

JOHN ASKIN'S MANY BENEFICIAL BINDS:
FAMILY, TRADE, AND EMPIRE IN THE GREAT LAKES

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that John Askin, a prominent British merchant, provides a vista from which to view the fluidity of the Atlantic fur trade and the constraints of the British Empire in the late-eighteenth-century North American Great Lakes. Through the critical exploration of Askin's life, family, and trade, this work examines the complex contestation and negotiation that confronted individuals as they went about their lives, businesses and day-to-day interests. Consideration of the family that Askin nurtured, the imperial and economic relationships that he maintained, and the public image he crafted shows that Askin maintained constant involvement with the complicated economic and social processes of the multi-ethnic communities in which he lived. Likewise, the network of kinship and colleagues that Askin developed allowed him to mute disruptive imperial demands and quell the economic uncertainty that occasionally defined the Great Lakes. Askin nurtured relationships with important British imperial officials like Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster and maintained several multi-ethnic families that connected him to new regions of the fur trade. This dissertation argues that Askin leveraged these relationships into a prosperous trade and established him as one of the region's dominant merchants, but his economic initiatives competed with British imperial designs, eventually making him a target of zealous British officials during the crisis of the American Revolution.

For Maddox, my son,

And

Jana, who was there
from the beginning.

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Suffice it to say, I am still learning...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1	
‘MY FATHER WAS A SHOP KEEPER’: A SCOTS-IRISH MERCHANT AND THE BRITISH IN THE GREAT LAKES.....	27
CHAPTER 2	
‘PRETTY MUCH OF A SCHEMER’: NEGOTIATING EMPIRE AND EXPANDING THE FUR TRADE IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD OF THE BRITISH GREAT LAKES.....	63
CHAPTER 3	
‘PERHAPS HE MAY ONE DAY BECOME MY SON IN LAW’: AN ALBANY WOMAN, AN INDIAN SLAVE, AND A FRENCH WIFE IN THE BRITISH GREAT LAKES.....	102
CHAPTER 4	
‘NEVER DISAPPOINT PEOPLE IN THE MATTER OF SHIPPING GOODS’: MANAGING THE FUR TRADE AND IMPERIAL DISRUPTIONS DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.....	133
CHAPTER 5	
‘MR ASKIN...SCHEMED OF HAVING THE KEYS OF CANADA IN HIS POCKET’: IMPERIAL CONFLICTS AND FUR TRADE CONTROVERSIES AT MICHILIMACKINAC DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.....	172
CHAPTER 6	
‘IT IS NECESSARY TO PROVIDE AGAINST THE WORST’: JOHN ASKIN, LAND SPECULATION, AND AMERICAN EXPANSION IN THE GREAT LAKES.....	209
CONCLUSION	
ALEXANDER HENRY’S LAMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF JOHN ASKIN IN THE GREAT LAKES.....	249
BIBLIOGRAPHY	
Archival Materials.....	260
Published Primary Sources Cited and Consulted.....	261
Journal Articles and Chapters from Edited Volumes Cited and Consulted.....	264
Secondary Sources Cited and Consulted.....	271

INTRODUCTION

EMPIRE, TRADE, AND MICROHISTORIES

“Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”¹

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

“A number of biographical studies have shown that in a modest individual who is himself lacking in significance and for this very reason representative, it is still possible to trace, as in a microcosm, the characteristics of an entire social stratum in a specific historical period...”²

Carlo Ginzburg

In 1793, almost thirty years after his migration to North America, John Askin returned a letter to a man from Maryland who claimed to be a distant relative. In the letter, John Askin provided the only contemporary rendering of his life and his family’s history. He wrote that, “[He] was Born at Aughnacloy in the North of Ireland in 1739...” and names his father, mother, brothers and sisters, before discussing his life in North America.³ “I came to this Country in 1758,” he continues, “and most of my time since

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26. Since I first read Trouillot’s work as an undergraduate, it has played an instrumental role in my conception of history. From Trouillot’s example of the Haitian palace of San Souci to John Askin’s relationship with his panise, Manette, I have tried to look for silences as a way of engaging and writing compelling “archaeological” histories.

² Carlo Ginzburg. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xx

³ Much of what historians know about John Askin’s life before his arrival in North America comes from a letter he sent to John Erskine in 1793, where Askin gives a brief history of his life in North American since his arrival, see: John Askin to John Erskine (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See unpublished document in: John Askin Papers, Box 2 in the Burton Historical Collections at the Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 2). Also, a large section of his

have been in Trade first at albany near New York...& since that at a place called Michilimackinac & for these last thirteen Years past here [in Detroit].”⁴ Askin notes that, “I married in 1772 & have a large Family some of my Daughters [are] married” and notes that he has “many other particular friends in London a Mr. Issac Todd [and] a Mr. Willm Robertson both may be found at Messr Phyn Ellis & Englis in London.”⁵ In one short letter, John Askin located himself and his family within the tangled and intertwined social, economic, and political world of the Great Lakes. He presented himself alongside respectable, wealthy, and influential individuals, but he provided very little insight into how he became such an important figure. The letter ignored decades of struggle and innovation; it silenced and obfuscated less respectable and exploitive behaviors; in fact, Askin almost refused to acknowledge his once dominant position in the Great Lakes fur trade. His silences are problematic, because his life offers unique insights into both the British Empire and the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth century.

Perhaps this is why John Askin is ubiquitous in the histories of the British Great Lakes, but allowed only to play bit repetitive parts. The basic scholarly narrative of Askin’s life has changed remarkably little since the publication of his collected papers by Milo Quaife in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁶ This is problematic. Historians who

papers were published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, see: John Askin. *The John Askin Papers*, 2 vols. Edited by Milo Quaife. (Detroit, MI: Detroit Library Commission, 1928 – 1931)

⁴ John Askin to John Erskine (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See: John Askin, Box 2

⁵ John Askin to John Erskine (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See: John Askin, Box 2

⁶ For a broad outline of John Askin’s life: Milo M. Quaife, editor, *The John Askin Papers*, 2 vols., (Detroit: Detroit Historical Society, 1928 -1931), 1: 1 - 21 (hereafter referred to as *Askin Papers*); Clarence

discussed John Askin have frequently commented on his relationship with an Indian woman named Manette and his children and they point out that despite the illegitimacy of their birth, “Askin ever regarded the children as legally his own, and discharged for them the complete obligation of a tender and loving parent.”⁷ However, few have bothered to question Askin’s motives, his intentions, or the role his children played in his trade. Persistent and unanswered questions relegated John Askin to a minor, albeit persistent actor in many historical narratives, which is unfortunate considering the unique construction of his family, and his relationship to the Atlantic trade and the British Empire. The only sustained narrative of John Askin’s life exists in relative obscurity as an unpublished manuscript housed at the archives of Mackinac City; it is roughly forty pages long and goes a long way toward documenting, exploring, and teasing out the

M. Burton, “Detroit Biographies,” *Burton Historical Collection Leaflet* 3 (1925); David R. Farrell, “John Askin,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 5: 37 – 39. For the most complete examination of John Askin’s early life, see: John Gram, “John Askin at Michilimackinac,” unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. (Hereafter referred to as: Gram Manuscript). Gram’s manuscript was very important helping to uncover relative materials outside of Askin’s collected primary sources and archive; his work is invaluable, and helped tremendously in the crafting of this project.

⁷ Milo M. Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1: 13. For a discussion of the importance of intermarriage and the communities created through intermarriage in the Great Lakes region see: Sylvia Van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Jennifer S. H. Brown. *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); and Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, editors. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985). For the role Indian women played as negotiators see: Clara Sue Kidwell, “Indian Women as Cultural Negotiators,” *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992): 97–107; Susan Sleeper-Smith. “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade.” *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000): 423 – 452. See also: Brett Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 781 – 783. Rushforth’s article is one of many new studies that have come out in the last few years that have begun to write and explore the history of Indian slavery in North America, for example, see also: Alan Gallay. *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); James F. Brooks. *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002)

ambiguities of John Askin's life, family, and trade at Michilimackinac.⁸ Yet, it suffers from its lack of historical and historiographical context; it tells historians much about Askin, but fails to tell why Askin matters, or should matter. This dissertation seeks to move John Askin from the periphery and to center him within the processes and dynamics of both empire and trade in the Great Lakes.

This dissertation explores John Askin's life from his emigration from Northern Ireland to Albany in 1758 through his relocation to Detroit in 1780 and his disastrous land speculations in the 1790s. The years between 1763 and 1780 comprise the bulk of this dissertation, a timeframe that reflects both Great Britain's and John Askin's ascendancy and decline in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. The ascendancy of both individual and empire required cooperation, compromise, and contestation with the region's Indian populations and the ever-present French inhabitants. These often intermarried populations with their economic, social, and political connections allowed astute British officers, officials, and merchants like John Askin to expand economically across the Great Lakes region and to extend the processes of the Atlantic trade into Great Lakes fur trade communities. British capital, Scots-Irish traders, Indian trappers and French laborers helped create an international, multi-cultural and inter-regional trade system that linked Mackinac to Detroit, Detroit to Montreal, and Montreal to London.⁹ As such, this period reflects John Askin's most prosperous period in the

⁸ See: Gram Manuscript.

⁹ See: Harry W. Duckworth, "British Capital in the Fur Trade: John Strettell and John Fraser." In *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan*, 1991. Jennifer S.H. Brown, et al. editors. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994): 40 – 44

Great Lakes fur trade; it shows his journey from poverty to prosperity. However, the American Revolution tested John Askin's hard won influence and authority. The military struggle of the mid-1770s and early 1780s highlighted intense divisions within Great Britain's North American Empire. At Michilimackinac, imperial designs encountered Askin's mercantile efforts; the clash profoundly affected both empire and individual. It forced Askin out of the community, and stymied the post's commandant. At Detroit, Askin watched as the Americans invaded the Ohio Valley, and he turned his efforts to land speculation, but to little avail.

This dissertation argues that the life of John Askin provides a vista from which to view the fluidity of the Atlantic world and the constraints of the British Empire in the late-eighteenth-century Great Lakes. Through the critical exploration of Askin's life, family, and trade, this work examines the complex contestation and negotiation that confronted individuals as they went about their lives, businesses and day-to-day interests. Careful consideration of the family that Askin nurtured, the imperial and economic relationships that he built, and the public image he crafted suggest that, from his earliest days in North America, John Askin maintained a constant involvement with the often complicated economic, social, and political restrictions and obligations of the French, Indian, and British Great Lakes communities in which he lived. The intertwined network of kinship and colleagues – French, British, imperial, and mercantile – that John Askin developed allowed him to mute imperial demands and quell the economic uncertainty that occasionally defined the Great Lakes. From Albany to Michilimackinac, John Askin nurtured relationships with important British imperial officials like Major Robert Rogers and Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster and Askin maintained several multi-cultural

families that helped connect him with new and important regions of the fur trade. Askin leveraged these relationships into building a large and prosperous trade in the Great Lakes, which presaged the Northwest Company, and established himself as one of the region's premiere and dominant middlemen through a series of trading depots, private ships, and familial labor. My research into John Askin's behavior and experiences exposes his creativity and maneuverability within the larger structures and processes of empire and the Atlantic world.

My dissertation employs specific events, periods, and developments in John Askin's life to explore over-arching themes of trade and empire through his multi-ethnic family. In other words, this dissertation tries to position Askin, for the first time in a sustained way, into a historiographical context. By doing so, Askin's life, his family, and his individual efforts within the Great Lakes fur trade allows historians to broaden the scope and better understand the currents and contours of British imperial and Atlantic world history in eighteenth-century North America. Over the last forty years, the Atlantic world narrative has emerged as the dominant paradigm through which historians understand and interpret the interconnected histories of post-1492 Euro-American, African and Native American societies and communities. More often than not, Atlantic world historians emphasize the inability of imperial powers to influence colonial societies and economies.¹⁰ Imperial historians, on the other hand, who operate in a much older historiographical strain and have been in some ways supplanted by these newer narratives, continue to stress the importance of imperial Europe in shaping the

¹⁰ Trevor Burnard. "Empire matters? the Historiography of Imperialism in Early America, 1492 – 1830." *History of European Ideas* 33 (2007): 87 – 107

Americas. Their works detail the restrictions that imperial structures placed on local and individual developments.¹¹ For example, historian Trevor Bernard suggests, in a recently published article, that these fields of Atlantic and Imperial history overlap uncomfortably, and that part of their apparent “incompatibility” is “one of [historiographic] tone.”¹² Through Askin’s life in the Great Lakes in terms of trade and as an agent of empire, it is possible to see how his efforts, activities, schemes, and innovations fit within the larger and interwoven fabric of Great Britain’s oversea empire. Askin serves as a knot that binds several disparate strings: his personal agenda, his multi-cultural family, his loyalty to the empire and the vagaries of the Atlantic trade, and therein lays this dissertation’s importance.

Of the eight related definitions of empire in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, each suggest a degree of centralized authority, power, and sway that yields little room for historical maneuverability.¹³ These definitions are problematic in a period when historical scholarship demands increased attention to porous borders, negotiable authority, and fluid identities. Since the late-nineteenth century, the study of the British Empire has produced long and storied historiographies that were narrated within a framework of Victorian triumphalism, evolved into works of post-war and post-colonial cynicism, and continue to undergo significant revision. For example, traditionally,

¹¹ Burnard, “Empire matters?” 87 – 107

¹² Burnard, “Empire matters?” 87 – 107

¹³ Oxford English Dictionary Online. “Empire.” <http://dictionary.oed.com/> (accessed September 8, 2009). The first definition reads: “Imperial rule or dignity.” The second definition reads: “Paramount influence, absolute sway, supreme command or control.” The third definition reads: “The dignity or position of an emperor; also, the reign of an emperor,” and so forth.

historians separate the “first” British Empire in North America from the “second” British Empire of India and Africa, which resulted in histories defined largely by the high-colonialist/nation-state based experiences of the late-nineteenth and early- twentieth centuries. P.J. Marshall’s recently published book, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c. 1750 – 1783*, reexamines this British imperial divide and tries to make sense of the collapse of Great Britain’s North American empire and the development of its Asia empire within a single continuum.¹⁴ Moreover, Marshall suggests that historians need to go beyond the constraints of the Atlantic world and to conceive the British Empire, first and second, within a global context. Today, imperial historians influenced by Atlantic world history have begun to question the myriad age-old dichotomies; these “New Imperial Histories” are remarkable in their efforts to respond to the critiques and developments of the Atlantic historians, who often criticized older imperial narratives as being exercises in narrowness and exceptionalism.¹⁵

The meteoritic rise of the Atlantic world paradigm in the 1960s was ushered in by Philip Curtain’s work on the Atlantic slave trade; it was one of the first methodologically influential and compelling histories that used trans-oceanic framing. In response to this trend, imperial historians have expanded the focus of their studies by paying greater attention to shared endeavors, experiences, and interactions between Europe, the

¹⁴ P.J. Marshall. *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America, 1750 – 1783*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For an earlier work dedicated to a vision of a “unified” first and second British empire, see: Vincent T. Harlow. *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763 – 1793*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1952 – 1964).

¹⁵ See: Alison Games. “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities.” *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 741-757

Americas, and Africa.¹⁶ If today, “[w]e are all Atlanticists” as historian David Armitage suggests, it is because it is no longer fruitful to see imperial or even national borders as hermetically sealed and homogenously peopled.¹⁷ Beyond Atlantic slave trade histories, scholars of colonial societies have found an Atlantic world perspective to be a natural extension of their own studies. For example, historian April Lee Hatfield’s *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* rebels against the persistent notion that “colonies existed alongside, but not within, the Atlantic world” and as such, “most historians have framed colonial history largely within political boundaries.”¹⁸ By locating the development of Virginia with its proper transatlantic, intercolonial and international context, Hatfield illuminates a Virginian world that was “mobile,” where individuals “crossed and recrossed” borders, and whose focus faced “outward” as much as it faced “westward.”¹⁹ By privileging fluidity, porosity, and heterogeneity, scholars became seriously engaged in writing Atlantic world narratives that were neither Eurocentric, Afrocentric, or Americentric. Instead, they produced works defined by detailed attentiveness and awareness of complex social, cultural, economic and imperial differences.

¹⁶ Along with the Atlantic world paradigm’s undermining of borders, post-colonial scholarship called into question the techniques of scholarships, the authority of archives, and the abstractness of colonial projects requiring historians to engage in an increasingly theoretical and multi-focal literature from former colonial localities.

¹⁷ David Armitage. “Three Concepts of Atlantic History.” *The British Atlantic World, 1500 – 1800*. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, editors. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11

¹⁸ April Lee Hatfield. *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1 – 3

¹⁹ Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia*, 1 – 3

Historian Kathleen Wilson, in her recently edited volume, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660 to 1840*, suggests that scholarly attention to “difference – in historical settings and forms of consciousness as well as in historiographic and critical practice” is at the heart of a new imperial historical approach.²⁰ Moreover, by centering an imperial literature on “difference,” it supposes a conception of empire that is fundamentally anxious of its elements, antinomial in its kaleidoscopic interests, and asymmetrical and limited in its application of authority.²¹ This analysis suggests avenues of action for individuals and groups like Native Americans, African slaves, and other marginalized communities to contest, negotiate, and even cooperate with imperial authority. On the other hand, historian Steven Sarson in his recently published book, *British America, 1500 – 1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire* makes the point that while American Indians, African slaves, and women shaped and influenced the contours of colonization and empire, they ultimately failed to maintain their homelands, escape their slavery, or achieve equal political rights.²² In the creation of colonies and the articulation of

²⁰ Kathleen Wilson. “Introduction: histories, empires, modernities.” *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in and the Empire, 1660 – 1840*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004), 3. Moreover, my work has been influenced by a paper delivered by Joshua Piker, which explored the notion of “Lies” as a way of discussing the fraught and increasingly incompatible historiographic presentations of Native peoples and their place and agency within empires. See: Joshua Piker, “Lying Together: Cross-Cultural Untruths and their Imperial Implications.” Delivered at the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Salt Lake City, UT, June 11, 2009

²¹ Wilson, “Introduction: histories, empires, modernities,” 8

²² Steven Sarson. *British America, 1500 – 1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire*. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), xiv. Sarson’s narrative tacks closely to a British imperial historiographical tradition that stresses the primacy of metropolitan forces in shaping colonial societies, see, for example: H. V. Bowen. *Elites, Enterprise, and the Making of the British Overseas Empire, 1688-1775*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); David Hancock. *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the Integration*

empire, “‘subaltern’ groups exercised less influence in these areas than they did in everyday life,” which left such endeavors and initiatives to “European or Euro-American men.”²³ Both Wilson and Sarson deal with the role of individuals within colonial society, but they diverge along ethnic, gender, and class lines; Wilson’s notion of empire shows clear signs of being influenced by Atlantic world studies and its appreciation of difference and the dynamics of cross-cultural fluidity.

The divergent views articulated by Wilson and Sarson represent a disjuncture of imperial design that some North American historians have been grappling with over the last twenty-five years.²⁴ For this dissertation, no one work is more important than Richard White’s seminal study, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*. Like historian Daniel Usner, Jr. and Juliana Barr, White employs a regional approach from which to explore Euro-American and Native American relationships in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁵ While White

of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²³ Sarson, *British America*, xiv

²⁴ Historians like James Merrill, Daniel Usner Jr., Richard White, Kathleen Duval and Juliana Barr, whose works place Native American peoples at the center of colonial North American regional histories, articulate an understanding of empire that is ephemeral and weak as it encounters Indian country. In fact, Juliana Barr’s work on Texas presents the Spanish Empire as being the subordinate partner to the region’s stronger Indian communities. See: James Merrill. *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and their Neighbors from European Contact through the era of Removal*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Daniel Usner, Jr. *Indian, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indian Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Kathleen Duval. *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); 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)

²⁵ See: Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indian Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

employs the traditional language of imperial centers and peripheries, his centers and peripheries are fast and loose, and somewhat unhinged from each other. He writes that, “[a]t the center are hands on the levers of power, but the cables [which connect the empire together] have, in a sense, been badly frayed or even cut. It is a world system in which minor agents, allies, and even subjects at the periphery often guide the course of empires.”²⁶ These fraying connections played a pivotal role in White’s articulation of “Middle Ground” developed between the French and Indians of the Great Lakes in the 17th century, born out of the violence and destruction of Iroquois invasions during the Fur Wars. These connections lasted because neither the French nor the Indians were able to dominate or control the other militarily. This balance forced both sides to cooperate, accommodate, and understand the other through face-to-face contact, but often involved misunderstandings of the other’s cultures and expectations in the pursuit of common economic and political pursuits.

By shifting the purview away from the center and towards the ambiguous and malleable periphery, White’s study privileges the agency of individuals who often appeared as minor or secondary actors in older imperial histories and narratives. Works such as White’s have forced historians to understand better the constrained nature of eighteenth-century authority and empire. As historian Jack Greene has pointed out, historians too often view the center’s relationship with the periphery within the context of the late-nineteenth century nation-state, which tended to override and obfuscate the degree to which power and authority were negotiated in every aspect of

²⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, xi

British imperial governance from the relationships between England and Ireland, Great Britain and its colonies, and from individual to individual.²⁷ This “odd imperialism,” as White describes it, opens avenues for new behaviors, creative responses, and unique cultural configurations.²⁸ Individuals like John Askin flourished in the Great Lakes, despite faulty and problematic management by British authorities in the region because of the traders’ ability to navigate successfully the often-fraught social landscapes and to skirt around imperial directions and orders occasionally and creatively.²⁹ In fact, the central conflicts and catastrophes in Askin’s tenure as a Great Lakes merchant came not from the French or Native American populations that he relied upon or from a general mismanagement of trade, but from periods of imperial recalcitrance and the lack of alternative responses on his part. This tension suggests that John Askin’s life, family, and individual trade required continual thought and action.

The bulk of the primary source material for Askin’s life comes from his archive housed at the Burton Historical Collections in Detroit, Michigan and the two-volume collection of Askin’s manuscripts edited by Milo M. Quaife in 1928 and 1931. The

²⁷ See: Jack P. Greene. “Transatlantic Colonization and the Redefinition of Empire in the Early Modern Era.” In *Negotiated Empires: Centers and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500 – 1820*. Christine Daniels, Michael V. Kennedy, editors. (New York: Routledge, 2002)

²⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, x

²⁹ A large and complex literature has grown around “cultural mediators,” or individuals, who played important roles in the processes of exchange and interaction in multi-cultural colonial contexts. See: *Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies of North American Frontiers*. James A. Clifton, editor. (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989); *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker*. Margaret Connell Szasz, editor. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Michael A. McDonnell, “Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade: Warrior, Soldier, and Intercultural ‘Window’ on the Sixty Years’ War for the Great Lakes.” In *The Sixty Years’ War for the Great Lakes, 1754 – 1814*. David Curtis Skaggs, et al, editors. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001); Larry L. Nelson. *A Man of Distinction Among Them: Alexander McKee and British-Indian Affairs along the Ohio Country Frontier, 1754 – 1799*. (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1999)

papers of Charles Andre Barthe, John Porteous, Thomas Gage, and James Sterling housed in Detroit and the Clements Library in Ann Arbor, along with research at the Mackinac Historical Park Archives, and the Ayers Collection at the Newberry Library have been instrumental in filling the gaps and blanks in Askin's own history and records. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century state historical collections, such the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection, the Wisconsin Historical Collection, and the Illinois Historical Collection detail their respective colonial history through biographies, community histories and the publication of both public and private primary sources.³⁰ Alongside these collections, I have made use of the numerous published collections of correspondence, historical documents, diaries, and plethora of travel and captivity narratives from the late eighteenth century. Together, these resources provide a window from which to view the history of British imperialism and Atlantic from the vantage of the Great Lakes.

While these sources provide information on John Askin's life, family, and trade, they present particular difficulties in framing this history. The majority of the archives I worked in, and the published materials I consulted, were collected and published in the nineteenth century, in an era of different historical assumptions, social values, and intellectual constraints. This situation forces modern historians to construct twenty-first-century narratives based on nineteenth-century assumptions about an eighteenth-century world. For example, historians have often over looked, or undervalued the roles

³⁰ See: Draper, Lyman C., Reuben G. Thwaites, Milo Quiafe, and Joseph Schafer, editors. *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, vol. 1 – 20. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1855 – 1911); *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, vol. 1 – 38. Multiple Editors. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1903 – 1978); *Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 1 – 38. (Lansing: The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1888 – 1912)

Askin's consorts played in his daily existence. Milo M. Quaife, the editor of John Askin's collected papers, wrote in his introduction that despite their illegitimacy, "Askin ever regarded the children as legally his own, and discharged for them the complete obligation of a tender and loving parent."³¹ However, few historians have bothered to explore whether this estimation was strictly true, or to ask the more obvious question of why John Askin claimed these children as his own, and why he raised them away from their mothers when he could have easily let them recede from the historical record. This silence, once created, cascades problematically from narrative to narrative. Yet, much of what I know about John Askin's sexual relationships comes from his receipts books and memorandum.³² These once living, breathing entities exist only in a hand full of written sources, in small notes recorded on the margin of some journal. Brief as they are, such mentions tether John Askin to his family, his family to his trade, and his trade to his status within the British Empire in the Great Lakes.

To write this kind of intimate history, in face of the limitations, exclusions, and silences presented by sources and archives alike, historians have to be creative in their approach to the past. For example, Historian Ann Stoler has called upon historians to pay closer attention to what she calls "the microphysics of daily lives."³³ By

³¹ Milo M. Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1: 13

³² See: "John Askin's Inventory for 1778," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. See: "Drafts Notes Receipts [sic] & Bonds Paid Commencing February the 11th 1761 and Ending July 17th 1762," Box 21, John Askin Manuscripts, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

³³ Ann Laura Stoler. "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen." In *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Ann Laura Stoler, editor. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 7

acknowledging, privileging, and exploring the quotidian experiences and the shared intimacies of colonial peoples, historians can rethink and re-read familiar stories and old archival materials and provide new insights into the complexity of colonial localities.³⁴ The half-written sentence, the subtle allusion, and the solitary name in a list of sundry items to be sold all offer a window into the lives of individuals forgotten and hidden by history. Only through contextualizing these individuals and placing them within the parameters of their own cultures and histories can they be fleshed out in a useful manner. To understand Askin, his life and his position with the Great Lakes fur trade society, for example, one must understand, or endeavor to understand, the role women played within his household, his trade, and his daily life. Once this occurs, it shows that these women are fundamentally tied to larger economic and political projects, even if their presence appears elusive and the evidence for their existence proves fragmentary and incomplete. Thus, in effect, Askin's household at Michilimackinac becomes a node in a complex network of imperial and Atlantic world trade and connections.

By paying closer attention to the social and economic circumstances that defined Askin's life in the Great Lakes in the late-eighteenth century, it is possible to tease out the colonial and indigenous legacies that defined him. Askin lived and existed in a largely French and Indian world, and his economic success evolved from a context that privileged re-invention. In other words, in the Great Lakes region, failures were not necessarily permanent social statuses were often malleable and identities were quite fluid. Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, for example, Askin weathered bankruptcy and

³⁴ Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire," 7

social disgrace by re-inventing himself as a French bourgeois merchant, even as he sought to bolster his position within the British military establishment by serving as the deputy commissary of Michilimackinac. Re-invention is a constant theme in Askin's life and the lives of so many others in this dissertation. Moreover, the fact that this economic and social re-invention occurred so often for Askin within the confines of his family and household suggests the degree to which intimacy, trade, and empire were tied and bound to each other - - sometimes quite uncomfortably. For Askin, his family proved to be a vital site of re-invention, especially during periods of economic and imperial turmoil. In the 1780s, Askin's marriage to Marie Archange Barthe proved instrumental in his efforts to expand his control over the infrastructure of the Great Lakes fur trade. Likewise, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, John Askin Jr., his son with his Panise, Manette, proved pivotal in Askin's re-invention as a land speculator in the Ohio Valley in the 1790s.

With cross-cultural interrelation and perpetual re-invention at the heart of John Askin's North American experience, the way in which he responded to the evolving circumstances of the Great Lakes fur trade in the late eighteenth century reflects a unique alternative model to economic expansion. The British regime's hold on the Great Lakes corresponded to and prompted a fundamental change of the fur trade. French, British, and Indian men and women like Askin pushed the trade into increasingly distant, rugged, far flung lands, and spawned unintended consequences. Small-scale merchants and traders confronted crippling economic competition, high transportation costs and rates, and diverse new avenues of individual participation, which evolved into larger-scale partnerships to alleviate and organize the fur trade.

Historiographically, much attention has been given to the Quebec-based Northwest Company, the Hudson Bay Company, and Michilimackinac-based American Fur Trade Company of the late-eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century. While Askin certainly participated in the development of these partnerships, particularly the Northwest Company, he chose a fundamentally different path to economic advancement. Instead of relying upon outside merchants, traders, and engages to pursue the trade further northwest of Michilimackinac, Askin placed the reigns of his trade in the hands of his family, his slaves, and his children and together they sought to monopolize and control the infrastructure of the Great Lakes' trade. Askin built trade depots at strategic points and appointed his French brothers-in-law to oversee them; he built ships to move goods across the lakes and trained Indian and African slaves to sail; he married his sons and daughters to important imperial officials to ensure his efforts would go undisturbed. His efforts were so successful that he boasted to the British commandant at Michilimackinac, that he had "the key[s] of Canada in his Pocket."³⁵

Competing colonial and indigenous legacies in the Great Lakes made re-inventions and economic success possible, which leads to a broader point about the historical and historiographical value of John Askin. In this micro-history of one man's life set within a broader imperial and Atlantic context, the trade that Askin pursued, the partnerships he formed, the family he nurtured, the children he sired, and the struggles and failures he endured demonstrate the negotiated nature of the British Empire in North America. From the moment Askin arrived in North America in 1758, he stepped

³⁵ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), July/August? 1780. *Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 9. (Lansing: The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1888 – 1912), 564

into contested landscape that required him to react to new situations, make decisions based on limited information, conform to old behaviors, and transgress new boundaries. His story is part of a much larger story about the nature of Euro-American Empires around the world. Askin helps reveal the “everydayness” of such projects and points to moments and locations where individual efforts shaped the aspirations, limits, and effectiveness of colonial and economic processes. In this dissertation, John Askin appears in various personae in service to the British Empire; he plays the role of the French merchant, the gentlemanly aristocrat, the scheming colonial, and the loving father. Even as these guises sometimes placed him at odds with imperial officials and their directives, Askin always positioned his work as beneficial to both King and country. Histories of marginal men like Askin tell historians about the fraying fabric of empires, and show how disparate and broken ties can be woven and bound anew.

In designing this dissertation, I have sought to find models of research, argumentation, and organization that best present, highlight, and explain John Askin’s lifelong observable behaviors. The unique construction of John Askin’s family, once detailed, is reminiscent in some ways of Natalie Zemon Davis’s work on the indomitable French wayfarer and his intrepid doppelganger in *The Return of Martin Guerre*.³⁶ In her introduction, Davis chided historians to think of peasants, a class often understood as living very restrictive existences, as having the ability “to fashion their lives in unusual

³⁶ See: Natalie Zemon Davis. *The Return of Martin Guerre*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983)

and unexpected ways.”³⁷ Davis demonstrates, through the story of Arnaud du Tilh, a French peasant, who usurps the identity, wife, and livelihood of long absent Martin Guerre, the creativity and the ability of individuals to structure their everyday lives. In addition a work such as Carlo Ginzburg’s “micro history” of the Italian miller, Menocchio, demonstrates that through individual lives “it is still possible to trace, as in a microcosm, the characteristics of an entire social stratum in a specific historical period.”³⁸ Historian Lara Putnam, whose own work looks at the genre in context of the Atlantic world, has written that the “microhistory has excelled at demonstrating connections,” which provides a perfect avenue from which to explore John Askin, his family, his partners, his trade and its relationship to the British Empire.³⁹

Thus, close reading of the historical records of the solitary individual is a methodology that allows me to connect Askin’s life to the broader context of the Atlantic trade and the British Empire in the Great Lakes in historically relevant and pertinent ways. In fact, as historian Jill Lepore suggests, the struggle to go beyond the individual subject to address important historiographical issues separates the microhistorian from the biographer.⁴⁰ As such, I have tried to interrogate the small moments of a man’s life,

³⁷ Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, 1

³⁸ Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, xx

³⁹ Lara Putnam. “To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World.” *Journal of Social History* 39 (2006): 61

⁴⁰ Jill Lepore. “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography.” *The Journal of American History* 88 (2001): 132. Lepore set forth four propositions that define and differentiate microhistory from biography. To Lepore, the individual role in the microhistory “lies in how [he] serves as an allegory for the culture as whole,” his or her ability to “address...small mysteries about a person’s life as a means to exploring the culture,” his or her tendency “to betray people who left abundant

those fortunate enough to be preserved in the archive, to illustrate the noisy, messy, joyous, violent, desperate human experiences often pushed aside or subsumed in the narratives of broader histories as a way of both humanizing and disrupting the processes of history. Likewise, to lose sight of the everyday is to miss how complicated imperial histories and lives actually are; it ignores the shifting and ambiguous nature of Askin's life – the myriad re-inventions – and his multi-cultural French and Indian family. However, as much as Askin's life seems invocative of an era, he may not have been entirely common. One of the limitations of the micro-historical writing is typicality, or just how applicable one man's experiences and actions are to a particular time and place. While this dissertation explores unique and salient moments of personal ambition within a larger world, it can only go so far in its claims to commonality or historical authority. This is not a failing. In fact, it is the opposite. The study of John Askin demonstrates the historical wealth offered by the study of one man's life and times, and the fields of British Empire and Atlantic-world history would benefit from similar explorations.

My dissertation's first chapter, entitled "My Father was a Shop Keeper': A Scots-Irish Merchant and the British Empire in the Great Lakes," details John Askin initial arrival in North America from Northern Ireland in 1758. John Askin's earliest efforts in Albany and Detroit are set against the backdrop of the British, French, and Native American contestation for the Great Lakes region of North America; it also explores his involvement in the Atlantic fur trade. This setting serves as a historical introduction to the major issues explored in this dissertation. John Askin entered the western trade through Albany, the traditional and predominant center of the British fur trade. He

records in order to resurrect those did not," and his or presence as "a character in his own book." See: Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 141

quickly profited from the violence of the Seven Years' War and acquired a position as a sutler and supplier to the British army in northern New York. However, failure and debt marred Askin's earliest endeavors in the Great Lakes: these failures haunted Askin for many years and shaped the course of his life for decades. Over expansion, poor partnerships, and the turmoil of Pontiac's Rebellion pushed Askin to the point of insolvency. Despite these earlier missteps, this chapter establishes a pattern of behavior that typifies the complicity of empire and trade in John Askin's existence in the Great Lakes. As he relocated from Albany to Michilimackinac in 1763 to become the army's deputy commissary, Askin began to develop an understanding of empire, trade, and family that reconnected him to British capital, established him within French and Indian communities, and minimized conflict, confusion, and outside disturbances.

Chapter two, "'Pretty Much of a Schemer': Negotiating Empire and Expanding the Fur Trade in the Interwar Period of the British Great Lakes," examines Askin's life after his removal to Michilimackinac to serve as a deputy-commissary to the British army. In the aftermath of Pontiac's War in 1763, John Askin's trade was in tatters, his reputation was ruined, and his creditors threatened his arrest. His position as deputy-commissar at Michilimackinac proved to be his only connection to the fur trade; it kept him connected to the important French and British merchants, traders, and suppliers in the Great Lakes fur trade. An old French farm and an Indian slave woman named Manette also helped Askin integrate himself into the French and Indian community of Michilimackinac and made himself indispensable to the British army. Askin's success helped him reconnect to the British merchant establishment, and allowed him to expand his trade into the upper Great Lakes, where he and his partners actively competed with

the Hudson Bay Company. Their actions presaged the evolution of the Northwest Company in the 1770s. This chapter demonstrates John Askin's success as a fur trader during the inter-war years and shows how his success was linked to the economic circumstances of the larger world of Atlantic commerce and to the face-to-face world of indigenous, French, and British interaction in the Great Lakes as the British sought to expand the trade and enhance its profitability. After years of near bankruptcy, John Askin became a profitable merchant and respectable member of the Great Lakes fur trade society.

Chapter three, "‘Perhaps He May One Day become My Son in Law’: A Mysterious Woman, an Indian Slave, and a French Wife in the British Great Lakes," examines John Askin's relationships with his Albany consort, his Panise, Manette, and his French wife, Marie Archange Barthe, as well as the children that resulted from these relationships. This chapter builds upon the previous analysis of John Askin's success in the Great Lakes fur trade, but pushes it into the realm of intimate encounter. This chapter argues that the relationships that Askin built with these women, and the children that resulted from these liaisons, created new links and ties that helped him establish his trade in new economically important regions of the Great Lakes. The process began at Albany shortly after Askin arrived from Northern Ireland. However, the mother of Catherine, Askin's oldest child, proved historically illusive, but like many "country" relationships, it tied him into the Indian communities of the Mohawk River Valley. Likewise, when John Askin removed to Michilimackinac, his purchase of a slave-woman named Manette, who happened to be the goddaughter of an established French merchant named Rene Bourassa, tied him into the French and Indian community. After

the success of his trading ventures in the upper Great Lakes, Askin married the daughter of a prominent French family at Detroit. This relationship provided Askin an important source of labor and familial connections that would allow him to expand and consolidate his trade in the Great Lakes to establish himself as one of the region's most important and wealthiest middlemen.

Chapter four, “Never Disappoint People in the Matter of Shipping Goods’: Managing the Fur Trade and Imperial Disruptions during the American Revolution,” describes the economic expansion of John Askin, his partners, and his family throughout the Great Lakes; his efforts placed him at the center of one of the most important and dominate trades in the region. This placement proved important as the fur trade in the 1770s grew increasingly complex and pushed deeper into North America; a process that required large sums of capital and organization. John Askin, at Michilimackinac, was well positioned to take advantage. After years of nurturing relationships with men like Isaac Todd and James McGill, establishing a marriage to Marie Archange Barthe and the promotion of her brothers to important posts, and the leveraging of his wealth into private ships, trading depots, and warehouses, John Askin established himself as one of the most dominant merchants at Michilimackinac. In essence, Askin stood at the center of a network of colleagues and kin that spread throughout the region. Askin used these connections to build depots, warehouses, and trading stations at strategic points along trade routes, which in return allowed him to move goods quickly, and with less cost. With the advent of the American Revolution, the violence and turmoil that rippled west into the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley disrupted the fur trade. However, with his network in place, Askin was able to

circumvent an economic crisis by relying heavily on his family, his colleagues, and his imperial connections. Askin's success aroused the jealousy of merchants and imperial officials alike.

Chapter five, "Mr. Askin...schemed...of having the Key of Canada in his Pocket': Imperial Conflicts and Fur Trade Controversies at Michilimackinac during the American Revolution," details the breakdown of John Askin's extensive Great Lakes fur and shipping trade in face of the imperial constraints created by the American Revolution. In the late 1770s and early 1780s, Askin watched, somewhat helplessly, as his ships were sunk and commandeered, fur returns diminished and supplies disrupted, and his carefully maintained network of colleagues were removed, or disbursed. With the promotion of Askin's close colleague, Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster, to Fort Detroit, Lt. Patrick Sinclair became the commandant of Michilimackinac; he proved jealous of his authority and desirous of reigning in the community's merchants and traders. This placed him in quick conflict with Askin. The connections of family, trade, and empire that John Askin employed since 1764 failed to overcome the strain of competing imperial interests. In trying to protect Michilimackinac from American machinations, Sinclair forced Askin to tear down his trading depots, arrested and detained Askin's brother-in-laws, removed Askin as his deputy-commissar, and forced him out of the community. After decades of establishing himself as a successful merchant and articulating a vision of empire that combined trade and family, Askin was once again in debt, alienated, and living in Detroit.

The final chapter, "It is Necessary to Provide against the Worst:' John Askin, Land Speculation, and American Expansion in the Great Lakes," examines Askin's life

after his removal from Michilimackinac in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Back in debt and his fur trade disrupted, John Askin faced an uncertain future in the 1780s and 1790s. From Detroit, Askin watched as the United States and Indians of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley struggled for mastery of the regions. Moreover, Great Britain refused to cede its western posts and supported Indian resistance to the United States' westward expansion. Ambiguity defined both regions. Askin saw a chance to profit and began to develop a series of extensive land speculations. This chapter shows how his efforts were connected to larger struggles in the Ohio Valley and how they represented an alternative understanding of westward expansion. While, in some ways no less exploitive than American efforts of conquest and dominance, John Askin's efforts represent a unique positioning of Indian interests within a matrix of imperial and national contestation, which can be tied to his experience as a fur trader and the important roles Indian peoples played in it. Like the fur trade, John Askin articulated a vision of the post-Revolutionary Ohio Valley that privileged face-to-face encounters that had made exchange possible. However, in face of United States recalcitrance, Indian defeat, and Great Britain's removal from the Great Lakes, his effort proved disastrous. By 1795, John Askin watched as the British army abandoned Detroit; the British regime ended, extinguishing his prominent position within it.

CHAPTER 1

‘MY FATHER WAS A SHOP KEEPER’: A SCOTS-IRISH MERCHANT AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN THE GREAT LAKES

“I was Born at Aughnacloy in the North of Ireland in 1739 that my Father was a Shop Keeper in that Town...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 [sic] called Michilimackinac & for these last thirteen Years past here [in Detroit.]”¹

John Askin to John Erskine, July 1 1793

“I thought it my duty to take this Step, not only to Justify myself to you, but also to prevent my living there being look'd [sic] upon either detrimental to the Public or Trade. For should any malicious means be taken to remove me from there, it would not only very much hurt my Circumstances, but [put] it out of my Power hereafter to do that Justice...[to my] Creditors which I always intended.”²

John Askin to Sir William Johnson, September 22, 1767

In the many lowlands and valleys of the Bann, Foyle, and Blackwater Rivers, the dark rich soil made for excellent farming, while the hills and peaks of the Sperrin Mountains, rough and rugged, were perfect for grazing cattle. In the late-sixteenth century, the lush landscape of Northern Ireland witnessed a series of bloody struggles between the English and Irish for its mastery; these conflicts led to the English

¹ John Askin to John Erskine (Detroit), 1 July 1793. Askin Papers, 1: 477 – 478. See unpublished document in: John Askin Papers, Box 2 in the Burton Historical Collections at the Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI. See also: John Gram, “John Askin at Michilimackinac,” unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram’s research has been instrumental in piecing together John Askin’s life in the early Great Lakes.

² John Askin to Sir William Johnson (Michilimackinac), 22 September 1767. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. 5, Edited by Alexander Flick, et al. (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1927), 693. For more on Sir William Johnson’s career and life, see: Julian Gwyn. “Sir William Johnson.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV; Arthur Pound, *Johnson of the Mohawks*. (New York: Macmillan, 1930); Milton Hamilton. *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American, 1715 – 1763*. (New York: Kennikat Press, 1976)

plantation of Ulster and the dispossession of thousands of Catholic Irish.³ These experiences served as a training ground for England's subsequent colonization efforts in North America in both technique and assumption.⁴ Over the next century, through wars, migrations, and tumults, Ulster would become a bastion of Protestant and British influence; its proximity to Scotland and England, decades of intermittent religious strife, the sprawling English Civil War, and an abundance of cheap land encouraged persistent Scottish and English migration.⁵ By 1650, the Scottish population of Northern Ireland was roughly ten thousand people, while the English population was around twenty thousand.⁶ Just thirty years later, in the 1670s, both populations grew to an astounding one hundred thousand Scots and two hundred thousand English settlers.⁷ By the time the migration stream diminished in the early eighteenth century, roughly one out of

³ For more on English colonial efforts in Northern Ireland see: Constantia Maxwell. "The Plantation in Ulster at the Beginning of James I's Reign." *The Sewanee Review* 31 (1923): 164 – 177; Philip S. Robinson. *The Plantation of Ulster: British Settlement in an Irish Landscape, 1600 – 1670*. (New York: St. Martin Press, 1984); *British Interventions in Early Modern Ireland*. Ciaran Brady, Jane Ohlmeyer, editors. (New York: Cambridge Press, 2004)

⁴ For more on Ireland's influence on English colonial efforts in North America see: Nicholas P. Canny. "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (1973): 575 – 598; Audrey Smedley. "'Race' and the Construction of Human Identity." *American Anthropologist* 100 (1998): 690 – 702; Eric Hinderaker, Peter C. Mancall. *At the Edge of Empire: The Backcountry in British North America*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

⁵ For a discussion of Scottish migration to Northern Ireland, see: M. Perceval-Maxwell. *The Scottish Migration to Ulster in the reign of James I*. (New York: Humanities Press, 1973); James G. Leyburn. *The Scots-Irish: A Social History*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962); R. J. Dickson. *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America, 1718 – 1775*. (London: Routledge, 1966)

⁶ R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America*, 3 - 4

⁷ R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America*, 3 - 4

every seven inhabitants of Ulster could reckon Scottish or English ancestry.⁸ Out of this massive flux of people, a family with the name Erskine arrived from Scotland, and settled in the County of Tyrone around the city of Strabane.⁹

Sometime after their arrival, the Erskine family changed their last names to Askin. Writing in the prime of his life in 1793, three generations removed from the change, John Askin wrote that he knew his “Grand father Spelt [sic] his name as [Erskine],” but could not explain the metamorphosis.¹⁰ It had been an Askin family tradition to reckon as a relative John Erskine, the Earl of Mar, whose estate rested in the north east of Scotland.¹¹ Known as “Bobbing John” for his propensity for shifting political allegiances, the Earl, after losing his governmental position with the ascension of King George I and the Whigs, led a rebellion against the British crown in 1715 in support of the Jacobite pretender, James Stuart.¹² The rebellion had been so disastrous that Louis XIV, the King of France, refused to let the pretender return. However, the French

⁸ R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America*, 3 - 4

⁹ Much of what historians know about John Askin’s life before his arrival in North America comes from a letter he sent to John Erskine in 1793, where Askin gives a brief history of his life in North America since his arrival, see: John Askin to John Erskine (Maryland), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478) (hereafter referred to as *Askin Papers*). See unpublished document in: John Askin Papers, Box 2. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 2).

