudes seem to have hardened racial attitudes and constructed identities. Yet, property-holders continued to buy and sell slaves through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Despite legislation seeking to limit its growth, slavery in the Great Lakes region seemed, in the early nineteenth century, to play a greater role in people's consciousness than previously.

Not only slaves, but servants often ran away from their contracts, hoping to lose themselves in the woods, and thus hire themselves out to a kinder, or more generous master. Fleeing from debts was another fairly common maneuver among traders. In 1799, Alexander Lorange, who owed Askin £195, became stranded at Fort Miami because of low water. John Anderson appealed to Askin, "I hope You will Not Lat one Minet pass But gat Some person to Come out to Sease or take him As You think Beast."¹¹⁵ In this particular case, Anderson and Askin had to proceed with caution as Lorange had been outfitted by another trader, Jean Baptiste Jerome, who would have protested the seizure of what he considered his own, rather than Lorange's goods.

Conclusion

¹¹⁴ Alexander Grant to Askin, 17 May 1803, *AP*, 2:388-90.

¹¹⁵ John Anderson to Askin, 16 November 1799, *AP*, 2: 267.

In 1802, the terms of Jay's Treaty finally forced Askin to move to the south shore of the Detroit River so that he could retain his British citizenship. He continued to amass land in Upper Canada, and this, combined with his holdings in Ohio and Michigan, gave him the nickname, "the count of Kent," for the county in which he resided. As his children grew, his family increased with the addition of children and grandchildren, many of whom took their places in the kin and business network that Askin had established. John Askin Jr. became a fur trader, a customs agent, and a supplier to the British military post on St. Joseph Island, to which the British army at Mackinac had relocated. Askin Jr.'s son, Jean Baptiste, became a trader in the Canadian Northwest. Through the marriage of his daughters, Askin became well-connected with the government of Upper Canada, and was also well-regarded on the American side throughout the war of 1812.¹¹⁶

As Askin's children grew, he found opportunities through them to increase both his contacts and influence and expand draw them into his business. The marriages of his daughters afforded him access to the upper echelons of the provincial government, as his daughter Catherine, or Kitty, had married not one, but two men who became "members of the Executive and Legislative Councils," William Robertson and after his death, Robert Hamilton. Askin's brother-in-law, Alexander Grant, who was married to his wife Archange's sister, became Administrator of Upper Canada in 1805.¹¹⁷

In 1799, after the close of the Revolutionary War and the signing of Jay's Treaty that assured the handover of British posts in U.S. territory, Askin wrote a letter to his old

¹¹⁶ Askin also "had access to power and prestige through his friends and relatives" even though he and his son "did not themselves hold high positions in the power structure of the period," Clarke, "The Activity of an Early Canadian Land Speculator," 105. Some of those who did have more power were Askin's sons-in-law, William Robertson and Robert. Hamilton (Catherine's first and second husbands respectively) who were "members of the Executive and Legislative Councils," and Askin's brother-in-law Alexander Grant, who became Administrator of Upper Canada in 1805.

¹¹⁷ Clarke, "The Activity of an Early Canadian Land Speculator," 105.

Michilimackinac friend Arent De Peyster, updating him on his affairs and the lives of his children: “I live on my farm near town & Keep a Shop in Col. McKee’s old house opposite LaMothes, that was. My Son John carries on the mercantile business in town, Mrs. Hamilton [Catherine] is dead & Mr. Hamilton married again. My Daughter Madelaine who was brought up in Canada has been married Some years past to a Doctor of Simcoe’s Rangers. Archange, Mrs. Meredith, is in Ireland with her husband, so that there remains with us, Alice & Nelly, likewise three Boys, the eldest of whom begins to assist me in the Shop”¹¹⁸ Additionally, Madelaine’s son John also lived with his grandparents in Detroit.¹¹⁹