¹⁰ John Askin to John Erskine (Detroit), 1 July 1793, *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See: John Askin, Box 2

¹¹ Milo M. Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1: 4. For more on Askin’s possible ancestor, John Erskine, the 22nd earl of Mar, see: Maurice Bruce. “The Duke of Mar in Exile, 1716 – 32.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 20 (1937): 61 – 82; W. L. Burn. “The Scottish Policy of John, Sixth Earl of Mar, 1707 – 1715.” *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 2 (1939), 439 – 448

¹² Maurice Bruce, “The Duke of Mar in Exile,” 61 - 63

king was kinder to Erskine; the Earl died in exile at Aix-la-Chapelle, or Aachen.¹³

James, John Askin's father, was the first to change his name in the early-eighteenth century, and perhaps he did so for a good reason.¹⁴ James was a shopkeeper in a region defined largely by rural agriculture, suggesting that the Askin family had a relatively higher social standing than did the average tenet-farming neighbors. He married a woman named Alice Rea, who grew up in the countryside around the village of Dungannon, a few miles east of James' home. Alice gave birth to five children: William, Robert, Mary, Sarah, and a boy named John, born in 1739.¹⁵

John Askin spent the first nineteen years of his life ensconced in the colonial patterns of northern Irish life, where he watched as absenteeism, rising rents, and the imperial dictates of Great Britain changed the social, political, and economic fabric of his community. Growing up, John Askin witnessed the antinomian processes of British governance in Northern Ireland pit imperial control against internal economic development. This tension contributed to persistent poverty and tremendous migratory pressures that pushed thousands upon thousands of Scots-Irish to North America, beginning in the early eighteenth century.¹⁶ When John Askin left his home in 1758 at

¹³ Maurice Bruce, "The Duke of Mar in Exile," 61 - 63

¹⁴ Maurice Bruce, "The Duke of Mar in Exile," 82

¹⁵ John Askin to John Erskine (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See: John Askin, Box 2

¹⁶ Scots-Irish, as label for these migrants, is fraught. It did not gain currency until the mid-nineteenth century, after the Potato Famine pushed millions of Catholic Irish to North America and spawned a nativist backlash. The term Scots-Irish differentiated an older Ulster Presbyterian Irish migration from the lower class new comers. Few of Askin's contemporaries would have responded to the term; they would have been "Irish," "Irish Presbyterians," or "Northern Irish." Likewise, the socio-ethnic-

the age of nineteen, he found employment as a trader in northern New York and became a sutler and supplier to the British Army during the Seven Years' War (1754 – 1763). His initial involvement in the newly opened Great Lakes fur trade between 1758 and 1762 ended in disaster. Poor partnerships and the complexities of the mixed French and Indian communities he encountered in the western posts pushed Askin towards insolvency in the short span of five years. This chapter argues that John Askin's earliest experiences in the Great Lakes region of North America impressed upon him an understanding of empire and trade that privileged complicity and collaboration, and stressed the importance of minimizing and controlling conflict, disruption, and uncertainty. His early experiences informed his subsequent behaviors in the 1760s, especially as John Askin began to fashion an interwoven understanding of empire and trade that would eventually expand to encompass and include his partners, his family, and his position within the British Empire.

The details of John Askin's childhood and adolescence are sparse to non-existent; he left only one written source about this period. Clearly, though, from his written record, his account and ledger books, and his personal library, John Askin grew up in a household that provided for his education.¹⁷ James Gordon, also born in

religious makeup of northern Ireland was complicated; Anglo-Irish, Scots-Irish, Catholic Irish, so it is difficult to speculate about the nature of Askin heritage. His close colleagues called him "Paddy" and certainly saw himself as "Irish" within the larger contextual affiliation to the British Empire. See: Maldwyn A. Jones, "The Scotch-Irish in British America," *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*. Bernard Bailyn, Philip D. Morgan, editors. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 284 - 289

¹⁷ See: "John Askin's Inventory for 1778," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. (Hereafter cited: John Askin Inventory, 1778). For a discussion of John Askin's book collection, see: Agnes Haigh Widder. "The John Askin Family Library: A Fur-Trading Family's Book." *The Michigan Historical Review* 33 (2007): 27 - 58. Widder makes the argument that John Askin's library "reveal[s]...intellectual and cultural interests, attributes that we do not traditionally associate with people

Northern Ireland and Askin's future business partner had "proceeded as far in the classics as Homer and the Greek Testament" by the age of 14, before being "sent to study physic [medicine]." ¹⁸ John Askin probably learned the merchant's trade at the hands of his father, James, a shopkeeper. Askin would have learned basic accounting, how to collect and reckon debts, and the importance of establishing a secure and honorable reputation. Moreover, the circle of acquaintances and associates that John Askin later kept in North America suggests that he was both comfortable and casual in genteel society; this required a set of skills, behaviors, and manners learned in Ireland. ¹⁹ At some point in his late childhood, or early adolescence, Askin lived with his maternal grandfather, John Rae, outside of Dungannon. ²⁰ In the fields of his grandfather's farm, John Askin, an astute, intelligent, and ambitious young man, began to realize that the social, economic, and political fabric of his community offered him little in the way of advancement. He would have heard it from the mouths of his relatives and friends, discussed and debated in the lively streets of Strabane, Belfast,

in the fur trade. Widder, "The John Askin Family Library," 27. The library suggests a solid middling education. Moreover, based on his written record, it seems that he arrived in North America with the ability to speak and write French, and he maintained intricate accounts and ledger books. These skills allowed him to find quick employment in the trading circles in northern New York.

¹⁸ Josephine Mayer. "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 17 (1936): 326. See also: Josephine Mayer, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 17 (1936): 423 – 439. This source provides some of the only solid insight into John Askin's early experiences and economic partnerships in the eastern Great Lakes fur trade after his arrival in North America.

¹⁹ For a discussion of genteel writing and manners in colonial North America, see: Danid S. Shields. *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997)

²⁰ Milo M. Quaife, editor. *Askin Papers*, 2 vols. Detroit: Detroit Historical Society, 1928 - 1931, 1:

and Londonderry, and articulated in print through pamphlets, broadsides and newspapers, that migration abroad offered greater personal advantage. By the time Askin made the decision to leave County Tyrone, each previous wave of migration precipitated a new one. North America had become a tangible and familiar, albeit idealized, landscape that numerous ship captains, colonial promoters, and even kith and kin advertized as a cure-all for Ulster's economic and social malaise.²¹

Ireland's colonial relationship with Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was plagued by mercantilist impulse and was economically insecure, which curtailed the development of several lucrative Irish industries that could have offered thousands of individuals like Askin a reason to remain. The Irish Woolen Act of 1699, for example, required Irish wool to be exported solely to England, which denied Irish manufacturers access to the growing and increasingly profitable North American markets. These restrictions retarded the growth of a stabilizing trade for the Irish economy.²² Linen, encouraged by Great Britain as a means of replacing wool, supplemented the relatively small profits of tenet farming. It became the prominent manufacture of Northern Ireland, but failed to overcome the rising rents Irish families

²¹ See: Patrick Griffin, *The People with No Name: Ireland's Ulster Scots, America's Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World, 1689 – 1764*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 91 - 93

²² For Great Britain's colonial influence on Northern Ireland's economy, see: W. Cunningham. "The Repression of the Woolen Manufacture in Ireland." *The English Historical Review* 1 (1886): 277 – 294; Francis G. James. "Irish Colonial Trade in the Eighteenth Century." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20 (1963): 574 – 584; James G. Leyburn. *The Scots-Irish: A Social History*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962); R. J. Dickson. *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America, 1718 – 1775*. (London: Routledge, 1966)

had to endure.²³ Increased competition for land, especially by the once marginalized and disposed Catholic Irish, drove rents higher and higher.²⁴ The widespread practice of absentee landholding, where the majority of land was held in ownership outside of Ireland meant that Scots-Irish and Irish productivity and rents were spent elsewhere, rather than being reinvested in the local economy.²⁵ Competition, poor harvests, rent racking, and linen slumps; these conditions mired the countryside in a perfect storm of rising poverty.²⁶ Those who could leave sold the leases to their dwindling land, collected whatever savings or surpluses they could muster, and migrated to North America.

Between 1731 and 1769, scholars estimate that roughly fifty to seventy thousand Scots-Irish immigrants made their way to North America.²⁷ Nearly two thousand men, women, and children left the ports of Londonderry and Belfast every year to endure the tedious three-month voyage to one of North America's principal settlements. The conditions of these small ships would have been cramped, but manageable for those on

²³ James G. Leyburn, *The Scots-Irish*, 157 - 168

²⁴ For more on Scots-Irish immigrant to North America and factors contributing to it, see: E.R.R. Green. "The 'Strange Humors' that Drove the Scotch-Irish to America, 1729." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 12, (1955), 113 – 123; James G. Leyburn. *The Scots-Irish: A Social History*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962); R. J. Dickson. *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America, 1718 – 1775*. (London: Routledge, 1966)

²⁵ See: Francis G. James, "Irish Colonial Trade in the Eighteenth Century." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20 (1963): 574 – 584

²⁶ See: E.R.R. Green, "The 'Strange Humors' that Drove the Scotch-Irish to America, 1729." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 1 (1955), 113 – 123

²⁷ R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America*, 58 - 59

board, except for instances when infectious and virulent diseases like smallpox broke out. A high number of these passengers, roughly four out of five, paid their own way across the Atlantic, while those who could not, indentured themselves for a fixed period.²⁸ James Gordon, like many of these immigrants, left home “with about 100 [pounds sterling] worth of Irish articles.”²⁹ Most disembarked in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Charleston; the majority of the Scots-Irish made their way into the backcountry regions of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas.³⁰ These multicultural and contested landscapes of English, Irish, Scots-Irish, Welsh, Scots, Germans, Africans, Delawares, Mingo, Iroquois, Catawbas, Cherokees, and Chickasaws offered the continuous stream of impoverished Scots-Irish settlers, at least, those willing to work for it, an abundance of agricultural and hunting opportunities-- a far cry from the chaotic, and destitute economy of Northern Ireland.³¹ However, a small stream of the Scots-Irish migrants eschewed the labor intensive farming and settlement practices required of these newly arrived settlers, and filtered into northern New York, around the Mohawk Valley corridor, where they became participants in the region's fur trade. Both John Askin and James Gordon choose this northern route instead of following their countrymen to the Appalachian backcountry settlements.

²⁸ R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America*, 87 - 89

²⁹ Mayer, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 327

³⁰ James E. Doan. "How the Irish and Scots Became Indians: Colonial Traders and Agents and the Southeastern Tribes." *New Hibernia Review* 3 (1999): 9-19

³¹ E.R.R. Green. “The ‘Strange Humors’ that Drove the Scotch-Irish to America, 1729.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 12 (1955): 113 – 123

After the death of his grandfather in 1758, when the nineteen-year-old John Askin left Northern Ireland never to return, he lost contact with his brothers and sisters. By the early 1790s, he feared they were either “Dead or so disperced [sic] that [he] could not Obtain any Satisfactory Account of them.”³² Thousands of miles of land and sea separated Askin from the hills and valleys of County Tyrone, but he never really left them. In North America, the young Askin would have encountered a familial landscape of empire, fraught economic processes, and colonized and colonizing peoples, but unlike County Tyrone, the Great Lakes offered unique economic and political opportunities for an industrious man.³³ In this new landscape, Askin achieved a degree of inclusion within the British Empire only dreamt of by his fellow Irish countrymen. Coming from a complicated and fraught colonial bastion of British sentiment, Askin built his new North American life in the service of the British Empire and its ascendant military. However, the unique and special circumstances of the Great Lakes – its French and Indian dominated social and economic processes – required particular adaptation and reinvention, and many of his British colleagues failed to respond, and suffered the very dire consequences. In 1815, nearly sixty years after his migration to North America, John Askin died in the comfort of his farm, outside of Sandwich, or what is today, Windsor, Ontario, across the river from the city of Detroit. He called his family’s farm “Strabane” after the ancestral home of his ancestors.

³² John Askin to John Erskin (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See: John Askin, Box 2

³³ See: Maldwyn A. Jones, “The Scotch-Irish in British America,” 295

John Askin left no record describing his arrival to North America. Were the seas rough and stormy, or calm and smooth? How long did the voyage last? Was it comfortable or crowded? It is impossible to tell. However, James Gordon, Askin's future business partner, left Northern Ireland in 1758, the same year as Askin, and he described his voyage as "very disagreeable and in some respects dangerous."³⁴ His wooden vessel, three weeks out of port, sprung a leak that the crew and passengers could not abate or stopper. To remedy the situation, Gordon writes that "every person on board,...about 40...were obliged to take their half hour at the [ship's] pumps."³⁵ Gordon and his shipmates had already begun to "despair of ever reaching land," when they encountered "a ship bearing a letter of Marque," which presented the passengers with a realistic possibility of being taken prisoner by the French.³⁶ However, they encountered a British ship, which helped the wounded vessel into the waters off Delaware. Sailing along the shore towards New York, both ships encountered another French privateer "who had made such Depredations on the Coasts" that it disrupted Pennsylvania's trade.³⁷ Seeing two British vessels, the French believed themselves to be over powered and fled from the two British vessels. For months, Gordon endured continuous fear and uncertainty, before arriving in the harbor of New York City. Both John Askin and James Gordon knew when they left their homes that North America was

³⁴ Mayer, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 327

³⁵ Gordon, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 327

³⁶ Gordon, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 327

³⁷ Gordon. "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 327 - 328

a contested imperial landscape. Perhaps, they experienced similar voyages, but both probably understood all too well the dangers they would face.

In the years and decades before both men left their home, the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley, a broad swath of land hemmed in by the Appalachian Mountains in the east and the Mississippi River to the west, became an imperially and economically contested region.³⁸ The Ohio Valley, particularly, remained outside of direct Euro-American control. The Iroquois Confederacy, situated in a long arch across northern New York, used their position between the French and British to speak on behalf of their clients, the Shawnee and Delaware, to control Euro-American access to the Ohio Valley. Both the Pennsylvanian Walking Purchase of 1737 and Treaty of Lancaster in 1744 substantiated Iroquois claims of suzerainty over the valley, but these treaties simultaneously alienated the Iroquois from the communities they presumed to speak for. Dispossessed, the Shawnee and Delaware migrated deeper in the Ohio Valley effectively severing Iroquois political control over them. Pennsylvanian traders and merchants moved west with their Shawnee and Delaware customers and became an important regional source for less costly British goods and manufactures. Moreover, these treaties encouraged massive land speculation in the region. By 1745, a group of wealthy Virginians formed the Ohio Company and began to chart lands for eventual sale.

Increased British activity in the Ohio Valley threatened what the French in

³⁸ For historical monographs that explore the military and economic contestation of French, British, and American empire in the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes, see: *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754 – 1815*. Edited David Curtis Skaggs, and Larry L. Nelson. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001); Eric Hinderaker. *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673 – 1800*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

Canada saw as an important link that connected the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River valley. The region's rivers and waterways connected the fur trade centers of the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes to the farming communities of the Illinois country and to the lower Mississippi Valley. In the upper country of the Great Lakes, the French built lasting and intimate political, social, and economic relationships with the Huron, Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi communities in the seventeenth century.³⁹ Because neither the French nor the refugee Indian communities could neither dominate nor expel the other, both sides were forced to cooperate with and accommodate each other. French priests, traders, and soldiers lived among the Great Lakes Indian communities, where face-to-face contact often created cultural misunderstandings in pursuit of common goals and trades.⁴⁰ The intimate and quotidian relationships that evolved from these misunderstandings developed into a workable system that placed the French in a mediatory position between many of the region's Indian communities.⁴¹ The French acquired the role of the fictive "Father" who mediated conflicts between his Indian "children," which organized the Great Lakes into an integrated element of the French empire.⁴² The processes of what historian Richard White called the "middle ground" had important implications for individuals and empires that sought to control, live, or operate in the region.

³⁹ See: Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

⁴⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 52

⁴¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground*, 52; 60

⁴² Richard White, *The Middle Ground*, 84

By the mid-eighteenth century, the Iroquois, who long played a pivotal role in North American imperial politics, declined along with their claims over the Ohio Valley. For the French or British, who both placed increased importance on the Ohio Valley, every intrusion by the other into the region began to magnify in importance. In response to increased British trading activity, a small French military expedition led by Pierre-Joseph Céloron journeyed into the valley in 1749 with the express purpose of dispersing British traders among the Delaware, Shawnee, and Miami.⁴³ The journey south from Montreal impressed upon Céloron that the extensive activity of Pennsylvanian traders and Virginian speculators had, in the span of a generation, turned the region's Indian populations into pro-British allies. At the village of Pickawillany, Céloron encountered an influential Miami chief named Memeskia, or Old Briton, who pointedly refused to heed the Frenchman's warning against maintaining his relationship with the British. The French expedition made it as far as the Allegheny River, on the fringe of Great Britain's Atlantic settlements, and returned to Montreal in the fall of 1749. Along his route, Céloron buried several lead plates that proclaimed France's hegemony over the Ohio Valley

These lead plates confirmed prevailing British notions about France's rather ephemeral land claims in North America. John Mitchell, a Virginian botanist and cartographer, wrote that the French “pretended[ed] to claim such a vast extent of [North America]...merely by means of a parcel of strolling Indian traders” who “live[d] a lawless

⁴³ For more on Céloron's journey in to the Ohio Valley, see: George A. Wood. “Céloron de Blainville and French Expansion into the Ohio Valley.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 9 (1923): 302 – 319

life among the savages, without any settled abode, or habitation.”⁴⁴ Brazenly ignoring Céloron's warning and French claims, British merchants and speculators from Virginia and Pennsylvania continued to exploit the territorial ambiguities of the Ohio River Valley. George Croghan, a Scots-Irish migrant to Pennsylvania, opened a trade depot on the Sandusky River; he traded with the Mingo, or the Iroquois of the Ohio Valley, and openly vied with the French for the Great Lakes' Indian trade.⁴⁵ Croghan established the largest trading post in the Ohio Valley at Pickawillany and he trade British goods among distant Shawnee, Miami, and Delaware villages. The French responded to Croghan's audacity by placing a bounty on his head, but to little avail. At this same time, Christopher Gist, an experienced Maryland surveyor, explored and charted the land around the Monongahela and the Ohio Rivers for the Ohio Company.⁴⁶ In the spring of 1752, both Gist and Croghan convened an Indian council at the Mingo village of Logstown, in the western fringe of Pennsylvania, where they acquired permission to build a permanent and fortified trading post at the confluence of the Monongahela and Ohio rivers.

⁴⁴ John Mitchell. *The Contest in America between Great Britain and France with its Consequences and Importance*. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1965), 200 – 201. Mitchell's map played an important role establishing the boundaries of the British Empire in North America in the late eighteenth century.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed discussion of George Croghan, see: A. T. Volwiler. "George Croghan and the Westward Movement, 1741 – 1782. *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 46 (1922): 273 – 311; Nicholas Wainwright, *George Croghan, Wilderness Diplomat*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959). For a narrative of Croghan's activities in the Ohio Valley in the aftermath of Pontiac's Rebellion, see: George Croghan. *George Croghan's Journal of his Trip to Detroit in 1767*. Edited by Howard H. Peckham. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939)

⁴⁶ For more on Christopher Gist and his activities in the Ohio Valley, see: David B. Trimble. "Christopher Gist and Settlement on the Monongahela, 1752 – 1754." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 63 (1955): 15 – 27; David B. Trimble. "Christopher Gist and the Indian Service in Virginia, 1757 – 1759." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 64 (1956): 143 - 165

As the British met with the Mingo, Delaware and Shawnee at Logstown, Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade, the son of a French trader, who married the sister of an influential L'Arbre Croche Ottawa Chief named Nissowaque, gathered a force of roughly three hundred French and Indian soldiers and warriors to expel the British from the Ohio Valley.⁴⁷ Traveling south from Detroit, they made their way toward Pickawillany, the village of Old Briton, who previously spurned French overtures. When they arrived in June, Langlade and his men found the Miami village virtually deserted; most of the Miami men were away hunting and the women were in the fields that surrounded the village. They captured the women captive and proceeded to attack the two-dozen Miami and British defenders for six hours before forcing their surrender. In the battle's aftermath, Charles de Langlade made an example of those who resisted the French and colluded with the British; they killed a wounded British merchant, cut out his heart and ate it. Old Briton, the Miami Chief who worked with Croghan to turn Pickawillany into one of the largest fur trade centers in the Ohio Valley, was boiled and had his heart eaten. In one quick swoop, Langlade achieved what Céloron failed to do, the expulsion of the British and the reassertion of France's alliance with the Ohio Valley Indians. To ensure France's continued control, the new governor-general of New France, the marquis de Duquesne, established a series of forts designed to hem in the British.

These forts galvanized the colonies of Pennsylvania and Virginia against the

⁴⁷ For more on Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade, see: Paul Trap, "Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IV; Michael A. McDonnell, "Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade: Warrior, Soldier, and Intercultural 'Window' on the Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes." In *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754 – 1814*. Edited by David Curtis Skaggs, et al. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001). Charles de Langlade played role in John Askin's trade at Michilimackinac; Langlade and Askin maintained kinship ties to Rene Bourassa, and both were well respected and useful to Captain Arent Schuyler De Peyster, the British commandant of Michilimackinac in the 1770s.

French. By the fall of 1753, the lieutenant governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, sent a young major named George Washington with an attachment of militia to direct the French to leave the region immediately. Led by Christopher Gist, Washington and his men made their way to Logstown, where they convinced the Mingo chief Tanaghrisson to accompany them to Fort Le Boeuf.⁴⁸ Once there, Washington delivered a letter to the French commandant ordering their withdrawal; it was courteously and unambiguously refused.⁴⁹ While Washington met with the French, Dinwiddie wasted no time sending a small force of fifty Virginians to fortify the confluence of the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers-- the long coveted site of British expansion into the Ohio Valley. By January 1754, Washington returned to Virginia, where he reported to the governor the extent of France's presence in the Ohio Valley by detailing their plans for the construction of a new fort. A few months later, in the rainy month of April, six hundred French soldiers forced the Virginians to flee from the river junction, and began building Fort Duquesne.

George Washington learned about the construction of the fort from the retreating Virginians. Undeterred, he pushed towards Fort Duquesne with his ally Tanaghrisson; they encountered a small French scouting party under the command of Joseph Coulon de Jumonville. In May 1754, Washington and Tanaghrisson ambushed the French party, killing most of the men. A few weeks later, in July, a much larger force of French

⁴⁸ For a biography of Tanaghrisson, see: William A. Hunter. "Tanaghrisson." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. III

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the roles George Washington played in the beginnings of the Seven Years War, see: David I. Bushnell Jr. "Washington and the French, 1753 – 1754." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24 (1916): 175 – 188; Stuart Leibiger. "'To Judge of Washington's Conduct': Illuminating George Washington's Appearance of the World Stage." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 107 (1999): 37 – 44

soldiers supported by Shawnee, Delaware, and Mingo warriors forced the retreating Washington to surrender. In the wake of these two small skirmishes and decades of continued hostilities in the Ohio Valley, a much larger and transformative military struggle developed between France and Great Britain as the Seven Years' War engulfed large sections of Europe, Asia, and the Americas in imperial violence and bloodshed. Following Washington's defeat, the British army in North America blundered from defeat to defeat. In 1755, an army under General Edward Braddock was destroyed outside of Fort Duquesne by a much smaller French and Indian force. Between 1755 and 1758, poor leadership and planning cleared the way for French victory. Under the command of General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, France captured important British fur trade centers at Fort Oswego and Fort William Henry and thwarted several invasions of Canada.

It is hard to know what, if anything, John Askin knew about the beginnings of the Seven Years' War and the controversy over the Ohio Valley as a fifteen year old in County Tyrone. Since James Gordon left Northern Ireland "at the height of the French War" knowing what was in store, it is possible to suppose that John Askin did too.⁵⁰ Both men left Northern Ireland in 1758, just as Great Britain finally evolved a successful military strategy for dealing with North America based on overwhelming numbers of professional troops and colonial militias. The British faced a diminished French army that was ill supplied, and unsupported by their Indian allies, who suffered repeated

⁵⁰ Gordon, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 327

smallpox epidemics.⁵¹ As such, the French were put on the defensive as the British pushed into Canada and captured Louisburg. The year that Gordon and Askin set sail the British captured Fort Duquesne. Disembarking at the ports of New York, the young Scots-Irish immigrants arrived in North America at the end of the war. The British military was ascendant, and the interior of the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes region of North America, long contested and closed, was opened to British traders.

After months at sea, John Askin disembarked from his ship and made his way to Albany, where he found employment as a clerk with the trading firm of Kennedy and Lyle.⁵² While so many of his compatriots moved to the back country regions of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas to cut trees and build farms, Askin sought out the center of Great Britain's North American fur trade. Albany, settled by the Dutch in 1614, was at the confluence of two important and strategic routes of movement in North America-- in the North, the Hudson River led through Lake Champlain to Canada, and in the West, the Mohawk Valley led to the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley.⁵³ First the Dutch, then subsequently the British, who gained control of Albany in 1664, found

⁵¹ For a discussion of small pox and its effect on military forces in North America in the eighteenth century, see: Elizabeth A Fenn. *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001)

⁵² John Askin to John Erskin (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478. See: John Askin, Box 2; Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 333. For more on Albany’s preeminent position in the British North American fur trade, see: Helen Broshar. “The First Push Westward of the Albany Traders.” *The Mississippi Valley History Review* 7 (1920): 228 – 241; Arthur H. Buffington. “The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 8 (1922): 327 -366

⁵³ Broshar, “The First Push Westward of the Albany Traders,” 228; Buffington, “The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion,” 328

themselves engaged in the economic and imperial contestation of the fur trade with the French and their Indian allies.⁵⁴ The powerful Iroquois Confederacy situated between the British in New York and the French along the St. Lawrence River controlled and mediated Albany's access to the fur rich Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley. Unlike the French, who received their furs directly from the Indian nations of the western Great Lakes, the Anglo-Dutch merchants of Albany were often forced to operate through Iroquois middlemen. Access to British goods fostered Iroquois dominance in both the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley and simultaneously allied Great Britain to the Iroquois Confederacy throughout the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries.

Imperial rivalry shaped the participation of Albany-based merchants in the North American fur trade. Unlike the French, whose traders developed lasting familial ties among the Indian communities they traded with, the Anglo-Dutch often failed to establish these intimate and quotidian connections in the west. Moreover, the Albany community also resisted the development of new British posts or forts that would threaten their dominant position in the fur trade. This strategy generally succeeded.⁵⁵ Albany successfully vied with the French in Montreal for furs. Cheaper British goods openly competed with the more costly French ones and drove western Indians to Albany to trade. These Indians also established political connections with the Iroquois, which encouraged an on-going and illicit trade between French merchants and their British

⁵⁴ Buffington, "The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion," 328

⁵⁵ Buffington, "The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion," 328

counterparts.⁵⁶ Before 1763, furs accounted for roughly 20 percent of New York City's exports; they were valued at 2,169 pounds sterling or \$868,000 in modern currency.⁵⁷ From their privileged position in northern New York, Albany merchants developed a much more extensive and highly profitable trade. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Albany faced increased competition from western British posts like Oswego, which traded directly with the Indians of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley and circumvented the Iroquois. Thus, at the end of the Seven Years' War, a cadre of younger traders and merchants, often newly arrived from Ireland, began to abandon the Iroquois and the narrow confines of the Mohawk valley for the western Great Lakes. These newly arrived young men transformed the limited and somewhat provincial Albany fur trade into a continental enterprise.⁵⁸

In 1759, John Askin entered into a partnership with James Gordon to supply the British army operating in northern New York that drew them to the Great Lakes.⁵⁹ The two young Scots-Irishmen drew their provisions from the firm of John Macomb, who was a fellow Scots-Irish trader.⁶⁰ Macomb left Northern Ireland three years before Askin and

⁵⁶ Buffington, "The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion," 349 - 351

⁵⁷ Walter S. Dunn, Jr. *Opening New Markets: The British Army and the Old Northwest*. (London: Praeger, 2002), 45

⁵⁸ The published primary source collection - *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, W. Stewart Wallace, editor. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934) - offer an interesting window into Scots-Irish experience in the Great Lakes.

⁵⁹ Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 392; Gordon, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." 333. For more about the life of John Macomb and his son, Alexander, see: Milo Quaife, ed. "Detroit Biographies: Alexander Macomb." *Burton Historical Collections Leaflet* 10 (1931), 1 - 16; 3 - 5

⁶⁰ John Macomb was a distant relative of James Gordon; Mayer, "The Reminiscences of James

Gordon, migrated with his family and left behind a successful business in Belfast.⁶¹

The middle-aged Macomb established his new trade in Albany, where he developed a brisk and profitable business supplying British officers with such luxury goods as books, wines, snuff, and fine foods, items too scarce or too extravagant to be acquired through traditional military supply channels.⁶² Under Macomb's tutelage, Askin and Gordon began supplying the troops under General Jeffrey Amherst; who was then engaged in dual campaigns against French fortifications at Ticonderoga and Niagara.⁶³ Unlike General James Abercrombie's defeat in 1758 at the battle of Carillon, where a force of French and Indians defeated a British army four times its size, Amherst's campaign proved successful. These victories, combined with General James Wolfe's victory on the Plains of Abraham outside of Quebec, brought the slow unraveling of the French regime in North America.

Askin began his trade as a sutler, an individual who followed an army into the field and supplied goods and merchandise, and would spend the next twenty-one years of his life as a British military supplier. Following Amherst's successful campaigns, John Macomb, in May of 1760, won a lucrative contract to outfit the rangers of Major Robert

Gordon," 333. Other scholars have contended that Askin and Gordon were also relatives, see: Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 392. However, John Askin notes that besides Richard Rhea, a relative living in New York City, he knew of no other kin in North America. See: John Askin to John Erskin (Detroit), 1 July 1793. *Askin Papers*, 1: 477 – 478 and John Askin, Box 2

⁶¹ Milo Quaife, ed. "Detroit Biographies: Alexander Macomb." *Burton Historical Collections Leaflet* 10 (1931), 3

⁶² Josephine Jane Mayer. "Major Robert Rogers, Trader." *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 15 (1934), 392

⁶³ Mayer, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 333

Rogers.⁶⁴ John Askin and James Gordon served as the ranger's sutlers; the two men followed the British army to Montreal and the western posts of Detroit and Michilimackinac. Askin and Gordon had the good fortune to supply one of the flashiest and most successful provincial officers in the Seven Years' War, Major Robert Rogers, who was born in western Massachusetts in 1731 to Scots-Irish parents and rose to prominence in the early years of the war in skirmishes with the French and Indians in northern New York.⁶⁵ As a testament to his military prowess and regard, Rogers forced the surrender of Fort Detroit in 1760.⁶⁶ These western victories placed the Major in an excellent position to exploit the newly opened fur trade. In fact, even before the war ended, he silently partnered with Lt. Colonel Edward Cole, a close acquaintance of the influential British officer and Indian diplomat, Sir William Johnson, and Cezar Cormick of Albany.⁶⁷ The partnership focused its activities around Detroit; Cole collected and packaged furs, shipped them to Niagara, and sold them at Albany and New York.⁶⁸ With the surrender of the Governor General of Canada and the capitulation of Montreal,

⁶⁴ Mayer, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 426 - 428

⁶⁵ For more on Major Robert Rogers' life and career during the Seven Years' War, see: C.P. Stacey. "Robert Rogers." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV; Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 388 – 397; *Treason at Michilimackinac? The Proceedings of a General Court Martial Held at Montreal in October 1768 for the Trial of Major Robert Rogers*. David A. Armour, editor. (Mackinac Island: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1972)

⁶⁶ Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 389

⁶⁷ This partnership drew their supplies from North York City. See: "Drafts Notes Receipts [sic] & Bonds Paid Commencing February the 11th 1761 and Ending July 17th 1762," Box 21, John Askin Manuscripts, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter referred to as: Askin's Receipt Book.) See also: Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 392. See also: Gram manuscript

⁶⁸ Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 390

the hostilities between France and Great Britain ended, and the western trade began to expand and escalate.

John Askin and Major Robert Rogers also became partners in this trade.⁶⁹ This was a particular boon for the ambitious Askin, as Rogers' name carried tremendous cachet in the region. As Askin became familiar and active in the western trade, he learned the importance of interpersonal connections in the facilitation of his business. By March 1761, the partnership between Askin and Rogers blossomed, while the one between Rogers and Cole teetered towards collapse. Rogers gave Askin his power of attorney to collect debts from Cole, while the erstwhile sutler and homesick James Gordon, who “continued in Albany unemployed,” became the partnership's clerk at the end of the year.⁷⁰ Gordon received this clerkship after chasing Cole from Detroit to Philadelphia by land to collect another debt for Rogers.⁷¹ What paltry business remained from Cole and Rogers fell into John Askin's hands; he collected peltry in Detroit and sold them at Albany. Between 1761 and 1763, Askin's new responsibilities kept him in perpetual motion; he traveled from Albany to New York, New York to Detroit, Detroit to Niagara, and Niagara back to Albany seasonally to settle his accounts, manage his trade, and collect his supplies.⁷² In Newport, Rhode Island, John Askin witnessed the dissolution of Rogers and Cole, and those involved received a return of

⁶⁹ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 429

⁷⁰ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 429

⁷¹ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 429

⁷² See: John Askin Receipt Book. Also: Gram Manuscript

975 pound on their investment.⁷³ The collapse of this partnership set the stage for the failure of another.

As the Seven Years' War came to a close in 1760, British merchants like John Askin, James Gordon, and others, quite often of Scots-Irish ancestry, moved into the Great Lakes and the upper Ohio Valley, where they planned to enter the lucrative western trade. Lured by a region "richer in [furs] than any other part of the world," these men encountered a French and Indian world they often misunderstood, but where they hoped to profit.⁷⁴ Following the fall of Quebec and Montreal in 1760 and the capitulation of the western posts, John Askin and others encountered a restrictive trade policy which forced these men to negotiate with reluctant imperial officials like General Jeffrey Amherst and Thomas Gage in order to operate in the Great Lakes. The reluctance was justified; the animosity caused by the Seven Year's War still festered and seethed in the Indian and fur-trade communities and Indian populations and fur traders remained hostile to British interlopers. However, this animosity failed to stop intrepid merchants like John Askin, who aspired to trade in a region where he was long denied access and was swept along by the false complacency of his military connections. Askin ignored precaution and safety out of ignorance or hubris, and brought supplies in Albany and headed west.

One of the earliest British merchants into the region, Alexander Henry, born in

⁷³ Mayer, "Major Roger Rogers," 393

⁷⁴ Alexander Henry. *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760 – 1776*. Milo Quaife, editor. (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1921), 11. For more on Henry's life and trade, see: David Armour. "Alexander Henry." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV; Majorie Gordon Jackson. "The Beginning of British Trade at Michilimackinac." *Minnesota History* 11 (1930): 231 – 270

New Jersey in 1739, and who would become a close acquaintance to Askin, traveled to the former French post of Michilimackinac dressed as the “Canadians [who] pursue the trade” and mimicked their “appearance and manners” to circumvent the wrath of the Indians.⁷⁵ He understood the dangers as well as the benefits of being British in the Great Lakes in the early 1760s. Henry wrote that “the hostility of the Indians was exclusively against the English,” and moved cautiously.⁷⁶ Decades of close and intimate interaction between French men and the men and women of Indian communities created ties of kinship that could not easily be disrupted or displaced by new arrivals.⁷⁷ Henry, dressed like a French trader, appreciated the outward manifestations of these deeply felt relationships, but failed, like so many others, to appreciate or participate in the social and cultural processes that made possible the exchange of furs for trade goods. Superficial alteration to dress and cosmetic changes could not interrupt the intimate ties of the Great Lakes communities and the ever-important networks of kin that determined exchange patterns.⁷⁸ Shortly after Henry and Askin’s arrival in Michilimackinac and Detroit respectively, they experienced first hand the terror and havoc created by their exclusion from these fur trade communities. Pontiac’s Rebellion impressed upon these men the importance of being part of this French and Indian world.

⁷⁵ Henry, *Alexander Henry’s Travels and Adventure*, 34 - 35

⁷⁶ Henry, *Alexander Henry’s Travels and Adventure*, 34

⁷⁷ See: Susan Sleeper-Smith. *Indian Women and French: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 5 – 7

⁷⁸ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French*, 5 - 7

To the British commander-in-chief, Jeffrey Amherst, the Indian peoples of the Great Lakes were simply the conquered subjects of the British Empire, no more, no less.⁷⁹ With the French defeat and the end of the war, the Amherst believed that the Indians could do little but accept British mastery. In February 1761, Amherst developed an Indian policy he believed would protect Indian lands, create a fair system of western trade, free from the excesses of alcohol, and reduce British administrative costs in the Great Lakes.⁸⁰ To achieve these aims, he curtailed the French and Indian practice of gift giving, except when such gifts were earned or desperately needed. Amherst equated these gifts with “bribes.”⁸¹ Warned by his subordinates about the social and political importance of this practice, Amherst ignored these warnings and pushed forward, arrogantly believing that the Indians lacked the power or will to effectively resist British military might.⁸² Moreover, the policy to curb gifts occurred at the same time as the British began to restrict the trade of gunpowder to Indians, and the military began to occupy former French posts and stridently demanded the return of British captives.⁸³

However, to the Indians of the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley, the British, by essentially abrogating the middle ground practices of their former French “fathers,”

⁷⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 256 – 257. For a biography of Jeffery Amherst, see: C.P. Stacey. “Jeffery Amherst.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IV

⁸⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 259

⁸¹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 257 – 25

⁸² White, *The Middle Ground*, 258

⁸³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 259

showed themselves as greedy interlopers who sought only Indian subjugation.⁸⁴ As the British moved into the region, every British action seemed to validate and reinforce Indian suspicions and fears. The British promised, for example, to leave the Ohio Valley, but they built a new fort instead.⁸⁵ British colonials filtered into the region intent on remaining. Years of fighting strangled the flow of goods into the Great Lakes and the Ohio; the Indians believed the British would reopen the trade. Instead, new British merchants trafficked in rum and traded for profit, which ignored, according to historian Richard White “just price and exchange as a means of securing friendship.”⁸⁶ The French practice of feeding Indians and repairing their weapons at council meetings became a tedious and fraught task negotiated with the British commandants. Many of the practices that defined and encouraged cordial relationship between the French and Indians were openly ignored, contested, or mocked by British officials, merchants, and soldiers in the region.⁸⁷ These deteriorating relationships led to murder and theft that further antagonized and disrupted British and Indian relationships.⁸⁸ Beginning in 1761, wampum war belts to attack the British began to circulate among Indian communities in

⁸⁴ Gregory Evans Dowd. *War under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, and the British Empire*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 78

⁸⁵ White, *The Middle Ground*, 259 - 260

⁸⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 264

⁸⁷ White, *The Middle Ground*, 264 - 266

⁸⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 265 – 268

the Great Lakes, the Ohio Valley, and the Illinois Country.⁸⁹ By 1763, years of imperial arrogance and mismanagement finally came to a bloody and violent head outside of Fort Detroit.

In the sweltering heat of August 1763, John Askin and James Gordon left Albany for Detroit with three boats laden with goods.⁹⁰ The two traders began their nearly seven-hundred mile journey by heading west on the Mohawk River to the portage of Fort Stanwix. Askin, who “was pretty much of a schemer,” wrapped fifteen ten-gallon kegs “filled with the best of spirits” in “Bales of Blankets and other coarse clothes” to elude detection. He planned to dilute the liquor at Detroit and sell it for an incredible, albeit illegal profit.⁹¹ The two men hoped to secret the one hundred fifty gallons of contraband across Lake Oneida to the open waters of Lake Ontario. They would portage Niagara Falls down to Lake Erie, which would take them easily into Detroit. In 1765, Sir William Johnson estimated that a similar voyage from Schenectady to Detroit cost roughly 442.19 sterling, or \$55,811 in labor, goods, and wages.⁹² However, halfway between Oswego and Niagara, a boat delivered them “News of the general Attack made by the Indians headed by Pontiac [sic] on the Western Posts.”⁹³ They

⁸⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 271 - 277

⁹⁰ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 430

⁹¹ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 430

⁹² Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 57. For a biography of Sir William Johnson, see: Julian Gwyn. “Sir William Johnson.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV

⁹³ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 430

waited, “cooped up,” in the wet and cramped lowlands between Fort Niagara and Lake Erie. From September to November, Askin and Gordon waited for favorable news from the west, battled sicknesses of “Auge and Fever,” which reduced Gordon to almost “a skeleton,” and they contemplated failure.⁹⁴

Unbeknownst to either man, in May 1763, the Ottawa Chief Pontiac laid siege to Fort Detroit. In the years before the rebellion, the Delaware prophet Neolin, who preached a nativist message calling upon Indians to reject European goods and behaviors, influenced Pontiac.⁹⁵ The news spread quickly throughout Indian country. The Potawatomi captured Fort St. Joseph on May twenty-fifth. Then the Indian communities in the Illinois country first captured Fort Miami and then Fort Ouitenon on the Wabash on June first. A day later, during a game of *baaga'adowe*, a group of Ojibwa and Sauk used a stray ball to capture Fort Michilimackinac and its British population. Hearing the tumult, Alexander Henry ran to his window and “saw a crowd of Indians within the fort furiously cutting down and scalping every Englishman they found.”⁹⁶ Henry fled his house and begged the former French commandant, Charles de

⁹⁴ Gordon, “The Reminiscences of James Gordon,” 430

⁹⁵ For more on Pontiac’s Rebellion, see: Francis Parkman. *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Gregory Evans Dowd. *War under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, and the British Empire*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). For a discussion of Neolin, pan-Indian revivalism, and its influence on Pontiac’s Rebellion, see also: Gregory Evans Dowd. *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1746 – 1815*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 33 – 37. Anthony F. C. Wallace’s *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* played an important role fostering modern historical discussions concerning notions of Indian spiritual revivals. Wallace, Anthony F. C. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. (New York: Knopf, 1973)

⁹⁶ Henry, *Alexander Henry’s Travels and Adventure*, 79. Lacrosse is a modern incarnation of *baaga'adowe*.

Langlade, to protect him from the Indians. The Frenchman intimated that he could not, and all seemed lost, except for the intervention of a Panise, who hid Henry from the Ojibwas and Sauks.⁹⁷ Discovered by the Langlade family and then the Ojibwa, Henry, along with the other British merchants and soldier who survived, were transported to their village several miles south of the fort. Once there, Henry waited for death, having been told that his captors intended to “make broth” of the captives.⁹⁸ To symbolize their threats, the Ojibwa offered Henry bread cut with the same bloody knives used to kill his countrymen.

Under guard, Alexander Henry survived his captivity by luck and circumstance as an Indian named Wawatam redeemed Henry by calling the Englishman his brother, testifying that Henry was neither slave nor “broth,” but kin. Historian Susan Sleeper-Smith has written that only those individuals “willing to function within the established social system proved the most successful, while ignorance of or blatant disregard for social processes produced disastrous results.”⁹⁹ A year before the attack, Wawatam came to Henry's trading house and told him about a vision he experienced during

⁹⁷ Henry, *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventure*, 80 – 87. “Pani”, “Panis”, “Panise”, while referring to the Pawnee, an Indian community living west of the Great Lakes, became a blanket term for all Indian slaves, regardless of their origins.

⁹⁸ Henry, *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventure*, 98. For a discussion of the role of “white Indians” and Euro-American captivity, see: James Axtell. “The White Indians of Colonial America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 55 – 88. For the diplomatic value of Indian slavery, especially in terms of “broth,” see: Brett Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003), 781 – 783

⁹⁹ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Woman and French Men*, 72

mortification and fasting, which told him to adopt an Englishman.¹⁰⁰ Unable to refuse this request, the two men became brothers following the exchange of gifts. However, the implication of such a relationship did not weigh heavily on Henry, because “Twelve months had...elapsed since the...incident, and [he] had almost forgot the person of [his] brother” until Wawatam returned from his winter's hunt to warn Henry of the “bad news” of “evil birds.”¹⁰¹ Warnings ignored led to violence and confusion. Luckily, Henry's own ignorance served the antinomian purpose of condemnation and redemption; a lesson about kinship British merchants, like Henry and Askin, would never forget. The British merchants who found a way to “penetrate the kin networks that controlled the western Great Lakes fur trade” discovered avenues from which to navigate this complex social landscape.¹⁰²

The deliberate violence of Pontiac's Rebellion impelled British officials in the Great Lakes to reconsider and ultimately abandon Jeffrey Amherst's disruptive policy towards the Indian policy and the fur trade. After the war, officials like Sir William Johnson and General Thomas Gage sought to restrict mercantile activity to the select posts of Michilimackinac and Detroit. This policy hoped to centralize the trade and restrict British movement and habitation among the Indians in the manner of the New York trade. When the fur trade failed to become profitable, the policy was rescinded in 1767, but not before it assured the French an intermediary role between the British and

¹⁰⁰ Henry, *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventure*, 73 - 75

¹⁰¹ Henry, *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventure*, 74

¹⁰² Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 63

their Indian allies and kin.¹⁰³ Moreover, the French maintained a vibrant and illegal trade at Montreal, Niagara, and Toronto that persistently frustrated British officials and merchants and their plans for the region. Pontiac's Rebellion prompted a return to the behaviors and processes deemed too costly and unnecessary by Amherst; it forced British traders and merchants, who wished to take part in the fur trade to accommodate themselves to the customs and practices of these French and Indian communities.

While Askin and Gordon waited outside of Niagara, the weather turned cold, and the partnership of John Askin, Major Robert Rogers, and James Gordon spiraled towards complete and utter bankruptcy and failure. The illicit goods acquired from Albany merchants never made their way to Detroit; the investment was never recouped. Pontiac's Rebellion eventually abated, but the partnership collapsed in 1764. Overcoming his sickness in late November 1763, Gordon returned to Albany "mustered up from the remains of [his] shattered fortune" and left for Ireland; he would return a few years later, free from blame and responsibility for the company's failure.¹⁰⁴ In March 1765, Major Robert Rogers, the silent partner of Cole and Rogers and Askin and Rogers, whose prestige and connections introduced the young Askin to the important posts of the Great Lakes, left North America for Great Britain to press for a civil or military command.¹⁰⁵ He also fled numerous creditors; Rogers would return a few years later only to face charges of treason after a disastrous and fraught tenure as Fort

¹⁰³ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 63

¹⁰⁴ Gordon, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon," 430 - 431

¹⁰⁵ Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 395 - 397

Michilimackinac's commander.¹⁰⁶ Only John Askin remained in North America after the events of 1763. The debt he incurred through his partnership and his early endeavors in the Great Lakes trade burdened him until 1771.¹⁰⁷ A humbled John Askin wrote to Sir William Johnson in 1767, after removing to Michilimackinac, "to Justify" himself to Johnson "to prevent [his living at the post]" to be "look'd upon [as] either detrimental to the Public or Trade."¹⁰⁸

In the span of his first five years in North America, John Askin went from ambitious immigrant to the verge of bankruptcy and economic ruin. Pontiac's Rebellion destroyed his Great Lakes trade, his partnership with James Gordon, and Major Robert Rogers, and alienated him from creditors in Albany and Schenectady. He owed these men roughly seven thousand pounds or nearly a million dollars in today's currency.¹⁰⁹ It was a staggering sum for the twenty-four year old Askin to shoulder, especially as he watched both Rogers and Gordon flee back to Great Britain, escaping the debt. With his trade and reputation in ruins, John Askin experienced his North American low-point; it would take him nearly ten years before he would crawl out of debt. Instead of remaining in northern New York, menaced by hostile creditors, John Askin traveled west

¹⁰⁶ Mayer, "Major Robert Rogers," 395 – 397

¹⁰⁷ John Askin Discharged from Debt (Albany), 24 December 1771, *Askin Papers*, 1: 43 – 45. See unpublished document in: John Askin Papers, Box 1. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin Box 1)

¹⁰⁸ John Askin to Sir William Johnson (Albany), 22 September 1767, *Sir William Johnson Papers*, 693

¹⁰⁹ John Askin Receipt Book. See also: Gram Manuscript

to Detroit, where his connections to Sir William Johnson and the British military secured for him a lifeline to the Great Lakes fur trade. From Detroit, he would travel north to Michilimackinac with a contingent of British troops to reassert Great Britain's imperial presence in the region following the 1763 rebellion. As a former sutler, John Askin shepherded the military's supplies northward to Michilimackinac, where he would stay and serve as the deputy commissar to the post. In 1764, John Askin went from a fur trader to a supply clerk; a demotion, but a demotion that would also center him at one of the most important fur trade centers of the Great Lakes.

A major conclusion can be drawn from the first five years of John Askin's life in North America, which established the parameters for his experience in the Great Lakes under the British Empire: British imperial policy was often detrimental to traders and merchants in the Great Lakes. "Cooped up" outside of Niagara, John Askin watched helplessly as British Indian policy fueled the flames of Pontiac's Rebellion, which came close to capturing every major British military garrison in the west. Following the collapse of his partnership with Major Robert Rogers and James Gordon, John Askin would use his position as deputy commissar at Michilimackinac to obfuscate, ignore, and modify imperial policies that rehabilitated his reputation and allowed him to reestablish himself within the fur trade. His efforts would eventually involve family members, colleagues, military officials, and other British commissaries.

John Askin arrived in the Great Lakes region of North America along with the British Empire, and his life and experiences illustrate what would become a persistent struggle throughout the tenure of the British regime. John Askin's earliest experiences reveal a conflict between imperial demands and his individual opportunity and economic

initiatives; this conflict became a strong theme in Askin's life. Over the next twenty years, Askin worked diligently to twist, tie, and bind these two competing and often contradictory impulses into a workable understanding of what it meant to be a British trader and merchant in the Great Lakes. The following chapter – a study of John Askin's removal to the post of Michilimackinac in 1764 – explores how the twenty-five year old Askin used his connections to the British military through his position as a deputy commissar to help reinvigorate his trade. Mired in a tremendous debt and alienated from his creditors in Albany and Schenectady, John Askin made the long trek from northern New York to Michilimackinac, where he served as the deputy commissar to the post for nearly sixteen years.

However, in 1764, this posting was his most viable connection with the Great Lakes fur trade. As the deputy commissar to the British garrison, Askin struggled to build and develop connections to the local French and Indian communities of Michilimackinac and the upper Great Lakes. He sought to re-new his relationship with the British mercantile establishment of northern New York through his dealings at Detroit. Stationed at an old Jesuit farm, John Askin slowly emerged from debt and established himself as one of the most important merchants in the region. The following chapter argues that Askin's success after the collapse of his trade was linked to the economic circumstances of the larger world of Atlantic commerce and the face-to-face world of indigenous, French, and British interaction in the Great Lakes as he sought to expand his trade and enhance its profitability.

CHAPTER 2

‘PRETTY MUCH OF A SCHEMER’: NEGOTIATING EMPIRE AND EXPANDING THE FUR TRADE IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD OF THE BRITISH GREAT LAKES

“We the said Creditors do for ourselves severally and Respectively...Remise Release and for ever Quit Claim unto the said John Askin ... & all manner of Action & Actions Cause & Causes of Action & Actions Suits Bills Bonds Writings Obligations Debts Dues Duties Reckonings Accounts Sum & Sums of money Judgments Executions Extents Quarrels Controversies Trespasses Damages & Demands whatsoever both in Law & Equity.”¹

John Askin Discharged From Bankruptcy, 1771

“[John Askin] 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 [of the Great Lakes].”²

Andrew Graham, Commandant of the York Factory, 1772

The wooden palisades of Michilimackinac, situated at the confluence of two of the largest lakes in North America, existed as a meeting ground between the French and Indians in the Great Lakes for almost fifty years before John Askin arrived to serve as the deputy commissar to the British garrison in 1764.³ Across the water, a small

¹ John Askin Discharged from his Creditors, 24 December 1771,” *Askin Papers*, 1: 43 – 45. See unpublished documents in: John Askin Papers, Box 1. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 1). See also: See: John Gram, “John Askin at Michilimackinac,” unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram’s research has been instrumental in piecing together John Askin’s life in the early Great Lakes.

² Andrew Graham, the commandant of the York Factory, to the company’s directors published in: *Documents Relating to the North West Company*. W. Stewart Wallace, editor. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), 39 - 44

³ Milo M. Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 2 vols. (Detroit: Detroit Historical Society, 1928 – 1931), 1: 5 - 6

wooded island, clearly visible from the sandy beaches north of the former French post, served as a spiritual center for the region's Indian populations long before Europeans ever set foot in North America. To the Odawa people, the island was the earthly home of the trickster Nanabozho; it was a place from where the Manitou taught them to first fish.⁴ Translated by some scholars as "the giant turtle," Michilimackinac also suggests an indigenous cosmological centrality, a place where the land itself rests on the back of a giant turtle shell.⁵ This translation refers to the Ojibwa origin story of Nanabozho, Turtle and Muskrat and the creation of dry land on wet earth.⁶ Translated by others, Michilimackinac simply refers to the "country of the Mishinimaki," the ancestral homeland of a dispersed Indian people.⁷ By the time the British occupied the post, the sediments of an accumulated history collected like so much sand on the beach, and it slowly wore away at the cultural presumptions of the newcomers.

It is hard to know what the twenty-four-year-old John Askin knew about the region's history before he arrived, but his movement to Michilimackinac suggests he understood, at the very least, the important role the community played in the fur trade.

⁴ W. Vernon Kietz. *The Indians of the Western Great Lakes, 1615 – 1760*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1956), 297 – 299. Kietz's discussion of Great Lakes Native American communities come largely from the records and narratives of French Jesuits and early French explorers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. See also: Louise Phelps Kellogg, editor. *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699*. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1917)

⁵ For a telling of the origin story, see: Paul Radin, A. B. Reagan, "Ojibwa Myths and Tales: The Manabozho Cycle." *The Journal of American Folklore* 41 (1928): 62. Different translations for Manabozho exist; Nanapush, Nanabozo, etc.

⁶ Radin, Reagan, "Ojibwa Myths," 62

⁷ Dwight H. Kelton. *Annals of Fort Mackinac*. (Detroit: Detroit Free Press, 1886), 9

It is probable that when he walked down the muddy streets, leaned against the splintering wooden walls of the post's houses, or dealt with the French traders and Indian trappers that surrounded him, he appreciated the quotidian and daily patterns of life – the intimate bonds and camaraderie - the community evinced. It was not long before Askin participated in these shared communal experiences and relationships; they played important roles cementing his economic status in the Great Lakes. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the major economic developments in the Great Lakes during the period from 1763 to 1772, or the inter-war period of the British Empire in North America. This timeframe coincided with major developments in John Askin's life, but it also sets the stage for the imperial conflicts that Askin faced later, during the American Revolution. Furthermore, this chapter's exploration serves as a contextual backdrop to John Askin's life; it details the major events of his existence and follows the Scots-Irish merchant from Albany to Michilimackinac as he struggled, like so many of his colleagues to pick up the pieces of shattered expectations of what that life should have been following the British victory in the Seven Years' War. With the removal of the French Empire from North America, the British command believed they would dictate policy in the Great Lakes, but Pontiac's Rebellion disabused many of those false assumptions. Finally, this chapter details how John Askin reemerged from the collapse of his Albany-based trade to become one of the most profitable and influential British traders and merchants at Michilimackinac.

This chapter demonstrates John Askin's success as a fur trader and shows how his success was linked to the economic circumstances of the larger world of Atlantic commerce and the face-to-face world of indigenous, French, and British interaction in

the Great Lakes as the British sought to expand the trade and enhance its profitability. After the violence of Pontiac's Rebellion and the collapse of John Askin's trade outside of Niagara in the winter months of 1763, a tremendous chain of debt strained Askin's relationships with his northern New York creditors, which threatened to relegate him to the margins of the fur trade. Moreover, Askin's economic misfortune coincided with British attempts to organize their vastly swollen imperial domains and develop a profitable and efficient trade and Indian policy. The struggles Askin faced in reconstructing his trade stemmed from his unstable economic and social position in the Great Lakes. As a deputy commissar at Michilimackinac, John Askin fashioned new connections during this period of economic uncertainty. The opportunity to exploit economic opportunities in the Great Lakes followed widespread mercantile resistance that had removed ill-conceived imperial restrictions on the region's fur trade.⁸

This chapter relies on a diverse collection of sources to develop a context for Askin's life and while records of John Askin's early life in North America and his removal to Michilimackinac do exist, they are fragmentary and limited in scope. After 1774, when he was financially secure, the sources concerning his experiences become more robust, and shed more light on his life as an influential, prosperous, and elite merchant in the fur trade community of Michilimackinac. Much of the information for this chapter comes from the correspondence of imperial officials like General Thomas Gage and Sir

⁸ This chapter establishes a distinction between the roles and activities of traders and merchants in the Great Lakes fur trade. A fur trader is an individual who directly exchanges merchandise for furs in Indian communities; they were often involved in the face-to-face relationships and exchanges that made the fur trade workable and profitable. Merchants, on the other hand, provided traders merchandise and credit; the means of pursuing the fur trade. Since Askin's collaboration with Major Robert Rogers in the early 1760s, he performed the role of the "middleman"; a person who organized activity between traders and much larger consortiums of merchants and financiers.

William Johnson, the letters and diaries of John Porteous and James Sterling, official letters concerning the North West Company, and John Askin's 1761- 1762 receipt book, and the memorandum book that Askin kept in 1766, which proved pivotal in establishing his debt and to whom it was owed. Beyond his memorandum books, the larger collection of primary sources used in this chapter develop a portrait of a merchant desperate to remain viable in the fur trade, despite the restrictions of imperial policy and a hostile merchant community. Askin staked his life in North America; and did not return home to northern Ireland, unlike James Gordon, his former partner. These sources reveal how Askin's connections with the British military, his position as deputy commissar, and his relationships with French and British merchants helped him develop a profitable trade.

Pontiac's Rebellion forced the British Empire to abandon, according to historian Susan Sleeper-Smith, "highly visible, overt form[s] of control."⁹ The policy that developed following the rebellion attempted to create a centrally structured trade and attempted to limit British interactions with Indian peoples. Sir William Johnson, one of the most important merchants and Indian leaders at Albany, planned to control the trade through a system of official licenses and placed the fur trade under the auspices of

⁹ Susan Sleeper-Smith. *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 57. Sleeper-Smith's work on the Great Lakes proved instrumental in establishing and demonstrating the importance of indigenous notions of kinship and the processes of intermarriage within North American encounter and the fur trade, particularly for the British, whose imperial and economic aims were thwarted by the ingrained patterns of French and Indian fur trade communities. Indian women often controlled access to Indian communities; they served as mediators between Euro-American and Indian cultural practices and configurations.

Crown appointed commissaries.¹⁰ Even General Thomas Gage believed in the utility of establishing a regulated trade. He wrote to Sir William Johnson that “Detroit & Michilimackinac seem[ed] to require [commissaries]... from the Great Number of Indians...[that] resort thither for Trade.”¹¹ The British merchants, who arrived into the region after 1760, precipitated this increased control. Unscrupulous traders used alcohol to lubricate the processes of trade and to fleece Indians of their furs, they neither faced the social consequences resulting from their action, nor learned the processes of the trade. Even John Askin, a trader, whose disastrous trading venture sought to profit from the trade in spirits, knew that rum could be extremely profitable.¹² As Richard White pointed out, British merchants understood that “A drunken Indian would agree to what a sober Indian would not.”¹³ By seeking to limit British and Indian interactions to established posts under commissarial control, Johnson’s post-Pontiac’s Rebellion policies sought to stifle Indian resentment and disruptive social relations that led to the violence and costly imperial embarrassments of 1763.

However, even as these policies went into effect throughout the Great Lakes, they began to instantly unravel as they met the reality of the French and Indian “middle

¹⁰ Nelson Vance Russell. *The British Regime in the Michigan and the Old Northwest, 1760 – 1796*. (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, Inc., 1978), 63 – 64

¹¹ General Thomas Gage to Sir William Johnson, (New York), 5 May 1766. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. 5. Edited by Clarence Flick, et. al. (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1921 – 1962), 201 – 202

¹² White, *The Middle Ground*, 342. For a discussion of how the rum trade affected Indian communities in eastern North America, see: Peter C. Mancall. *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 342

ground.” Frustrated, Sir William Johnson watched as the interior French moved in and out of established posts and Indian communities and continued trading with their Indian kin with impunity, just as they had been doing since before the Seven Years’ War. Licenses and commissaries restricted British merchants and traders to established forts, while their French counterparts traded in Indian villages and established new ties with communities at St. Louis and New Orleans.¹⁴ This diverted some of the fur trade down the Mississippi River into French and Spanish hands. General Thomas Gage, the commander-in-chief of the British Army in the Great Lakes, believed this was quite problematic.¹⁵ Besides the restrictions placed on the fur trade, intense British Francophobia exacerbated by Pontiac’s Rebellion hindered Great Britain’s efforts to govern the Great Lakes in an effective and efficient manner.¹⁶ For example, the commander of Fort Detroit, Major Henry Gladwin, blamed the French for Pontiac’s violence and claimed they were “at the bottom of [the] affair.”¹⁷ Likewise, large segments of the British command concurred with this assessment. British traders watched as the interior French ignored and flaunted British restrictions; many seethed with resentment and frustration, while other British merchants, desperate to expand the trade, helped undermine the form and substance of Johnson’s Policies.¹⁸ British

¹⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 319

¹⁵ White, *The Middle Ground*, 319

¹⁶ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French*, 57. See, also: White, *The Middle Ground*, 323

¹⁷ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 61

¹⁸ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 61

merchants and traders believed that these restrictions were the ruination of the fur trade in the western Great Lakes. However, the more astute traders realized that success depended less on ousting the French from the trade than on developing strong relations with these French and Indian fur trade communities; they learned that they gained nothing from standing apart.

Some British merchants at Montreal, Detroit, and Michilimackinac supplied the interior French with merchandise and supplies to winter among the Indians of the western Great Lakes. This extended their trade into Indian country, despite British trade policies. Sometimes these merchants sold their own furs to the French with the hope of fetching higher profits outside British markets.¹⁹ Likewise, merchants also paid handsomely for French labor to carry their goods and furs from Albany and Montreal to Detroit, Michilimackinac, Green Bay, and Sault Ste. Marie, which allowed the British to side step imperial restrictions against wintering among the Indian communities. By 1767, the majority of merchants, French and British alike, resisted imperial attempts to control the fur trade. Resistance intensified when it became clear that Johnson's policies failed to create a profitable and efficient trade. For example, between 1764 and 1767, the British witnessed the returns from the fur trade diminish, but the costs of supplying the Indians who came to Michilimackinac and Detroit with presents proved

¹⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 319 – 321. Askin's 1766 Memorandum Book during this period shows a continual involvement in the fur trade through the French community of Michilimackinac. See: "John Askin's Memorandum Book, 1766," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan (Cited hereafter as John Askin's Memorandum Book). For a discussion of the interior French role undermining British restrictions, see: Keith R. Widder. "The French Connection: The Interior French and their Role in the French-British Relations in the Western Great Lakes Region, 1760 – 1775." *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754 – 1814*. David Curtis Skaggs, Larry L. Nelson, editors. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001)

increasingly costly.²⁰ The posts' commandants assumed the higher costs of these presents. British Indian and trade policy blundered in other areas as well. Instead of displacing interior French labor in the fur trade, Sleeper-Smith noted that Johnson's efforts only "reinforced the fur trade as it had long existed."²¹ The processes of exchange remained firmly in the hands of the French and Indian fur trade communities of the Great Lakes. To achieve success in the fur trade, successful British merchants and traders began to conform to the practices of this French and Indian world, by re-creating the day-to-day relationships that sustained the long established "middle ground."

In the tumultuous inter-war period, many British merchants and traders learned the socially and economically important lesson that relationships with the Indian communities of the Great Lakes embodied, according to historian Richard White, "relationships beyond profits" and that only "a stable trade could evolve as a basis of a stable social relationship."²² In other words, traders and merchants like John Askin, learned that success in the fur trade required more than rum, which proffered quick profits, and began to emphasize the stronger and more intimate ties of indigenous kinship. British merchants who took French or Indian wives found once icy and closed Indian villages warmed to their presence and became integral to their success.²³ From

²⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 320

²¹ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 62 – 63

²² White, *The Middle Ground*, 355

²³ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 63

an indigenous perspective, marriage created ties, identities, and established social positions for these newly arrived traders.²⁴ In a fur trade still rooted in the Indian world of family, kinship, and gifting, intermarriage proved instrumental and powerful. By 1772, David McClure, a missionary working in Pittsburgh, commented that “the great part of the Indian trade keep a squaw...they allege the good policy of it, as necessary to a successful trade.”²⁵ The French and Indians with their dense networks of kinship and obligations often excluded British traders from their communities. Astute traders and merchants, like John Askin created ties with Indian women and French families that allowed them, along with their access to British capital and credit, to expand their trade into regions in the upper Great Lakes.

Michilimackinac had its own patterns of life, and Great Britain’s Indian trade policy in the Great Lakes did little to alter them. Along Michilimackinac’s shoreline, during the late spring and early summer months, the French and Indian population exploded; trappers and traders returned from Indian hunting grounds to deliver their furs and resupply. By late fall and early winter, the post’s numbers dwindled, leaving a dozen or so merchant families and soldiers. The French, at posts like Michilimackinac,

²⁴ For a discussion of the importance of intermarriage and the communities created by it in the Great Lakes region, see: Sylvia Van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Jennifer S. H. Brown. *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); and Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, editors. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985). For the role Indian women played as negotiators see: Clara Sue Kidwell. “Indian Women as Cultural Negotiators,” *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992): 97–107; Susan Sleeper-Smith. “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade.” *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000): 423 – 452

²⁵ As quoted in White, *The Middle Ground*, 324

“were bred up together like Children [with the Indians] & ...have always adopted the Indian Customs & manners, treated them Civilly & supplied their wants generously.”²⁶

Native woman played key roles binding French and Indian fur trade communities together. Through intermarriage, Native woman linked their French fur trade husbands with the kin based communities of the western Great Lakes. The fur trade communities of the western Great Lakes, like Michilimackinac, Detroit, Fort Saint Joseph, Vincennes, and Quaitenon were multi-ethnic villages, where the French lived side by side with Indian peoples.²⁷ At Fort Saint Joseph, for example, Native women cultivated fields of corn, may have used French plows, and collected corn in French carts. In these diverse, multiethnic communities that developed around the fur trade, the complex network of kin that tied the French and Indians together often “baffled outsiders” and excluded non-kin.²⁸

Some thirty miles south of Michilimackinac was the principle Odawa village complex of *Ahnumawautikuhmig*, or *Arbre Croche*. In 1671, French Jesuits founded a mission for the Odawa near St. Ignace and when the village moved south, the French priests followed and established a mission and a farm.²⁹ Nearly a century after they

²⁶ George Croghan, British Indian Agent, as quoted in White, *The Middle Ground*, 316

²⁷ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 55. For a break down of the population of Fort St. Joseph in 1780, see: “Census of ever woman, child & slave resident at the Post of St Joseph.” In the *Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 10. (Lansing: The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1888 – 1912): 406 - 407

²⁸ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 55

²⁹ James M. McClurken. “Augustin Hamlin Jr.: Odawa Identity and the Politics of Persistence.” *Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies of North American Frontiers*. James A. Clifton, editor. (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 85

established the *Arbre Croche* mission, the Jesuit order came under increased political attack in Europe, which would lead the Jesuits to abandon their spiritual efforts in the Odawa community.³⁰ A favorable climate at *Arbre Croche* allowed the Odawa people to live and farm in the north west of Michigan's lower-peninsula nearly year around, which no doubt appealed to the missionaries. The stable community, flush with corn and fresh fish, emerged as an important center of the Great Lakes fur trade.³¹ Moreover, the proximity of *Arbre Croche* to Michilimackinac fostered the social and economic exchanges between the Indians and French that supplied the fur trade with corn. Through the intimate nature of the fur trade, it became common for Odawa women to follow their French husbands on trade expeditions to Michilimackinac, Green Bay, and Sault Ste. Marie.³² The traders who lived at *Arbre Croche* traveled between these communities and found themselves incorporated into a complex web of kinship that situated Frenchmen as "codependent parts of Indians" and ensured "accountability" to their Indian partners.³³ These ties proved lasting, intimate, and protective. The British discovered this in 1763, when Pontiac's Rebellion spread to Michilimackinac, and the Ojibwa and Sauk communities surrounding the post killed several of the British soldiers,

³⁰ McClurken, "Augustin Hamlin Jr.," 85. McClurken discusses the Jesuit presence among the Odawa; he suggests they abandoned the community sometime in the 1760s. This corresponds with Askin's arrival at Michilimackinac. For an account of the suppression of the Jesuits in Europe, see: Manfred Barthel. *The Jesuits: History & Legend of the Society of Jesus*. Mark Howson, editor. (New York: Marrow, 1984)

³¹ McClurken, "Augustin Hamlin Jr.," 86

³² McClurken, "Augustin Hamlin Jr.," 86

³³ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 57

but, by and large, left the French inhabitants of the community unmolested.

A year after the bloody events of Pontiac's Rebellion, the British once again established their presence at the narrow strait that joined Lakes Michigan and Huron into one large body of water. Two companies of three hundred soldiers under the command of Captain William Howard occupied the storm-beaten and dilapidated fort of Michilimackinac in the summer of 1764.³⁴ As the soldiers labored to make the post habitable, few reflected on the importance of their arrival.³⁵ The British garrison, however, connected the French and Indian communities of the western Great Lakes to the larger economic processes of the British Atlantic world. Laden with supplies, John Askin traveled north with Captain Howard's regiment of soldiers from Detroit. So did Alexander Henry, the one time resident of Michilimackinac and Indian captive; he wished to restart his stalled trade. Askin remained in the community to serve as its deputy commissar. As a man who began his North American career as a sutler and supplier to the British army during the Seven Years' War, the position of deputy commissar would have seemed quite familiar to the young Scots-Irish merchant, and especially important given that it placed him into direct contact with the mercantile worlds of the Great Lakes.³⁶

³⁴ Alexander Henry. *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760 – 1776*. Milo Quaife, editor. (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1921), 179

³⁵ Russell, *The British Regime in the Michigan*, 113

³⁶ It is difficult to pinpoint how Askin became the deputy-commissar of Michilimackinac; he left no record of his appointment. During the early 1760s, Sir William Johnson, an important Albany merchant and British Indian policy architect, conceived on a system of royally appointed commissaries to oversee trade and Indian relationships at important western posts. Askin's ties to the military as a sutler could account for his appointment.

In the late-eighteenth century, civilians staffed the commissariat. Their task was immense; it involved the continuous supplying of goods and foodstuffs to the entire British army. For shillings per day, John Askin supervised a tangled web of supply lines that sustained a garrison that routinely cost the British Crown roughly twenty- five-thousand pounds per year.³⁷ Provisioning the fort represented a tremendous responsibility for a single merchant, but proved exceedingly lucrative as well.³⁸ Michilimackinac's icy clime made Askin's endeavors more difficult. Rivers froze over and the lakes iced up, which left the community isolated for months from neighboring posts.³⁹ Often forwarded supplies arrived in Askin's hands putrefied, or expected goods were lost or pilfered during shipping. Amateur in orientation, and often staffed by local merchants, men like Askin coordinated, purchased, and tested supplies, and when the supply chain broke down, these men had to procure them through unofficial channels. Developing ties with the local French and Indian communities often proved key to a commissar's success. This position encouraged John Askin to establish ties with several of the most important French traders and merchants at Michilimackinac:

³⁷ For an analysis of the organization of the British Army in the Eighteenth Century, see: Alan Guy. *Oeconomy and Discipline: Officership and Administration in the British Army, 1714 – 1763*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Edward E. Curtis. *The Organization of the British Army in the American Revolution*. (New York: AMS Press, 1969); Walter Dunn. *The New Imperial Economy: The British Army and the American Frontier*. (Westport: Praeger, 2001). See also: Gram Manuscript

³⁸ For example, in 1768, the partnership of Phyn and Ellice received seven hundred seventy pounds to provision Fort Niagara. See: Walter S. Dunn, Jr. *Opening New Markets: The British Army and the Old Northwest*. (London: Praeger, 2002), 53

³⁹ John Askin writes that the waters surrounding Michilimackinac became "passable in Boats" on April 26, 1774, but a day later "Some Ice returned." The lake froze over for large portions of the winter, isolated Michilimackinac, and disrupting the flow of goods. See: "Diary of John Askin at Mackinac, 1774." *Askin Papers*, 1: 50. See original document in: John Askin Papers, Box 21. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 21)

men like Rene Bourassa, Charles de Langlade, and Maurice Blondeau.⁴⁰ When the garrison's supply of flour ran low, or their barrels of salted pork arrived rancid and molded, John Askin purchased substitutes for these supplies from the local French traders of Michilimackinac or from the Indian communities that surrounded him in the Great Lakes. The liberal nature of the civilian commissary helped Askin tremendously as he struggled to get a new toehold in the fur trade.

John Askin also purchased his way into the kin-based world of the Great Lakes.⁴¹ Sometime after he arrived at the fort in 1764, Askin purchased an Indian slave woman named Manette from Rene Bourassa.⁴² Before Askin's arrival, in September of

⁴⁰ John Askin's Memorandum Book. See Gram Manuscript

⁴¹ Brett Rushforth. "A Little Flesh We Offer You': The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 781 – 783. See also: Alan Gallay. *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); James F. Brooks. *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Milo Quaife, the editor of John Askin's collected papers, claimed that Askin purchased Manette from Rene Bourassa shortly after his arrival at Michilimackinac in 1764, but provides no evidence for this claim. Numerous historians accept this. Surely, John Askin owned an Indian slave; he lists her in his memorandum book. See: Milo M. Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1: 13; John Askin's Memorandum Book.

⁴² Bourassa headed into the Great Lakes in the late 1720s after taking advantage of the highly profitable, but illegal trade that developed between the French at Montreal and the British in Albany. Working with French explorers and traders like Francois Lefebvre and Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de La Verendrye, Bourassa became deeply involved in the Great Lakes fur and slave trade. In 1736, Sioux warriors captured Bourassa claiming that he provided arms and supplies to their enemies. He barely survived the encounter; only the intervention of a Panise saved him from torture. Afterwards, Bourassa settled in Michilimackinac in the 1740s. "The Mackinac Baptismal Register" offers a window into the nature of Bourassa's family and trade; it records the births and marriages of his children and grandchildren, but also demonstrates the centrality that Indian slavery to his household. For example, between 1742 and 1763, Rene Bourassa and his son-in-law, Charles de Langlade, account for the majority of the entries related to Indian slavery during this period. For a short biography of Rene Bourassa, see: David A Armour. "Rene Bourassa." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 4; Milo Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1:13; Joseph Lafitau. *Rare of Unpublished Documents, or the Aulneau Collection, 1734 – 1745*, 2 vols. Arthur E. Jones, editor. (Montreal: Archives of St. Mary's College, 1893), 93 – 94; See the various entries in the "The Mackinac Register," *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, vol. 19. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1908): 10/13/1737, 9/20/1742, 9/8/1748, 3/17/50, 2/28/1750, 2/13/1754, 6/9/1754, 4/17/1756, 11/4/1757, 11/6/1757, 7/13/1758, and 5/26/1760. (Hereafter referred to as: WHC). See: John Gram, "John Askin at Michilimackinac,"

1748, Bourassa baptized a young woman named Marianne and served as her godfather. Two years later, Marianne gave birth to a child named Basile.⁴³ Bourassa and his wife served as the child's godparents. In a fur trade society, where indigenous notions of kinship defined identity, John Askin's purchase of Manette created a connection between the young British merchant and the established French trader, whose network of kin boasted Charles de Langlade, an important French soldier and Indian leader. These connections opened avenues for Askin that would have been closed otherwise. Beyond this, it is difficult to identify the role that Manette played in Askin's household.⁴⁴ Native women often played a key role in Great Lakes agriculture, but there is nothing to suggest that Askin employed Manette in the fields. She established a connection between Askin, the French community, and the fur trade, but she did not translate. Sometimes, Indian woman and Panis functioned as traders – a person who knew furs and provided goods in exchange. Manette most likely worked in

unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram made the connection between the name Marianne and its diminutive form, Manette.

⁴³ See: September 8, 1748 entry for details on Marianne's baptism in "The Mackinac Register," *WHC* (1908) 19: 25; March 17, 1750 entry for details of Basile's birth and baptism in "The Mackinac Register," *WHC* 19: 28

⁴⁴ Indian slavery in the Great Lakes was a multifaceted experience, like elsewhere in North America, and its severity hinged on many factors. For example, Augustin Grignon, a relative of Charles de Langlade, relates the story of Jocko, a slave Langlade's. Jocko drank, stole, and secured his freedom by generally being a nuisance. Likewise, Jocko's mother, owned by a Menomonee woman named Kattesh, kin to a chief Tomah, proved to be a bigger thief, drunk, and burden than her son. Exasperated and eschewing manumission, Kattesh simply sent the mother back to her previous owners, the Sauks. A different Indian slave owned by Langlade died in his service, while another named Antoine served for ten years, was set free, and became a trader in the fur trade, before finding his way back to his former Missouri river community. An interior French trader at Green Bay named Augustin Bonnterre purchased an Indian slave woman and married her. Some slaves met violent ends, such as Amable Roy's, a contemporary of Askin, whose slave died in a drunken fight. Collo, another of Charles de Langlade's slaves, was murdered by a "Chippewa in a fit of jealousy." A Menomonee woman ordered her sick slave to take off her over-dress, and then stabbed her to death, apparently without provocation. See: Augustin Grignon's *Recollections*," *WHC* 3; 256 – 258

Askin's household, where they lived in close proximity to one another; she performed the domestic chores that the frequently absent commissar needed.⁴⁵

Likewise, shortly after his arrival, John Askin established a connection to the local Odawa community by purchasing a neighboring farm. When the Jesuits left the Great Lakes, the priests abandoned their missions and farms.⁴⁶ The farm provided John Askin the means of supplying the British garrison with corn and in the summer months fresh vegetables, and his relationship with the Odawa village offered access to fresh fish, when the garrison's supply of meat dwindled. To ensure the productivity of his farm, John Askin hired an overseer – a man named Josiah Wood – for 36 pounds a year.⁴⁷ Together, Askin and his overseer harvested an incredible variety of crops: buckwheat, potatoes, oats, parsnips, beans, squash, cucumbers, onions, spinach, peas, rye and hay.⁴⁸ The richness and variety of these crops accentuated the rather bland diet of stale flour, salt pork, and grog of the British soldiers stationed at the fort. John Askin's position as deputy commissar, his farm, and his entrée into the intricate kin

⁴⁵ In 1778, Askin wrote to a French colleague at Detroit asking for “two pretty panis girls from 9 to 16 years of age” to help his wife run the household: John Askin to Mr. Beausoleil (Mackinac), 18 May 1778, *Askin Papers*, 1: 98. See, also: unpublished documents in: John Askin's Letterbook 1778, John Askin Papers, Box 22. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 22)

⁴⁶ It is difficult to tell how John Askin acquired this farm. In the late eighteenth century, many Catholic nations in Europe suppressed the Jesuit Order, often citing political intrigue. The property, if auctioned off, could have arrived in Askin's hands cheaply.

⁴⁷ Askin's Memorandum Book. See: Gram Manuscript

⁴⁸ For evidence of the close attention Askin paid to his farm, as well as the coming and goings on at Michilimackinac, see: “Diary of John Askin at Mackinac, 1774.” *Askin Papers*, 1: 50 – 58. See, also: John Askin, Box 21. His diary is particularly useful; he records the arrivals and movements of people he traded and collaborated with in the Great Lakes fur trade.

networks of the French and Indian fur trade society gave him the means to weather the substantial debts he incurred after Pontiac's Rebellion and the aftermath of British trade policy from 1763 to 1767.

As the fort's deputy commissar, John Askin frequently found himself in Detroit overseeing the transfer of Fort Michilimackinac's supplies before the winter months choked the lakes with dangerous ice. John Porteous, a Scottish merchant with links to a Schenectady trading house, encountered the twenty-five-year-old Askin there in the spring of 1765.⁴⁹ Askin loaded martial and food supplies – gunpowder, flour, pork, and rum – onto a small ship called *Victory*.⁵⁰ With a merchant's eye for detail, Askin carefully accounted the number, weight, and variety of goods on the ship, before sending it up the St. Clair River. Both John Askin and John Porteous waited in Detroit together for several weeks as their supplies arrived and were loaded on ships.⁵¹ By early June, the men left Detroit, laden with supplies.⁵² Two weeks later, on June 17, they "arrived at Michilimackinac at 9 O'clock." John Porteous stayed at Michilimackinac until early August, before he set "of[f] to see the Indian village of L'Arbre Croche."⁵³ He

⁴⁹ John Porteous, Diary of trip from Schenectady to New York, Schenectady, Detroit, Mackinac, L'Arbre Croche, St. Marys, Channel Islands, St. Ignace, Mackinac. March 15, 1765 – May 23, 1766. John Porteous Manuscript, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter referred to as "John Porteous Diary.")

⁵⁰ John Porteous Diary 1765 - 1766

⁵¹ John Porteous Diary 1765 - 1766

⁵² John Porteous Diary 1765 - 1766

⁵³ John Porteous Diary 1765 - 1766

stayed at Askin's farm, and visited the nearby Odawa community. These new relationships that John Askin developed at Michilimackinac and Detroit with his fellow Scots-Irish merchants operating in the Great Lakes fur trade proved instrumental in establishing and expanding his trade into new regions in the coming years.

John Porteous, and his partner, James Sterling, were linked to the London networks of capital and credit that financed the British fur trade following the Seven Years' War. These two merchants were among of the first to arrive in the Great Lakes before Pontiac's Rebellion. While Askin and his partner were confined to Niagara, both Porteous and Sterling weathered the violence at Detroit when Pontiac laid siege to the fort in 1763.⁵⁴ In fact, Sterling's relationship with a Frenchwoman named Angelique Cuillerier dit Beaubian reportedly saved the fort from being surprised by Pontiac's warriors.⁵⁵ Unlike other traders, these men survived the economic turmoil and dislocation caused by Britain's initial mismanagement of the Great Lakes. But more importantly, both Sterling and Porteous played a crucial role in Askin's success; they vouched for Askin, when the merchant establishment of northern New York considered the deputy commissar of Michilimackinac *persona non grata* after his trade collapsed in 1763. Porteous and Sterling described to Askin his precarious position in 1765 and it was John Porteous, who delivered the letter to Askin's farm. In the letter, James Sterling warned John Askin to "come down to [New York] to settle his affairs, as there

⁵⁴ For a discussion of John Porteous' and James Sterling's role in the early British Great Lakes fur trade, see: R.H. Fleming. "Phyn, Ellice and Company of Schenectady." *Contributions to Canadian Economics* 4 (1932): 7 – 41

⁵⁵ See: *The City of Detroit Michigan, 1701 – 1922, vol. 2*. Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon Miller, editors. (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 1423

have been many here who complain much against [you]" with some merchants going as far as to threaten force.⁵⁶ However, John Askin remained at Michilimackinac as deputy commissar because he lacked the means to remedy the debts he owed his New York creditors; to give up his post would have made him quite vulnerable to arrest.

John Askin kept a detailed record of his debt, which he labeled "An Account of My Debt & such Effects as I have to Dispose Of."⁵⁷ He estimated his personal debt to be somewhere around 7,000 pounds, a staggering sum for such a young merchant.⁵⁸ He listed the tally of his debt alongside inventory of his assets, which included watches, canoes, Indian corn, wooden table, and Manette, his "Panisese wench," whom he valued at 50 pounds.⁵⁹ The creditors hounded Askin, and their persistent threats to dislocate him from Michilimackinac threatened his ability to repay them. John Askin owed money to many of the important merchants of the New York establishment: Greg and Cunningham, Hymen Levy, Henry Agnew, and Kennedy and Lyle.⁶⁰ Askin's receipt book, kept in the years before Pontiac's Rebellion, listed these names with regularity and it details the complex network of debts and credits that characterized the British fur

⁵⁶ James Sterling to John Porteous, (Detroit) 29 September 1765, in James Sterling Letterbook, housed at the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Hereafter referred to as: Sterling Letters)

⁵⁷ John Askin's Memorandum Book. See Gram Manuscript

⁵⁸ John Askin's Memorandum Book. See Gram Manuscript

⁵⁹ John Askin's Memorandum Book. See Gram Manuscript

⁶⁰ For a description of the firms and individuals who held John Askin's debt, see: "John Askin Discharged from his Creditors, 24 December 1771," *Askin Papers*, 1: 43 – 45. See also: John Askin, Box 1

trade.⁶¹ British Indian and trade policy did little to promote a profitable fur trade, but once the policies were rescinded Askin's position as deputy-commissar, his farm, and his newly established connections with the French and Indian communities at Michilimackinac provided him the means to cover his debt and transform him eventually into a wealthy merchant.

Prompted by Sterling and Porteous, John Askin inventoried his assets and debts as a prelude to his return to upstate New York in the fall of 1766. He relinquished his position as deputy commissar to fellow merchant William Maxwell, who served until 1772. Upon his arrival at Detroit, John Askin met James Sterling in September.⁶² Askin remained in Detroit for several months, then headed east towards upstate New York, arrived at Fort Stanwix in early December, and arrived in Schenectady a few weeks later.⁶³ The twenty-eight-year-old merchant moved among the community aiming to reestablish ties and quelling concerns of his ability to repay his debt. Individuals like John Askin required increasingly large investments of capital to expand the fur trade into more lucrative and fur rich areas.⁶⁴ It often took three or four years before investments turned around, but in the meanwhile, price fluctuations, market collapses, and political

⁶¹ "Drafts Notes Receipts [sic] & Bonds Paid Commencing February the 11th 1761 and Ending July 17th 1762," John Askin Manuscripts, Box 22. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin's Receipt Book)

⁶² Record of Manette's manumission found in: *Early Land Transfers: Detroit and Wayne Country, Michigan, 1703 – 1796*, vol. A, B, C. (Detroit: Louisa St. Clair Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1936), 9

⁶³ John Askin's Receipt Book. See Gram Manuscript

⁶⁴ Marjorie Gordon Jackson. "The Beginning of British Trade at Michilimackinac." *Minnesota History* 11 (1930): 265

changes could transform a once profitable venture into a disaster. Individuals who defaulted on their debts, or seemed unable to repay them, found it tremendously difficult to secure credit to purchase additional goods so crucial to their trade. John Askin found himself in this position in the winter of 1767. But luckily for the young merchant, his close partnership with James Sterling and John Porteous allowed him to develop a relationship with their influential Schenectady based partners and financiers, James Phyn and Alexander Ellice.

The Phyn & Ellice partnership that eventually linked these men together developed out of the early activity of John Duncan, who in 1761 was an established merchant in the Schenectady fur trade.⁶⁵ Duncan attempted to construct a storehouse on the Niagara Portage, but the merchants of Albany claimed that this position gave him an unfair trade advantage, and the Proclamation of 1763 denied Duncan's claim to the Indian land where his storehouse would be located.⁶⁶ Instead, under Duncan's direction, James Sterling moved to Detroit in the early 1760s, but Pontiac's Rebellion stymied his efforts to expand the trade. When the violence abated, Duncan and Sterling formed a permanent partnership in 1764; Duncan supplied the merchandise, while Sterling, still in Detroit, exchanged the goods for furs.⁶⁷ A year later, John Porteous became Sterling's partner and oversaw the trade at Michilimackinac.⁶⁸ However, by

⁶⁵ Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, 8

⁶⁶ Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, 8

⁶⁷ Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, 8

⁶⁸ Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, 9

1765, it was clear that Duncan lacked the means to adequately capitalize their activity in the western Great Lakes, and further expansion required the addition of two merchants.⁶⁹ James Phyn and Alexander Ellice supplied additional capital. During the early months of 1767, as Duncan prepared to retire, Phyn, Ellice, Sterling, and Porteous planned to further expand their trade into the upper Great Lakes and Askin represented the potential link in that expansion.