Askin’s younger boys continued in school. In 1798, their tutor Matthew Donovan attempted to charge Askin £39/10 for Charles’s, Alex’s, James’s, and their cousin Alex Grant’s tuition.¹²⁰ Askin, ever mindful of his money, replied, “I am sorry to find you made out your account for the Schooling of my Children & Commodore Grant’s Boy higher than our agreement. . . . Please therefore to make out a new Account and charge me as heretofore, and according to our Agreement and I will pay you, tho’ Charles went only, or not even half the time as the other children.”¹²¹ In 1801, the Askin boys were still struggling with English grammar and geography although Charles was by now helping his father out in his store. Their new instructor, David Bacon, recommended that they spend four evenings a week at his school, where they were responsible also for their

¹¹⁸ Askin to Maj. Joseph Arent De Peyster, 5 January 1799, *AP*, 2:173-74. Col. Alexander McKee was the Indian agent and a very powerful government official in Detroit. Askin’s close relationship with him indicates the high status and access to power that Askin enjoyed.

¹¹⁹ Dr. Robert Richardson to Askin 6 August 1801, *AP*, 2:356.

¹²⁰ Matthew Donovan to Askin, 23 November 1798, *AP*, 2:155-56.

¹²¹ Askin to Donovan, 26 November 1798, *AP*, 2:156.

own firewood and candles during the lessons.¹²² Clearly, Askin felt that their education was important only insofar as it prepared them to enter a business he continued to build, even as the political situation rearranged the Empire underneath his very feet.

The British had always been uncomfortable with the near-Native lifestyle of the interior French, and though they fought to maintain the Upper Country as an Indian territory for the protection of the trade, they also attempted to make it more British and less French in character. What they did not expect, but quickly adapted to, was the face to face nature of relationships in the Upper Country during the eighteenth century. John Askin's career and business practices represent the dynamics of change that occurred in the institution of slavery in the Great Lakes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His purchase of and country marriage to Manette introduced him not only to the networks that created trade opportunities, but also brought him face to face with a slavery based on relationships and obligations, a form that evolved ultimately from Native American conceptions of obligation, captivity and unfreedom, and which the French had institutionalized. Together, French and Indian peoples solidified regional customs of slavery, kin, and obligation. British traders who could not adapt to the French and Indian model were unsuccessful in their bid for riches, often to the point of being killed. As more British traders entered the region, however, as trapping moved further west, and as kin relationships with interior French bourgeoisie superceded the importance of native kin structures, slavery also began to transform. It had always been about labor as well as relationship and barter. With growing numbers of Africans, the political subdivision of the region, and a growing sense of racial difference, slavery in the Old

¹²² David Bacon to Askin, 28 November 1801, *AP*, 2: 361-62.

Northwest and Upper Canada came to resemble slavery in other northern American cities more closely than it did the old, Native model.

But the biggest change in the region was a result of the imposition of the political border through what had once been a borderland of Indian power and the fringes of imperial incursion. Historians like Richard White and Colin Calloway have shown how the Revolution swept away the middle ground, pushed the Indians of the Southern Great Lakes aside, and opened the door for an empire of settlement that neither wanted nor needed Indian partners the way the fur trade did. They have examined these diplomatic and political changes ultimately as a narrative of westward expansion that triumphed over a sort of golden age of mutual accommodation between whites and Indians. This is not to say that the middle ground was not itself violent; nor was its demise a foregone conclusion. By examining John Askin's labor, slavery, shipping, and agricultural records we get a more nuanced picture of how merchants in the Great Lakes were transformed by and in turn shaped this same middle ground, for their own ends. In an Indian world, traders needed to adopt Native kin networks and attitudes to become successful traders. Once established in the trade, however, they felt comfortable to recreate more familiar Anglo-American networks that centered on the supply rather than the fur-seeking end of the trade.