Phyn and Ellice drew their supplies and merchandise from New York City from men like Hymen Levy, who shipped supplies and manufactures up the Hudson River to Albany. The goods were stored and packed at Schenectady, and then forwarded west in the early spring. When the goods arrived into the hands of James Sterling at Detroit, he supplied the traders who exchanged the trade goods for furs.⁷⁰ By 1766, as the restrictions of the Johnson Policy were relaxed British traders carried on a face-to-face trade with the Indians of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. Historian R. H. Fleming described the Phyn and Ellice partnership as characteristic of the British Great Lakes trade, a trade defined by commercial middlemen.⁷¹ The British fur trade relied on this middling network of forwarders, established at the larger port sites of the Great Lakes, to shepherd goods and furs back and forth. These middlemen connected the major

⁶⁹ Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, 9

⁷⁰ For a discussion of the credit and debt aspect of the British trans-Atlantic fur trade, see: Harry W. Duckworth. "British Capital in the Fur Trade: John Strettell and John Fraser." *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan*, 1991. Jennifer S.H. Brown, et al., editors. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994)

⁷¹ Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, 11

supplies centers of London and New York to the Indian villages west of Lake Superior.⁷²

Unlike the fur trade under the French régime, where imperial price supports fostered the intimate relationships between French traders and Indian communities and buffered the corrosive effects of large scale market forces, long term investments, long chains of debt, and unrestricted competition among British traders and merchants created an environment driven, in great part, by the pursuit of profits.⁷³

The months that John Askin spent at Schenectady proved invaluable for the development of his trade in the late 1760s and early 1770s, but these ties proved increasingly problematic as the nascent conflicts between the British Crown and their Atlantic seaboard colonies strained trans-Atlantic mercantile relationships. At Michilimackinac, John Askin worked alongside a cadre of French and Scots-Irish merchants stationed and financed through Montréal and Quebec. Fur traders or merchants like Isaac Todd, James McGill, and William Grant entered the Great Lakes fur trade at Montreal around the same time John Askin entered it through Albany. Like numerous British merchants operating in the Great Lakes, Todd, McGill, and Grant migrated to North America during the Seven Years' War. Born in Ireland three years after Askin, Todd, for example, entered the Great Lakes trade in 1765, and like Askin suffered numerous set backs and misfortunes.⁷⁴ Likewise, McGill, who was born in Scotland and eventually wintered in Green Bay, oversaw the exchange of goods for furs

⁷² Jackson, "The Beginning of British Trade," *Minnesota History*, 265

⁷³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 335

⁷⁴ For a biography of Isaac Todd, see: Myron Momryk, "Isaac Todd," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. V.

for William Grant at Michilimackinac in 1767.⁷⁵ Grant directly married into the Great Lakes fur trade society and tried to claim the exclusive rights to trade at Green Bay from his French family, who had acquired them under the French regime.⁷⁶ Grant claimed “antient custom,” and offered to pay the British Crown for his monopoly, but the Crown demurred.⁷⁷ Before the imperial conflicts of the American Revolution severed the New York merchant community from the western Great Lakes, John Askin found himself economically and personally connected to the two most important communities of the North American fur trade.

After a yearlong absence, John Askin returned to Michilimackinac in the summer of 1767 and discovered that Captain William Howard, the man who reestablished Great Britain’s presence in the upper Great Lakes, had been replaced. As the commandant of Michilimackinac, Howard had struggled with the task of implementing British imperial policies, while maintaining workable relationships with the region’s Indian communities.⁷⁸ His efforts aroused the jealousy and animosity of Michilimackinac’s British traders, who believed that he favored French traders when he authorized licenses to trade in the upper Great Lakes.⁷⁹ The angry traders and their merchants

⁷⁵ For a biography of James McGill, see: J. I. Cooper, “James McGill.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. V

⁷⁶ Frank E. Ross. “The Fur Trade of the Western Great Lakes Region.” *Minnesota History* 19 (1938), 290

⁷⁷ Ross, “The Fur Trade of the Western Great Lakes,” 290

⁷⁸ Jackson, “The Beginning of British Trade,” 247 - 250

⁷⁹ Jackson, “The Beginning of British Trade,” 247 - 250

sent a protest to London, which resulted in an investigation that recalled Howard. In his place, the Crown appointed the debt-ridden Major Robert Rogers as commander of the post.⁸⁰ John Askin and Rogers, after four years apart, now reestablished their friendship at Michilimackinac, perhaps overcoming any ill feelings over their disastrous and near ruinous partnership of the early 1760s. However, it was not long before Rogers showed the community that his failings extended well beyond the fur trade. Unlike his predecessor, Rogers's relationships with his commanding officers were plagued with conflict and hostility. For example, Sir William Johnson and General Thomas Gage, two of the most important imperial officials in eastern North America, refused to officially acknowledge Rogers's command of the Michilimackinac post.⁸¹ However, Major Rogers's personal actions also seemed selfish, and narrowly focused on the region's merchant community. For example, he financed an expedition to find the "fabled" Northwest Passage and he dealt directly with French and Indian communities, ignoring British imperial trade policies in the Great Lakes.⁸²

The perpetual crises and conflicts that surrounded Major Rogers put John Askin in awkward situations. For example, a dispute over the smuggling of rum developed between Rogers and Benjamin Roberts, Sir William Johnson's Indian agent, and John

⁸⁰ For a discussion of Major Robert Rogers' tenure at Michilimackinac, see: John R. Cuneo. *Robert Rogers of the Rangers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Keith R. Widder. "The 1767 Maps of Robert Rogers and Jonathan Carver: A Proposal for the Establishment of the Colony of Michilimackinac." *The Michigan Historical Review* 30 (2004): 35 – 75

⁸¹ Cuneo, *Robert Rogers*, 199

⁸² Widder, "The 1767 Maps of Robert Rogers," 35 – 75

Askin was implicated in the affair.⁸³ The Indian agent cleared Askin of any wrong doing, but the smuggling charge focused imperial attention on Askin, who had a history of smuggling rum.⁸⁴ In the Great Lakes of the British Empire, corruption, graft, smuggling, and inefficiencies remained persistent and common, but very few commissaries, agents, or commanders were ever charged with treason.⁸⁵ Problems reached a crisis stage during December of 1767, when a conflict between Rogers and his secretary, Nathaniel Potter, led to Rogers's arrest for conspiracy against the British Crown.⁸⁶ In his deposition, Potter claimed that Rogers had conspired to return the Great Lakes to the French Empire. While Potter's claims lacked substance and amounted to little more than innuendo, the charge led General Thomas Gage to order the arrest of Major Robert Rogers. Ultimately acquitted of the charge against him, Rogers never returned to the Great Lakes and he never saw John Askin again. The Major returned to London, mired in debt, alcoholism, and poverty, and died in 1795.⁸⁷ But in 1768, when the military transported Rogers in chains to Montreal, little did he know that in just four years, the debt that had followed him and Askin since Pontiac's Rebellion would be

⁸³ Cuneo, *Robert Rogers*, 216 – 217

⁸⁴ John Askin to Sir William Johnson (Michilimackinac), 22 September 1767. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, V: 693

⁸⁵ Russell, *The British Regime in the Michigan*, 89

⁸⁶ For an excellent exploration and collection of primary sources connected to Major Robert Rogers' trial, see: *Treason? At Michilimackinac: The Proceedings of a General Court Martial held at Montreal in October 1768 for the Trial of Major Robert Rogers*. David A. Armour, editor. (Mackinac Island: The Mackinac Island Park Commission, 1972)

⁸⁷ Cuneo, *Robert Rogers*, 278

repaid in full by his former partner, now a twenty-nine-year old merchant.

John Askin's Schenectady connections and his successful tenure as Michilimackinac's deputy commissar proved instrumental in the expansion of Askin's trade between 1767 and 1772. His position at Michilimackinac allowed Askin to assess the vast countryside around Lake Superior and to identify a large swatch of land rich in beaver pelts and potential profits. At Michilimackinac, John Askin relied on trade goods supplied through James Sterling and John Porteous to outfit Forrest Oakes, an English trader who arrived in the Great Lakes following the capitulation of Montreal in 1761.⁸⁸ Oakes received licenses to trade at Michilimackinac in 1766 and 1767, and Askin provided the goods. Traders like Oakes and French trader Maurice Blondeau and his brother, Kewshew, forwarded trade goods to merchants stationed at Grand Portage.⁸⁹ While competition for the upper Great Lakes trade came from many different directions, many of these forward traders worked either directly or indirectly for the merchants of upstate New York or from the Lower St. Lawrence Valley, like William Edgar and Isaac Todd. Edgar, based in Detroit, entered the trade through upstate New York. Like Askin, Edgar began his career supplying the British army.⁹⁰ Seeing an opportunity to

⁸⁸ Askin's mentions Oakes in his 1774 diary, establishing his presence and activity in the community. See: John Askin, Box 21. For a biography of Forrest Oakes, see: George Thorman. "Forrest Oakes." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IV. Oakes also played a particularly menacing role in the journal of Daniel Morison, a surgeon's mate, at Fort Michilimackinac, which he kept between 1769 – 1772, see: Daniel Morison. *The Doctor's Secret Journal*. George S. May, editor. (Mackinac Island: Fort Mackinac Division Press, 1960)

⁸⁹ Grace Lee Nute. "A British Legal Case and Old Grand Portage." *Minnesota History* 21 (1940): 134

⁹⁰ Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 62

streamline the trade going on at Grand Portage, John Askin cleared a large track of land, and built a trading depot there in 1768.⁹¹ As long as the waters remained opened, the depot allowed Askin, to send supplies necessary for the trade – corn, flour, rum, lines, hatchets, powder, and guns – directly to the traders, or Indians for direct exchanges.⁹² This arrangement allowed traders and trappers to remain in the field for longer periods with the hopes of collecting larger quantities of furs while the competition returned to Michilimackinac to resupply.

With a firm foothold in the upper Great Lakes, Askin and his colleagues at Michilimackinac and Montreal began to compete with the Hudson's Bay Company for the prime beaver pelts collected by the region's northern Indians. The Hudson's Bay Company, which was established by a royal charter in 1670, had challenged the French monopoly over the fur trade.⁹³ The Company's domain stretched from the icy reaches of the far north to the northern banks of Lake Superior. The Company developed a centralized system of trade, where Indians came to exchange their furs with British traders for a collection of trade goods. The British quickly established a factory-fort at

⁹¹ In his deposition, Maurice Blondeau claims "That he went up to Grand Portage the first time in 1766. That he knows the fort where the bourgeois were, which was not then cleared and was not cleared for two or three years thereafter and then by a man named [Askin.]" See: Nute, "A British Legal Case and Old Grand Portage," 134

⁹² Nute, "A British Legal Case and Old Grand Portage," 134

⁹³ For the founding of the Hudson Bay Company, as well as its activities and relationships in the North American fur trade, see: Barry M. Gough. "The 'Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay': A Study of the Found Members of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1665 – 1670." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 2 (1970): 35 – 47; Ann Carlos and Frank Lewis. "Trade, Consumption, and the Native Economy: Lessons from York Factory, Hudson Bay." *The Journal of Economic History* 61 (2001): 1037 – 1064; James G. E. Smith. "Chipewyan, Cree and Inuit Relations West of Hudson Bay, 1714 – 1955." *Ethnohistory* 28 (1981): 133 - 156

York on the Nelson River, which flowed into the bay. Just as quickly, the French contested Britain's competition. The factory-fort changed hands numerous times before the Seven Years' War expelled the French empire from North America. The Hudson's Bay Company established close and intimate relationships with the region's Indians, like their French competitors did in the south. Country marriages, *a la façon du pays*, with Native woman created ties between Indian communities and British merchants. Moreover, these women mediated conflicts and provided valuable labor for their husbands and the Hudson's Bay Company. It was noted that Native women often carried as many furs on their backs as two British traders.⁹⁴ Free from French competition, the Hudson's Bay Company soon discovered, to their chagrin, that a new cadre of British and French traders, often working in concert, labored diligently to divert the flow of furs from the York fort-factory to Montreal and Schenectady.

The centralized and factory-based nature of the upper Canadian trade made it easier for merchants like Askin to exploit the fractures and fissures of the region's fur trade communities. By 1769, Askin participated in the development of a coalition of merchants dedicated to expanding their fur trades into the territories claimed by the Hudson's Bay Company.⁹⁵ This trading network began in Montreal, where Isaac Todd and George McBeath, a Scottish born merchant who wintered at Lake Superior in 1765,

⁹⁴ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 3 – 8. For a discussion of the familial differences between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Montreal and Quebec based merchants, of the North West Company, see: Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980)

⁹⁵ Much of the information concerning John Askin's activity in the fur trade above Lake Superior and his competition with the Hudson's Bay Company comes from a letter written by Andrew Graham, the commandant of the York Factory, to the company's directors published in: *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, W. Stewart Wallace, editor. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), 39 - 44

supplied John Askin at Michilimackinac.⁹⁶ From there, Askin supplied Maurice Blondeau and his brother at Kewshew at Grand Portage, who then sent the goods to Thomas Corry, who had established a fortified trading post north of Lake Winnipeg. Corry, who had ties with the region's Indian communities, particularly the Cree, Dene, Sioux, Gros Ventre, and Ojibwe, exchanged goods for furs, coordinated activity in the region, and interfaced with officials and traders from the Hudson's Bay Company.⁹⁷ For example, Corry developed an important connection through Cree Chief Wappenssew, who had traded with the Hudson's Bay Company since 1755.⁹⁸ Andrew Graham, the commandant of the York Factory, wrote to his superiors in London, that Corry refused "no favour" to Wappensassew; he supplied the chief housing, clothing, food and drink, and "In return he induces the Indians to resort thither."⁹⁹ Corry's efforts proved successful with Chief Wappenssew. In fact, while Corry did most of this work face-to-face, Graham claimed that Askin's goods often proved instrumental in developing the northwest trade.

In his letter to the directors of the Hudson's Bay Company, Andrew Graham

⁹⁶ Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772. *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 40. Many of these merchants, particularly Todd and Askin, later formed the North West Company, which became a major competitor to the Hudson's Bay Company.

⁹⁷ Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 40

⁹⁸ Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 40

⁹⁹ Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 40

described the thirty year old John Askin as “formerly ... 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.”¹⁰⁰ Such a large trade in furs collected a handsome profit. For example, in 1767, James Sterling boasted that he collected thousands of packs of furs from the upper Great Lakes since he arrived in North America, which fetched roughly one hundred thousand pounds at market.¹⁰¹ According to Graham, a highly biased observer, Askin’s “new England Rum” proved key to the Michilimackinac merchant’s success, especially in the upper Great Lakes.¹⁰² According to historian W.J. Eccles, alcohol, at least economically, represented an “ideal exchange item,” and Askin and many of his colleagues trafficked it.¹⁰³ For example, Detroit merchant William Edgar financed a trading venture at Fort Miami in 1767 and supplied Fred Hambuck, a minor trader in Detroit.¹⁰⁴ Hambuck wrote to Edgar asking for three hundred gallons of rum, which he believed would sell out.¹⁰⁵ Even if Edgar exchanged one gallon of rum for

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson’s Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 40 - 41

¹⁰¹ Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 64

¹⁰² Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson’s Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 42

¹⁰³ W. J. Eccles, “The Fur Trade and Eighteenth-Century Imperialism,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983): 350 – 351

¹⁰⁴ Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 64 - 65

¹⁰⁵ Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 64 - 65

just one beaver pelt, he would have doubled his profits.¹⁰⁶ Rum rarely traded for such low rates. However, the trade often proved dangerous for the trader, but not the merchant.¹⁰⁷ However, the nature of the upper Great Lakes trade reflected the discerning patterns of trade that developed in Indian communities. While British rum proved helpful for the British trader within the exchange process, Indian peoples continued dictating the nature of goods, merchandise, and supplies the traders brought into the community. Traders who ignored Indian tastes, preferences, and desires quickly went bankrupt.

After just two seasons of competing with the Hudson's Bay Company, Isaac Todd, George McBeath, the Blondeau brothers, Thomas Corry, and Askin discovered the profitability of the trade west of Michilimackinac. Corry retired from the trade an extremely wealthy man.¹⁰⁸ John Askin himself left Michilimackinac in the fall of 1771 and returned to northern New York.¹⁰⁹ After eight years of suffering through the effects of his tremendous debt, John Askin returned to repay his creditors. He paid the seven thousand pounds in full. In November, John Askin arrived at Schenectady, where, under the auspices of Phyn and Ellice, the thirty-two-year merchant encountered his

¹⁰⁶ Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 64 - 65

¹⁰⁷ Dunn, *Opening New Markets*, 64 - 65

¹⁰⁸ W. S. Wallace. "The Pedlars from Quebec." *Canadian Historical Review* 13 (1932), 387 – 402

¹⁰⁹ John Askin Discharged from his Creditors, 24 December 1771, *Askin Papers*, 1: 43 – 45. See, also: John Askin, Box 1

former creditors.¹¹⁰ The firms of Greg and Cunningham, Kennedy and Lyle, and the many other names that dotted his ledger books, finally released him from his debt and “for ever Quit Claim unto the said John Askin his Heirs Executors & Administrations all...Accounts Sum & Sums of money Judgments Executions Extents Quarrels Controversies Trespasses Damages & Demands whatsoever.”¹¹¹ This singular moment attests to the sheer profitability of the Great Lakes fur trade following the initial violence and tumult of Pontiac’s Rebellion in 1763. It demonstrates how quickly it rebounded from the ineffective restrictive imperial trade policies of Sir William Johnson; the activities of men like Askin proved malleable to changes in the British policy and farsighted in the continual expansion of the fur trade.

Impressed by the repayment of his debt and encouraged by the tremendous profits of Askin’s trade in the upper Great Lakes, James Phyn and Alexander Ellice attempted to develop a relationship with him. Phyn and Ellice wrote to John Porteous, following Askin’s departure from Schenectady in 1772. They “shewed [him] every civility” and in return Askin promised to give them “preference of his business.”¹¹² They began to supply Askin with bulk goods for his trade and provided him generous terms of

¹¹⁰ John Askin Discharged from his Creditors, 24 December 1771, *Askin Papers*, 1: 43 – 45. See, also: John Askin, Box 1

¹¹¹ John Askin Discharged from his Creditors, 24 December 1771, *Askin Papers*, 1: 43 – 45. See, also: John Askin, Box 1

¹¹² Phyn and Ellice to Porteous (Schenectady), 4 January 1772, Letter books of Phyn and Ellice, merchants at Schenectady, New York, 1767 – 1773, vol. 1 - 3, housed at the Buffalo Historical Society, Buffalo, New York. Microfilmed. Copy on file at: Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan.

credit.¹¹³ Askin had to cover the cost of transport of the goods back west, but he had the right to sell the furs wherever he wished, which proved fortuitous in the coming years.¹¹⁴ These newly established connections proved short-lived. After several months of travel, Askin returned to Michilimackinac and prepared to replace Corry in the northwest in the fall. Andrew Graham of the York factory-fort believed that Askin “intend[ed] to built a proper [trading] house” from which to carry out their trade.¹¹⁵ Instead, Askin married the oldest daughter of Charles Andre Barthe, an established trader at Detroit, whose large family had connections with the Miami communities of the Wabash River valley. Marie Archange Barthe traveled to Michilimackinac shortly after her marriage to Askin, and her brothers and sisters followed her.

As the tendrils of John Askin’s trade snaked further and further northwest, Askin established a blacksmith on the old Jesuit farm south of Michilimackinac. This forge supplied the British garrison at Michilimackinac with axes, tools, nails and other items for a reasonable price, but more importantly the blacksmith repaired the weapons of the

¹¹³ Fleming, “Phyn, Ellice,” n 4, 24. The footnote at the bottom of the page spells out the items that Phyn & Ellice Company planned on supplying Askin at Michilimackinac, as well as the rates of credit. Phyn and Ellice Company promised to send “bulky articles & few fine goods” at “125 (5) advance at 12 Mos. Credit, 129 at 15 M. Credit & 133 1/3 at 18 M. Cr.” Both Askin and the Phyn and Ellice Company partnership proved short lived; the American Revolution severed Michilimackinac from Albany and Schenectady.

¹¹⁴ Fleming, “Phyn, Ellice,” n 4, 24

¹¹⁵ Andrew Graham to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson’s Bay Company, (York) 26 August 1772, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 41

Indians who visited the post to deal with the British Crown.¹¹⁶ The establishment of a blacksmith was characteristic of Askin. James Gordon, Askin's former partner, described him as "pretty much of a schemer;" he was a man who would not have missed an opportunity to integrate himself into the established patterns of daily life.¹¹⁷ In fact, this ability proved key to Askin's success. He purchased an Indian slave to establish a connection to the French community of Michilimackinac. He bought a farm to ensure that his tenure as deputy-commissar proved successful. His position as deputy-commissar gave him the means of repaying his burdensome debt, establishing new ties with British merchants, and ultimately developing a profitable and expansive trade.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from John Askin's life in the interwar period of the British Empire in North America. First, the connections that Askin made between 1763 and 1772 proved instrumental to his success in the Great Lakes fur trade. Askin spent the majority of these years reestablishing ties, building new ones, and creating a network of individuals who would finance his activities in the region. However, more importantly, these connections demonstrate the fundamentally multi-ethnic nature of the British Atlantic fur trade. In fact, the term "British" Atlantic seems to

¹¹⁶ George S. May, "The Askin Inventory: A Mackinac businessman's property in 1778." *Mackinac History: An Informal Series of Illustrated Vignette* No. 2. (Mackinac Island: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1963), 2 – 7. For a discussion of John Askin's property during the late 1770s, see: John Askin's Inventory for 1778," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. See also: Askin's Inventories for 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779, John Askin Papers, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. (Hereafter cited: John Askin Inventory, 1776, 1777, 1778, or 1779) Askin's inventories in the late 1770s show a window into the profitability of the Great Lakes fur trade and Askin's success.

¹¹⁷ Josephine Mayer, "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 17 (1936), 430

somewhat obscure the diversity of its participants on a day-to-day level. Moreover, it ignores the regional differences in the pursuit of the trade. For example, British traders at Montreal competed with traders at Albany. Both communities competed for furs that were controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company with the British in the North West. Native communities in the Great Lakes were village complexes that consisted of different tribes and their French kin; they were as important as the wealthy London-based financiers that capitalized the fur trade. Stationed at Michilimackinac, John Askin's experience in this period closely resembles a loose braid of competing interests and initiatives. His individual efforts were one among many, but Askin's actions often intersected with the efforts and initiatives of others and together they constituted the fabric of Great Britain's empire and trade. However, these trading networks proved elastic and malleable, but susceptible to disruption and stress.

The second major conclusion to draw from Askin's experience between 1763 and 1772 relates to the nature of British governance in the Great Lakes. Askin's experience during Pontiac's Rebellion, as deputy commissar at Michilimackinac, and his success as a merchant were closely linked to the British military in this region. Often at the mercy of post commandants, Indian agents, and imperial policies, Askin and so many others developed workable relationships with these individuals in the pursuit of furs in the Great Lakes. For example, the policies of Sir William Johnson, developed in aftermath of Pontiac's Rebellion, created a restrictive trade that hindered Askin's initial ability to overcome his debt. Yet, Askin's position as deputy-commissar allowed him to maintain a connection to the Great Lakes fur trade, even while his colleagues clamored for repayment. The conflicted nature of John Askin's allegiance to the British Empire and

the pursuit of his trade forced him to develop an intertwined understanding of both. In the face-to-face world of imperial governance, when post commanders changed or Indian agents resigned, existing relationships and connections vanished. Thus, like the French of the late- seventeenth and early- eighteenth centuries, Askin counted on the intimate connections of his family and the solidifying role of kinship to buffer the stress of imperial conflicts.

The following chapter – a study of John Askin’s family – explores the intimate connections that the merchant developed to extend his trade. It was common for many British traders to create ties with the Native communities they worked in, but how they treated these connections differed. Some traders and merchants established life long relationships with Native woman, raised children with them, and often sent these children off to be educated in Montreal, Quebec, and London before having them return to take part in the trade. On the other hand, many of the relationships between British men and Native women proved fleeting and exploitive; these traders would abandon their country wives and their children when they moved to a different community, or found better marriage prospects. John Askin chose, in some respects, both pathways. The following chapter argues that the relationships Askin developed with three different woman –an upstate New York consort, an Indian slave, and a Frenchwoman from Detroit – resulted in the creation of new links to regions of the Great Lakes fur trade and shows how Askin’s success was tied to the female figures in his life. In other words, each woman represents a new focus of John Askin’s trade. John Askin’s situation was linked to the economic processes of the British Atlantic world through the connections he developed with the British, French, and Indian communities of the western Great

Lakes, Montreal, Schenectady, New York, and London, but he also used sexual liaisons and marriage to extend his trade into the increasingly profitable areas of the fur trade.

CHAPTER 3

‘PERHAPS HE MAY ONE DAY BECOME MY SON IN LAW’: AN ALBANY WOMAN, AN INDIAN SLAVE, AND A FRENCH WIFE IN THE BRITISH GREAT LAKES

“I sincerely wish you much joy of your Boy, perhaps he may one Day become my Son in law, I have Girls worth looking at.”¹

John Askin to Sampson Fleming, April 28, 1778

“I hope [Mr. Barthe] has applied the money I gave him to the discharging of his Debts at Detroit, it really hurts me to think of him indebted to any person, if he told me right he had more than sufficient from me to pay what he owed.”²

John Askin to Alexander Grant, April 28, 1778

John Askin joked with his superior at Detroit, Sampson Fleming, about the birth of Fleming’s newborn child. In his letter, Askin wrote, “I sincerely wish you much joy of [the birth of] your Boy, perhaps he may one Day become my Son in law, I have Girls worth looking at.”³ The birth of a child was a joyous occasion in the Great Lakes that Askin experienced; he had fathered several daughters with different women. By the time Askin wrote to Fleming, at least three different women had played pivotal roles in his personal and business life. Between 1757 and 1772, the intimate relationships that

¹ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Mackinac), 28 April 1778. *The John Askin Papers*, vol. 1. Milo Quaife, editor. (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928), 86. (Hereafter cited as *Askin Papers*). See original document in: John Askin’s Letterbook 1778, John Askin Papers, Box 22. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 22). See also: John Gram, “John Askin at Michilimackinac,” unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram’s research has been instrumental in piecing together John Askin’s life in the early Great Lakes.

² John Askin to Commodore Alexander Grant (Michilimackinac), 28 April 28 1778, 1: 77. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

³ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Mackinac), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 86. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

Askin maintained with these women proved pivotal to his trade in the Great Lakes. Askin's position at Michilimackinac had allowed him to establish partnerships with several influential merchants in the Great Lakes, but his intimate relationships proved equally important to his success. These women, however, left no written record of their existence, and Askin, despite his voluminous archive, barely commented on any of them. On one level, Askin's comments to Fleming was a tongue-in-cheek jest, but it also revealed a fundamental understanding of the nature of cross-cultural marriage in British North America.

This chapter examines the realm of Askin's intimate encounters and argues that the relationships that John Askin developed at Albany, Michilimackinac, and Detroit created new networks that helped him extend his trade into economically important regions of the Great Lakes. Each of these relationships reflected a particular period and moment in John Askin's life in North America between 1757 and 1772, and each relationship corresponded to a particular set of struggles in the Great Lakes fur trade. Before the violence and turmoil of Pontiac's Rebellion, John Askin helped cement his ties to upper New York through his relationship with an Albany woman. Likewise, when Askin's trade was in shambles and his social position in the Great Lakes was threatened by debt, he established ties to French and Indian communities by purchasing a Panise, Indian slave woman from an established French family.⁴ Once his Great Lakes trade was successful and his debts repaid, Askin married the daughter

⁴ "Pani", "Panis", "Panise", while referring to the Pawnee, an Indian community living west of the Great Lakes, became a blanket term for all Indian slaves, regardless of their original origins.

of an established French family in Detroit; a marriage that opened up new avenues of trade and sources of labor.

Much of the information for this chapter comes from a completely fragmented and ambiguous set of references culled from Askin's written record. The paucity of sources reflects the fluid and elusive nature of Indian women in the Great Lakes fur trade. This observation is particularly true for Askin's Albany and Michilimackinac relationships; these women lacked the European cultural capital to record or preserve their histories, particularly in comparison to Marie Archange Barthe, Askin's French wife.⁵ Much of what historians can know about these women and their connection to Askin comes from two main sources: a book of receipts that Askin kept between 1761 and 1762, and a memorandum book he maintained throughout 1766 and 1767.⁶ In the previous chapter, these two documents proved instrumental in establishing the nature and extent of John Askin's debt and trade and revealed major aspects of his earliest fur trading ventures in upper New York. By focusing on what historian Ann Stoler has called "the microphysics of daily life," it is possible to re-read these sources in a manner that provides new insights into the role these intimate encounters played in Askin's

⁵ For a discussion of cultural capital, see: Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*. J. F. Richardson, editor. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 241 – 58. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is the learned skills, knowledge, or self investment or improvement that allows individuals to operate and succeed in society. See, also: Pierre Bourdieu. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

⁶ See: Drafts Notes Receipts [sic] & Bonds Paid Commencing February the 11th 1761 and Ending July 17th 1762, John Askin Manuscripts housed at the Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (cited hereafter as Askin's Receipt Book); 1766 Memorandum Book of John Askin, National Archives of Ontario, microfilmed by Toronto Public Library, copy on housed at the Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit Michigan. (cited hereafter as Askin's Memorandum Book). See also: Gram Manuscript; Gram uncovered the important nature of this source in terms of Askin's sexual history.

Great Lakes trade.⁷ Askin's relationship with Marie Archange Barthe, established after his economic resurgence in the 1770s, is better documented, and reveals, like his earlier relationships, how intimate ties allowed him to expand his trade and to establish his presence in important new fur trade regions.

Marriage played an important role in cementing and facilitating social, economic and political relationships, especially in Great Lakes fur trade society. Indigenous and Euro-American understandings of marriage coalesced into "country marriages" which linked traders to Indian communities and mediated the harsher aspects of Euro-American trade and nascent capitalism.⁸ Over the last thirty years, the works of scholars like Sylvia Van Kirk, Jennifer Brown, Jacqueline Petersen, Tanis Thorne, and Susan Sleeper-Smith have shown that Indian women played active roles in securing what was best for them, their families and their communities through marriage to French and British merchants and traders and by providing access to kinship networks.⁹ The Indian women that appear within these historians' works were well positioned to act as

⁷ Ann Laura Stoler. "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen." *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Ann Laura Stoler, editor. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 7

⁸ Sylvia Van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur trade Society, 1670–1870*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 4 - 8

⁹ Milo M. Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1: 13. For a discussion of the importance of intermarriage and the communities created through intermarriage in the Great Lakes region see: Sylvia Van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Jennifer S. H. Brown. *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); and Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, editors. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985). For the role Indian women played as negotiators see: Clara Sue Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Negotiators," *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992): 97–107; Susan Sleeper-Smith. "Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade." *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000): 423 – 452; Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001)

cross-cultural “mediators” within their communities, where they often served as translators, guides and negotiators, which allowed them to create lasting and permanent ties between Euro-American and Indigenous communities. This historiography successfully re-centered Indian women within the processes and dynamics of the Great Lakes fur trade, and this chapter extends this literature to incorporate the lives of Indian slave women like Askin’s Panise Manette. As a captive of war, diplomacy, or trade, Indian captives faced harrowing experiences marked by fear, uncertainty, and violence as the captives were carried into the Great Lakes region from raided Indian communities in the west.

The relationships and the family that John Askin built and nurtured in the late-eighteenth century attests, in some ways, to historian Gwenn Miller’s observation that “in colonial contexts the very acts of clothing families, finding and eating food, parenting children, building and laboring for foreign companies encompass both violence and dependence; the tension between the two is part and parcel of colonial ties.”¹⁰ John Askin’s marriage and relationship strategy during the interwar period of the British Great Lakes represents an octopus with its tentacles stretching out and grasping new peoples, new lands, and economic opportunities. With each relationship, Askin, who was roughly twenty to thirty-three years old during this period, deliberately established himself within a French and Indian fur trade, where these colonial relationships were shadowy and elusive. In fact, Askin’s household became a tangled knot of competing interests of

¹⁰ Gwenn Miller. “The Perfect Mistress of Russian Economy,” 315. Miller talks about violence; the nature of Askin’s relationship with Manette is predicated on the violence inherent in the Great Lakes Indian slave trade, which evolved out of indigenous processes of warfare and adoption. See also: Brett Rushforth. “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 781 – 783

empire, trade, and family, and became an important node within the Atlantic world fur trade. This chapter details the evolution of John Askin's relationships and marriage, alongside major developments of his trade, and explores how each woman's appearance corresponded with his arrival into a new community.

The Atlantic voyage that carried John Askin from the small village of Aughnacloy in Northern Ireland to Albany in North America in 1758 lasted months.¹¹ Such journeys in the eighteenth century were often long, cold, and dangerous. However, Askin's was especially worrisome, because of the Seven Years' War, which engulfed Europe and large swatches of North America in British and French violence and bloodshed. The Scots Irish sought better conditions and opportunities in North America. Most of Askin's fellow Scots-Irish compatriots migrated to the backcountry regions of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas.¹² However, Askin chose to migrate to the eastern Great Lakes, no doubt drawn by the fur trade and stories of its profitability. Nineteen years old, young and ambitious, Askin probably disembarked from his ship at New York City, traveled up the Hudson River, and arrived at Albany, the principal site of Great Britain's North American fur trade. Once there, John Askin encountered firsthand the ravages, thrill, and pull of the Seven Years' War, and he quickly found a way to profit from it.

¹¹ For a discussion a similar Scots-Irish trans-Atlantic voyage, see the narrative of Askin's partner, James Gordon: James Gordon. "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." Josephine Mayer, editor. *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 17 (1936), 316 – 333; 423 – 439

¹² R.J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America*, 58 – 89

Askin spent the next two years traveling back and forth from New York City to Albany and Schenectady to Detroit.¹³ Askin became increasingly familiar with the fur trade centered at Detroit, an economic pursuit where French and Indian communities defined the region's trade.¹⁴ These communities with their dense networks of kinship often excluded outsiders, even persistent ones.¹⁵ However, astute and ambitious men, like John Askin, quickly learned that trade often depended on relationships with French or Indian women.¹⁶ At some point during the establishment of his partnership with Major Robert Rogers and James Gordon, Askin began a sexual relationship with a historically under-documented woman in New York. It is probable that their relationship began sometime before 1761.¹⁷ In a memorandum book Askin kept throughout 1766, he recorded the birth of a daughter named Catherine, who was born "below Albany in May 1762."¹⁸ Catherine was the first of Askin's many children. However, there is also evidence that Askin's daughter may have been born months earlier. A receipt that

¹³ For a discussion of John Askin's activity after his arrival in North America to Pontiac's Rebellion see the second chapter of this dissertation; also, Josephine Mayer. "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 17 (1936): 316 – 333; 326. See, also: Josephine Mayer. "The Reminiscences of James Gordon." *Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 17 (1936): 423 – 439. This source provides some of the only solid insights into John Askin's early experiences and economic partnerships in the eastern Great Lakes fur trade.

¹⁴ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 55

¹⁵ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 32

¹⁶ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 32

¹⁷ Askin's Memorandum Book.

¹⁸ Askin's Memorandum Book

Askin wrote in April 1762 shows that he paid fourteen shillings a week to a woman named Mary Patten for her services as a wet-nurse.¹⁹ It is ultimately impossible to tell why Askin hired this wet-nurse, but what is clear is that Askin had an established relationship as he was simultaneously worked to build a trade and often travelled laboriously between Albany and Detroit; perhaps the mother and daughter traveled with him across the Great Lakes.²⁰

Historians know little to nothing about Catherine's mother. However, John Askin's desired position in the Great Lakes trade provide some insight into who she might have been, and how she fit into Askin's daily life and trade in the early 1760s. Given the important role Indian women played in fostering cross-cultural exchanges with Euro-American men throughout North America, John Askin, like many of his colleagues, would have pursued a relationship to enhance his trade.²¹ Catherine's mother may

¹⁹ Askin's Receipt Book. See also: Gram Manuscript.

²⁰ Based on Askin's subsequent relationships, one with an Indian slave and one with a French woman, Catherine's mother may have also been French or Indian in origin, but this is an assumption based on scant evidence. However, in the early 1790s, Elizabeth Simcoe, the wife of the lieutenant governor of Lower Canada, John Graves Simcoe, commented that Catherine and his sister, Madeline, the daughter of Manette, were "French women from Detroit." See: Elizabeth Simcoe. *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary*. Mary Quayle Innis, editor. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007) 109. However, the fact that Simcoe called both Askin's daughters French may have more to do with their relationship with Askin's subsequent wife, Marie Archange Barthe, a French woman from Detroit. It is curious that Elizabeth called Madeline French, since others knew that she was "the Daughter of a Pawaneese slave taken in war, by a respectable Merchant near Detroit who has since married a white woman."²⁰ As quoted in: Ruth B. Philips. *Patterns of Power: The Jasper Grant Collection and Great Lakes Indian Art of the Early Nineteenth Century*. (Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Collection, 1984), 16. This reference is also problematic as it seems unlikely that John Askin enslaved Manette himself, or took her through war. It may be a reference to the violent origin of Manette's first entry into the Great Lakes. Far from clearing up any confusion about the nature of Catherine and her mother, the multi-ethnic nature of John Askin's family further complicates and problematizes their identities. With scant references in Askin's archive, his family seems destined to historical obscurity.

²¹ See: Clara Sue Kidwell. "Indian Women as Cultural Negotiators." *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992): 97–107

have been Indian, or a white woman engaged in domestic labor and familiar with the trade. Situated around Albany, and surrounded by the Iroquois, Askin could have established a relationship with a woman from one of these communities. However, John Askin also traveled back and forth across the Great Lakes on behalf of his partnership's trade; spending a fair share of his time at Detroit. It is possible that she came from there. In fact, Indian women often traveled with French men to facilitate the exchange process. While the men exchanged their merchandise for furs, the women served as translators or perhaps rekindled relationships and ties of kinship.²² As an ambitious, but neophyte trader, John Askin, like many other Euro-American traders before him and after, would have seen relationships with Indian women as well-worn paths to success in the Great Lakes fur trade.

The relationship Askin maintained with Catherine's mother existed within a complex landscape of French and Indian sexual, intimate, and marriage arrangements.²³ Historian Carolyn Podruchny has described French and Indian relationships, particularly between lower-class French traders and their Indian wives, as defined by "overarching pattern[s] of fluidity" between partners, but not lacking necessarily in "sincerity."²⁴ For example, she writes that "Among many interior Aboriginal groups marriages between tribes were encouraged as a way to cement

²² James M. McClurken. "Augustin Hamlin Jr.: Odawa Identity and the Politics of Persistence." *Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies of North American Frontiers*. James A. Clifton, editor. (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 85 - 87

²³ See: Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), particularly, Chapter 8: "Tender Ties, Fluid Monogamy, and Trading Sex," 247 – 286

²⁴ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 285

diplomatic and trading relationships.”²⁵ With the arrival of European traders and merchants, Indian families “hoped for both trading advantages and a lasting commitment to their families.”²⁶ However, this observation cannot always be applied broadly. For example, Indian women often “negotiated the conditions of sexual liaisons and played roles in building alliances” on their own terms.²⁷ Likewise, in some cases, Indian men resisted sexual relationships between French men and Indian women, particularly when individual traders had affairs with married women, or when sexual violence occurred. Moreover, the trade and bartering of sex, particularly in polygamous Indian communities, occurred, and slave women faced precarious commoditization and lives within European communities.²⁸ In short, sexuality and intimacy was complex, fluid, and malleable in the Great Lakes. When Askin arrived at Albany as a young man, he encountered a French and Indian world where sexual intimacy, temporary or permanent, often existed alongside successful and lucrative fur trades. Given his subsequent relationships at Michilimackinac and Detroit, the myriad sexual and marital patterns of the Great Lakes proved informative. As such, it provided Askin an avenue of integration and re-invention as a new British trader within a French and Indian world.

²⁵ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 255

²⁶ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 255

²⁷ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 263

²⁸ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 263 – 264

When John Askin made the arduous trip west to Michilimackinac in 1764 his three-year-old daughter, Catherine, traveled with him to the distant British outpost.²⁹ It seems unlikely that Askin cared for his daughter alone, and there is reason to believe her mother, or at the very least, servant traveled with them on the St. Lawrence River and through the Great Lakes. However, in the absence of concrete evidence, speculation about the parameters of their relationships must suffice. Marriages and relationships established kinship ties, identities, and positions for new merchants and traders.³⁰ While it is impossible to tell if Catherine's mother was Indian or Euro-American, Askin understood the social processes that defined the parameters of the exchange process. Following Pontiac's Rebellion, John Askin watched as his social and military connections failed him. His profitable trade collapsed into debt and insolvency. At Michilimackinac, John Askin struggled to reestablish a position within the Great Lakes trade; he purchased an Indian slave woman named Manette from an established French trader at Michilimackinac.

²⁹ It is hard to exactly pinpoint how John Askin became the deputy-commissar of Michilimackinac; he left no record of his appointment. During the early 1760s, Sir William Johnson, an important Albany merchant and Indian policy architect, conceived on a system of royally appointed commissary to oversee trade and Indian relationships at important western posts like Michilimackinac. Askin's ties to the military as a sutler, and his position at Albany could account for his appointment. Likewise, when John Askin, implicated in a rum trade controversy at Michilimackinac during the tenure of Major Robert Rogers in the late 1760s, Askin wrote to Johnson to beg his pardon and to explain his involvement. This suggests that Askin served at Johnson's behest. See: John Askin to Sir William Johnson (Michilimackinac), 22 September 1767. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, editors Alexander Flick. (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1927), 5: 693

³⁰ See: Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur trade Society, 1670–1870*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 3 – 8.

In the aftermath of Pontiac's War, Askin's experience as a sutler during the Seven Years' War proved a valuable resource for his position as the deputy commissar of Michilimackinac. However, organizing this task proved arduous. Goods manufactured in Great Britain traveled across the Atlantic Ocean for the distant military post; they often were collected and sorted at Quebec and Montreal, floated down river and lake to Detroit, and then forwarded north to Michilimackinac.³¹ During the long and arduous journey, these goods were often pilfered, lost, damaged or spoiled, which left soldiers wanting and Askin frustrated. With Michilimackinac serving as his connection to the Great Lakes fur trade; Askin knew that his livelihood depended upon his success as a commissar.³²

French fur trade families of Michilimackinac were the first people Askin encountered when he arrived in 1764.³³ These established families with French last names like Langlade, Blondeau, Chevalier, and Bourassa were often married to Indian women from the Great Lakes, or were born from such unions.³⁴ For example, Charles

³¹ For an analysis of the supply and organization of the British Army in the Eighteenth Century, see: Alan Guy, *Oeconomy and Discipline: Officership and Administration in the British Army, 1714 – 63*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Edward E. Curtis, *The Organization of the British Army in the American Revolution*. (New York: AMS Press, 1969); Walter Dunn, *The New Imperial Economy: The British Army and the American Frontier*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001). See: Gram Manuscript

³² See: Keith R. Widder, "The French Connection: The Interior French and their Role in the French-British Relations in the Western Great Lakes Region, 1760 – 1775." *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754 – 1814*. David Curtis Skaggs, Larry L. Nelson, editors. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001)

³³ Many of these families appear in Askin's 1766 memorandum book.

³⁴ For biographies of these Frenchmen, see: Paul Trap. "Charles-Michel Mouet de Langlade." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV; Francois Beland. "Maurice-Regis Blondeau." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. V; David A. Armour. "Rene La Ronde Bourassa." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV

de Langlade, famous for his raid against the British trading post of Pickawillany, was the nephew of the influential *Arbre Croche* Odawa chief Nissowaquet through his mother.³⁵ Frenchman Rene Bourassa arrived from Montreal in the early 1730s and his children connected him to many of the important families of Michilimackinac. His daughter, Charlotte-Ambroisine, married Charles de Langlade in 1754.³⁶ His son, Rene, had married a woman from the Chevalier family ten years earlier.³⁷ British merchants throughout the Great Lakes discovered that these families controlled the processes and access to the fur trade and they could not easily be cast aside. This situation led successful merchants like James Sterling at Detroit to establish intimate ties with these communities.³⁸ However, while these intertwined communities proved difficult to penetrate, except through marriage, Askin chose, instead, to purchase his ties.

Askin tethered himself to the French bourgeois merchant families of Michilimackinac; men and women who lived in comfortable houses, held sumptuous parties, and controlled large sections of the Great Lakes fur trade. In a recently published book, historian Jay Gitlin characterized these elite French communities as “cosmopolitan in two ways”: firstly, a place like Michilimackinac existed as a center of

³⁵ See: David A. Armour, “Nissowaquet,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV

³⁶ See: Charles Langlade’s Marriage Contract, Aug. 11, 1754, vol. 18. Draper, Lyman C., Reuben G. Thwaites, Milo Quiafe, and Joseph Schafer, editors. *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1855 – 1911), 35 – 40. (Hereafter WHC).

³⁷ See: Record of the baptism of Rene Francois, the son of Rene Bourassa and Anne Charlotte Veronique Chevalier in “The Mackinac Register,” WHC 19: 13.

³⁸ *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701 – 1922*, vol. 2. Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon Miller, editors. (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 888

“cross-cultural contact and exchange” and secondly, the merchant class never lost sight of European economic developments and their principal wholesalers.³⁹ This cosmopolitanism had a local edge as well: these men were fluent in Indian languages, and respected local customs, politics, and trade practices.⁴⁰ Askin, alienated from his British creditors, probably viewed these men as models of fur trade success. These were men who understood frontier and indigenous trade practices and the unique calculations of supply and demand that characterized the European markets, long distances, and chains of credit.⁴¹ Often working out of their own family homes, elite French merchants of the Great Lakes successfully sidestepped the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War and British trade restrictions of the 1760s to maintain their control of the fur-trade through their Indian allies and ties of kinship. Many Michilimackinac merchants even expanded their efforts into new communities, like St. Louis and New Orleans.⁴² However, while some Frenchmen succeeded in the post-war landscape, others failed and suffered. This situation engendered new opportunities for British and French mercantile cooperation in the Great Lakes. The wealth and status of the French bourgeois proved a model for Askin’s success and reinvention; his opportunity to enter this community came in the form of an Indian slave named Manette.

³⁹ Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 9

⁴⁰ Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier*, 9

⁴¹ Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier*, 9

⁴² Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 62 – 63

Like Catherine's mother, Manette's existence within Askin's household and historical archive is elusive. It seems likely that Rene Bourassa, an established fur trader involved with Indian slavery, owned Manette before Askin. In 1748, Bourassa had baptized a young Indian woman in September of 1748; she took the name of Marianne, for which Manette is a shortened form.⁴³ Likewise, when Marianne gave birth to the son of a local French trader in 1750, both Rene Bourassa and his wife served as the child's godparents.⁴⁴ It seems likely that Marianne, or Manette came from an Indian community outside of the Great Lakes and arrived into the region after a journey marked by tremendous fear, violence, and uncertainty.⁴⁵ She would have spoken a different language, lacked vital ties of kinship, and was initially isolated in her new community.⁴⁶ Much of this information comes from the Mackinac Baptismal

⁴³ See: Record of the baptism of Marianne, Panise of Rene Bourassa in "The Mackinac Register," WHC 19: 24. See: John Gram, "John Askin at Michilimackinac," unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram made the connection between the name Marianne and its diminutive form, Manette; his work has been instrumental in uncovering sources quite relevant to Askin's intimate life.

⁴⁴ See: Record of the baptism of Basile, the son of Manette in "The Mackinac Register," WHC 19: 28. See: Gram Manuscript

⁴⁵ For the discussion of how Indians became captives, and then became members of Euro-American communities as slaves, see: Brett Rushforth, "A Little Flesh We Offer You': The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 781 – 783. Rushforth's article is one of many new studies that have come out in the last few years that have begun to write and explore the history of Indian slavery in North America, for example, see also: Alan Gallay. *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); James F. Brooks. *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002)

⁴⁶ Indian slavery in the Great Lakes was a multifaceted experience, like elsewhere in North America, and its severity hinged on many factors. For example, Augustin Grignon, a relative of Charles de Langlade, relates the story of Jocko, a slave Langlade's. Jocko drank, stole, and secured his freedom by generally being a nuisance. Likewise, Jocko's mother, owned by a Menomonee woman named Kattesh, kin to a chief Tomah, proved to be a bigger thief, drunk, and burden than her son. Exasperated and eschewing manumission, Kattesh simply sent the mother back to her previous owners, the Sauks.

Register, which historians have utilized to explore the role Indian women and their kinship played in the Great Lakes fur trade.⁴⁷ One historian has written that in the Great Lakes “Baptism affirmed the value of social relationships and ‘extended the bonds of social solidarity.’ Godparents ensured entrée into the trade, and well-known fur traders and their wives were frequent godparents.”⁴⁸ This well established process was entrenched at Michilimackinac by the time Askin arrived into the community. In effect, Catholic baptism and indigenous captivity adoption strategies merged in the Great Lakes to create symbolic ties that incorporated new elements, like Indian captives and slaves, within established roles and patterns of the existing community.

Historian Brett Rushforth’s work on Indian slavery in the French Great Lakes during the late- seventeenth and early- eighteenth century demonstrates the centrality of Indian captivity and slavery to the processes of the French and Indian “middle ground.”⁴⁹ Within Indian communities of the Great Lakes, it was a pervasive practice to adopt captives taken by war and raid to replace lost relatives. “Because of their

A different Indian slave owned by Langlade died in his service, while another named Antoine served for ten years, was set free, and became a trader in the fur trade, before finding his way back to his former Missouri river community. An interior French trader at Green Bay named Augustin Bonnterre purchased an Indian slave woman and married her. Some slaves met violent ends, such as Amable Roy’s, a contemporary of Askin, whose slave died in a drunken fight. Collo, another of Charles de Langlade’s slaves, was murdered by a “Chippewa in a fit of jealousy.” A Menomonee woman ordered her sick slave to take off her over-dress, and then stabbed her to death, apparently without provocation. See: Augustin Grignon’s *Recollections*,” *WHC* 3; 256 – 258

⁴⁷ See: Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade,” *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000): 423 – 452; Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). Sleeper-Smith’s work on the Great Lakes established and demonstrated the importance of indigenous notions of kinship in the processes of encounter and the fur trade.

⁴⁸ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 43

⁴⁹ Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You” 777

symbolic power to mitigate the effects of warfare or murder,” Rushforth argues, “captives became an important medium of exchange in the gift giving that characterized Indian diplomacy.”⁵⁰ Such gifts erased hostilities and ensured peaceful negotiations. As the French and Indian alliance developed, “The colony’s Indian allies – especially the Ottawas and Illinois – acquired captives from their western enemies and then offered them as symbolic gifts to French merchants associated with the fur trade,” where French cultural practices transformed captives into slaves.⁵¹ The French looked upon Indian captives through the prism of African chattel slavery, and treated these gifts of flesh as labor rather than symbolic representations of renewed life and peace.⁵² In the early- eighteenth century, as French labor in North America became scarce, Indian slavery became a widespread practice throughout New France. Despite its commonality, Rushforth argues that “New France’s Indian slave system never fully escaped its origins in the diplomacy and gift exchange that first brought Indian captives into French hands as slaves.”⁵³ It was still a malleable and shifting practice, when John Askin arrived in the Great Lakes in 1764.

These insights provide a way of examining John Askin’s relationship with Manette. Despite being a prominent French fur trader, Rene Bourassa was also a

⁵⁰ Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You” 785

⁵¹ Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You” 793

⁵² Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You” 780

⁵³ Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You” 808

slaver and was not well liked by the local Indian communities of Michilimackinac.⁵⁴ This made him somewhat vulnerable to Indian retaliation, especially as the atmosphere of the Great Lakes became increasingly tense and hostile in the early 1760s. With the outbreak of Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763, the British garrison at Michilimackinac became a target. When Ojibwa and Sauk warriors surprised the British garrison as they watched a *baaga'adowe* game, British trader Alexander Henry recalled that "Amid the slaughter which was raging I observed many of the Canadian inhabitants of the fort calmly looking on, neither opposing the Indians, nor suffering injury."⁵⁵ However, while many of the French inhabitants of the community were left unmolested during the capture of Michilimackinac, Rene Bourassa suffered. He watched as the Ojibwa and Sauk slaughtered his horses and cattle, while they looked for hiding Englishmen.⁵⁶ Like

⁵⁴ It seems that Bourassa raided the Sioux, and supplied raiding parties of the Sioux. In 1736, a party of Sioux warrior captured Bourassa and his party, and they claimed that the Frenchmen supplied arms and merchandise to their enemies. Bourassa barely survived the encounter. See: Jos. Fr. Lafitau, *Rare of Unpublished Documents, Vol. 2 or the Aulneau Collection, 1734 – 1745*. Arthur E. Jones, editor. (Montreal: Archives of St. Mary's College, 1893), 93 – 94 Bourassa headed into the Great Lakes in the late 1720s after taking advantage of the highly profitable, but illegal trade that developed between the French at Montreal and the British in Albany. Working with French explorers and traders like Francois Lefebvre and Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de La Verendrye, Bourassa became deeply involved in the Great Lakes fur and slave trade. In 1736, Sioux warriors captured Bourassa claiming that he provided arms and supplies to their enemies. He barely survived the encounter; only the intervention of a Panise saved him from torture.⁵⁴ Afterwards, Bourassa settled in Michilimackinac in the 1740s. "The Mackinac Baptismal Register" offers a window into the nature of Bourassa's family and trade; it records the births and marriages of his children and grandchildren, but also demonstrates the centrality of Indian slavery to his household. For example, between 1742 and 1763, Rene Bourassa and his son-in-law, Charles de Langlade, account for the majority of the entries related to Indian slavery during this period. For a short biography of Rene Bourassa, see: David A Armour. "Rene Bourassa." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 4; Milo Quaife, editor, *Askin Papers*, 1:13; Joseph Lafitau. *Rare of Unpublished Documents, or the Aulneau Collection, 1734 – 1745*, 2 vols. Arthur E. Jones, editor. (Montreal: Archives of St. Mary's College, 1893), 93 – 94

⁵⁵ Alexander Henry. *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760 – 1776*. Milo Quaife, editor. (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1921), 80

⁵⁶ David A. Armour, "Rene La Ronde Bourassa," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IV

Henry, who was captured by the Indians shortly after their attack and spent a year in captivity among the Ojibwa, Bourassa must have felt himself to be in a precarious position. When the British military reoccupied the post in 1764, Bourassa breathed a sigh of relief, and probably looked for a connection to this emerging British world. Perhaps, by selling Manette to Askin, Bourassa hoped to establish links to the new imperial regime.⁵⁷ It is telling that Bourassa sold Manette to Askin, the new military commissar and conduit for British trade and merchandise.⁵⁸

Through Manette, Askin purchased ties into the complex network of French and Indian kinship that the Bourassa family represented; a network that included Charles Langlade, the Chevaliers, and the Blondeaus.⁵⁹ Through the symbolic processes of Catholic baptism, Manette transformed into Bourassa's goddaughter, and became a fictive member of Bourassa's family.⁶⁰ For Askin, alienated from New York's merchant community, his position as Michilimackinac's commissar was one of the only connections that kept him tied to the Great Lakes fur trade. Manette helped him become indispensable to the British garrison he supplied and served. For example,

⁵⁷ Like John Askin's later relationship with Marie Archange Barthe, a daughter of an established French trader, whose trade suffered during the Seven Years' War, an older French network of kinship was revitalized through access to British capital and connections.

⁵⁸ This line of analysis is speculative, but suggests an interesting way of looking at the transaction. It shows, in some ways, the kinds of mutually beneficial relationships that evolved between the French and British in the absence of British cultural chauvinism.

⁵⁹ For the connections between these families, see: Christian Denissen, *The Genealogy of the French Families of the Detroit River Region, 1701 – 1936, 2 vols.* (Detroit: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1987)

⁶⁰ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 43

when military supplies of flour arrived spoiled or pilfered, Askin drew provisions from Bourassa and the French merchant community.

When, in the fall of 1766, the twenty-eight-year-old Askin returned to New York to meet with his creditors and leverage new relationships with James Sterling and John Porteous, he was able to expand his trade for the first time since Pontiac's Rebellion.⁶¹ He traveled south to Detroit with Manette and another woman, who may have been Catherine's mother.⁶² That year John Askin manumitted Manette in November, and in February, she gave birth to one of his children.⁶³ After the manumission, Askin traveled west across Lake Erie and arrived at Fort Stanwix, where in early December, another child named "Marianne was born."⁶⁴ Like Catherine's mother, it is impossible to tell what became of Manette after her manumission. It is perhaps telling of the value he placed on their relationship that Askin manumitted Manette, rather than selling her as he had originally planned. Several weeks before he left Michilimackinac, he valued his "Paniseses wench" at 50 pounds in the currency of New York.⁶⁵ With her

⁶¹ See: James Sterling to John Porteous, (Detroit), 29 September 1765, in James Sterling Letter Book, housed at the Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; John Askin's Memorandum Book

⁶² John Askin's Memorandum Book. See also: John Gram's Unpublished Manuscript on Askin at Mackinac City, MI.

⁶³ See: Record of Manette's Manumission found in Early Lands Transfer: Detroit and Wayne County, Michigan, 1703 – 1796, Vol. A, B, C. (Detroit?: Louisa St. Clair Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1935), 9; John Askin's Memorandum Book. See also: John Gram's Unpublished Manuscript on Askin at Mackinac City, MI.

⁶⁴ John Askin's Memorandum Book

⁶⁵ John Askin's Memorandum Book

manumission, it is possible that Askin acknowledged the role Manette played in securing relationships with the French merchants and traders that helped define his new Great Lakes trade. Perhaps, John Askin rewarded Manette for helping him rehabilitate his trade and his reputation as well.

Askin was a successful trader well before his marriage to Marie Archange Barthe, a mixed-ancestry French woman. His position and success as deputy commissar at Michilimackinac was made possible by his relationship with the French and Indian community through Manette and through his reinvigorated British connections that he established on his trip to upper New York in 1766 and 1767. At first, Askin expanded his trade by building a trading depot at Grand Portage, on the north shore of Lake Superior.⁶⁶ This innovation allowed him to resupply traders and the region's Indians more efficiently. In just two seasons of active participation in the Grand Portage trade, Askin became tremendously wealthy. Impressed by the repayment of his substantial debt, many important Albany and Montreal merchants, such as Phyn & Ellice, pursued Askin as a trading partner as a way to participate in the trade to the west of Michilimackinac.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Grace Lee Nute. "A British Legal Case and Old Grand Portage." *Minnesota History* 21 (1940): 117 – 148; 134. In a deposition, Maurice Blondeau, who worked with Askin in the 1760s and 1770s, particularly in the trade above Lake Superior, indicates that Askin traded there.

⁶⁷ Phyn and Ellice to Porteous (Schenectady), 4 January 1772, Letter books of Phyn and Ellice, merchants at Schenectady, New York, 1767 – 1776, housed at the Buffalo Historical Society, Buffalo, New York. Microfilmed. Copy on file at: Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan; R.H. Fleming, "Phyn, Ellice and Company of Schenectady." *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, Vol. 4 (1932): 7 – 41

When Askin returned from upper New York, his partners had planned for him to go directly north to Lake Winnipeg and relieve Thomas Corry as their winterer in the region.⁶⁸ However, once at Detroit, Askin's plans seemingly went awry. When the thirty-three-year old merchant arrived in Detroit in the summer of 1772 he remained for awhile.⁶⁹ Detroit was the largest community in the Great Lakes. Under the British regime, it grew exponentially from nearly nine hundred inhabitants in 1765 to nearly three thousand people just fifteen years later.⁷⁰ British explorer Jonathan Carver described the inhabitants of the community as "chiefly French...[and] more attentive to the Indian trade than to farming."⁷¹ The post consisted of "upwards of one hundred houses" and "somewhat regular" streets, but also housed some of the oldest and most established French fur trade families in the region.⁷² These families married into other French and Indian communities through the Great Lakes, like Michilimackinac, St. Joseph, and Kaskaskia, and had evolved an intertwined and interconnected community that was instrumental to the British fur trade.⁷³ It is hard to tell when Askin first met

⁶⁸ Andrew Graham, the commandant of the York Factory, 39 – 44

⁶⁹ Andrew Graham, the commandant of the York Factory, 39 - 44

⁷⁰ See chart published in: Nelson Vance Russell. *The British Regime in the Michigan and the Old Northwest, 1760 – 1796*. (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, Inc., 1978), 103

⁷¹ Jonathan Carver. *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*. (London: J. Water, Charing-Cross, and S. Crowder, in Paternoster Row, 1778), 15; For a biography of Jonathan Carver, see: William Browning. "The Early History of Jonathan Carver." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 3 (1920): 291 – 305

⁷² Carver, *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, 151

⁷³ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 43

Charles Andre Barthe, the head of one of these established French families, or when he proposed to marry his older daughter, but in 1772, they were officially married. Unlike his relationships with Catherine's mother and his Panise, Manette, this marriage with Marie Archange Barthe proved permanent and lasting.

The Barthe family first arrived in North America in the early-eighteenth century and settled in the community of Montreal, where Theophile Barthe served as a master armorer for the French crown.⁷⁴ Shortly after his arrival, Theophile married Marguerite-Charlotte Alavoine and together they had seven children.⁷⁵ The oldest, a boy named, Charles Andre Barthe, born in 1722, followed in his father's footsteps, and learned the armorer's trade; he became so proficient in his work that he also became the King's Armorer at Montreal.⁷⁶ However, by 1740, the younger Barthe relocated to Detroit, where he continued to work as an armorer, silversmith, and Detroit's overseer and repairer of roads.⁷⁷ At Detroit, Barthe married Marie Therese Campeau in 1747.⁷⁸ She

⁷⁴ See: Quiafe, John Askin Paper, 34, 12n. See: *The Jesuit Relations and Allies Documents: Trade and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610 – 1791*, vol. 70. Reuben Gold Thwaites, editor. (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1891) for important insights in Barthe's life at Detroit. In the Jesuit Relations, the priests refer to him as Barte. For example, in 1748, Father de la Richardie notes that, "Barte owes...a livre of vermilion and 3 pairs of mitasses." (40) Two years later, Richardie records that he "received from sieur barte, armorer, at detroit, The sum of 312 livres in discharge of sieur duouchel, blacksmith, to whom The said barte owed That sum and more for the house in the fort that I sold him last year, 1759." (46)

⁷⁵ The complex familial network of the Barthe family can be pieced together, Christian Denissen's *The Genealogy of the French Families of the Detroit River Region, 1701 – 1936, 2 vols.* (Detroit: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1987) proved especially valuable. See also: Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin, *Legends of le Detroit*. (Detroit: Thorndike Nourse, 1884) for genealogical information on French families in Detroit.

⁷⁶ See: Quiafe, John Askin Paper, 34, 12n.

⁷⁷ See: Quiafe, John Askin Paper, 34, 12n.

was the daughter of one of the earliest families to settle in the community following its establishment in the first years of the eighteenth century. The Campeau family came to North America and settled in Montreal in the early-seventeenth century, they fostered a long line of fur traders and blacksmiths, before relocating to Detroit in the 1720s.⁷⁹

Marie Therese Campeau had eleven children, before dying in childbirth in 1765. Barthe and his family lived comfortably on a farm inherited from his wife's father, and with trade being brisk, Barthe also acquired other plots of land along the Detroit River.⁸⁰

Moreover, through his work as a silversmith, Barthe became increasingly involved in the lucrative French Great Lakes fur trade, where silver ornaments, especially bracelets, medals, armbands, ear-rings and gorgets played an important role establishing ties and conducting diplomacy.⁸¹ When Barthe's brother, Pierre, arrived the two brothers began a successful fur trade in the Indian communities along the Wabash River valley.⁸²

Following the Seven Years' War and Pontiac's Rebellion, Charles Andre Barthe's trade and partnership with his brother Pierre began to suffer. By 1760, British

⁷⁸ See: Quiafe, John Askin Paper, 34, 12n.

⁷⁹ See: David A. Baerreis. "Trade Silver and Indian Silversmiths." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 34 (1950): 76 - 82

⁸⁰ See: Krum, Early Land Transfers, 18, 191, 202, 172; *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701 – 1922*, vol. 1. Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon Miller, editors. (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 185 - 186

⁸¹ For a discussion of the silver-trade in the fur trade and Euro-American and Indian diplomacy in the Great Lakes, see: David A. Baerreis. "Trade Silver and Indian Silversmiths." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 34 (1950): 76 - 82

⁸² See the possible diary of Charles Andre Barthe: "Diary of a Journey into the Indian Country, 1765 – 1766. Housed at the Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

merchants and traders, like Askin, began flooding into the French posts of Detroit and Michilimackinac and tried to oust or side step the former French traders. Pontiac's War destroyed Barthe's trade and his relationship with the Indians, and with his economic endeavors in tatters, Charles struggled to maintain his large family. After his wife died, he increasingly relied on his eldest daughter, Marie Archange, to run the household. As Askin struggled to rebuild his trade at Michilimackinac, Barthe struggled to rebuild his as well, but several unprofitable trading ventures left him in debt with the French and British merchant establishment at Detroit, which is probably when Askin met the older French trader.⁸³

By 1771, Charles Andre Barthe floundered in debt. To continue his trade, Barthe mortgaged his family's farm, but it did little to help.⁸⁴ The following year, his debts forced Barthe to sell all of his properties in Detroit and he would have been ruined except for the intervention of his new son-in-law. Moreover, this marriage proved extremely advantageous for Barthe and his family. After the wedding, Askin purchased several of the properties that Barthe had been forced to sell just two years earlier.⁸⁵ It is clear that the British merchant cared deeply about the social and economic welfare of

⁸³ See: Quiafe, John Askin Papers, 34, 12n.

⁸⁴ See: Krum, Early Land Transfers, 18, 191, 202, 172; *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701 – 1922*, vol. 1. Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon Miller, editors. (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 185 - 186

⁸⁵ For a discussion of John Askin's property during the late 1770s, see: John Askin's Inventory for 1778," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. See also: Askin's Inventories for 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779, John Askin Papers, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. (Hereafter cited: John Askin Inventory, 1776, 1777, 1778, or 1779); *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701 – 1922*, vol. 1. Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon Miller, editors. (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 185 - 186

his father-in-law, who seemed quite prone to unprofitable investments. In 1778, for example, Barthe, once again, required Askin's assistance to repay his debts. In a letter to Commodore Alexander Grant, Askin wrote that he "hop[ed] [Barthe] applied the money I gave him to the discharging of his debts at Detroit, it really pains me to think of him indebted to any person."⁸⁶ For the rest of his life, Barthe maintained a trade and business subsidized by Askin, and when the old Frenchman passed away in Detroit in 1786, his family, comfortably ensconced in Askin's network of trade and fueled by British capital, enjoyed tremendous success and fortune at both Detroit and Michilimackinac.⁸⁷

In many ways British capital in the guise of merchants like John Askin, arrived to revitalize and reestablish French connections in the Great Lakes. This began with the relocation of most Barthe family members from Detroit to Michilimackinac. Only Marie Archange Barthe's younger sister, Therese, stayed behind in Detroit to care for her ailing father, while the rest of the family followed Askin north.⁸⁸ Once they arrived at Michilimackinac, they found the community accommodating and quite familiar. For example, through their mother's side, the Barthe children were related to the important and influential Chevalier family at Michilimackinac, Fort St. Joseph, Cahokia, and

⁸⁶ John Askin to Commodore Grant (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 77. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

⁸⁷ See: John Askin's ledgers for 1785, 1787 – 1789, 1788 – 1796; housed at the Burton Historical Society Collections at the Detroit Library, Detroit Michigan.

⁸⁸ See: The Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. MHPC: 9, 622 - 623

Detroit.⁸⁹ Through the intertwined and intermarried nature of the French and Indian communities of the Great Lakes, Askin's reach stretched into regions where he and other British traders and merchant had previously lacked opportunity.⁹⁰ Askin gained access to communities like Sault Ste. Marie and the Wabash River Valley; marriage and kinship with the Barthes and their extended families proved fundamentally transformative to both the Barthe family and to Askin.

Beyond kinship, marriage to Marie Archange Barthe and relocation of her family to Michilimackinac proved to be a further boon for Askin's trade in terms of organization and labor. Unlike many of his British colleagues, Askin had anticipated the need for a quicker turn-around on merchandise for Great Lakes furs, which led to his founding a trading depot at Grand Portage in 1767.⁹¹ With the arrival at Michilimackinac of Marie Archange's brothers, Louis, Jean Baptiste, and Bonaventure Antoine Barthe, Askin finally had the ability to expand and solidify his hold on the Great Lakes fur trade. These three young educated Frenchmen were quickly incorporated into Askin's business, and soon formed the backbone of its day-to-day operations through the 1770s. Jean Baptiste Barthe, whom Askin considered the ablest of the three brothers, soon became Askin's partner in the creation of a new and extensive trading depot at

⁸⁹ For an analysis of the relationship between these French families, see: Christian Denissen, editor. *The Genealogy of the French Families of the Detroit River Region, 1701 – 1936, 2 vols.* (Detroit: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1987).

⁹⁰ *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701 – 1922*, vol. 1. Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon Miller, editors. (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 234. Commodore Alexander Grant, the British official who controlled and oversaw the British Navy in the Great Lakes, married Therese Barthe at Detroit, despite neither being able to speak the other's language.

⁹¹ Nute, "A British Legal Case and Old Grand Portage," 134

Sault Ste. Marie.⁹² Both Louis and Bonaventure found work on Askin's newly built and privately owned Great Lakes' trading vessels, which Askin planned to use to carry merchandise and furs from his privately owned depots across the region.⁹³ The labor and activities of these three French men, alongside Askin's own access to British capital, credit, merchandise and imperial consideration, positioned Askin and his family members as one of the most important households in the entire Great Lakes region.

In the spring of 1778, six years after his marriage to Marie Archange Barthe, John Askin wished Sampson Fleming "much joy of [the birth of his] boy," and reminded Fleming that he had "Girls worth looking."⁹⁴ Askin revealed the deep importance he placed on intimate relationships and marriages. From his elusive relationship with Catherine's mother in upper New York, through his relocation to Michilimackinac, where he purchased Manette, Askin relied on his relationships with women to expand his trade into the upper Great Lakes. Once he was married to the daughter of the established French Barthe family at Detroit, Askin's new connections and labor allowed him to establish a broader grasp over the Great Lakes trade throughout the 1770s. Askin consolidated British capital and credit, imperial connections and concerns, and the social relationships that gave him entrée into the French and Indian communities of the Great Lakes within his extended household.

⁹² See: The Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. MHPC: 9, 622 - 623

⁹³ See: The Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. MHPC: 9, 622 – 623

⁹⁴ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Mackinac), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 86. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

Askin's relationships and familial connections in the interwar period of the British Empire suggests the importance of family and household in understanding the inter-related nature of empire in the Atlantic world. His choice of intimate partners suggests his understanding of the intricacies of the Great Lakes society. The socially and culturally diverse nature of his sexual and familial relationships attests to the multi-ethnic nature of the eighteenth-century British Atlantic fur trade and helps to explain Askin's economic success. Between 1757 and 1772, as he struggled to and succeeded in revitalizing his reputation and his position in the fur trade, his position as deputy commissar allowed him to reconnect to the important centers of British capital and credit. Beyond his position as a commissar at Michilimackinac, however, as this chapter shows, Askin's success was also tied to the intimate relationships that defined his daily life in the Great Lakes. While it is impossible to precisely identify Catherine's mother as French or Indian, the ethnicity of Manette and the role Marie Archange Barthe played in the trade suggests these women provided the connections that proved instrumental to John Askin's Great Lakes trade. These women were the connections that bound together the disparate impulses of Askin's economic and imperial life.

Encompassed within John Askin's shifting intimate relationships are hosts of contradictory impulses and social, political, and economic processes that made the British Empire and the fur trade in the Great Lakes workable and prosperous. The pattern of lifelong behavior established in this chapter demonstrates the importance Askin placed on these relationships, and centers concepts of "households" and "families" as important analytical sites of imperial and Atlantic world history. John Askin's old Jesuit farm housed the children of three different sexual relationships,

Askin's French wife and her extended family, a collection of African and Indian slaves, important British and French merchants, and frequently housed aristocratic British officials traveling in the Great Lakes. John Askin's household represented the cultural encounter, economic organization, imperial authority, and social distinction that characterized the British Empire and its Atlantic world. By weaving together these disparate and occasionally antagonistic strands, Askin built a successful trade and constructed a multicultural family that enhanced his economic and social status in the Great Lakes. As such, the family and kinship networks that Askin established through the women discussed in this chapter are fundamental to understanding the larger economic and political projects of the British Atlantic world.

Askin's multi-cultural and multi-ethnic household reveals the importance of ambiguity and self-presentation in the Great Lakes fur trade. Askin reinvented himself in the 1760s and 1770s and he emulated the behaviors of his fellow French merchants; his marriage to Marie Archange Barthe was the final act in this decade long economic and intimate process. Askin's efforts suggest the composite nature of the British Great Lakes fur trade and how French and Indian practices continued to influence the actions of certain traders and merchants. Askin's French family, partners, language and lifestyle structured his social life and simultaneously contributed to his economic success. The following chapter explores how John Askin parlayed his economic success from the late 1760s and his network of kin and colleagues into becoming a preeminent middleman in the fur trade. It carries forward the notion that Askin's marriage strategy, particularly with Marie Archange Barthe, placed him in a position to invest and participate in many of the developing arenas of the fur trade through their

labor and connections. Between 1772 and 1778, a period that corresponds to the build up and outbreak of the American Revolution, was pivotal in the history of the Great Lakes' fur trade as it saw the rise of large-scale trading partnerships like the North West Company. Askin's success during this period was linked to his ability to organize and monopolize important aspects of the fur trade, while employing his network of kinship and colleagues to negotiate the imperial disruptions caused by the American Revolution.

CHAPTER 4

'NEVER DISAPPOINT PEOPLE IN THE MATTER OF SHIPPING GOODS': MANAGING THE FUR TRADE AND IMPERIAL DISRUPTIONS DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

"I am much mortified that you did not send Mr. Oakes's share of merchandise with that of the other gentlemen. One should never give offence in trade. To go on the other extreme, I mean to please everybody."¹

John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe, June 21 1778

"I did not go to Detroit last fall as I intended when I see you last, these troublesome times causes many disputes in which a man often gets involved, notwithstanding his great desire to the contrary I therefore thought it most prudent to stay where I'm sure to live in peace."²

John Askin to Alexander Henry, June 23 1778

John Askin spent the icy winter of 1778 compiling a list of his property.³ It became a near yearly tradition in his household. However, as the now thirty-nine-year-old merchant categorized the odds and ends of his estate and trade in his ink-stained ledger, he must have thought, if only briefly, about the lean times he had experienced

¹ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 21 June 1778, *Askin Papers*, 1: 141. This sentiment must have come from Askin's earliest involvement in the fur trade, where so much of his own reputation and status was lost because he failed "please everybody." See original document in: John Askin's Letterbook 1778, John Askin Papers, Box 22. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 22). See also: John Gram, "John Askin at Michilimackinac," unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram's research has been instrumental in piecing together John Askin's life in the early Great Lakes.

² John Askin to Alexander Henry (Montreal), 23 June 1778, *Askin Papers*, 1: 145. See also: John Askin, Box 22

³ For a discussion of John Askin's property during the late 1770s, see: John Askin's Inventory for 1778," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. See also: Askin's Inventories for 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779, John Askin Papers, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. (Hereafter cited: John Askin Inventory, 1776, 1777, 1778, or 1779)

just ten years before. Still, Askin's life was not without its struggles. In the years that he spent developing his upper Great Lakes trade, the political and economic conflicts that emerged between metropolitan London and their Atlantic seaboard colonies in the aftermath the Seven Years' War erupted into full-fledged violence. This chapter explores John Askin's response to the major imperial and economic developments in the Great Lakes region between 1772 and 1778. As a major merchant at Michilimackinac and an imperial official serving as the army's deputy commissar, John Askin worked to maintain a profitable and organized trade, while dealing with shortages of flour and liquor, recalcitrant British officials, and a financial crisis as his ships and his merchandise were pressed into service of the British Empire. It was a precarious endeavor. For many of the important French and British merchants and traders in the Great Lakes, the disruptions caused by the imperial struggles taking place along the Atlantic seaboard, down the St. Lawrence River, and into the Ohio Valley coincided with a problematic, but expansive period in the region's fur trade, which forced these men to streamline and supply an increasingly competitive and far flung trade north-west of Lake Superior. During this critical period, Askin worked to solidify his position as a preeminent middleman in the Great Lakes fur trade, while he also negotiated the demands of being a loyal British official in an increasingly complicated and war-torn world.

The previous chapters demonstrated that John Askin's economic success in North America was linked to the circumstances of the British Atlantic World and the intimate face-to-face world of the Great Lakes in the interwar period. This chapter shows that Askin's success during the American Revolution was linked to his ability to

organize and take advantage of the expanding but complicated fur trade and his ability to negotiate with imperial officials to turn imperial policies to his own benefit. Stationed at the edge of the British Empire in North America, Askin was at the mercy of the ongoing violence and warfare along the St. Lawrence River. The war disrupted the movement of furs and merchandise up and down river, which agitated the already economically precarious fur trade in the Great Lakes. Moreover, the American Revolution coincided with a complex reorganization of the fur trade that the British and French merchants precipitated a few years before. By the 1770s, the fur trade stretched further north and the competition between merchants and traders became more acute, which required reorganization and cooperation. The major struggles that Askin encountered during this period stemmed from these two conflicting developments: personal trade and larger imperial concerns. After a lifetime of building relationships with the French, British, and Indian communities of the Great Lakes, Askin respond to imperial restrictions and economic developments of the 1770s in a manner that marked him as one of most important merchants in the region.

Unlike the source material in the previous chapters, which tended to be fragmentary and limited in scope, this chapter develops largely out of Askin's own personal writings. After he became wealthy, his records became more robust. Askin's letters, especially those preserved in his letter-book of 1778 allows historians to reconstruct and interpret Askin's understanding of empire, the nature of his trade, his relationships with his family and partners, and his position and place in Great Lakes' society during the American Revolution. However, many of these letters are problematic. Despite the imperial conflicts swirling around him between 1772 and 1778,

his records lack any substantive discussions or opinions about the war, except for the occasional rumor and innuendo. The immense bound volumes of the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* and the *Wisconsin Historical Collections* compiled in the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century provide additional primary material for assessing the British response to the American Revolution from a Great Lakes and Ohio Valley perspective.⁴ These sources reveal how Askin's connections with the British military as well as his relationships with his fellow French and British merchants sometimes placed him in precarious positions at Michilimackinac. Furthermore, the inventories Askin compiled between 1776 and 1779 provide unique insights into his household and trade during this period, which was unclear in the 1760s. These documents suggest that British and French life at Michilimackinac, particularly among the wealthier merchant class, was far from a rustic frontier experience, but was firmly connected to the intellectual, social, and cultural developments of the British Empire. In fact, with a single letter to his principal suppliers, Isaac Todd and James McGill, John Askin confirmed to his Montreal-based colleagues that at Michilimackinac: "Nous sommes fort sur Le Dernier Gout de Londres," or "We are well up on the latest London styles."⁵

⁴ See: Draper, Lyman C., Reuben G. Thwaites, Milo Quiafe, and Joseph Schafer, editors. *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, vol. 1 – 20. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1855 – 1911); *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, vol. 1 – 38. Multiple Editors. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1903 – 1978); *Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 1 – 38. (Lansing: The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1888 – 1912)

⁵ John Askin to Messrs. Todd and McGill (Mackinac), 14 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 128. See also: John Askin, Box 22. For a discussion of the relationship between British manufactures and the British Empire in North America, see: T. H. Breen. *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). According to Breen, the market revolution of the mid-eighteenth century made the lives of "modestly wealthy

The great wealth generated by his involvement in the fur trade between 1768 and 1772 transformed the social and material conditions of John Askin's household.⁶ Unlike other frontier locations in the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley, where scarcity defined daily existence, Michilimackinac, especially its elite British and French merchant class, exuded luxury.⁷ The outward manifestation of this wealth began with John Askin's collection of real estate. By 1778, his holdings extended from Grand Portage to Michilimackinac and Detroit to Montreal; these lands were used in his trade as sources of fresh food from his Grosse Pointe farms or Sault Ste. Marie depots, where his agents collected and stored furs and supplies.⁸ With his new wealth, and perhaps tiring of traveling back and forth between Fort Michilimackinac and his Arbre Croche farm, John Askin began to build "a tolerable good House two Storry high."⁹ With the help of imported carpenters, Askin constructed his new home "in the Subarbs" just outside of the fort, where nearly "one hundred [other] houses" "tolerabl[y] good ones" already

families...warmer, more comfortable, more sanitary, [and] perhaps simply more enjoyable." Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, xv.

⁶ For an analysis, compare Askin's trade and household inventories for 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779 with the list of Askin's personal property and debts in his memorandum book from 1766. See: "John Askin's Memorandum Book, 1766," National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan (Cited hereafter as Askin's Memorandum Book). See Gram Manuscript

⁷ See: Alan Taylor, "'Wasty Ways': Stories of American Settlement." *Environmental History*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Jul., 1998), 291 - 310

⁸ For an account of John Askin's land holdings, see: John Askin's Inventory 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779. Moreover, an examination of Askin's written record shows that the bulk of his attention was focused on the property he owned at Michilimackinac, Detroit, Sault Ste. Marie, and Grand Portage. He seemed to buy these lands at auction, and he used his shipping vessels and Captain Samuel Robertson to scout for favorable locations for trading houses in the Great Lakes.

⁹ John Askin to Commodore Grant (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 78. See also: John Askin, Box 22

existed.¹⁰ He wrote to his superior, the commissary of Fort Detroit, Sampson Fleming, that “My own family consist[ed] of about 20 persons always” and they flitted in and out of his household with seasonal regularity.¹¹

Inside John Askin’s new house, the environs were sumptuous. In the kitchen and dining rooms, for example, “Japened Candlesticks” illuminated Askin’s dinners.¹² The family ate from expensive pewter plates, used two or three sets of fine china, and took their coffee out of a large and ornate silver coffee pot.¹³ Askin and his family gathered together around a “Common dining Table” to eat food cooked on one of their several stoves.¹⁴ Afterwards, over brandy or wine, Askin retired to a “fine large Arm Chair” where no doubt he read a book from his extensive private library; he held volumes dedicated to mercantile accounting, French literature, and the words and deeds of famous Roman statesmen.¹⁵ Or perhaps, he retired to his expensive writing desk lit by a “new fashioned lamp” to finish his voluminous correspondence, total accounts, or

¹⁰ John Askin to Thomas McMurry (Mackinac), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 69. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹¹ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Detroit), 4 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 105. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹² See: John Askin Inventory 1778

¹³ See: John Askin Inventory 1778

¹⁴ See: John Askin Inventory 1778

¹⁵ See: John Askin Inventory 1778. For an extended discussion of John Askin’s book collection, see: Agnes Haigh Widder, “The John Askin Family Library: A Fur-Trading Family’s Book.” *The Michigan Historical Review* 33.1 (2007). Widder makes the argument that John Askin’s Michilimackinac library “reveal[s]...intellectual and cultural interests, attributes that...[are] not traditionally associate with people in the fur trade.” Widder, “The John Askin Family Library,” 1

study maps before he and his wife retired to bed.¹⁶ When the family woke up in the morning, they had “Tea & loaf Sugar,” “Chocolate,” and “Coffe” alongside fresh milk, wheat, oats, barley, salt pork, beef, and eggs from Askin’s farm.¹⁷ Afterwards, John Askin spent most of his time organizing his trade: he oversaw the placement of his goods on one of his private ships; he directed the operations of his blacksmith as they repaired weapons from visiting Indians; and tallied the productivity and output of his farms.¹⁸ The implements used to maintain these businesses were all carefully and precisely listed in his inventories. From gold watches to ironing boards, sleighs, carriages, and finely made bed curtains, John Askin and his family lived in comfort and enjoyed its luxuries. The quality of their life attests to the profitability of the fur trade, but also to the material prosperity offered by the British Empire in the late- eighteenth century; John Askin benefited from his ability to ascend the British class structure and perpetuate his claims of trans-Atlantic social distinctions, despite their mercurial connection to authority.¹⁹

¹⁶ See: John Askin Inventory 1778

¹⁷ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 78. See also: John Askin, Box 22. This letter discusses the scarcity that the people of Michilimackinac experienced during the American Revolution, but it reveals Askin’s expectations and what he was generally accustomed.

¹⁸ See: “Diary of John Askin at Mackinac, 1774.” *Askin Papers*, 1: 50 – 58. See unpublished documents in: John Askin Papers, Box 21. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 21)

¹⁹ See: Michael J. Braddick, “Civility and Authority.” *The British Atlantic World, 1500 – 1800*. David Armitage, Michael J. Braddick, editors. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). Braddick writes that, “The Movement of goods and people around the British Atlantic world created a shared material culture which reflected common assumptions about status distinctions.” Authority often manifested itself as “liv[ing] appropriately,” or, in other words, “to bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentlemen.” Braddick, “Civility and Authority, 93 - 94

In July of 1775, John Askin purchased two African slaves named Jupiter and Pompey from Abraham Dow, a merchant from Albany.²⁰ These two slaves played important roles in Askin's business and trade. For example, Pompey and Jupiter piloted Askin's fleet of ships, bateaux, and canoes throughout the late 1770s and were a recognized presence on the lakes.²¹ Askin placed these men at the center of a rather complex network that extended from Grand Portage to Detroit. Female slaves performed domestic work alongside Askin's wife inside their household. In May 1778, Askin wrote to a French colleague asking for "two pretty panis girls from 9 to 16 years of age."²² These young slaves laundered clothes, worked Askin's garden, carried water, and emptied chamber pots.²³ Beyond their labor, these male and female slaves served as status symbols for the middle-aged merchant; in his inventory, Askin listed these men

²⁰ Sale of Negro Slaves to John Askin from Abraham Douw (Albany), 15 July 1775. *Askin Papers*, 1: 58. See also: John Askin, Box 1. John Askin's written record shows a continual involvement in the Indian slave trade in the Great Lakes region of North America, for example, see: John Askin Inventory 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779; "The Baptism Register of St. Anne de Detroit," Housed in the Special Collections of the Burton Historical Society, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI.

²¹ See: "Diary of John Askin at Mackinac, 1774." See also: John Askin, Box 21. In fact, Captain Samuel Robertson, Askin's son-in-law, seems to reference Pompey and Jupiter transporting goods. Robertson writes that, "[He] ... inquired concerning the negros with the littele vessel; he told me that they pased [L'Arbre Croche] 15 or 20 days ago on their way to Mitchlimackna" with supplies and merchandise. See: "Remarks on Board his Majestys Sloop Felicity by Samuel Roberts on Piloting her on Lake Michigan," *WHC*: 11, 203 – 212

²² John Askin to Mr. Beausoleil (Michilimackinac), 18 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 98. See: John Askin, Box 22. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. (Chapel Hill: The University of Chapel Hill Press, 1996), particularly, "Tea Table Discourses and Slandorous Tongues: The Domestic Choreography of Female Identities," played an important role in conceptualizing the nature of work Panise women did in Askin's household.

²³ See: John Askin's Inventory 1778

and women alongside a sedan chair.²⁴ Because of the muddy pathways of Michilimackinac, John Askin occasionally traveled around the community carried by slave men and women to save his cuffs and shoes from ruin and wear. It must have seemed, to those who watched the spectacle, a vivid and highly visual reminder of Askin's social position in Great Lakes society.