Moreover, by reading Askin and the middle ground against the burgeoning field of border studies, we can also see how ideas of permeability, power, identity formation, creative hybridity, and exclusion are relevant to the Great Lakes world before 1800. Askin himself is a perfect example of a border person, who used all of these tools to establish himself as a local power broker with close ties to multiple ethnic and social

groups in the borderland, but to the new seat of colonial power as well. Askin was thus able to use his influence to move among Indians, Moravians, French, and Anglo-Americans in order to increase his wealth, but perhaps even more significantly, the strengths of his relationships.

Epilogue

As a border person, Askin wielded significant local power in the Great Lakes region during his lifetime, building—if not an empire, exactly—a comfortable life of far-reaching personal, economic, and political influence. Yet, he is rarely remembered today outside of local history circles, as any more than an occasional observer to the larger diplomatic theater of Great Lakes, or middle ground, history.

Askin was a contemporary of other colonial American power brokers and border people like William Johnson, George Croghan, William Cooper, and William and Alexander Macomb. All of these men came to North America during the middle part of the century to make their fortunes in trade and diplomacy between the Indians, British, Americans, and Interior French. Yet, Johnson, Croghan, Cooper, and the Macomb brothers are all more well-known.¹ All were land speculators, and all had relations—either business, personal, or both—with Indians.

Like Askin, Johnson was born in Ireland and came to America mid-century to make his fortune in the Indian trade. Both men “married” Indian wives, although at different stages of their lives—Askin’s first “country wife” was the Indian slave Manette, while Johnson’s first “wife” (the two never married), was a Palatine German woman, Catharine Weisenberg, with whom he had several children. Askin later married an Interior French Catholic from a prominent Upper Country métis family, while Johnson

¹ For the life of Sir William Johnson, see Fintan O’Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005); Timothy J. Shannon, “Dressing for Success on the Mohawk Frontier: Hendrick, William Johnson, and the Indian Fashion,” *WMQ* 53, no. 1 (1996), 13-42 ; *New York History* 89, no. 2 (2008), a special issue on Johnson’s legacy; Michael J. Mullin, “Personal Politics: William Johnson and the Mohawks,” *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1993), 350-58; James Thomas Flexner, *Mohawk Baronet: A Biography of Sir William Johnson* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989).

chose the Mohawk Molly Brant, Joseph's sister, to live with him. Johnson also had possible long-term relationships and children with other Native women, including Elizabeth Brant, a cousin of Molly's. While both men were in the Indian trade, they lived in different regions—Johnson in the Mohawk valley in New York, and Askin in the western Great Lakes. And though Askin and Johnson were contemporaries, with careers overlapping from the Seven Years' War through the mid-1770s, to some extent they belonged to different colonial eras. Johnson's power and influence rose through his skilful dealings with both Indians and whites during the 1740s, and then during the Seven Years' War. Askin only arrived during the middle of the war, and though he began his career in North America in New York, he quickly made the move west, before the war was even officially over. Johnson's death in 1774 prevented him from having to choose sides during the war, possibly losing his property and influence. Askin, though a loyal British subject, remained on the American side trying to make money and benefit from his assets as long as practically possible, until even he moved across the Detroit River to the Upper Canada town of Sandwich, now Windsor, in 1800.

George Croghan, too, had been born in Ireland, and like Johnson, worked as an Indian agent on the New York and Pennsylvania frontiers.² Like Johnson, with whom he often worked, he died before the Revolution, and actively functioned as a go-between or official agent between Indians and Anglo-Americans on imperial diplomatic missions. The Macomb brothers were also Irish, and achieved great success in the Great Lakes and Albany fur trades. Judge and land speculator William Cooper, father of novelist James

² See Nicholas B. Wainwright, *George Croghan: Wilderness Diplomat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959); and James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: Norton, 1999); Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

Fenimore Cooper, was the only man in this group who was born in North America. He was the youngest, and like Askin kept a shop early in his life.