While his slaves labored, Askin entertained wealthy British and French merchants, and the upper class officers of the British army in his home.²⁵ These guests included Captain Arent Schuyler De Peyster, the commandant of Michilimackinac, and his wife, De Peyster's fellow British officers, who, by and large, came from wealthy families in Great Britain, successful merchants like Isaac Todd, James McGill, and Alexander Henry, when they were in the community, as well as resident and visiting bourgeois French merchants.²⁶ Writing to John Hay in April 1778, Askin claimed the inhabitants of Michilimackinac "passed out Winter as agreeably as the place would admit of [with] a Dance every week."²⁷ Moreover, Askin must have made a favorable impression at these events as he borrowed a "Country Dance Book" from Sampson

²⁴ See: John Askin's Inventory 1778

²⁵ For an extended discussion of the leisure activities of the wealthy French and British inhabitants at Michilimackinac, see: Nelson Vance Russell, *The British Regime in Michigan and the Old Northwest, 1760 – 1796*. (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, Inc., 1978), 139 – 160

²⁶ These social events often served as nexuses of authority and influence, particularly in the Great Lakes, where British imperial governance often relied on quotidian and face-to-face interactions to exercise power, see: Kathleen Wilson, "Introduction: histories, empires, modernities." *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in and the Empire, 1660 – 1840*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004)

²⁷ John Askin to John Hay (Mackinac), 27 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 68. See also: John Askin, Box 22

Fleming.²⁸ These events featured the imported drink and food, for which people donned their best clothes. Askin's letters reveal a striking attention to his wardrobe; he wrote that "[he was] in such want of Waistcoats & Breeches" that he ordered "fine white Cloth" and very particular buttons.²⁹ He ordered clothes for his wife and daughters from Montreal. "Mrs. Askin begs," her husband wrote to Isaac Todd and James McGill that they "deliver [to] Madam Perinault the piece of Silk with the trimmings, that's coming or come from England for her" so that it might be turned into a fine, well-crafted dress.³⁰ Evening soirees, like the slaves who carried him around in his sedan chair, announced John Askin's wealth and status; they separated him from the lower ranks of the Michilimackinac's society and showed how far he had come himself since his arrival in North America.

However, the parties at Michilimackinac became more rustic and simple over time; the wines and fine spirits and the chocolates and fabrics that made these social events experiences became scarcer as the effects of the American Revolution moved west. Even vital supplies like corn, wheat, and rum required for the region's fur trade became more difficult to acquire. With the mercantile communities of Montreal and Detroit living in fear and uncertainty of invasion, even distant Michilimackinac felt the anxiety. The supply lines between Great Britain and the Great Lakes became stressed

²⁸ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 79. See also: John Askin, Box 22

²⁹ John Askin to Todd and McGill (Montreal), 23 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 143 – 144. See also: John Askin, Box 22

³⁰ John Askin to the Northwest Company (Montreal), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 84. See also: John Askin, Box 22

and strained under imperial conflict and by the expansive nature of the trade itself. These developments threatened every aspect of the trade: from the London-based financiers all the way to the French traders who wintered in Indian communities. Imperial British officials at Montreal, Detroit, and Michilimackinac, while cognizant of the importance of the fur trade, had to subordinate important aspects of it as they tried to wage successful military campaigns. Stationed at the heart of the fur trade and at one of the most important British posts in the region, Askin acutely experienced the effects of these economic and political developments. Affluent, influential, and well regarded throughout the Great Lakes, Askin nonetheless lived precariously from 1775 to 1778; the imperial struggles between Great Britain and their North American colonials put his position, his trade, and his family and their lifestyle in jeopardy, but only temporarily, in Askin's mind.

Following the end of the Seven Years' War, the interests of the British Empire and their North American colonies had begun to diverge.³¹ Between 1756 and 1763, the British national debt doubled from slightly more than seventy-million pounds to close to one- hundred-thirty-million pounds by the war's end - - a substantial burden for the British taxpayers.³² Moreover, shortly after Great Britain's victory, imperial arrogance and cultural mismanagement in the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley sparked the

³¹ For a discussion of the Seven Years' War and its influence on of the American Revolution, see: Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754 – 1766*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000)

³² For these figures, see: Edmund Sears Morgan, Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 21

violence and turmoil of a full-scale Indian war. The British Crown responded by issuing the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that established a temporary boundary line down the Appalachian Mountains with the express aim of creating a western reserve for the region's Indians. The Proclamation also forbade the public purchase and speculation of Indian lands by colonial speculators.³³ This measure caused public outrage throughout the Atlantic colonies. By 1763, thousands of British colonials had migrated into the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes with the intent of usurping, claiming and settling these lands. From 1763 to 1768, the British military establishment, fearful of renewed violence, struggled to protect Indian country from settlers, often removing the same individuals repeatedly, while simultaneously controlling and regulating the region's fur trade.

Saddled with a large and diverse colonial domain, the British Empire responded to these post-war developments by maintaining a sizable military presence. However, the post-war army garrisoned in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Quebec, Montreal, Detroit and Michilimackinac cost the British Empire roughly three-hundred-thousand pounds a year, which contributed to an already substantial debt.³⁴ While metropolitan officials in London never sought to make the North American colonies pay for the entire debt the empire incurred from the Seven Years' War and Pontiac's Rebellion, many believed that the colonies should defray the expenses related to their own security. In

³³ For a discussion the political controversies caused by the Royal Proclamation of 1763, see: R. A. Humphreys, "Lord Shelburne and the Proclamation of 1763," *The English Historical Review*. Vol. 49, No. 194 (Apr. 1934); Eugene M. Del Papa, "The Royal Proclamation of 1763: Its Effect upon Virginia Land Companies," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1975). See: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Royal Proclamation, October 7, 1763," Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/proc1763.asp, (accessed April 30, 2010)

³⁴ See: Peter D. G. Thomas, "The Cost of the British Army in North American, 1764 – 1775." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Jul., 1988), 510 – 516; 511

response, Parliament passed the Sugar Act in 1765, which lowered the preexisting tax on molasses by half, but created measures to stringently enforce preexisting laws, which had been largely circumvented by New England smuggling with the West Indies.³⁵ Parliament also issued the Quartering Act of 1765, which required British soldiers to be housed and provisioned in private residences in North America if public accommodations like barracks and inns could not be procured.³⁶ Unlike the Sugar Act, which indirectly required the colonial British to support their own defense, the Quartering Act aroused colonial fears of political disfranchisement and tyranny.³⁷ The consequence of these acts established the first of many imperial attempts to re-organize its colonial domains; this reorganization produced increased debate and hostility on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean throughout the 1760s and 1770s.

The British Parliament, still desperate to raise revenue, then passed the Stamp Act into law in 1765 by a large majority.³⁸ The language of the law required printed materials, like legal contracts and official licenses, newspapers and pamphlets, and even playing cards to be printed on officially stamped papers produced in Great

³⁵ See: Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000)

³⁶ See: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Quartering Act; May 15, 1765," Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quartering_act_165 (accessed April 30, 2010)

³⁷ For colonial fears of tyranny, particularly in relationship to Parliamentary Acts, see: Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics*. (New York: Knopf, 1968)

³⁸ For a discussion of the Stamp Act, see: Charles R. Ritcheson, "The Preparation of the Stamp Act," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct. 1953), 543 – 559; John Philip Read, "In Our Contracted Sphere": The Constitutional Contract, The Stamp Act Crisis, and the Coming of the American Revolution," *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan., 1976), 21 – 47;

Britain.³⁹ The colonial reaction to the Stamp Act, and to subsequent regulatory laws, revealed a strikingly divergent understanding of the relationship between empire and colony. Since the passage of the Navigation Acts in 1651, for example, the relationship between the British Empire and their North American colonies was marked by imperial inattention and haphazard organization. With the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Rebellion of 1688, Parliament established itself as the dominant political body in Great Britain, and the empire itself. However, alongside these events, local houses of assemblies modeled on Parliament developed in the colonies.⁴⁰ These assemblies claimed responsibility for the laws and activities of its domains through direct election. The consequence of the Seven Years' War, the massive debt accrued by fighting it, and the empire's ungainly new territories forced Parliament to exercise powers and authority that it had historically claimed, but had traditionally ignored and neglected.

The passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 unleashed a series of constitutional debates that propelled the British colonials in North America into an increasingly revolutionary mindset. Appealing to British common law and prevalent political theory, colonial leaders denounced the act as unconstitutional and unauthoritative; they claimed that since the colonies had no directly elected representatives in Parliament, Parliament lacked the right to level direct taxes on the colonies. The British Crown and Parliament

³⁹ See: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Stamp Act, March 22, 1765," Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/stamp_act_1765.asp (accessed April 30, 2010)

⁴⁰ For the evolution of local parliamentary authority as a reason for the American Revolution, see: Jack P. Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689 – 1776*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963); Jack P. Green, "Transatlantic Colonization and the Redefinition of Empire in the Early Modern Era: The British-American Experience." In *Negotiated Empires: Centers and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500 – 1820*. Christine Daniels & Michael V. Kennedy, editors. (New York: Routledge, 2002)

disagreed. The intense colonial backlash - the protests, organizations, mobs and violence - against the Stamp Act led to its repeal in 1766, but the constitutional controversies remained unsettled, which prompted the passage of the Declaratory Act, which stated that Parliament "had, hath, and of right ought to have, full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of America."⁴¹ However, when a government passes a law that validates its right to pass laws it represents a breakdown of political authority. Consecutive ministries in Parliament continued passing revenue-generating acts: the Townsend Duties of 1767 and the Tea Act of 1772.⁴² With each new law, the colonial response became increasingly more hostile and reactionary: the Townsend Duties, for example, led to a flurry of political pamphlets and intense debates, wide-scale boycotts, and mob violence in Boston.⁴³ Protests in Boston led to bloodshed in 1773; an angry mob attacked British soldiers, who then fired upon the crowd. Further unrest prompted Boston protestors to dump taxed-tea into the city's harbor to protest the Tea Act. Parliament responded with a series of laws designed to punish the people of Boston in 1774.

Fearful of the rebellious sentiment of the Atlantic seaboard colonies and perpetually suspicious of interior French loyalty, Parliament also passed the Quebec Act

⁴¹ See: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Declaratory Act, March 18, 1766," Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declaratory_act_1766.asp (accessed April 30, 2010)

⁴² See: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Townshend Act, November 20, 1767." Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/townsend_act_1767.asp (accessed April 30, 2010)

⁴³ See: Benjamin Woods LaBaree, *The Boston Tea Party*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970)

in 1774. Deemed “intolerable” by the rebellious colonials, the law ceded most of the territory of the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley to the province of Quebec; it also established a governor and legislative council appointed by London, affirmed major aspects of the preexisting French legal system, and allowed the open practice of Catholicism.⁴⁴ In the years leading up to its passage, the merchant establishments of Quebec and Montreal had roundly criticized the purported substance of the Act.⁴⁵ Most of the controversy coalesced around the potential effects on the fur trade and on the pre-existing roles merchants played in the administration of the region: a change in the courts, for example, removed civil jurisdiction from local justices of peace and placed it in the hands of a Crown appointed four-man court.⁴⁶ Montreal, Quebec, and Great Lakes merchants feared such changes would “introduce such a State of Slavery and Dependence among Us as has ever been deemed dangerous to, and inconsistent with, the freedom of a Trading Body.”⁴⁷ Despite organized and persistent protests in Canada, the Quebec Act passed. Historian Donald Creighton wrote that while merchants “crowded into taverns and private houses...for long and angry meetings; they appointed new corresponding committees, and...petitioned king, lords and

⁴⁴ See: “The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Quebec Act, October 7, 1774,” Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quebec_act_1774.asp (accessed April 30, 2010)

⁴⁵ Donald Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*. (Toronto: The Macmillan Company: 1956), 51 – 57

⁴⁶ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 53 - 54

⁴⁷ As quoted in: Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 54

commons” their activities failed to foster an abundance of revolutionary sentiment.⁴⁸

Pursuit of the fur trade in the Great Lakes alienated the British of the Saint Lawrence River from their counterparts along the Atlantic seaboard during the 1760s and 1770s. Unlike other regional economies in North America, the success of fur trade merchants and traders in the Great Lakes’ depended on the labor of the region’s Indian peoples to acquire furs and to turn a profit.⁴⁹ The processes of exchange placed importance on unfettered access to British merchandise: linens, cloth, rum, guns, powder, and other items required for trade. Furthermore, the success of the fur trade also depended upon long chains of debts and credits that originated from the large financing houses of London: successful participation required access to tremendous capital, especially as merchants and traders at Michilimackinac, Detroit, and Montreal pushed the trade further into the northwest.⁵⁰ London credit made the fur trade workable between 1764 and 1778; it ensured that these men were directly tied to Great Britain through trade, and that their livelihoods and social positions were linked and trans-Atlantic in orientation. Following the passage of the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townsend Duties of 1767, the colonial merchants along the Atlantic organized boycotts and signed non-importation agreements against British manufactures and luxury goods to protest the laws. This did not occur at Quebec, Montreal, or Detroit: such actions

⁴⁸ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 57

⁴⁹ For the important role Indigenous peoples played in the processes of the trans-Atlantic fur trade, see: *Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World*. Susan Sleeper-Smith, editor. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009)

⁵⁰ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 57 – 60

would have caused the fur trade to collapse.⁵¹ Unrest and hostility developed in these regions, but the intertwined nature of the British merchants in the Great Lakes to metropolitan London quelled revolutionary fervor.

After the bloodshed of Lexington and Concord sparked the military conflict between Great Britain and their Atlantic colonies in 1775, one of the first military campaigns conducted by the rebellious colonists was directed at the Saint Lawrence River and the citadels of Quebec and Montreal. The newly formed Continental Congress and its military under George Washington hoped to persuade these communities to join their revolutionary cause. The initial stages of the campaign were successful: an Irish-born general named Richard Montgomery captured Montreal and forced the British army under General Guy Carleton to retreat to Quebec in November of 1775. However, the invasion highlighted the deep ambiguity that British and French merchants in Montreal, Quebec, Detroit, and Michilimackinac held towards their rebellious neighbors.⁵² Despite increasing revolutionary violence, most of the major British merchants in these communities – Isaac Todd, Alexander Henry, Simon McTavish, and James McGill – resolved to remain neutral or loyal to the British Crown, while those who did switch sides were often minor merchants, who were originally from the rebellious Atlantic colonies.⁵³ In fact, when the rebels besieged Montreal, the merchants sought to surrender the city, if the rebels promised not to quarter soldiers,

⁵¹ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 60 - 64

⁵² Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 61 - 65

⁵³ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 63

not to make the merchants take up arms against Great Britain, and most importantly, “That trade...in general, as well within the province as in the upper country...shall be carried on as freely as heretofore, and passports shall be granted for that purpose.”⁵⁴

Trade trumped revolution.

Unmoved by revolutionary rhetoric, the merchants and traders of the Great Lakes sought only to keep fur trade open and merchandise moving during the American Revolution, which entailed expanding the fur trade above Lake Superior. At Michilimackinac, John Askin, as a member of the first successful Montreal-based partnership to compete with the Hudson’s Bay Company, pushed the trade further north and west. He remained largely unconcerned with theoretical constitutional debates. Instead, his letters and diaries attest to the structural problems of his increasingly expansive trade, which required moving his furs and merchandise over extremely rugged and icy landscapes, and across long distances from London to the trading houses of the upper Great Lakes. He fretted over scarcities, long turnarounds on his investment, and the increased risk of disaster. While colonial protests devolved into revolutionary violence, Askin showed more concern for re-organizing the fur trade and overcoming its difficulties. Even as soldiers shed blood on Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, and Quebec, Askin invested his profits into expanding his labor force, to protecting his vessels, and developing his land holdings to tackle the complications of an increasingly sprawling fur trade.

John Askin’s continued investment in the expansion of the Great Lakes’ fur trade reveals his complete confidence in the British Empire, and its ability to overcome and

⁵⁴ As quoted in: Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 64

quell the increasingly hostile inter-imperial controversies and conflicts in the east. He invested in an expansive British vision of North America that he had actively supported as a commissar and helped shape as a merchant since his arrival in the region in the early 1760s. The war meant business as usual. Fifteen years after Great Britain dismantled France's oversea empire, many observers, including Askin, could not have imaged anything but Britain's victory over its rebellious colonists. Once the colonials faced real British soldiers, they would understand the futility of such violence. Moreover, few merchants forgot how poorly the colonies and colonists preformed during the Seven Years' War; colonial governments were often unable to coordinate limited military attacks against the French or even maintain a consistent or effective cross-colony defense against French-inspired Indian raids on the backcountry.⁵⁵ While John Askin left few direct comments on the American Revolution, his actions during the 1770s suggests that his loyalties and his understanding of the future rested with Great Britain; his efforts must be understood within the context of his life: he thrived through his connection to the British military and the economic opportunities these imperial connections provided him. Like so many other British merchants and traders, he invested in the Great Lakes trade because he assumed that it would remain under British control. To him, the central struggle that he faced during this period was not the idea that the colonists would defeat the most militarily and economically powerful empire in the world, but focused on how to negotiate the unintended and direct

⁵⁵ For a discussion of colonial soldiers and how British professional soldiers viewed them during the Seven Years' War, and its connection to the American Revolution, see: Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society during the Seven Years' War*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996)

consequences of the military struggle.

The middle-aged John Askin thus spent the years between 1772 and 1778 actively focused on expanding his fur trade. He and his fellow merchants faced two major issues. The British fur trade, which had long been based on credit and lengthy turnovers of furs and merchandise, became increasingly competitive during this period, especially as inter-imperial conflicts pushed the merchants and traders of northern New York into insolvency and they fled west to Montreal, Detroit, and Michilimackinac. These influxes led to destructive trade practices. Some traders undercut their competition, which slashed already narrow and precarious profit margins. Increased violence and murder between traders strained the social fabric of the upper Great Lakes.⁵⁶ Second, the far-flung nature of the trade threatened to undermine the successful provisioning of the traders who wintered in the regions above Lake Superior.⁵⁷ The supply lines that worked well under the French and the British regimes before 1763 strained under increased distances, rugged landscapes, and the limitations of organization. Askin withdrew from direct involvement in the northwest trade in the mid-1770s and focused on the quotidian problems of tying this enterprise together into a workable and efficient endeavor.

Before 1772, Askin had anticipated the need for a more efficient exchange process by establishing his first trading house at Grand Portage on the north shore of

⁵⁶ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 74

⁵⁷ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 70

Lake Superior in the mid-1760s. This allowed him to send goods directly to his men wintering among Indian communities, so that they could remain in the field longer, instead of returning to Michilimackinac to re-provision. In 1775, Askin extended this practice at Sault Ste Marie, where he built a trading house and placed it under the direction of his brother-in-law, Jean Baptiste Barthe. This large establishment consisted of a wooden palisade that surrounded the storehouses and trader cabins.⁵⁸ Askin's operation at Sault Saint Marie became a site of tremendous activity, both as a forwarding station for the upper Great Lakes and as a site of production, where workers packed furs and hulled corn, blacksmiths repaired weapons and crafted tools, and a cooper built containers for the trade.⁵⁹ Then, in June 1778, he sent his son-in-law, Captain Samuel Robertson "to examine the coast along the French River [at Georgian Bay]," and "decided to build a [trading] house there."⁶⁰ The Michilimackinac merchant wrote to Jean Baptiste Barthe that it would "facilitate the transport of my goods from Montreal by the Grand River."⁶¹ This location would have been a tremendous boon for Askin: the route circumvented the long trek down Lake Ontario to Fort Detroit, from Detroit to Michilimackinac, and instead established a direct route between Montreal and the upper Great Lakes.

⁵⁸ See: The Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC*: 9, 622 - 623

⁵⁹ See: John Askin Inventory 1777

⁶⁰ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 6 June 1778. *Askin Papers* 1: 115. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁶¹ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 29 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 103. See also: John Askin, Box 22

The trading posts that Askin maintained throughout the Great Lakes region helped expedite the movement of furs and merchandise, but it also placed Askin at the center of an important network of exchange. Moreover, with the migration of the Barthe family to Michilimackinac, the marriage of Therese Barthe, Marie Archange Askin's younger sister, to Commodore Alexander Grant in 1774, and the marriage of Captain Samuel Robertson to Askin's eldest daughter Catherine, Askin had the labor and connections to firmly establish himself as a major force in regional shipping.⁶² At Detroit, John Askin built the *Archange*, named after his wife, in 1774.⁶³ It operated between Niagara and Detroit. Around the same time, Askin began the construction of the *Welcome* to circuit goods from Michilimackinac, Detroit, and Niagara.⁶⁴ Two smaller vessels, the *Mackinac* and the *De Peyster*, named after Askin's close colleague and Michilimackinac commandant, ran supplies to Askin's trading depots at Sault Saint Marie and Grand Portage from Michilimackinac.⁶⁵ By 1776, these ships, controlled and owned by Askin, Barthe and Samuel Robertson, represented a sizeable private fleet, especially when Great Lakes' shipping was under military control, because of the

⁶² For the marriage of Samuel Robertson to Catherine Askin, see: John Askin to Thomas McMurry (Montreal), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 70; John Askin to Messers. Todd and McGill (Montreal), 28 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 100. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁶³ See: Diary of John Askin at Mackinac, 1774." *Askin Papers*, 1: 50 – 58. See also: John Askin, Box 21; "Return of all the Vessels upon Lake George, Champlain, Ontario in the year 1759 till this date, Excepting those employed at present, July 1778." *WHC* 11: 199

⁶⁴ "Return of all the Vessels upon Lake George, Champlain, Ontario in the year 1759 till this date, Excepting those employed at present, July 1778." *WHC* 11: 199. For an account of Samuel Robertson's captaincy, see: "Remarks on Board his Majestys Sloop Felicity by Samuel Roberts on Piloting her on Lake Michigan," *WHC*: 11, 203 – 212

⁶⁵ John Askin to Charles Chaboillez (Grand Portage), 27 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 151. See also: John Askin, Box 22

American Revolution.⁶⁶ Moreover, Askin and his partners profited from their close relationship to Commodore Alexander Grant, the British official charged with controlling and administering the British Empire's naval presence on the lakes as well as managing its civil trading vessels. Shepherding rum, corn, wheat, and merchandise between Askin's trading houses, these vessels stitched the internal trade of the Great Lakes together and represented a tremendous investment by Askin into the region's infrastructure.

Instead of allowing the trade to devolve into mutually destructive competition, which occurred under the French regime before the Seven Years' War, several elite British and French merchants like Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, James McGill, Isaac Todd, Charles Chaboillez, Simon McTavish and others formed a loose cooperative that evolved into the Northwest Company in the early 1770s.⁶⁷ After Pontiac's Rebellion, under the British regime, small-scale fur traders and merchants lacked access to substantial capital and labor and were confronted by overwhelming competition and problematic distances.⁶⁸ These circumstances limited their overall effectiveness and created the need for centralization and organization. Growing out of a series of shifting and vacillating partnerships and companies, the consortium of merchants that became the Northwest Company eventually came to control the upper Great Lakes fur trade,

⁶⁶ Russell, *The British Regime in Michigan*, 170 - 177

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the Northwest Company, see: W. L. Morton, "The Northwest Company: Peddlers Extraordinary." *Minnesota History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter, 1966), 157 – 165; Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); *Documents Relating to the Northwest Company*, W. Stewart Wallace, editor. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934)

⁶⁸ Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 70 - 74

especially in terms of capitalization and organization. By the end of the 1770s, the Northwest Company, divided among sixteen partners, began to actively compete with the Hudson's Bay Company and employed clerks who maintained trading houses, winterers who lived among the Indian communities, and a host of laborers and canoe-men. Following in the wake of Askin's earlier Montreal partnership, the Northwest Company continued to push the fur trade deeper into the Hudson's Bay basin and would be instrumental in integrating these new regions into the British Empire.

While never an investor, Askin enjoyed a lucrative and beneficial relationship with the Northwest Company, whose many members he counted as close colleagues and former partners. It is hard to overstate the importance of the Northwest Company to Askin's trade in the 1770s. A casual examination of his letter book for 1778, for example, shows that much of his daily attention, particularly in terms of shipping, focused on ensuring the swift and smooth transfer of Northwest Company merchandise and provisions.⁶⁹ Askin wrote to his major suppliers Isaac Todd and James McGill in 1778, and called the Northwest Company "the most respectable both as to proprietors & amount."⁷⁰ In May of 1778, Askin forwarded vessels laden with "Rum, Corn & what's Most necessary" to Grand Portage, where Northwest Company traders, Forrest Oakes

⁶⁹ See: John Askin to the Northwest Company (Montreal), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 83; John Askin to the Northwest Company (Montreal), 2 July 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 159 – 160. See also: John Askin, Box 22. Likewise, these letters refer to the activities, cargoes, partners, etc. of the Northwest Company in many of his letters during the late 1770s and 1780s.

⁷⁰ John Askin to Messrs. Todd and McGill (Montreal), 14 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 127. See also: John Askin, Box 22

and Charles Chaboillez, supervised the exchange of goods for peltry.⁷¹ Askin's importance to the Northwest Company cannot be discounted either. In fact, neither to be tied down nor to deny the chance to profit from other traders, Askin wrote to Joseph Frobisher and James McGill, who "transact[ed] the business of the N. W. Co." to assert his independence.⁷² To Askin, while the Northwest Company had "the Preference" of ships, depots, and storage, he intended "to serve others" as well, and his efforts throughout the 1770s ensured he would.⁷³

John Askin continued to supply all traders wintering in the upper Great Lakes. As he informed his old colleague, James Sterling at Detroit, he had "positive contracts for above thousand [pounds]" of flour.⁷⁴ Liquor and spirits continued to play a large role in this trade as well. He also carried on a brisk trade in high quality alcohols for the aristocratic British officers and commanders of the upper Great Lakes. He ordered the "best Madeira" for one officer and "one barrel of good port wine and two barrels of whiskey" for Jean Baptiste Barthe's personal enjoyment.⁷⁵ Besides liquors and grains,

⁷¹ John Askin to the Northwest Company (Montreal), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 83. See also: John Askin, Box 22. For a biography of Forrest Oakes, see: George Thorman, "Forrest Oakes." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IV. For a biography of Charles Chaboillez, see: Gratien Allaire, "Charles Chaboillez." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. V.

⁷² John Askin to Joseph Frobisher and John McGill (Mackinac), 13 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 124. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁷³ John Askin to Joseph Frobisher and John McGill (Mackinac), 13 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 125. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁷⁴ John Askin to James Sterling (Detroit), 5 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 108. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁷⁵ John Askin to Messrs. Todd and McGill (Montreal), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 85. See also: John Askin, Box 22

Askin's ships carried other merchandise integral to the fur trade. Writing to Benjamin Frobisher, of the Northwest Company, Askin promised his fellow merchant that he "delivered [to his traders] the Canoes, all your corn, Sugar, Gum, Bark, & Watap."⁷⁶ Despite the war, Askin's efforts continued to prove quite profitable. Captain Samuel Robertson estimated that his father-in-law's trading house at Sault Saint Marie was worth around seven thousand pounds: a tremendous and lucrative investment.⁷⁷ But all of Askin's success and control bred resentment: a group of merchants from Detroit complained that John Baptiste Barthe at Sault Saint Marie charged unfair rates and believed that the Crown should control regional shipping instead of Askin and his family.⁷⁸

By 1778, John Askin maintained depots across the region. He had a trading house at Grand Portage on the southern coast of Lake Superior, a stockade compound at Sault Sainte Marie, and he had plans to build another one at the French River. These sites became important centers of production. Askin operated blacksmiths at these locations; he processed and stored corn; and he employed barrel-makers to create

⁷⁶ John Askin to Benjamin Frobisher (Mackinac), 6 June 1778. *Askin Papers* 1: 109. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁷⁷ Affidavit of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 626

⁷⁸ In a memorial address to General Frederick Haldimand, a group of merchants complained: "We were told that it was your Excellency's orders; that no vessels save those belonging to the King should navigate on the Lakes... but it is with great regret we still see two vessels navigating on Lake Huron the property of Monsr. Barthe, one of which is called the Makina...the other called the De Peyster...By which unfair means...Barthe has the advantage of all other Merchants trading at the posts of Makina and Detroit by forwarding his goods to the earliest markets and demanding an exorbitant price for the freight of Merchandise belong to others." Quoted in: Memorial of the Merchants of Detroit to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 21 August 1781. *MPHC* 19: 654

containers for his trade. Furs and goods carried from the trading houses arrived on Askin's many wooden carts and were loaded into his fleet of ships; everything traveled south from the Great Lakes to Michilimackinac, then to Detroit, then up the rivers towards Montreal and London. There the ships waited for the journey back north.

John Askin, thus, overcame many of the structural problems of the Great Lakes fur trade, but despite his best efforts, the American Revolution introduced chaos and uncertainty into the region and frustrated his carefully crafted plans. In a terse letter, to his brother-in-law, Jean Baptiste Barthe, who had failed to deliver the proper amount of provisions to a fellow trader named Forrest Oakes, Askin warned Barthe that one "must never disappoint people in the matter of shipping goods."⁷⁹ However, even Askin knew that this was becoming harder and harder to do in the Great Lakes. After working ceaselessly to organize the fur trade, to tie it together, to become an integral part of it, the American Revolution presented Askin with a series of difficulties: he saw supply-lines disrupted, old partnerships collapse, and violence prevent the movement of essential goods for the fur trade from Montreal to Michilimackinac. To Askin, this was a familiar landscape, having spent his first years in North America in a context defined by violence and imperial restrictions. Yet, he still wrote to a colleague, who was trying to sell him an African slave-woman, that his own family "want[s] Bread more than Cooks."⁸⁰

Despite being deeply invested in the infrastructure of the upper Great Lakes

⁷⁹ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Mackinac), 21 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 141. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁸⁰ John Askin to Philip Dejean (Mackinac), 4 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 105. See also: John Askin, Box 22

trade, there was little Askin could do to prepare for or negotiate the unforeseen risks of the American Revolution, which he assumed were temporary, in the face of British military and economic superiority. After the capture of Montreal by the Americans and their subsequent retreat in 1775, the contest for the Ohio Valley and the Great lakes intensified. In November, Major Henry Hamilton, an aristocratic Irish-born commander, became the lieutenant governor and superintendent of Fort Detroit.⁸¹ Two years after his appointment, Hamilton held councils with the surrounding Indian communities and raised warriors to raid backcountry American settlements in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.⁸² In response to these bloody skirmishes, the governor and assembly of Virginia authorized George Rogers Clark, a young Virginian, to raise a small contingent of soldiers to invade and capture key British posts in the Ohio Valley and the Illinois Country in 1777.⁸³ Within a year, Clark captured the French and Indian fur trade communities of Kaskaskia and Vincennes, while trumpeting the newly established alliance between the United States and the French Empire as a way of swaying the opinion of the French and Indian inhabitants.⁸⁴

At Michilimackinac, Askin remained relatively safe from the violence that

⁸¹ For a biography of Henry Hamilton, see: Elizabeth Arthur, "Henry Hamilton," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IV; *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution and the Unpublished Journal of Lieut. Gov. Henry Hamilton*. John D. Barnhart, editor. (Crawfordsville, IN.: R. E. Banta, 1951)

⁸² Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 368

⁸³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 368 - 378

⁸⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 368 - 378

occurred in the south, but he had to contend with the war's indirect consequences. In November 1775, months after the battles of Lexington and Concord, Askin lost a valuable cargo of rum when a ship called the *Chippewa* wrecked on the shallows of Lake Erie.⁸⁵ Rather than allowing the goods to fall into the hands of the rebellious colonial army attacking Montreal, the ship's commanding officer ordered everything to be destroyed.⁸⁶ Three years later, Askin still had "no news about the Payment of [his] Rum" and tried desperately to get the supplies dispensed from the King's Storehouse at Niagara.⁸⁷ Askin also watched as the British military clamped down on civilian shipping and pressed his own ships into imperial service. While Askin petitioned for the repayment of his lost goods, the commandant of Michilimackinac, Captain Arent Schuyler De Peyster, pressed Askin's ship, the *Welcome*, into military service; it was outfitted with guns and cannons to protect the fort.⁸⁸ After the loss of one of his most important trading vessels, Askin watched as his goods at Montreal, Detroit, and Michilimackinac were shunted aside so that military supplies could be shipped first.

⁸⁵ A letter sent to Lt. Gov. Hamilton by a French merchant named Ademar St. Martin, relates the destruction of the *Chippewa*, which he mistakenly referred to as the *Sauteaux*. St. Martin writes that the vessel had "been thrown on the shores of Prequ' Isle [during a storm] & could not be got off." See: Adhemar St. Martin to Lt. Gov. Hamilton (Detroit), 10 August 1776. *MPHC* 19: 319

⁸⁶ Adhemar St. Martin to Lt. Gov. Hamilton (Detroit), 10 August 1776. *MPHC* 19: 319

⁸⁷ John Askin to Messrs. Todd and McGill (Montreal), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 84. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁸⁸ In a letter sent Major De Peyster, the commandant of Michilimackinac, by General Frederick Haldimand, De Peyster is given the authority of pressing a private vessel into the Crown's service. See: Haldimand to De Peyster (Michilimackinac), 25 December 1778. *MPHC* 9: 355. De Peyster informed Haldimand that he already "armed the *Welcome* to send to Labay St. Josephs Milwakee &c." See: De Peyster to Haldimand (Quebec), 24 October 1778. *MPHC* 9: 374. By 1779, De Peyster paid Askin for this shit. See: De Peyster to Haldimand (Quebec), 9 July 1779, *MPHC* 9: 390

Askin wrote to his brother-in-law, Commodore Alexander Grant that “he [had] a very considerable cargo on the way all last year & no part of it arrived here which [was] a severe Stroke to him.”⁸⁹ With these policies in effect, Askin struggled to fulfill his obligations and contracts. He wrote to his principal suppliers in Montreal, James McGill and Isaac Todd, that “I do declare that as things now go on, I don’t know what to order, of all I write for nothing Arrives.”⁹⁰

Responding to the invasions of the Ohio Valley and the Illinois Country in the late 1770s, Major Henry Hamilton refused to allow merchandise related to the fur trade to leave his post, creating severe shortages in the Great Lakes. Like the pressing of his ships in the Crown’s service, the embargo placed John Askin in a difficult position. Writing to Charles Chaboillez, a Northwest Company trader at Grand Portage, in May of 1778, Askin apologized to the Frenchman about sending him whiskey instead of rum: “You will see by my former letter that it has been impossible to get liquors up from Montreal...we are told that Governor Hamilton will not allow either liquor or provisions to leave [Detroit.]”⁹¹ To circumvent the shortages caused by Hamilton’s policy, John Askin drew supplies directly from the King’s Stores at Michilimackinac to supply and provision

⁸⁹ John Askin to Commodore Grant (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 75. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹⁰ John Askin to Messrs. Todd and McGill (Mackinac), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 84. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹¹ John Askin to Benjamin Frobisher (Mackinac), 6 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 110. See also: John Askin, Box 22

the fur trade and his family.⁹² The Crown's supplies of flour, however, were often "so bad" that sending them to the traders could have made them ill.⁹³ Desperate to fulfill his customers' contracts, Askin resorted to an *ad hoc* system of proportional supplying. He ordered Jean Baptiste Barthe "to divide [his] merchandise equally between...two vessels in manner so that...[the] trader[s] would receive some goods," rather than nothing at all.⁹⁴

To Askin's dismay, the British military establishment in the region failed to realize that "the [fur] trade is now increased," and that it required more provisions and merchandise to operate.⁹⁵ Frustrated, he wrote to James Sterling claiming that if the disruptions caused by the American Revolution and imperial restrictions continued "some persons in [the] back country will perish & the trade will be hurt."⁹⁶ Askin continued his letter by saying that, "I know that when fours Vessells arrived here in the Spring, loaded with Corn & Flour mostly, there was not too much, nor hardly...any left" to

⁹² Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 13 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 599. De Peyster writes, "Mr. Askin hearing that his Flour to a considerable amount was put into the King's Store at Detroit Represented to me the distress his numerous family must be in unless I suffered him to borrow some Flour out of the Store, having at that time near two years Provisions."

⁹³ John Askin to Charles Chaboillez (Grand Portage), 27 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 151. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹⁴ John Askin to Mr. Beausoleil (Michilimackinac), 18 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 98. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹⁵ John Askin to Commodore Grant (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 77. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹⁶ John Askin to James Sterling (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 71. See also: John Askin, Box 22

subsist or trade.⁹⁷ With shortages and scarcity, Askin rethought how he conducted his business and trade. He decided, for example, “not [to] make any more contracts with traders until these troubles are over.”⁹⁸ Instead, Askin engaged new merchants and traders on commission and only when supplies were available and cheaply acquired. This ensured profit and satisfaction, but smaller returns. Askin’s policies were meant to “please everybody” and “never [to] give offence.”⁹⁹

Askin relied upon his friendship with Captain Arent Schuyler De Peyster to influence the thrust of imperial policy in the Great Lakes as well.¹⁰⁰ Born to a wealthy family in New York City in 1736, De Peyster purchased an ensign’s commission in the British army in 1755 and served in the Seven Years’ War in North America and Europe.¹⁰¹ After several years of intermittent postings in North America – Montreal, Quebec, and Albany – and his promotion to captain in 1767, De Peyster, an experienced and able administrator, was appointed as the commandant of Michilimackinac in 1774 where he quickly took up the post’s administration and

⁹⁷ John Askin to Commodore Grant (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 77. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹⁸ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 26 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 149. See also: John Askin, Box 22

⁹⁹ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 26 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 149. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹⁰⁰ For a biography of Arent Schuyler De Peyster, see: David A. Armour, “Arent Schuyler De Peyster,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. VI; David A. Armour, Keith R. Widder, *At the Crossroads: Michilimackinac during the American Revolution*. (Mackinac Island: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1978)

¹⁰¹ Armour, Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 8

mantle.¹⁰² Like the French during the Seven Years' War, the British relied upon the Indians to secure the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley from American invasion.¹⁰³ As much diplomat as soldier, De Peyster sought the expertise of former French officers and interpreters like Charles de Langlade and Louis Chevalier to influence and secure vital Indian support for the British Empire.¹⁰⁴

As the post's deputy-commissar, Askin reported on the state of the King's Stores, barracks, and Great Lakes fur trade within days of the new commandant's arrival at Michilimackinac. With his usual attention, Askin's accounts were detailed: he listed the quality and quantity of flour, rum, and salt pork, the condition of the post's linens, the number of candles, and every other item necessary to keeping the army secure and sound at a distant post.¹⁰⁵ At the many parties and dances, De Peyster and Askin shared many bottles of fine wine; they ate together from well-stocked dinner tables, and passed many hours in polite conversation. They established an enduring and beneficial relationship and Askin even named one his ships after the commandant. For De Peyster, the relationship began simply: he borrowed mousetraps, the occasional book, and one of Askin's carriages.¹⁰⁶ For Askin, the friendship became pivotal to his trade:

¹⁰² Armour, Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 8

¹⁰³ Armour, Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 13 - 17

¹⁰⁴ See: Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 65 - 66

¹⁰⁵ See: Askin Inventories, 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779

¹⁰⁶ Armour, Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 35 - 36

he relied on De Peyster to authorize his mercantile maneuverings, such as making up his shortfall of supplies for the fur trade by diverting goods from the King's Stores.¹⁰⁷ Since his earliest day, Askin had appreciated the value and the utility of maintaining close relationships with the British military at Michilimackinac.

Responding to Lieutenant-Governor Henry Hamilton's embargo of non-military goods and merchandise for the Great Lakes, Askin's relationship with Major Arent De Peyster proved instrumental in reopening Askin's trade. Askin wrote to James Sterling at Detroit that "Major De Peyster...wrote so pressingly to Governor Hamilton about my things getting forward that I dare say ... I will not be refused if there is room."¹⁰⁸ Writing to the principal investors of the Northwest Company in May 1778, Askin stated that he "applied to Major De Peyster who will have made known to Governor Hamilton the bad consequences of laying an Imbargo on Provisions & ct. without which it's impossible that trade can be Supported."¹⁰⁹ By appealing to De Peyster, Askin assured his partners and their traders that he made every effort to secure their goods, but he also broadcasted that he had the means of shaping and influencing imperial policies and directives in the Great Lakes.

Within months of Major De Peyster's letter to Henry Hamilton, Askin wrote to his partners at Grand Portage and Montreal in June 1778 that his "vessel from Detroit

¹⁰⁷ See: John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Detroit) 4 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 105. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹⁰⁸ John Askin to James Sterling (Detroit), 10 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 72 – 73. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹⁰⁹ John Askin to the Northwest Company (Montreal), 8 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 83. See also: John Askin, Box 22

arrived” and “that she is leaving for the Sault” immediately.¹¹⁰ Askin wasted no time forwarding goods to their proper recipients: he ordered his brother-in-law, Jean Baptiste Barthe, to “Mark 38 barrels of rum N W for the Northwest Company, and ... 10 barrels mark C CH for Mr. Charles Chaboillez.”¹¹¹ But after inventorying the ship, Askin found that “instead of being loaded for [him] Solely, She was obliged to bring the Kings Stores & even other things, so that [he] only got in her some Rum & Flour.”¹¹² Despite the letter from De Peyster, which Askin “imagine[d]...explained fully...[the] reasons for letting [his] Vessell go to Detroit” and which stated in clear terms the dismal state of the fur trade, Hamilton again choose to place the needs of the empire over the demands of the trade. However, the swiftness of Hamilton’s response to De Peyster’s letter demonstrated Askin’s ability to alter imperial policy by operating within the protocols of the face-to-face world of the Great Lakes. With De Peyster’s intervention, Askin established himself as one of the most important middlemen in the entire region. However, over the next two years, between 1778 and 1780, the braid of trade, empire, and family that Askin so carefully tied and bound together began to unravel.

In June 1778, John Askin wrote to Alexander Henry, his old friend and fellow merchant, about plans for the future. Despite the restoration of his trade, the American

¹¹⁰ John Askin to Charles Chaboillez (Grand Portage), 30 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 152. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹¹¹ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault St. Marie), 30 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 156 – 157. See also: John Askin, Box 22

¹¹² John Askin to Messrs. McGill and Frobisher (Grand Portage), 30 June 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 154 – 155. See also: John Askin, Box 22

Revolution wore John Askin thin; he did not want any part of it, and he said as much. Askin argued that “troublesome times causes many disputes in which a man often gets involved, notwithstanding his great desire to the contrary.”¹¹³ Henry understood Askin’s sentiment. In fact, Askin’s comment was a thoroughly bourgeois French sentiment; a frank desire to avoid conflict in pursuit of trade, which suggests the deepening influence of his French kin and extended family.¹¹⁴ Both men had survived the violence of Pontiac’s Rebellion; rebuilt their trade in a period of profound restriction; and they grew wealthy from the upper Great Lakes trade.¹¹⁵ As middle-aged men, both well versed in the seasonal ebb and flow of the fur trade, they understood the importance of anticipating and minimizing disturbances in their lives and their work. Having surveyed North America’s revolutionary landscape, John Askin “thought it most prudent to stay [at Michilimackinac] where [he was] sure to live in peace.”¹¹⁶ His prudence paid off. Decades of hard work allowed Askin to build an extensive trade that encompassed the Great Lakes, and involved his family, his fellow merchants, and British imperial officials.

¹¹³ John Askin to Alexander Henry (Montreal), 23 June 1778, *Askin Papers*, 1: 145. See also: John Askin, Box 22. John Askin and Alexander Henry experienced many of the same events in the Great Lakes. They entered trade through Albany, they both suffered the consequences of Pontiac’s Rebellion, and they both became early investors in the upper Great Lakes fur trade. They had the commonality of shared experience; he and Askin remained partners and close colleagues for the next thirty years.

¹¹⁴ For a discussion of bourgeois French attitudes to Anglo-American conflicts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, see: Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); particularly, chapters one through three.

¹¹⁵ For a discussion of Alexander Henry’s life during this period, see his narrative: Alexander Henry, *Alexander Henry’s Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760 – 1776*. Milo Quaife, editor. (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1921)

¹¹⁶ John Askin to Alexander Henry (Montreal), 23 June 1778, *Askin Papers*, 1: 145. See also: John Askin, Box 22

These carefully crafted interpersonal and interfamilial connections helped Askin weather the imperial and economic disruptions caused by the American Revolution. Had he moved to Detroit, Askin would have risked everything.

John Askin's activities, during the years between 1772 and 1778, further attest to the centrality of "middle-men" in the successful prosecution of the Great Lakes fur trade. As explored in this chapter, John Askin invested a tremendous amount of time, energy, and capital into labor, lands, and ships required to move a large volume of furs and merchandise back and forth from London and Michilimackinac. His earlier efforts in the late 1760s coincided and anticipated the success the Northwest Company. A decade later, operating in a shared landscape, both John Askin and the Northwest Company responded to the fraught nature of the trade, but followed different paths. From 1763, merchants and traders pushed the fur trade further and further northwest into distant, unfamiliar, and rugged landscapes. The nature of this endeavor required tremendous amounts of cooperative capital, which fostered the growth of large-scale and multi-member partnerships like the Northwest Company in Quebec. Instead of joining this fur trade juggernaut, Askin tried to monopolize the shipping and warehousing of furs and merchandise on the Great Lakes. His investment in its infrastructure allowed Askin to insulate himself from the vagaries of a Northwestern and trans-Atlantic fur trade. He was successful to a point.

The extent of John Askin's precarious success relates to the nature of British governance in the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley. As deputy-commissar he had maintained a tenuous connection to the Great Lakes' fur trade. His position provided a protective buffer from which to develop a successful trade and it put him into contact

with many of the key figures of the British Empire in North America. In the late 1770s, the connections that Askin had built allowed him to influence and re-orient imperial policies. Askin became an *arbiter* of empire and trade. He wrote to his brother-in-law, Commodore Alexander Grant, “I certainly am or ought to be a judge of the Provisions necessary to carry on the trade of this place.”¹¹⁷ It was not an idle boast. His knowledge, his experience, his position, and his economic and political relationships proved valuable. Askin spent decades fashioning this kind of network, and he did not fear putting it to use. However, his position and status relied on his ability to keep the interests and activities of his family, his fellow merchants, and imperial officials working in symphony, which proved increasingly problematic.

The following chapter explores how easily the braid of empire, trade, and family frayed and the snapped, as the line between commerce and governance became calcified and rigid. For merchants like Askin, the line between empire and trade left him room to maneuver, but as the chaos of the American Revolution continued, British defeats led to an imperial reshuffling. Maneuverability became difficult. The following chapter explores Askin’s fraught relationship with Major Patrick Sinclair, the new commandant of Michilimackinac. It argues that the economic control offered by Askin’s network of kinship and trade threatened the prerogatives and authority of the British Empire in the Great Lakes and resulted in Askin’s removal as commissar and his relocation to Detroit.

¹¹⁷ John Askin to Commodore Grant (Detroit), 28 April 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 76. See also: John Askin, Box 22

CHAPTER 5

'MR ASKIN...SCHEMED OF HAVING THE KEY OF CANADA IN HIS POCKET': IMPERIAL CONFLICTS AND FUR TRADE CONTROVERSIES AT MICHILIMACKINAC DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

"Mr Askin who schemed [about his depot at the French River] vaunted before Major De Pester of having the key of Canada in his Pocket, & then received my answer that I would endeavor to put every Key in this part of the Country in your Excellency's hand."¹
Patrick Sinclair to Frederick Haldimand, July 1780

"[It seems that] Quarrelling with one Commissary has procured me many Enemies, I am afraid that some may be practiced below & get to his Excellency's Ears."²
Patrick Sinclair to Dietrich Brehm, August 23 1780

By 1778, the course of the American Revolution had gone poorly for the British Empire in the backcountry settlements of the Ohio Valley and Illinois Country. The maneuvering of George Rogers Clark and his small force of American soldiers spread fear, uncertainty, and panic in the Great Lakes communities under British control. At Michilimackinac, John Askin, the thirty-nine-year-old merchant and deputy commissar, was left mostly unscathed during the early years of the war. Of course, he suffered some; he lost a large shipment of rum on Lake Erie because of the rebels, and he weathered an embargo of trade goods by the lieutenant governor of Detroit, but

¹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), July/August? 1780. *Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 9. (Lansing: The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1888 – 1912), 564. (Hereafter referred to as *MPHC*). See also: John Gram, "John Askin at Michilimackinac," unpublished manuscript, June 1995, Mackinac State Historic Parks Library, Mackinac City, Michigan. Gram's research has been instrumental in piecing together John Askin's life in the early Great Lakes.

² Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 23 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 602

emerged stronger and more central to the region's fur trade. Between 1772 and 1778, Askin's profitable upper Great Lakes fur trade, his French and indigenous familial connections, and his relationship to the British military transformed him into an important merchant for the entire region. He controlled expansive trading depots at Sault Ste. Marie, Grand Portage, and Michilimackinac, from which he provisioned both independent and Northwest Company traders. He linked his posts through a series of privately owned sailing vessels, and fetched handsome profits from transporting the furs and merchandise of other traders and merchants. He staffed his posts and vessels with his family and his slaves; they played important roles in his trade, and his family became wealthy and privileged in the process. Yet, unbeknownst to Askin, events unfolding hundreds of miles south of his newly built home in 1778 would culminate in his disgrace and exile from Michilimackinac, after his twenty years of residence.

This chapter examines on the conflicts that developed between John Askin and a series of British officials during of the American Revolution in the late 1770s, and shows how his network of familial and mercantile ties was ultimately subordinated to conflicting imperial designs. Askin's trading houses and ships were spread throughout the Great Lakes and were located at strategic points so that they dominated the region's civilian and military supply lines. Moreover, several serious military setbacks for the British in the Ohio valley and Illinois country precipitated major changes in the commands of Detroit and Michilimackinac. The promotion and transfer of Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster deprived Askin of a key imperial supporter. De Peyster had granted his deputy-commissar, and other elite British and French merchants, a degree of leniency to develop and expand trade in the Great Lakes. Captain Patrick Sinclair, De Peyster's

replacement, subordinated the activities of these merchants to solidify the British Empire in the region during an intense period of disruption and upheaval. The struggles that developed between Askin and Sinclair in the late 1770s and early 1780s were defined by a debate over the primacy of empire and personal trade in the Great Lakes region. The struggle ended with Askin's replacement as deputy commissar, his exile to Detroit, and his near bankruptcy. However, Askin's ties and connections ensured his economic and social longevity, and he proved a chronic challenge to Sinclair's authority, long after he removed to Detroit.

This chapter relies on a collection of imperial/military-oriented sources to contextualize John Askin's political conflicts and trade during the final years of the American Revolution in North America. Much of the information comes from the correspondence of British military officials like General Frederick Haldimand, Major Arent Schuler de Peyster, and Captain Patrick Sinclair, documents relevant to the commissariat of Michilimackinac, the legal deposition of Askin's son-in-law Samuel Robertson, and the private correspondence of Askin himself. However, like other periods in Askin's life, his archive and written record are largely silent on his removal from Michilimackinac, and consequently, this chapter relies on a series of primary sources that frequently are hostile towards Askin and his family. As in the previous chapter, many documents derive from the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, which provides important insights into the British imperial and economic responses to the American Revolution in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. These sources proved pivotal in establishing the nature of Askin's relationship with the British military establishment in the late 1770s, and they reveal the nature of the conflict with Captain

Patrick Sinclair that led to Askin's dismissal from his position as deputy-commissar at Michilimackinac. However, more importantly, these documents reveal and allow for a broader examination of the conflict between empire and private ambitions that are exemplified by Askin and Sinclair.

The personal and military conflicts that enveloped John Askin reveal the complicated, transitory, and fraught nature of the British Empire in the late-eighteenth century. Historians, like Richard White, Daniel Usner Jr., and more recently, Juliana Barr, have long been suspicious of articulations of empire that privilege the activities of the metropolitan center at the expense of the periphery.³ In his seminal study, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*, White employs the language of centers and peripheries, but views the peripheries as controlling the center. He writes that, "At the center are hands on the levers of power, but the cables [which connect the empire together] have, in a sense, been badly frayed or even cut. It is a world system in which minor agents, allies, and even subjects at the periphery often guide the course of empires."⁴ Likewise, historian Kathleen

³ Historians like James Merrill, Daniel Usner Jr., Richard White, Kathleen Duval and Juliana Barr, whose works place Native American peoples at the center of colonial North American regional histories, articulate an understanding of empire that is ephemeral and weak as it encounters Indian country. In fact, Juliana Barr's work on Texas presents the Spanish Empire as being the subordinate partner to the region's stronger Indian communities. See: James Merrill. *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and their Neighbors from European Contact through the era of Removal*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Daniel Usner, Jr. *Indian, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indian Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Kathleen Duval. *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); 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)

⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, xi

Wilson, in the recently edited volume, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660 to 1840*, argues that by giving attention to “difference – in historical settings and forms of consciousness as well as in historiographic and critical practice” a complicated picture of empire develops.⁵ To Wilson, empires are inherently anxious of their elements, antinomial in the pursuit of their interest, and asymmetrical in the application of power.⁶ Both White and Wilson highlight and privilege avenues of action for individuals and communities that contested, negotiated, and even undermined imperial authority, and John Askin’s experience suggests the extent of such maneuverability.

Since his arrival in North America, John Askin’s success in the fur trade resulted from his skillful merging of economic, familial, and military connections in Albany, Detroit, and Michilimackinac, and allowed for his reinvention at key moments of crisis. In 1778, John Askin asked his superior in the British commissariat “is it not as just that I a Servant of the Crown reaps a Bennifitt by government as any merchant whatsoever?”⁷ Askin already knew the answer to this rhetorical question. However, the American Revolution exposed the myriad structural fault lines within the British Empire, forcing military and civilian officials in the Great Lakes to protect their authority, even at

⁵ Kathleen Wilson. “Introduction: histories, empires, modernities.” *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in and the Empire, 1660 – 1840*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004), 3

⁶ Kathleen Wilson. “Introduction: histories, empires, modernities,” 3

⁷ John Askin to Sampson Fleming (Mackinac), 10 May 1778, *The John Askin Papers*, vol. 1. Milo Quaife, editor. (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928), 86. See original document in: John Askin’s Letterbook 1778, John Askin Papers, Box 22. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 22). Askin’s comments to Fleming suggest an understanding of trade that merged empire and trade; he understood they benefited each other.

the expense of other community interests, and contradicted Askin's doctrine of self interest. The conflicts that enmeshed Askin in the late 1770s evolved from activities and practices that developed before the war, when his trade was under the auspices of lenient commandants. His actions were ignored because they coincided with the larger economic interests of the British Empire. However, when the events of the American Revolution challenged the British Empire in the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes, the lines between loyal and disloyal and trade and empire became rigid and calcified. The military needs of the British Empire subsumed the private economic activities of John Askin, and forced him to abandon his own agenda and vision for the Great Lakes fur trade.

The events that led to John Askin's exile from Michilimackinac began in the contested and multi-ethnic landscape of the Illinois Country. Three years after the battles of Lexington and Concord, George Rogers Clark, a twenty-five year old Virginian, and his motley crew of American soldiers crossed over the Ohio River and captured several important British posts in the Illinois country in rapid succession during the summer of 1778.⁸ Clark hoped his invasion would stymie the continuous Indian raids that ravaged the backcountry settlements of Pennsylvania and Virginia. With less than two hundred soldiers, George Rogers Clark occupied Kaskaskia in July and captured Vincennes in August; he quickly subjugated the smaller surrounding communities as well. The Virginian, bolstered by the news of the French and American

⁸ For a narrative of Clark's life and his campaign in the Ohio Valley and the Illinois Country, see: *The Life of George Rogers Clark, 1752 – 1818: Triumphs and Tragedies*. Kenneth Carstens, Nancy Carstens, editors. (Westport: Praeger, 2004)

military alliance, solidified his victories in the region by requiring the French inhabitants to take oaths of allegiance to the United States and he styled himself as an Indian leader and a war chief, which he hoped would complicate the relationship between Great Britain and their Indian allies.⁹ The rapidity of George Rogers Clark's attack and the success of his campaign sent shock waves of fear throughout the British Great Lakes and Ohio River Valley. With American soldiers operating in the Illinois Country, largely uncontested, Detroit and Michilimackinac faced constant peril of attack and a response from the British military.

Detroit's Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton planned to recapture the fallen posts and to oust the American interlopers from the region. Born in Dublin, Ireland in 1734 to a member of the Irish parliament, Hamilton purchased an ensign's commission and rose to the rank of major during the Seven Years' War.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the Quebec Act of 1774, which reorganized the territory Great Britain captured from the French and secured after Pontiac's Rebellion, the British Crown appointed civilian governors to administer the affairs of established posts. Hamilton, after selling his military commission, was appointed lieutenant governor of Detroit by General Guy Carleton in 1775. As a newly created office, Hamilton found it difficult to negotiate the extent of his authority; he was taken advantage of by the British, French, and Indian inhabitants of the Great Lakes, who ignored imperial directions to pursue personal profits in the fur trade. Moreover, and most importantly, Hamilton lacked authority over

⁹ See: White, *The Middle Ground*, 368 – 378.

¹⁰ For a biography of Henry Hamilton, see: Orville John Jaebker. *Henry Hamilton: British Soldier and Colonial Governor*. [Dissertation] Indiana University, Microfilm, 1954, housed at Michigan State Library, East Lansing, Michigan.

his soldiers, which made many his dictates difficult to enforce. The confusion that surrounded Hamilton's governorship was further complicated by the American Revolution, which was a military conflict, rather than a civil one. Hamilton focused his military efforts at Detroit on rallying the Indians of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley against the Americans, which he believed was the only way to protect the vital British interests in the regions. The violence Hamilton unleashed in the backcountry provided the catalyst for Clarke's invasion.

In the frantic months after the capture of Kaskaskia and Vincennes, Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton waited at Detroit for orders from the British at Montreal and Quebec concerning the American threat, but definitive orders never came. Impatient, Hamilton decided not to wait for an official decree. Instead, the lieutenant governor organized a small mixed force of roughly two hundred British soldiers, French militia, and Indian warriors. By October of 1778, as the weather turned cold and wet, Hamilton and his men began the arduous three hundred miles trek south into the Illinois country. Along the way, Hamilton held a council at Quaitenon on the Wabash River, where he persuaded the Wea to reaffirm their alliance to Great Britain. After nearly two months of marching, the British, French, and Indian force arrived at Vincennes, and quickly captured the community in December. The French militia that swore allegiance to the American cause and whom George Rogers Clark, before leaving, tasked to protect the community, deserted en masse at Hamilton's approach; they felt little affinity towards the British Empire, or the rebellious colonies. This left only token resistance, which Hamilton and his soldiers quickly pushed aside. With Vincennes once again in British hands, his supply lines stretched, and Clark at Kaskaskia, Hamilton allowed his Indian

forces to return to their villages and his militia to disperse, which left him only a skeleton crew of British soldiers to hold the post during the winter against an unlikely American counter-attack.

In late January of 1779, George Rogers Clark learned of Henry Hamilton's campaign, and responded aggressively. Instead of waiting for spring, Clark organized a party of volunteers and set out across the flooded and wet Illinois landscape in early February to recapture Vincennes. Carrying few supplies, Clark and his men, often disillusioned and mutinous, made their way towards Hamilton and his soldiers virtually undetected. On February 23, Clark recaptured the town of Vincennes without firing a shot, and laid siege to the British-held fort. Hamilton held his position overnight, before surrendering unconditionally to Clark, who threatened to overrun the fort if the British resisted. In the aftermath, Clark ordered the brutal deaths of several pro-British Indians in retaliation for the raids on the backcountry settlements, put Hamilton and many of the British soldiers and traders in chains and sent them as prisoners to Virginia. The loss of Vincennes and Kaskaskia further damaged British cachet with the Indians of the Wabash, Illinois, and Miami River valleys, and opened a direct avenue of attack to Detroit, which Clark intended to exploit. Moreover, with the advent of the French and American alliance and the French and Spanish alliance against the British in 1778 and 1779, the Mississippi River became an increasingly problematic region. Spanish and French soldiers used the community of St. Louis to launch raids and initiate diplomatic missions to the Indians.¹¹ The British command historically had mistrusted the interior

¹¹ For a discussion of the growth of St. Louis, and its French origins during this period, see: Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); particularly, chapters one through three.

French, and many regional commanders during the late 1770s considered the French agents and spies, as many refused to support the British or declare allegiance. At Detroit, news of Hamilton's capture precipitated an internal crisis, and the British replaced the post's captured commandant with Major Arent Schuler de Peyster.¹²

De Peyster left Michilimackinac following a successful tenure as its commandant. He had arrived at the post only a year before the outbreak of colonial hostilities and his skillful negotiations with the region's Indians ensured their continued allegiance to the British Empire. For example, in 1775, de Peyster's emissaries organized a council with the Sioux and Ojibwa west of Michilimackinac, which established peace between both nations, and removed a potential diplomatic crisis.¹³ Historian Susan Sleeper-Smith has written that "de Peyster appreciated the social complexity" of the French and Indian communities that surrounded him, unlike other arrogant and Francophobe British commanders.¹⁴ Through reciprocal relationships with Frenchmen like Louis Chevalier and Charles de Langlade, who were linked to some of the most important families in the region, de Peyster was able to raise Indian war parties for the British military against the

¹² For a biography of Arent Schuler De Peyster, see: David A. Armour. "Arent Schuyler De Peyster." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. VI; See also: De Peyster, Arent Schuyler. *Miscellanies by an Officer*. (Dumfries: C Monro, 1888)

¹³ See: Paul L. Stevens, "Wabasha Visits Governor Carleton, 1776: New Light on a Legendary Episode of Dakota-British Diplomacy on the Great Lakes Frontier." *Michigan Historical Review* 16 (1990): 21 – 48

¹⁴ Susan Sleeper-Smith. *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 64 - 65

Americans.¹⁵ Between 1776 and 1777, for example, Langlade and his band of Great Lakes Indians helped re-capture Montreal and served in the disastrous British campaign led by General John Burgoyne in upstate New York. While George Rogers Clark invaded the Illinois Country in 1778, de Peyster rebuilt segments of Michilimackinac's wooden fort and sent belts of war to the Souix, Winnebago, Ottawa, and the Ojibwe trying to reaffirm their support for the British after these embarrassing defeats at the hands of the Americans.¹⁶ Through his continual and knowledgeable efforts, he assured his superiors at Quebec that the upper Great Lakes Indians were still supportive of the British cause against the Americans.¹⁷ The British hoped de Peyster's experience and understanding would allow him to assume the illusive responsibilities of Detroit's lieutenant governor.

When Major Arent Schuler de Peyster relocated to Detroit in 1779, he left behind a community of British soldiers, French and British merchants and traders, and Indians extremely grateful for his liberal management of Michilimackinac and his lenient fur trade policies. While de Peyster's tenure was far from idyll – frustrated by the war and stunted by scarcity – his deft understanding of the social realities of the Great Lakes fur trade society endeared him to many, especially his close friend and subordinate, John Askin. Upon hearing of de Peyster's promotion to Detroit, Askin organized, along with

¹⁵ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 65

¹⁶ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 27 June 1779. *MPHC* 9: 388 - 389

¹⁷ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 27 June 1779. *MPHC* 9: 388 - 389

several other influential merchants, like Benjamin Lyons and Louis Chaboillez, the purchase of an ornate silver punch bowl to commemorate de Peyster's service.¹⁸ They ordered it from the Montreal-based partnership of Isaac Todd and James McGill, and had it etched with an image of a giant turtle, which was symbolic of Michilimackinac.¹⁹ In response to their generosity, de Peyster wrote to Askin and his colleagues that their "approbation of my conduct, during a long command, in the critical situation of affairs, cannot be otherwise than flattering to me."²⁰ He continued, by saying that, "he [had] ever made it [his] study to promote the trade of this Post and its Dependencies."²¹ This sentiment is what so endeared de Peyster to Askin; the relationship that the two men built over de Peyster's tenure proved lasting and instrumental to Askin's fur trade. De Peyster's comments confirm Askin's own understanding of the relationship between empire and private trade -- braided together and mutually beneficial. When de Peyster left Michilimackinac, he left with more than just a silver bowl, but also with a web of relationships that made his tenure workable. He left behind a vacuum of authority and expectation; one that would prove difficult to fill.

The man chosen to replace Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster at Michilimackinac

¹⁸ Letter to Major De Peyster from the Merchants of Michilimackinac (Michilimackinac), 20 September 1779. *Miscellanies by an Officer*. (Dumfries: C Monro, 1888), 3 - 4

¹⁹ Letter to Major De Peyster from the Gentlemen Traders of Michilimackinac (Michilimackinac), 20 September 1779. *Miscellanies by an Officer*, 3 - 4

²⁰ Letter to the Gentlemen Traders, and to the Post of Michilimackinac, and its Dependencies (Michilimackinac), 20 September 1779. *Miscellanies by an Officer*. 4 - 5

²¹ Letter to the Gentlemen Traders, and to the Post of Michilimackinac, and its Dependencies (Michilimackinac), 20 September 1779. 4 - 5

was born just three years before John Askin in Scotland in 1736.²² At eighteen, Patrick Sinclair joined the British army, enlisting in 1754 as the perpetual antagonism between France and Great Britain once again careened towards war in North America. After fighting in the Caribbean, Sinclair served under the command of General Jeffrey Amherst in northern New York in the early 1760s during the British campaign against French Montreal. A competent soldier, he quickly rose in the army's ranks to become a lieutenant, before transferring to the royal marines. Between 1763 and 1767, Sinclair's men patrolled the waters of Lake Ontario and Huron. He built a small fort at the mouth of the St. Clair River; this soon became his home, and he built strong relationships with the Ojibwe Indians and French and British Detroit merchants. However, in 1767, when Sir William Johnson's Indian policy and trade reforms failed, the British Crown cut the military's budget in the Great Lakes, and Sinclair was mustered out of active service. Like de Peyster at Michilimackinac, Sinclair was also given a silver cup by several Detroit merchants to show their respect and gratitude for his years of service. Returning to Scotland in 1769, Sinclair spent the next six years of his life semi-retired; he served the military as a recruiter, and continually sought a new command in the Great Lakes. Like Major Henry Hamilton at Detroit, the Crown posted Sinclair as lieutenant governor of Michilimackinac in April 1775, where he would serve alongside Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster as the post's civilian commandant.

Little did Captain Patrick Sinclair know, but it would take him nearly four years before he would take up his coveted commission at Michilimackinac. With the outbreak

²² For a biography of Patrick Sinclair, see: William Lee Jenks. *Patrick Sinclair*. (Lansing: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck, Crawford & Co., 1914)

of the American Revolution, sea travel became dangerous as colonial privateers plied the Atlantic Ocean looking for vulnerable British shipping vessels. Likewise, rebel military activity along the St. Lawrence River, directed at Quebec and Montreal in 1775 and 1776, made travel into the Great Lakes precarious and fraught, as John Askin discovered. This left Sinclair un-phased. Shortly after receiving his orders, Sinclair sailed to North America, disembarked from his ship at Baltimore in July of 1775, and planned to head to New York City, travel up the Hudson River to Quebec, and then sail west to Michilimackinac, but his plans went awry. The colonial Congress, fearful of his strong relationship with the Ojibwe Indians in the Great Lakes, quickly ordered Sinclair's arrest. After receiving his parole in March 1776, Sinclair sailed back to England, where he remained for a year, before again sailing to North America. This time he landed in Philadelphia, the colonial capital then under British military control, in 1777, but in the wake of the French and American alliance, the city's position appeared untenable. That summer, the British abandoned Philadelphia and Sinclair traveled north to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Instead of proceeding directly to Quebec, the French navy forced him to remain in the frozen community throughout the winter. But in June 1779, Patrick Sinclair finally arrived in Quebec, where General Frederick Haldimand detailed Sinclair's civilian authority and his new responsibilities at Michilimackinac.

In July 1779, General Frederick Haldimand, the Royal Governor of the Quebec, provided Captain Patrick Sinclair a letter detailing his command at Michilimackinac, which Haldimand hoped would "re-unite as much as possible the Civil and Military

Powers in the same Hands.”²³ However, as the lieutenant governorship was a civilian position, Sinclair only “receiv[ed] the Honors usually paid to the Commanding officer” and wielded the powers “necessary for the Security of the Post and its immediate Defense” only in the absence of a senior military officer.²⁴ To Haldimand, Sinclair’s most important responsibility required him “to pay great attention to the Indians, usually resorting to Missilimackinac [sic]” and “to study the Humours and Dispositions of the several Persons attached to [the] post, the Traders thereto and Interpreters,...should any of them behave in a manner unbecoming the Fidelity & Allegiance they owe their Sovereign.”²⁵ This order eventually proved disastrous to John Askin, but it initially sought to quell American and French machination in the upper Great Lakes, especially in the aftermath of Clark’s success. Upon receiving and reading Haldimand’s instructions, Sinclair quickly fired off a letter to protest; he complained that such restrictions “limit[ed] his charge” and the split nature of his commission invited “disobedience of orders” and “annihilate[ed]” his military rank, which he “procured by Purchase & earned by Twenty-five years Service.”²⁶ Haldimand replied that he “re-considered the Tenor of [his] commission,” but could not “invest him with fuller powers”

²³ Instructions for Captain Patrick Sinclair, Lieut. Governor & Superintendent of Indians at Missilc. (Quebec), July 1779. *MPHC* 9: 517

²⁴ Instructions for Captain Patrick Sinclair. *MPHC* 9: 517

²⁵ Instructions for Captain Patrick Sinclair. *MPHC* 9: 517

²⁶ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 27 July 1779. *MPHC* 9: 518

than he already had; the commission was civilian and military rank could not matter.²⁷

Patrick Sinclair read Haldimand's response and wasted no time in composing a terse worded response. In a rather petulant reply, Sinclair wrote that he never solicited his appointment to Michilimackinac, nor he did not wish to embarrass the King's Service or himself, as Henry Hamilton had, and asked for immediate "leave to return to England."²⁸

Taken aback and affronted by Patrick Sinclair's scurrilous letter, General Frederick Haldimand conceded that the position of lieutenant governor proved "awkward & productive of misunderstandings," but refused to placate Sinclair's tempestuous moods and ordered him to proceed to Michilimackinac with all possible haste.²⁹ Even before Captain Patrick Sinclair arrived at his new command, he was already disgruntled about the nature of his commission and the parameters of his responsibility. This placed him in an uncomfortable position; he had the authority to oversee several important arenas of political administration in the upper Great Lakes, but he lacked the military authority to enforce his policies, and at any moment, he feared, a senior military official at the post could contravene his orders. For example, as part of Haldimand's instructions, Sinclair could not send troops outside of the "natural limits of the Garrison" without permission, and he had to maintain a constant

²⁷ General Frederick Haldimand to Captain Patrick Sinclair (Quebec), 17 August 1779. *MPHC* 9: 519

²⁸ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 17 August 1779. *MPHC* 9: 519 - 520

²⁹ General Frederick Haldimand to Captain Patrick Sinclair, (Quebec) 20 August 1779. *MPHC* 9:

communication with his superiors at Detroit and Niagara.³⁰ In effect, Sinclair had plenty of responsibility, but little direct authority. These contradictions weighed heavily on Sinclair as he made his way to Michilimackinac in October 1779. Once there, he met Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster, who, according to Sinclair, provided him “the fullest Information with great readiness, and will leave this place in a state which does him great credit, and yield[ed] [him] great satisfaction and aid.”³¹ Moreover, Sinclair found that Major de Peyster’s “unwearied attention ... left [nothing] unessayed to attach the Indians to Government.”³² However, when the new commandant discovered that the allegiance of some of the inhabitants at Michilimackinac and St. Joseph were in question; he required that French and British merchants and traders who wintered in the upper Great Lakes among the Indians to swear an oath to the British Crown.

Lieutenant Governor Patrick Sinclair’s suspicions were justified. With Major Arent Schuler de Peyster at Detroit and Major Henry Hamilton in chains, Sinclair found himself in the sole command of Michilimackinac at point when the political and military situation in the Great Lakes seemed to turn against the British Empire, if only temporarily. Most pressingly, George Rogers Clark and his American forces continued to occupy the Illinois Country threatening the British post of Detroit, which if captured

³⁰ Instructions for Captain Patrick Sinclair. *MPHC* 9: 517

³¹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand. (Quebec), 7 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 523

³² Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 7 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 526. In a letter written to General Haldimand, Sinclair claims that “Thirty six Minomies...have brought to this place a large armed Boat, loaded at Pencour, in which were twelve men & a Rebel Commissary.” Sinclair had reason to worry about the activity of traders in the Great Lakes, especially as American presents or gifts could sway allegiances. See: Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Michilimackinac), 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 548 - 549

severed the supply line to Michilimackinac. With Clark's victory, the British found their reputation tarnished and their authority disputed in the Illinois and Ohio Valley. Moreover, the French alliance coupled with Spain's declaration of war against Great Britain in May of 1779 transformed Spanish posts west of the Mississippi River into significant centers of French, Spanish, and American military activity and Indian diplomacy.³³ While Askin and his colleagues believed Great Britain would prevail over the colonies, they discovered an imperially fraught frontier, where French, Spanish, American, and British agents vied for Indian alliances and military support. In fact, under the orders of General Haldimand, in February 1780, Sinclair and several other western commandants, like de Peyster, began planning a series of aggressive Indian raids against the Spanish settlements of St. Louis, Natchez, and New Orleans.³⁴ A month later, Sinclair wrote to Haldimand that he "engaged the Indians to the Westward in an attack on the Spanish & [the Americans in the] Illinois Country."³⁵ Building upon de Peyster's earlier efforts, Sinclair raised "Seven hundred fifty men including Traders, servants and Indians" for the British campaign against the allies.³⁶ Likewise, at Chicago, longtime British ally and Indian leader, Charles de Langlade "with a chosen

³³ See: A. P. Nasatir. "The Anglo-Spanish Frontier in the Illinois Country during the American Revolution, 1779 – 1783." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 21 (1928): 291 – 358.

³⁴ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Michilimackinac), 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 548

³⁵ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Michilimackinac), 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 548

³⁶ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Michilimackinac), 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 548

Band of Indians and Canadians” raided the Illinois Country. Hamilton’s defeat spurred new British military activity, but left Sinclair intensely insecure.³⁷

Soon after arriving, Lieutenant Governor Patrick Sinclair surveyed the community and discovered that it was militarily untenable. He wrote to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm, the aide-de-camp of General Frederick Haldimand at Quebec, that “Fort [Michilimackinac] [was] in every point of view exceptionable, one [incapable] of being secured against any annoyance but small arms, of giving any protection to vessels, Traders, or any collection of Fuel, Forage, or other Articles necessary...for the Garrison.”³⁸ Before he had even set foot at Michilimackinac, Sinclair spent several hours surveying a small island in the straits between Lake Huron and Michigan. To the new commandant, Mackinaw Island seemed to boast a good harbor and productive lands, but more importantly, it provided safety from American, Spanish, and French military machinations in the Great Lakes.³⁹ He planned to make big changes at Michilimackinac. Again, writing to Brehm, Sinclair argued that the “Island would be our place of greatest safety even with temporary works which the Garrison might raise against an Event.”⁴⁰ Within months of his arrival and without express permission from the British high command, he prepared to transfer the military and the entire community

³⁷ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Michilimackinac), 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 548 - 549

³⁸ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 7 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 523 - 524

³⁹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 7 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 524

⁴⁰ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 7 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 524

of Michilimackinac across the straits, and ordered a small detachment of soldiers, laborers, and skilled craftsmen to begin building a blockhouse and a wharf.⁴¹ Despite protests by elite French and British merchants and traders, who bore the costs of transporting their own houses, merchandise, warehouses and families across to the island, by early 1780, Sinclair's project became a community affair, and he came to rely upon the efforts of John Askin's son-in-law, Captain Samuel Robertson.

Married to Catherine, Askin's oldest child, Samuel Robertson played an important role in the expansion of his father-in-law's trade in the late 1770s. The Lieutenant Governor encountered Robertson shortly after his arrival at Michilimackinac. In October of 1779, Sinclair found "the Indians in Lake Michigan very wavering & several Depots of Corn in the rivers there," and sent Robertson along with "two Canadians...& Mr. Gautier, Interpreter" with presents and ordered them to purchase all of the spare corn the Indians could muster.⁴² The mission proved successful. A week later, Robertson and his crew arrived back at Michilimackinac "without accident."⁴³ In early November, Sinclair sent Robertson over to Mackinac Island to build its new wharf. Over the next several months, Sinclair built a solid relationship with Robertson, and Askin's son-in-law began to play a major role in helping the Lieutenant Governor establish his new fortifications on Mackinac Island. In February of 1780, Sinclair wrote

⁴¹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 7 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 524

⁴² Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 29 October 1779. *MPHC* 9: 530

⁴³ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), (6 November 1779). *MPHC* 9: 533

to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm that “with [the] aid of a Mr. Robertson, an able artificer and sensible man,” he was able “to erect a Block House.”⁴⁴ Beyond “Inspection of the Works,” Robertson also expanded the island’s wharf; he built it out “to 150 feet in two fathom water well framed & partly filled with stone.”⁴⁵ A month later, on March 16, 1780, Sinclair crossed over to Mackinac Island, surveyed Robertson’s work, and asked him for the use of one of his smaller ships stationed at Sault Ste. Marie. The two men left the Island together that evening, but the following night’s events led to Samuel Robertson’s improbable arrest and the destruction of Askin’s trade.⁴⁶

According to Sinclair, Samuel Robertson intercepted a letter intended for Jean Baptiste Cadot, a long time interpreter and Indian agent for the British at Sault Ste. Marie.⁴⁷ The letter contained Sinclair’s orders for the recruitment of “[French] Canadian Volunteers,” which “militated against [Robertson’s] Private Views.”⁴⁸ Writing to General Frederick Haldimand, the Lieutenant Governor argued that since “Canadians managed Mr. Robertsons Vessels & Trade at St. Marys [Sault

⁴⁴ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 15 February 1780. *MPHC* 9: 538

⁴⁵ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 15 February 1780. *MPHC* 9: 538

⁴⁶ See: Charges against Samuel Robertson (Michilimackinac), April? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 618 – 619; Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 622 – 627; Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 8 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 576 – 578; Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Addendum) (Quebec), 8 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 577 - 578

⁴⁷ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Addendum) (Quebec), 8 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 577.

⁴⁸ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Addendum) (Quebec), 8 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 577

Ste. Marie],” Askin’s son-in-law “had the rashness to gain an Indian to deliver a Letter...[which Robertson] broke open and cut out the words in it which offended.”⁴⁹ Afterwards, Robertson sent a letter by way of a young sailor “to inform Mr. Askin of the reason for intercepting it,” but the sailor, exhausted, fell asleep in the spring snow, and froze to death.⁵⁰ While conceding that his case was largely circumstantial, Sinclair arrested Robertson and Louis Barthe, another one of Askin’s brother-in-laws, who had translated the Indian’s orders for Robertson, in late April 1780.⁵¹ This action was disastrous for Samuel Robertson, who left supplies on Mackinac Island – liquor, furniture, and flour – which were ransacked.⁵² After spending nearly forty days in Michilimackinac’s guardhouse, Sinclair accepted a bond offered by Montreal-based merchants Joseph Frobisher and William Grant for Robertson to appear before General Frederick Haldimand at Quebec.⁵³ It was a horrible blow for John Askin as well. He lost an important member of his family and a trading partner; Robertson co-owned “two small Vessels” with Askin and Jean Baptiste Barthe, and co-owned part of Askin’s and Barthe’s trading depot at Sault Ste. Marie. Likewise, Robertson’s misfortunes also presaged another disastrous disruption to John Askin’s life, personal trade, and his long-maintained and beneficial relationship with the British military.

⁴⁹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 8 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 577

⁵⁰ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 8 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 577

⁵¹ Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9:624

⁵² Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9:625

⁵³ Bond for Samuel Robertson (Montreal), 3 July 1779. *MPHC* 9: 620

Shortly after the Robertson fiasco, Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair ordered the King's Store at Michilimackinac inventoried in early April 1780, and he discovered that the amount of supplies it held was less than what he had expected. Sinclair had been suspicious of his deputy commissary, John Askin, since he took command of the post in October of 1779. He wrote to General Frederick Haldimand that "The King's Provision store ha[d] required not only my strict Attention, but my vigilance, being in the charge of a man who has a contract with the North West Traders."⁵⁴ Now, Sinclair had confirmation of his long held suspicion. Official records told Sinclair that there were eight-hundred- thirty gallons of rum, one-hundred-fifteen-thousand-four-hundred-twenty pounds of flour, fifty three thousand two hundred twenty pounds of pork, and other sundries in storage, but Askin's private accounting told Sinclair a different story.⁵⁵ The commissariat was short by twenty-seven gallons of rum, seventeen thousand pounds of flour, and four-thousand pounds of pork.⁵⁶ When Sinclair discovered these discrepancies, he immediately "place[d] a sentry on the Provisions stores," relieved John Askin of his position, and gave "the charge of [the King's Stores]" to David

⁵⁴ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), February? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 545

⁵⁵ See: John Askin's Return of Provisions & Liquors which should be in Store on the Island & at the Post of Michilimackinac, (Michilimackinac), 24 April 1780. *MPHC* 9: 656; John Askin's Account of all the Provisions & Rum in His Majestys Store at the Fort of Michilimackinac, (Michilimackinac), 4 April 1780. *MPHC* 9: 656; Captain Patrick Sinclair's Account of Provisions and Deficiencies of his Majestys Stores at Michilimackinac, (Michilimackinac), April? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 656

⁵⁶ Captain Patrick Sinclair's Account of Provisions and Deficiencies of his Majestys Stores at Michilimackinac, (Michilimackinac), April? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 656

Mitchell, the post's regimental surgeon.⁵⁷ After nearly sixteen years at Michilimackinac, the forty-one year old merchant was at a loss, and in a difficult position. The loss of Robertson and his removal from his imperial position disrupted his trade and livelihood. John Askin handed over the keys and accounts to Mitchell, paid his four- thousand pound bond to Sinclair, and traveled south to Detroit to deal with the repercussions of his actions.

General Haldimand wrote to the Lieutenant Governor in August, 1780: "I am sorry that a man capable of Dishonesty has been so long entrusted with a charge of such consequence as the King's Provision Store."⁵⁸ He applauded Sinclair's discovery. "They are capable of telling many Falsehoods," Sinclair wrote to Haldimand, "I mean Mr. Askin & Mr. Robertson...I know so little of [these men]...excepting their Demerit, that I cannot conceive what they have said or will say."⁵⁹ In just three months, Sinclair arrested Robertson on a circumstantial case and he destroyed the reputation of one of the most influential and important British merchants at Michilimackinac. To Sinclair, Askin represented mercantile initiative run awry; he and Jean Baptiste Barthe, the most able of Askin's French brother-in-laws, flaunted the ban on private shipping, his depots straddled some of the most important strategic river openings in the Great Lakes, and they had the familial ties and French labor to flaunt British authority. However, with the

⁵⁷ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec) 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 554

⁵⁸ General Frederick Haldimand to Captain Patrick Sinclair, (Michilimackinac), 10 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 567

⁵⁹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 8 July 1780. *MPHC* 9: 577

promotion and transfer of Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster, Askin lost a valuable ally in his business endeavors and a critical supporter in his understanding of the relationship between empire and his private trade. With Sinclair's arrival, Askin encountered a man jealous of his own position, and authority, who was suspicious of men that were successful and culturally ambiguous. To Sinclair, John Askin's removal was more than a personal triumph and expression of his authority, but a step towards asserting the prerogatives of British Empire over the disruptive needs of its self-serving merchants and traders.

In June 1778, while a disgruntled Captain Patrick Sinclair made his way to Michilimackinac, John Askin sent Samuel Robertson "to examine the coast along the French River [at the Georgian Bay]," where he planned "to build a [trading] house."⁶⁰ Like his other investments in the mercantile infrastructure of the Great Lakes since the early 1770s, the French River depot would "facilitate the transport of [Askin's] goods from Montreal by the Grand River" and circumvented the long and costly trek from the St. Lawrence to Michilimackinac and the upper Great Lakes.⁶¹ A month later, Robertson was busy building Askin's new depot.⁶² Partnered with Michilimackinac based Benjamin Lyons, a Jewish trader whose early life in North America mirrored

⁶⁰ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 6 June 1778. *Askin Papers* 1: 115. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

⁶¹ John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 29 May 1778. *Askin Papers*, 1: 103. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

⁶² John Askin to Jean Baptiste Barthe (Sault Ste. Marie), 6 June 1778. *Askin Papers* 1: 115. See original document in: John Askin, Box 22

Askin's, Askin invested roughly six-hundred pounds in this new endeavor. They planned to trade with the surrounding Indian communities.⁶³ The establishment of the French River depot reveals John Askin's business acumen and his complex understanding of the economic realities of the British Great Lakes. He understood that with a rapidly expanding fur trade, successful traders and merchants required effective means of storing, transporting, and facilitating the movement of merchandise and furs. Since emerging from bankruptcy in 1772, Askin established himself as the region's consummate middleman. By the time Sinclair arrived at Michilimackinac in late 1779, John Askin's depots, ships, French kin, and laborers defined major aspects of the fur trade, claimed some of the most strategic localities of the Great Lakes, and occasionally flaunted imperial restrictions. This did not sit well with Major Patrick Sinclair.

John Askin's trade depot at Sault Ste. Marie and the French River troubled the recently appointed Lieutenant Governor of Michilimackinac. In February 1780, months before Askin's dismissal, Sinclair ordered Jean Baptiste Cadot at Sault Ste. Marie "to remove part of a square of 120 feet per side fortified by Messr. Askin & c. &c," which, according to Samuel Robertson had been built by Askin and his partners at their own expense and sanctioned by Major de Peyster.⁶⁴ Likewise, in May, Sinclair ordered Askin's partner, Benjamin Lyons, to give "Bond for removing the Houses at the entrance of The French River," which Sinclair feared might tip off French, Spanish, and American

⁶³ See: Askin's Inventory for 1778, National Archives of Ontario, Toronto, microfilmed by Toronto Public Libraries, copy on file at the Colonial Michilimackinac Archives, Petersen Center Library, Mackinac City, Michigan.

⁶⁴ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 15 February 1780. *MPHC* 9:545

agents to an important and strategic waterway in the upper Great Lakes.⁶⁵ However, in a letter to General Frederick Haldimand written in July 1780, two month after he ordered Lyons to post bond, Sinclair revealed that his actions went beyond fear of hostile agents discovering the entrance to the French River. He wrote Haldimand that, “Mr Askin who schemed [the depot’s construction] vaunted before Major de Peyster of having the Key of Canada in his Pocket.”⁶⁶ Sinclair answered Askin’s boast by saying that he “would endeavour [sic] to put every key in this part of the Country in [Haldimand’s] Hands.”⁶⁷ Sinclair’s attack on Askin’s depots, his family, and his own position as deputy commissar revealed a degree of animosity towards the Michilimackinac merchant, but also reflected the degree to which Sinclair was willing to use his imperial authority to stymie and disrupt mercantile activity in the upper Great Lakes.

The destruction of John Askin’s trading depots at Sault Ste. Marie and the French River location coincided with broader initiatives by Sinclair at Michilimackinac, which disrupted the network of colleagues and kin that defined Askin’s fur trade. Meddling with Askin’s trade depot at Sault Ste. Marie disrupted more than the intricate flow of furs and merchandise, Sinclair ordered the post’s “Clerk, Merchandise & every [employee of Askin’s] to come to Michilimackinac.”⁶⁸ Their goods were seized without receipt and

⁶⁵ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm, (Quebec), 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 552

⁶⁶ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), July/August? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 564

⁶⁷ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), July/August? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 564

⁶⁸ Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9:625

vaulted, which effectively destroyed one of Askin's largest and most profitable investments.⁶⁹ With Samuel Robertson and Louis Barthe in chains, only Jean Baptiste Barthe remained free to conduct Askin's trade at Sault Ste. Marie. In 1780, Barthe returned Sault Ste. Marie; he had left two years earlier to marry in Detroit. When Barthe left Detroit, Major Arent de Peyster "promised him [his] protection, as a Person proper to be instructed with the Execution of the Commanding officers orders at St. Mary's," marking Barthe Jean Baptize Cadot's temporary replacement.⁷⁰ However, when Barthe and his family arrived at Michilimackinac, Sinclair promptly refused to allow them to travel north. According to Robertson, Sinclair "ordered [Barthe to] immediately ... settle his Business & Return to Detroit."⁷¹ This came as a severe blow to Askin's trade and family. With Jean Baptiste Barthe unable to travel to Sault St. Marie "everything there became lost, even Debts Due us by Traders."⁷² In the spring of 1780, Sinclair targeted Askin's network of trade in the upper Great Lakes. He demolished the French River depot and eviscerated Askin's Sault St. Marie operation, arrested and expelled three of Askin's most important partners and family members from Michilimackinac, and placed "the whole of [their] Property [roughly] 6 & 7000 Pounds N.Y.C....into the possessions of

⁶⁹ Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9:625

⁷⁰ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to Captain Patrick Sinclair, (Michilimackinac), 26 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 584

⁷¹ Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 626

⁷² Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 626

others.”⁷³ This was a shocking display of imperial authority and Askin never fully recovered from its consequences.

While steadily dismantling John Askin’s network of trade in the Great Lakes, Lieutenant Governor Patrick Sinclair’s letters intimated to General Frederick Haldimand that Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster was responsible for the lax administration of Michilimackinac and the disloyal and greedy actions of the post’s merchants. Then in July 1780, Major de Peyster received a petition at Detroit drafted by two companies of soldiers stationed at Michilimackinac. The soldiers complained that they had not been paid for nearly eleven months and that they seldom “received more than one Gill of Rum per day & some days but a chew of Tobacco apiece.”⁷⁴ Before petitioning de Peyster, some of the soldiers took their complaints to Sinclair, but “his answer always [was] *damn you for a pack of Villains & Scoundrels, none of your Majors or Mr. Askin’s ways with me – it won’t do.*”⁷⁵ Sinclair associated Askin with de Peyster, whose disloyalty and impropriety characterized the former commander at Michilimackinac. The soldiers claimed that their “poor usage [was] principally give[n] to provoke us to do something that may bring a Scandal on the Regiment,” and by extension de Peyster.⁷⁶ In fact, Sinclair subtly connected de Peyster to all of the post’s failings, particularly

⁷³ Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. *MPHC* 9:626

⁷⁴ Petition to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster, from Two Companies of the Kings, or Eighth Regiment of Foot garrisoned at Michilimackinac. (Detroit), 30 July 1780. *MPHC* 9: 588. This letter reveals how respected and well-liked Askin and De Peyster were in the British garrison and community of Michilimackinac.