These men shared many similarities—they were mostly Irish. They speculated, often largely, in land. They had political ambitions: William Macomb was a member of parliament in Upper Canada. Cooper was a judge. Askin was a justice of the peace. Johnson was an officer in the British Army, and the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and Croghan was a Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs under Johnson. They all owned slaves, both Indian and African American. They were all involved in trade and could describe themselves as merchants. Yet, why is Askin so much less remembered?

The answer lies along the border. Or rather, it lies in the writing of history along the borders of modern nation-states. The border not only seems to marginalize Askin's influence in the Great Lakes fur trade after 1800, but it more significantly marginalizes him as a figure in either American or Canadian history.

For Johnson and Croghan, their deaths before the American Revolution cement their roles in colonial American history. As border people, they straddle the physical and mental frontier between Indians, Anglo-American settlers, and merchants. They were larger than life figures, whose roles as go-betweens, negotiators, and officials of the British empire further emphasized their importance in American history. Moreover, it is in this capacity as officials that they most differ from Askin, who never held such a position even though he, like Johnson, lived intimately with Indian peoples and relied on them for his livelihood. Geography is also a major factor, as the New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio Valley frontiers were hotly contested sites of imperial, Indian, and settler conflict. Some of the most intense Indian and European negotiations and

tensions occurred in these areas, with Johnson and Croghan in their very centers. Askin, by contrast, held a minor position as a local magistrate—he was not an agent of empire. And though he did get involved in the Ohio Valley in terms of helping the Moravians resettle first in Michigan and then in Upper Canada, he acted as a private individual rather than as a government official. Johnson and Croghan, moreover, had chronology on their side, working to secure peace and prosperity during the 1740s and throughout the French and Indian War, Pontiac's War, and the other conflicts that lead up to the crises of the mid-1770s. Askin did not even land in North America until the Seven Years' War was well under way, and as a merchant, he tended to act in his own self-interest rather than in the negotiation of treaties. Had Askin lived earlier, he may have had more opportunity for official status.

But what of the Macombs, and William Cooper? Like Askin, Cooper was a local official who was heavily involved in land speculation and debt. Yet, he was not affected by the establishment of the Canada-U.S. border as was Askin; rather, Cooper came to historical significance through his famous son, novelist William Fenimore Cooper, who immortalized his father's life and times in the *Leatherstocking Tales*. Cooper was solidly American, as was Alexander Macomb, brother of Detroit trader William Macomb. The latter was, as previously mentioned, active in Upper Canada politics and though he lived in the United States, he died before Jay's Treaty would have required his move across the River to British territory. Alexander, conversely, had cast his lot on the American side where, like William Cooper, his more famous son kept his name in the limelight. Alexander Macomb the younger fought against the British in the War of 1812, and eventually became Major General of the United States Army, a position he held until his

death in 1841. Askin's children, on the other hand, went on to solidly middle class careers and marriages in the British empire and Canada, as discussed in chapter five.

Whether or not the border was responsible for the stunning success of Alexander Macomb or James Fenimore Cooper is not the question; rather, the border becomes significant because it affects the way individuals are perceived in national memory. First, Askin chose Canada. This removed him from American history. He becomes, ultimately, an important figure in local history, particularly in the histories of Detroit, Windsor, and to a lesser extent, Upper Canada. Second, this marginalized him to some extent in fur trade history, which moved west and focused on the Native families of wintering backcountrymen. The most influential works on the fur trade center on the Canadian Prairie and the north, with the dissolution of the North West Company into the Hudson Bay Company, and the rise of the métis as a distinct ethnic group in the nineteenth century. This trend also removes Askin as an influential character in Canadian national history.

John Askin's life is worthy of study because of his enormous influence in his own time, in terms of his negotiations with Indians, with Anglo-American officials, and with other traders. If the William Johnsons and their diplomacy, warfare, and mutual misunderstanding made the middle ground, men like Askin and the Macombs lived in it. They reaped its benefits, and they ultimately transformed it, even as its passing signaled the end of the way of life that had made their fortunes.

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