⁷⁵ Petition to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster. *MPHC* 9: 588. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁶ Petition to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster. *MPHC* 9: 588

with the Great Lakes' fur trade. Sinclair sought to discredit the intermingling of trade and empire that characterized de Peyster's tenure at Michilimackinac and Askin's close alliance partnership with de Peyster. Such nebulous and shifting borders between empire and private trade troubled Sinclair, a man who privileged the primacy of empire, and believed the form simply "[wouldn't] do."⁷⁷

Upon receiving the soldiers' petition, Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster quickly defended John Askin and himself. Several weeks later, in August 1780, de Peyster wrote to General Frederick Haldimand at Quebec, and assured the general that he "ever found Mr. Askin & his family most usefull [sic] & faithful Servants to Government, & as such was always ready to do him any Civility in my power."⁷⁸ The Lieutenant Governor of Detroit explained that "Mr. Askin hearing that his Flour to a considerable amount was put into the King's Store at Detroit – Represented to me the distress his numerous family must be in unless I suffered him to borrow some Flour out of the Store."⁷⁹ With more than two years worth of flour at Michilimackinac, de Peyster agreed to let Askin borrow "a few Barrels," and if the deputy commissar "exceeded the bounds of Reason," then it was without his permission to so.⁸⁰ All told, Sinclair estimated that roughly forty-two to eighty-five barrels of flour were missing from

⁷⁷ Petition to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster. *MPHC* 9: 588

⁷⁸ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 13 August 1780, *MPHC* 9: 599

⁷⁹ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 13 August 1780, *MPHC* 9: 599

⁸⁰ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 13 August 1780, *MPHC* 9: 599

Michilimackinac's stores; this proved to be much more than for personal use, but certainly within reason given the nature of spoilage, damage, and theft that characterized late-eighteenth-century supply lines in North America.⁸¹ Regardless of the discrepancy or how it came about, de Peyster wrote to Haldimand that he could not "be persuaded that [Askin] was actuated by dishonest principles," and "If Mr. Sinclair thinks he was," de Peyster continued, then "he certainly pays me a very bad complement."⁸² With de Peyster's letter, what began as a local squabble between Patrick Sinclair and John Askin and his family evolved into a much larger struggle between British military officials.

For John Askin, Major de Peyster's letter and defense to General Frederick Haldimand came too late to effectively change the circumstances on the ground at Michilimackinac. In spring of 1780, John Askin watched Lieutenant Governor Patrick Sinclair destroy what took decades to build; Sinclair razed the French River and Sault Ste. Marie depots, he ordered Askin's merchandise confiscated and allowed debts to go uncollected, and he detained Askin's most important family members and trading partners at Michilimackinac. By the summer of 1780, Askin's trade was in shambles and he was desperate to resolve the situation. On July 29, he wrote to Nathaniel Day at Montreal that "My situation is the most disagreeable I ever was in, added to my being

⁸¹ Captain Patrick Sinclair's Account of Provisions and Deficiencies of his Majestys Stores at Michilimackinac, (Michilimackinac), April? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 656

⁸² Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), 13 August 1780, *MPHC* 9: 599

out of business and living at great expense.”⁸³ It was a telling statement considering Askin’s experience after Pontiac’s Rebellion. However, before he could leave Michilimackinac “to make up all Deficiencies that appear to have arisen from the management of the [post’s] Stores,” Sinclair ordered the former deputy commissar to post a four-thousand-pound bond; a large sum considering the circumstance the merchant found himself in.⁸⁴ After writing to Day, Askin watched his servants load his household possessions onto a small sailing vessel; he said farewell to his wife, Marie Archange Barthe, and his children on the sandy beach at Michilimackinac as they boarded the ship.⁸⁵ A strong wind and sturdy sails propelled Askin’s family south towards Detroit, and he would shortly follow. After sixteen years of building his family, his connections, and his trade, John Askin left Michilimackinac just as he had first entered it; nearly bankrupt.

Instead of Askin holding “the key of Canada in his Pocket,” Sinclair placed them firmly in General Frederick Haldimand’s own hands.⁸⁶ The struggle between Sinclair and Askin at Michilimackinac in 1780 speaks to a central tension that defined the British Empire in the Great Lakes since the early 1760s; the relationship between imperial directives and the private initiatives of merchants and traders. John Askin’s trade, his

⁸³ John Askin to Nathaniel Day, (Montreal), 29 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 551

⁸⁴ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec) 29 May 1780. *MPHC* 9: 554

⁸⁵ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Alexander Harrow, (Michilimackinac), 29 July 1780, *MPHC* 9: 602

⁸⁶ Captain Patrick Sinclair to General Frederick Haldimand, (Quebec), July/August? 1780. *MPHC* 9: 564

family and his connections allowed him to expand across the Great Lakes, monopolize key localities, and circumvent imperial restrictions. By 1779, Askin could truly boast that he held “the key of Canada in his Pocket,” as he was one of the most central and dominant middlemen in the fur trade. Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair’s attack on John Askin’s position, trade, family, and connections came at a time of tremendous imperial uncertainty, strain, and disarray, when rebellion threatened the fabric of the Britain’s North American Empire. With the Americans, Spanish, and French operating with impunity in the Illinois Country, and threatening Detroit and Michilimackinac, Sinclair used his authority and position to secure the post against any threat, even perceived internal ones. With a list of circumstantial evidence against Samuel Robertson and small discrepancies in the King’s Stores, Sinclair dismantled John Askin’s carefully constructed trade and rejected the merchant’s understanding of the intertwined and braided relationship between family, trade, and empire. In the end, John Askin’s trade was subverted to the demands and prerogatives of the British Empire, but in the end, Sinclair’s victory proved short lived and ephemeral.

Nearly a year after Captain Patrick Sinclair took command at Michilimackinac, his struggles with John Askin evolved beyond a local dispute into a broader conflict that included Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster at Detroit, and despite his success ousting Askin and his family from the community, Sinclair ultimately failed to take into consideration the influence of these two men. When Captain John Mompesson arrived at Michilimackinac to take command of the post’s military garrison, Sinclair was forced

into the role of civil governor and quickly found his decisions questioned.⁸⁷ Mompesson also carried with him a copy of the soldier's petition. Upon reading it, Sinclair wrote to de Peyster disavowing its contents, while de Peyster commented to another commander that "no doubt...[Sinclair] will explain away some passages...which appear to me to rudely couched."⁸⁸ Despite implicating de Peyster in Askin's fraud, Sinclair was shocked that he "became the object of [de Peyster's] Enmity."⁸⁹ In September 1780, the Lieutenant Governor of Michilimackinac fired off a letter to de Peyster at Detroit that "It remains with you to put a stop to every unsettled demand set up against me by Individuals upon no grounds that I could understand but that they were to be granted or complained of."⁹⁰ Exasperated, de Peyster replied to Sinclair: "I surely have accounts enough to settle at Detroit without interfering with those of Michilimackinac."⁹¹ Fearful of Haldimand's reaction to Sinclair's continual hostility, in October, de Peyster wrote that his "disputes with Capt. Sinclair [were] all chimerical, the mere produce of his

⁸⁷ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 23 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 602. See also: Captain John Mompesson to General Frederick Haldimand, 22 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 589 – 590. The same controversy that played out between Patrick Sinclair and Frederick Haldimand about the limits of Sinclair's commission as commandant of Michilimackinac, occurred again between Mompesson, Sinclair, and Haldimand over whether Mompesson, who held a military rank, could countermand Sinclair.

⁸⁸ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to Lieutenant Colonel Mason Bolton, (Fort Niagara), 8 September 1780. *MPHC* 9: 614

⁸⁹ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster (Detroit), 13 September 1780. *MPHC* 9: 616

⁹⁰ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster (Detroit), 13 September 1780. *MPHC* 9: 616

⁹¹ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to Captain Patrick Sinclair (Michilimackinac), 17 September 1780. *MPHC* 9: 617

own brain for as God is my Judge.”⁹² After several years dealing with Sinclair’s petulant nature, Haldimand was apt to agree with de Peyster’s description of events.

In 1780, as autumn turned into snowy winter, Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair struggled to find the reason for his deteriorating relationships with Captain Arent Schuyler de Peyster and General Frederick Haldimand. Sinclair wrote to a colleague that it must have been “Quarrelling with one Commissary [which] has procured me many Enemy’s, I am afraid that some may be practiced below & get to His Excellency’s Ears.”⁹³ After destroying Askin’s trade, Sinclair placed the blame for his own misfortune on Askin, his family, and his connections. To preserve his relationship with de Peyster and Haldimand, Sinclair quickly sought to make amends. He wrote to de Peyster: “Sir – As I before assured you, it is my desire and wish to be on good terms with you & to satisfy all in my power those who I have had unfortunate dispute with.”⁹⁴ Then he ordered the bonds he took from Askin and Benjamin Lyons to tear down their French River depot returned and claimed, “The matter which brought them on will be, I hope, forgot[ten].”⁹⁵ In December 1780, Sinclair met with Benjamin Lyons personally to apologize; Lyons wrote to Askin that “I came into his House, he received me very kindly,

⁹² Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to General Frederick Haldimand (Quebec), 1 October 1780. *MPHC* 9: 615

⁹³ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm (Quebec), 23 August 1780. *MPHC* 9: 602

⁹⁴ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster (Detroit), 15 October 1780. *MPHC* 9: 618

⁹⁵ Captain Patrick Sinclair to Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster (Detroit), 15 October 1780. *MPHC* 9: 618

and told me he was very sorry that he ever had any falling out with my Friend Askin.”⁹⁶

Sinclair begged Lyons to tell Askin that “he could never be easy till he should have it in his power to serve [him] and Captain Robertson.”⁹⁷ It must have been a bittersweet sentiment for John Askin to read Lyon’s letter; the damage had been done, and there was little Sinclair could do to revive Askin’s crippled and broken trade.

In 1781, the year after the Askin and Sinclair conflict at Michilimackinac, General George Washington marched his rag-tag colonial army south from their positions around New York City, where the Americans had besieged the British garrison for nearly three years, to a small Virginian community called Yorktown. With the help of a French fleet, Washington forced the surrender of a large contingent of British troops in North America. Despite American victory, the Indian warfare in the west continued almost unabated for several decades; Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster continued spending vast sums of money organizing raiding parties against the Americans in the Ohio Valley. Three years later, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and took command of Fort Niagara, before ill health forced him to leave the Great Lakes permanently in 1785. Likewise, Captain Patrick Sinclair remained at Michilimackinac, and incurred his own expenses keeping the Indians of the upper Great Lakes loyal to the British Crown. However, in 1782, the military refused to pay out Sinclair’s drafts, and he was subjected to a military investigation into his conduct. Sinclair, the official who criticized Askin’s

⁹⁶ Mr. Benjamin Lyons to John Askin (?), (Detroit?), 27 December 1780, *MPHC* 9: 627. It is difficult to tell if the recipient of this letter was John Askin. However, verbal references and the nature of the letter itself, i.e. why would he tell this conversation to any one but Askin, suggests it was meant for Askin.

⁹⁷ Mr. Benjamin Lyons to John Askin (?), (Detroit?), 27 December 1780, *MPHC* 9: 627

mismanagement of the King's Stores at Michilimackinac, would spend the next two years of his life at Quebec desperately trying to settle his own accounts. Upon his return to England, Sinclair was sent to debtor prison and sued General Frederick Haldimand for nearly fifty-thousand pounds to pay off the debts he incurred as commandant of Michilimackinac. At Detroit, John Askin once again struggled to rehabilitate his reputation and reinvigorate his trade. Despite his best efforts, he never reclaimed his dominant position in the Great Lakes fur trade; instead, he sought to re-make his fortune through land speculation in the Ohio Valley.

CHAPTER 6

'IT IS NECESSARY TO PROVIDE AGAINST THE WORST': JOHN ASKIN, LAND SPECULATION, AND AMERICAN EXPANSION IN THE GREAT LAKES

"But as it is necessary to provide against the worst, if the Indians thro the needy Interpreters Should be prevailed on in spite of all you can do to agree that the Americans have the Right of confirming the sales of their lands...No doubt you will in that case produce your claims and get the Indians to acknowledge them in open Council and take necessary Steps to secure them, but never at the expense of betraying the Interests of the Indians since the object of Your voyage was to serve them."¹

John Askin to John Askin Jr., July 5 1795

"Certain influential Characters ... were employed to poison the minds of the Other Nations assembled at this place – advising them to insist upon the Absolute & inherent right of disposing of all of their Lands."²

General Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, September 20 1795

Detroit, 1795. Fifteen years after Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair forced John Askin out of Michilimackinac, the fifty-five year old British merchant organized a new business venture. It was an ambitious plan, something akin to his earlier exploits, when he was a much younger man. His competition with the Hudson Bay Company in the late 1760s made him wealthy and influential in the fur trade, while his position as the region's consummate middleman in the 1770s made him a target of imperial jealousies. By 1780, much had changed. He lived with his family at Detroit, but his trade, his principal

¹ John Askin to John Askin Jr., (Detroit), 5 July 1795. *The John Askin Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Milo Quaife (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928), 550. See original document in: John Askin Papers, Box 3. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 3)

² Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, (Greenville), 20 September 1795. *Anthony Wayne: A Name in Arms, Soldier, Diplomat, Defender of Expansion Westward of a Nation. The Wayne-Knox-Pickering-McHenry Correspondence*. Richard C. Knopf, editor. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1959), 461

livelihood, was in shambles. His failures and struggles rippled outward and affected both his family and his partners. He was a British subject living in contested American lands, but that seemed irrelevant; the British army remained, the British merchants remained, and the British Crown began to incorporate Detroit into Canada. The violence of the American Revolution did not abate; the Americans pushed into the Ohio Valley and the Indians resisted. The control and sovereignty of western land became the central issue of the 1780s and 1790s. It was a dire time, where ambiguity, violence, and uncertainty reigned. Askin, his son, and several partners planned to purchase a large swatch of land south of Lake Erie from the Indians, force the United States to recognize the Indian right to sell their lands and hoped to become prosperous in the process.

The final chapter of this dissertation explores the ambiguity of the post-Revolutionary-War Great Lakes and Ohio Valley, and John Askin's efforts at land-speculation. It shows how his efforts reflected the larger struggles in the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes, and how his scheme represented a merchant's understanding of westward expansion. While no less exploitive than American efforts of conquest and speculation, John Askin's efforts represent a unique positioning of Indian interests within a matrix of imperial and national contestation, which can be tied to his experiences as a fur trader. By acknowledging that the Indians had the right to sell land to individuals, John Askin hoped to profit from land speculation, but he also assumed that Indian peoples would fare better under a British regime, where they had been better, albeit unevenly, protected from the encroachment of settlers. John Askin's attitudes reflected the post-Revolutionary British imperial and mercantile exertions to protect the fur trade

and the Indian peoples connected to those pursuits. These actions evolved within a context of regional uncertainty as many British politicians, generals, and merchants “predicted that the [new American] republic inevitably would collapse into anarchy and civil war.”³ Several influential British merchants lobbied for an Indian buffer state between the United States and British Canada. Land speculation also represents John Askin’s last major business venture. While he would live until 1815, another twenty years, he chose to remain outside of the political events that would pit the United States and Great Britain against each other.

This chapter relies on John Askin’s own written record to provide a clear context for his life and his land investments in the post-Revolutionary Ohio valley and the Great Lakes between 1783 and 1795. Much of this information comes predominately from John Askin himself. His collected correspondence with his partners, Isaac Todd and James McGill, his son, John Askin Jr., and his other colleagues and investors, such as Alexander Henry, proved instrumental in reconstructing his post-Michilimackinac trade, debts, and his speculation efforts. Moreover, the unpublished material related to the Cuyahoga Purchase, such as the large hand drawn maps at the Burton Historical Collections, offer an interesting window into the Indian peoples who sold their lands to Askin. To understand the United States’ conception of the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes, Indian peoples, and British efforts during this period, this chapter employs the collected correspondence of important American officials -- men such as Arthur St. Clair, Anthony Wayne, Timothy Pickering, and Henry Knox. In addition, *The American*

³ Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies*. (New York: Knopf, 2010), 5

State Papers, particularly the Indian volume, provide important insights into eighteenth-century treaty negotiations. For example, both the diary of John Askin Jr. and the treaty minutes recorded by the United States at the Treaty of Greenville offer insight into the perspectives of the Indian negotiators and translators.⁴ These documents provide an overview of western expansion that underscores the multi-ethnic and multi-imperial contestation of the trans-Appalachian west.

Since Lawrence H. Gipson's seminal multi-volume study, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution*, which labeled the Ohio Valley as a "zone of international friction," the historiography of the region has focused predominantly on imperial and violent contestations over its landscape.⁵ With the ethnohistorical approach of the 1980s and 1990s, scholars, like Michael N. McConnell and Richard White, have depicted Indian, French, and British communities in the Ohio Valley that were socially, culturally, economically and politically diverse and showed how they often shaped the contours and processes of Euro-American empire.⁶ In the late 1990s, historian Eric Hinderaker, building on this earlier literature, presented a portrait of the Ohio Valley, where colonialism took the form of a "negotiated systems; [where]

⁴ See: *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 9 vols. (Greenville: Southern Historical Press, 1994). John Askin Jr.'s participation in the Treaty of Greenville recalls the actions of important cross-cultural negotiators like Andrew Montour and Alexander McKee; men whose unique knowledge of Indian and Euro-American protocols allowed them to influence important decisions and events. Moreover, their presence at treaty negotiations often spoke to the ambiguity of frontier relationships.

⁵ See: Lawrence Henry Gipson. *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, vol. 1 – 15. (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1936 – 1970)

⁶ See: Michael N. McConnell. *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and its Peoples, 1724 – 1774*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992)

individuals [can] shape, challenge, or resist [it] in many ways.”⁷ The individual agency of French, Indian, and British hunters, traders, merchants, agents and soldiers proved transformative to the nature of empire in the Ohio Valley from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. To Hinderaker, the central tension of the French and British Empires revolved around their constant struggle and inability to control their subjects and to shape circumstances on the ground to meet imperial needs. However, in the post-revolutionary Ohio Valley of the 1780s and 1790s, when settlers and speculators, freed from even the minimal British restraints like the Proclamation of 1763, flooded into the Ohio Valley in pursuit of land, and thereby displaced Indian peoples. The weak and fragile United States could do little to stem the tide and the circumstances suggest that in the Ohio Valley, land, empire, disorder, and violence were closely linked.

For example, in a recent monograph entitled *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier*, historian Patrick Griffin pushes this historiography to its logical and somewhat problematic extreme by casting the revolutionary frontier as somewhat akin to Thomas Hobbes’ “state of nature,” where war existed between man and man unfettered by the constraints of civilization.⁸ Between 1763 and 1794, white settlers and their Indian counterparts lived lives defined by violence and uncertainty, as each side struggled to maintain mastery of this land. In 1763, the proclamation line failed to hinder western expansion and the British Empire’s inability to maintain its boundaries adequately signaled weakness to Indian and settler, especially as North

⁷ Eric Hinderaker. *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673 – 1800*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi.

⁸ See: Patrick Griffin. *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007)

America devolved into revolutionary violence. After the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the violence continued unabated as a weak United States struggled with internal and external disruptions such as an inefficient federal government, tax controversies, and state rivalries. By 1794, western white settlers and the nascent United States established an “American Leviathan” or a national identity based on western expansion and institutionalized Indian hatred. To ensure their security and prosperity, white settlers lent their support to the United States, which in turn promised military protection against Indian violence. Unlike Eric Hinderaker, Patrick Griffin shows the United States and its settlers working in collusion as they dispossessed the multi-cultural communities of the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes.

John Askin’s post-Revolutionary experience at British Detroit offers an interesting perspective on the imperial contestation that plagued the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes following the American Revolution. Alongside other identifiable French, British, and Spanish land speculators, John Askin’s activities provide an alternative avenue from which to view western expansion and the early history of the United States. In fact, Askin and his partners provide a complex narrative of western expansion; one that suggests the multiplicity of land speculation proposals on both sides of the border. This is not to suggest that British, French, or Spanish designs on Indian lands were less exploitive to Indian peoples, but speaks to the kaleidoscopic interests that developed from individual initiatives.

Following his exile from Michilimackinac in 1780, John Askin struggled in chronic debt to his Montreal partners, developed an unprofitable fur trade partnership in the Wabash River valley, and most importantly, invested heavily in land schemes, much to

the chagrin of his colleagues. John Askin positioned himself to compete with national designs of United States expansion, which led him to the Ohio Valley. In 1783, negotiators from Great Britain and the United States met in Paris to draft a treaty that would end the American Revolution. George Washington's victory at Yorktown in 1780 and the endless and costly stalemate outside of New York City between the Americans and British armies led to the collapse of the Lord North's ministry, which had prosecuted the war since 1775. Afterwards, a short-lived coalition government in Britain formally signed the Treaty of Paris and the following year, the United States, organized under the Articles of Confederacy, debated and ratified the treaty as well; the war ended, but confusion remained.⁹ Great Britain agreed to relinquish its authority over its thirteen Atlantic seaboard colonies and even acknowledged the United States' claims over all of the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River.¹⁰ But as historian Alan Taylor points out, British officials instantly regretted the treaty's new boundary through the Great Lakes as too generous to the United States and "detrimental to Canadian security" and sought ways to push the boundary further south.¹¹ The Americans frequently pointed to the exploits of George Rogers Clark to justify their claims to the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes. In the post war landscape,

⁹ See: Colin G. Calloway. *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Calloway explores the implications of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, where imperial negotiations in Paris had drastic and important consequences for the interior North America. The effects of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 can be understood similarly.

¹⁰ See the text of The Treaty of Paris: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Treaty of Paris, September 30, 1783," Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/paris.asp (accessed May 30, 2010)

¹¹ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 15

the treaty recognized the Mississippi River as the new border with the Spanish Empire to the west. Moreover, to the north, the boundary with British Canada followed the St. Lawrence River eastward through Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, up the Detroit River to Lake Huron, through the straits of Ste. Saint Marie to Lake Superior, where it ended at the headwaters of the Mississippi River. On paper, the United States became one of the largest nations in the world, but in reality, it remained weak and fractious.

Several years after the treaty signing, Thomas Jefferson, the vice president of the United States, wrote to Benjamin Franklin, one of the principal architects of the French and American alliance during the American Revolution and the peace proceedings, to inquire about the map they used to negotiate the Treaty of Paris.¹²

Franklin replied that, "I now can assure you that I am perfectly clear in the Remembrance that the Map we used in tracing the Boundary was brought to the Treaty by the Commissioners from England, and that it was the same that was published by Mitchell above 20 years before."¹³ Entitled *A Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*, John Mitchell's map, published in 1755, proved to be one of the most influential and enduring British representations of North America.¹⁴ For fifty years after its initial printing, the map was published, republished, and plagiarized on numerous

¹² Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Franklin, (New York), 31 March 1790. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 16. Julian P. Boyd, editor. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 283

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Franklin, (New York), 31 March 1790. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 283

¹⁴ John Mitchell. *A Map of the British and French dominions in North America, with the roads, distances, limits, and extent of the settlements, humbly inscribed to the Right Honourable the Earl of Halifax, and the other Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners for Trade & Plantations, by their Lordships most obliged and very humble servant, Jno. Mitchell. Tho: Kitchin, sculp.* Second impression, 1st edition. (London: Sold by And: Millar, 1755). (Hereafter cited as Mitchell's Map)

occasions; it played an important role during the Seven Years' War, the drafting of the Quebec Act in 1774, and in debates during the Treaty of Paris.¹⁵ The chief British negotiator and a merchant familiar with North America, Richard Oswald, used Mitchell's map extensively during the treaty negotiations; thick red boundary lines and his tightly drawn annotations covered the map before he gave it to King George III for the his perusal.¹⁶ As these men poured over Mitchell's map and used it to carve up North America, they ignored its origin, its importance, and its ideological implications.

To John Mitchell, a Virginian born in 1711, France "pretend[ed] to claim such a vast extent of [North America]" "merely by means of a parcel of strolling Indian traders" who "live[d] a lawless life among the savages, without any settled abode, or habitation."¹⁷ Mitchell resolved to establish Great Britain's claim to the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes by mapping the French out of North America. It took him five years of steady and fraught work, between 1750 and 1755, to produce his map, but what he achieved was an imperially expansive vision of Britain's North American domain, which

¹⁵ For a list of the map's involvement in international affairs, see: United States. *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*. (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1931).

¹⁶ See the following articles: J. P. D. Dunbabin. "Red Lines on Maps: The Impact of Cartographical Errors on the Border between the United States and British North America, 1782 – 1842." *Imago Mundi* 40 (1998): 105 – 125; Samuel Flagg Bemis. "Jay's Treaty and the Northwest Boundary Gap." *The American Historical Review* 27 (1922): 465-484. Lawrence Martin and Samuel Flagg Bemis, "Franklin's Red-Line Map Was a Mitchell," *The New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 105-111; Matthew H. Edney. "John Mitchell's Map of North America: A Study of the Use and Publication of Official Maps in Eighteenth-Century Britain." *Imago Mundi*, 60 (2008): 63 – 85; Susan Martha Reed. "British Cartography of the Mississippi Valley in the Eighteenth Century." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 2 (1915), 213 – 224

¹⁷ John Mitchell. *The Contest in America between Great Britain and France with its Consequences and Importance*. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1965), 200 – 201

spread from the Atlantic Ocean and pushed deeply into the continent's interior.¹⁸

Through creative labeling, Mitchell diminished Indian claims when it did not benefit the British, and he accentuated those that did. For example, Mitchell designated "Iroquois" lands as running down the north spine of the Appalachian Mountains.¹⁹ Likewise, from the forks of the Mississippi River and the Ohio Valley, through Canada to Lake Nipissing, in long thick black text, he labeled the land "Six Nations."²⁰ Likewise, in the Illinois country, Mitchell writes, "The Six Nations have extended their Territories to the River Illinois, ever since the Year 1672, when they subdued and were incorporated with the Antient Chaouanons, the Native Proprietors of these Countries, and the River Ohio: Besides which they likewise claim a Right of Conquest over the Illinois, and all the Missisipi [sic] as far as they extend."²¹ Through sweeping labels and well-placed subscripts, John Mitchell used the violent history of the Iroquois Confederacy and its "conquest" by Great Britain to cartographically map the French out of the Ohio valley and Great Lakes, to subjugate local Indian populations, and to claim the entire region to the Mississippi as Britain's own.

It seems fitting that the boundaries of the United States were first articulated using John Mitchell's map; his worked created a simplified and self-referential caricature of the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes that played into the United States' territorial and

¹⁸ See: Mitchell's Map

¹⁹ See: Mitchell's Map

²⁰ See: Mitchell's Map

²¹ See: Mitchell's Map

imperial presumptions, but reveals a flaw inherent in Great Britain's and the United States' visions of North America. Land, and the control of land, played an important role for both Mitchell and the United States in their vision of North America. However, during the Treaty of Paris negotiations in 1783, neither Great Britain nor the United States took into account the aspirations, desires, and politics of the numerous Indian nations that controlled and defined these regions. While the United States claimed sovereignty over a large swatch of North America, the Americans lacked the power, organization, and economics in the early 1780s to impose its laws and policies over the territory.²²

However, the United States took its first steps toward exercising control over its western domains with the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784, which forced the Iroquois, internally divided by the American Revolution, to relinquish their claims to the lands of the Ohio and established reservations for them in upstate New York and Pennsylvania.²³

However, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix was far from definitive; few of the Indian nations, who lived in the Ohio lands that the United States claimed and that were relinquished by the treaty, attended or participated in the council.²⁴ These negotiations angered those Indians living within the treaty borders and failed to secure a lasting peace. The Indians quickly repudiated the treaty, but it served, as one historian noted, to “set the tone” for the treaties that would come after, i.e. sparsely attended councils intent on promoting

²² Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 417

²³ Wiley Sword. *President Washington's Indian War: The Struggle for the Old Northwest, 1790 – 1795*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 23 – 25

²⁴ Sword, *President Washington's Indian War*, 23 - 25

and establishing United States sovereignty at the expensive of Indian lands and independence.²⁵

Collectively, the treaties of Fort Stanwix (1784), Fort McIntosh (1784), and Fort Finney (1786) created a “boundary line” on the Muskingum River between the United States and the western Indian nations, but the often-dubious large-scale land cessions that followed these treaties accomplished little more than alienating and frustrating the Indians, rather than appeasing them.²⁶ The Muskingum River was further west; the Indians demanded the border conform to the Ohio River. These treaties led to open hostility. For example, the Indians of the Western Confederacy, a loose coalition of tribes from the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley, understood the implications of these imperial cartographic processes. In December of 1786, the Confederacy gave a speech at Detroit where they begged the United States to “prevent...surveyors and other people from coming upon our side [of] the Ohio River.”²⁷ Historian Richard White notes that the United States’ claims to these lands were rather illusionary, and lacked the state power or structure to implement them forcefully.²⁸ As one of several powers competing for the region, the United States soon “launched into ... a confrontation with the western

²⁵ Eric Hinderaker. *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673 – 1800*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 232 – 236

²⁶ Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*, 232

²⁷ Speech of the United Indian Nations, at their Confederate Council, held near the mouth of the Detroit River, 28 November – 13 December 1786. *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* 1: 8 – 9

²⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 417

Indian confederation and the British.”²⁹ Adding fuel to the fire, the United States could neither stop nor deter its own population from migrating into the Ohio Valley, which contributed to increased tension, violence, and murder on an already hostile borderland.³⁰ Kentuckian John Filson, traveling up the Ohio River to the Illinois country in 1785 witnessed the havoc and trouble American settlers would create in the mixed French and Indian community of St. Vincent; one morning he woke up and found a murdered man on his doorstep.³¹ Often, land speculations and settlers posed an even greater threat than the Indians did to the image of the United States’ authority and suzerainty. Squatters consciously ignored boundary lines, settled on un-ceded Indian land, and ignored political and military directives.

While the United States seemed unable to control its population, Great Britain was far from idle in their efforts to develop Canada and offered land as an alternative to American initiatives in the Great Lakes and Ohio valley. While outnumbered by nearly two hundred fifty to one by the Americans, the British Empire developed a Canadian strategy that sought to solidify Indian support and prey upon the weakness of the American Republic in the 1780s and 1790s.³² By re-affirming the processes of the French-Indian “middle-ground,” British commandants, Indian agents, and merchants throughout the contested regions continued the expensive gift giving, repairs, and

²⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 417

³⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 418

³¹ John Filson. “Two Journeys of John Filson.” Beverley W. Bond, Jr., editor. *The Mississippi Historical Review* 9 (1923): 322

³² Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 27

privileges that ensured Indian support and helped stymie American settlement and trade efforts.³³ “Playing for time,” as Alan Taylor writes, “the British waited to see if the United States would collapse, leaving the forts, the Indians, and the fur trade in the British orbit.”³⁴ Moreover, Great Britain pursued broader efforts to further destabilize the United States; they reinforced the Navigation Acts on their old colonies, which denied American merchants, ships, and sailors direct access to lucrative British ports and markets, particularly, the West Indies.³⁵ These efforts led to bankruptcy, depression, and political turmoil and strengthened Britain’s already dominant military and economic hold over the Atlantic. As the United States seemed to spiral towards chaos, Great Britain reformed the colony of Quebec, splitting it into two provinces: the Francophone Lower Canada of Montreal and Quebec, and the Anglophone Upper Canada further west. Highly subsidized by the Crown, British Canada served as a model of effective imperial governance: lower taxes; nominally free land; and little frontier violence.³⁶ Disaffected Americans flocked to Canada, even as they pushed into Indian held lands south of the border.

Widespread discontentment caused by American treaties and by the influx of American migrants led Indians of the western Great Lakes and the Iroquois to gather in British Detroit in 1786 to reject the treaties and land cessions, and to form a unified,

³³ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 27 - 28

³⁴ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 28

³⁵ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 32

³⁶ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 32 - 33

albeit shifting, front against the United States.³⁷ At various times, the confederacy consisted of Shawnee, Wyandot, Delaware, Munsee, Miami, Connoy, Nanticoke, Mahigan, Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, Cherokee, Creek, Sauk, Fox, Ojibwa, Six Nations, and the Seven Nations.³⁸ In the wake of the Detroit council, the United States and the Indian confederacy again tried to resolve their conflicts at the Treaty of Harmar, or Muskingum in 1789, but the negotiations, once again sparsely attended, resolved little but to re-confirm onerous American claims and re-establish the US-Indian border at the Muskingum River.³⁹ The Indians of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley ignored and repudiated these treaty negotiations; they raided and attacked military and civilian establishments throughout the trans-Appalachian west. Despite a tenuous unity, the Indian confederacy scored impressive victories against the splintered and nearly bankrupt United States in the late 1780s and early 1790s under the leadership of Miami war-chief Little Turtle and the Shawnee war-chief Blue Jacket. Their first victory came against General Josiah Harmar, an experienced officer of the American Revolution, at a battle along the Maumee River.⁴⁰ The following year, in 1791, the confederacy gave the United States one of its worst defeats at the Maumee River; General Arthur Sinclair,

³⁷ Speech of the United Indian Nations, at their Confederate Council, held near the mouth of the Detroit River, 28 November – 13 December 1786. *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* 1: 8 – 9.

³⁸ Helen Hornbeck Tanner. "The Glazie in 1792: A Composite Indian Community." *Ethnohistory* 25 (1978): 15 – 16

³⁹ Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*, 232 – 236

⁴⁰ Sword, *President Washington's Indian War*, 130

the governor of the Northwest Territory, lost more than six hundred soldiers at the hands of Little Turtle and Blue Jacket.⁴¹

Unlike the United States, which, during this period, transitioned from a relatively weak confederacy into a stronger and centralized federal republic, the western Indian confederacy that resisted American expansion “had neither an army, a treasury, nor any form of coercive central authority,” which hindered their ability to wage a long-term and effective war.⁴² However, the British Empire provided supplies, weapons, and support to Indian nations in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley.⁴³ Using the pretext of American debts to British merchants and the fate of Loyalist Americans and their property, Great Britain refused to abandon its western posts at Michilimackinac and Detroit. From these communities, British Indian agents like Alexander McKee, whose son, Thomas, married one of John Askin’s daughters, worked constantly to promote British and Indian relationships.⁴⁴ McKee, whose mother may have been Shawnee or a white captive of a borderland community, learned the customs, languages, and cultural protocols of the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes from a very early age. These qualities made him a perfect agent for British interests in the region as well as a respected and influential figure in the trans-Appalachian west. Working alongside men like Matthew Elliot and Simon Girty, all

⁴¹ Sword, *President Washington’s Indian War*, 200

⁴² White, *The Middle Ground*, 416

⁴³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 466 - 488

⁴⁴ For a short biography of Thomas McKee, see: John Clarke. “Thomas McKee.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. V; Larry L. Nelson. *A Man of Distinction Among Them: Alexander McKee and British-Indian Affairs along the Ohio Country Frontier, 1754 – 1799*. (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1999)

minor traders alienated by American settlers, they funneled British supplies into Indian communities, encouraged resistance to American settlers and soldiers, and even worked towards the creation of an Indian buffer-state in Great Lakes and Ohio Valley.⁴⁵ Treading a precarious path, Great Britain sought to encourage Indian resistance and thwart American designs without precipitating a war with the United States.

Tribal rivalries, differences of opinions, and conflicting agendas created tension among the members of the western Indian confederacy. For example, Joseph Brant, a chief of the Mohawks, played a pivotal role in the early history of the confederacy, but tried to make it “an extension of the Iroquois covenant chain,” which alienated many Indian communities in the Ohio Valley.⁴⁶ Over two decades of continuous violence sapped and strained the ability of the Indians to harvest crops, provide for themselves, or focus on the fur trade.⁴⁷ By the early 1790s, the Indian confederacy was weakened, but continued to pose an effective threat to American interest in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. After the victories over Harmar and St. Clair, the Indians of the western confederacy met in a Grand Council at a village complex called the Glaize, at the mouth of the Maumee and Auglaize Rivers in 1792, where they discussed the possibility of promoting their own boundary with the United States.⁴⁸ Pointing to the original Fort

⁴⁵ For a biography of Matthew Elliot, see: Reginald Horsman. *Matthew Elliot, British Indian Agent*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964). For a short biography of Simon Girty, see: Douglas Leighton. “Simon Girty.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. V

⁴⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 433

⁴⁷ White, *The Middle Ground*, 466 - 488

⁴⁸ Tanner, “The Glaize in 1792,” 15

Stanwix Treaty of 1768, the Council insisted on the Ohio River as a natural border between the United States, instead of the Muskingum River further west.⁴⁹ However, while the confederacy debated, the United States raised a new American army under the command of General Anthony Wayne to again invade Indian lands north of the Ohio River.⁵⁰ Buoyed by British supplies and foodstuffs along with expectations of British military support, the Indians prepared to repulse the invading United States army.

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, imperial contestation in the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes defined day-to-day life for the many Americans, British, and Indian inhabitants of these regions. The map created by John Mitchell, the negotiations at the Treaty of Paris in 1783, and the incoming swarms of American settlers altered the political, social, and economic landscape of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley in often concrete but personal ways. After John Askin left Michilimackinac the issues of sovereignty over land and participation in land speculation destabilized the Great Lakes fur trade. As the contest for the Ohio Valley became more acute in the early 1790s, John Askin formed a partnership with several important British merchants at Montreal and Detroit to purchase, claim, and develop a large swatch of land south of Lake Erie. His efforts placed his son, John Askin Jr., in the middle of the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the Treaty of Greenville, where Askin sought to alter American Indian policy.

⁴⁹ Tanner, "The Glaize in 1792," 15 - 16

⁵⁰ White, *The Middle Ground*, 466 - 488

When Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair ousted John Askin from his position as deputy commissar at Michilimackinac, destroyed his trade depots, and arrested his son-in-law in 1780, Askin had little choice but to remove south to the confines of Detroit. Despite Sinclair's apologies, Askin faced a difficult situation. He complained: "My situation is the most disagreeable I ever was in, added to my being out of business and living at great expense," but like after Pontiac's War, he pressed forward, and tried to forestall ruin.⁵¹ However, despite the setbacks of the American Revolution, Askin still belonged to the strongest empire in the world; its ships and vessels controlled the Atlantic, its soldiers and Indian allies kept the United States out of the Great Lakes and Ohio valley, and Canada seemed to prosper and strengthen, while the confederacy of Britain's colonies teetered towards dissolution. At Detroit in the mid-1780s, Askin, an original loyalist, whose ties to region extended back to its original occupation, watched hundreds of dispossessed colonials from the Atlantic colonies settle around the Detroit River.⁵² Throughout Upper Canada, the Crown built grain and timber mills; the Governor-General and Council provided free land, tools, and supplies to these new settlers, and they transformed the landscape.⁵³ Askin would have been hard-pressed to ignore the changes going on around him, or fail to appreciate British designs for the region. He had hope and acted accordingly.

⁵¹ John Askin to Nathaniel Day, (Montreal), 29 July 1780, MPHC 9: 551

⁵² Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 23 - 24

⁵³ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 23 - 24

In October of 1780, Askin formed a partnership with Robert Hamilton and Richard Cartwright at Fort Niagara to carry “on Trade at Niagara, Detroit, and other of the upper Posts.”⁵⁴ The Scotsman, Hamilton, and the American, Cartwright, represented a new generation in the fur-trade; both men entered the trade during the American Revolution in New York. It represented, for Askin, a shift from his upper Great Lakes trade back to the St. Lawrence River, like his earlier days, when he first arrived in North America. By 1783, John Askin was able to pull the strands of his disrupted trade back together to make a profit. Writing from Montreal, James McGill, one of Askin’s oldest colleagues, principal supplier and carrier of debt, announced that they received “a very handsome profit,” roughly two thousand pounds sterling, from “the different sales of Furrs” that Askin and his partners collected.⁵⁵ “We may now flatter ourselves,” McGill declared optimistically, “with things going on more smoothly in the future, & that we shall be more free from perplexity & anxiety than has been the case for two or three years past.”⁵⁶

While John Askin struggled in Detroit, his remaining kin and colleagues at Michilimackinac felt his absence at Michilimackinac acutely. After Sinclair’s dispute with De Peyster and Askin, John Baptiste Barthe found himself in the middle of an imperial

⁵⁴ Partnership between John Askin and Hamilton and Cartwright, (Niagara), 3 August 1781, *Askin Papers*, 1: 188. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁵⁵ Isaac Todd and James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 11 October 1784, *Askin Papers*, 1: 200 – 201. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁵⁶ Isaac Todd and James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 11 October 1784, *Askin Papers*, 1: 201. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

dispute that kept him from his trading depot and his responsibilities at Sault St. Marie.⁵⁷ Despite receiving a commission from Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster in the spring of 1780, Barthe had to wait more than a year before he returned to the post in May of 1781.⁵⁸ By then his partnership with John Askin began to unravel. One year later, a dispute over shipping freight costs arose between Barthe and Askin; Barthe claimed that Askin had overcharged him.⁵⁹ Moreover, bad investments, poor fur trade returns, and general mismanagement caused further strife between both men forcing them into arbitration. John Baptiste Barthe received roughly eighteen hundred pounds from Askin for overcharges, but the auditors found that Barthe still owed five thousand pounds to Askin, even after the deductions.⁶⁰ James McGill, no longer optimistic about Askin and his partners, wrote that Barthe owed McGill and Todd “very near to 70,000” pounds.⁶¹ McGill pleaded with Askin to press Barthe “to convert every thing into Returns” as “Houses & Lands can never produce much benefit to Merchants,” especially in light of the uncertainty caused by Indian resistance, the ineffectiveness of the United States,

⁵⁷ Financial Settlement between John Askin and Jean Baptiste Barthe, (Detroit), 19 June 1786, *Askin Papers*, 1: 250 – 251. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁵⁸ Major Arent Schuyler De Peyster to Captain Patrick Sinclair, (Michilimackinac), 26 May 1780. MPHC 9: 584; Deposition of Samuel Robertson (Quebec), 21 August 1780. MPHC 9: 626

⁵⁹ Financial Settlement between John Askin and Jean Baptiste Barthe, (Detroit), 19 June 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 250. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁶⁰ Financial Settlement between John Askin and Jean Baptiste Barthe, (Detroit), 19 June 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 250. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁶¹ James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 12 April 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 236. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

and Great Britain's refusal to leave the Great Lakes.⁶² Without Askin's diligent supervision and direction, McGill and Todd viewed Barthe as "unfortunate in having embarked in a business he was unequal to manage & having met also several untoward accidents in the prosecution of it."⁶³

After spending two years in Quebec after his arrest by Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair, Samuel Robertson, the husband of Askin's daughter, Catherine, and one of the most able ship-captains in the Great Lakes, died. Luckily for Askin, in 1785 Catherine married Robert Hamilton, Askin's new partner at Niagara. Likewise, John Askin's eldest daughter with Marie Archange Barthe, Therese, married Thomas McKee, a British military officer and the son of Alexander McKee, one of the most influential Indian agents in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley, in 1790. These two marriages again connected Askin to important figures and merchants. However, a third connection, one of the most important changes for Askin, was the increasing involvement of his oldest son in his trade and business. John Askin Jr., the son of his panise slave Manette, grew up between the Indian world of his mother and the Euro-American world of his father, where, at Michilimackinac, he acquired an intimate knowledge of the region's Indian languages and customs and received a French-style education at Montreal and Detroit.⁶⁴ Following several years of apprenticeship in the fur trade, John Jr. then

⁶² James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 12 April 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 236. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁶³ Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Detroit), 20 December 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 276. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁶⁴ John Askin to Thomas McMurry, (Michilimackinac), 28 April 1778, *Askin Papers* 1: 68 – 69. See original document in: John Askin's Letterbook, Box 22

collaborated with his father in his trade in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Askin wrote to Isaac Todd, who was in London, about the advantages of working with his son. “I foresee,” John Askin wrote, “greater Security ... having an Interested Person to Visit frequently those who are Trading out.”⁶⁵ The elderly Askin pointed towards his own “health” and noted that John Jr. “is perfectly Sober, honest, Industrious & Saving & now Married [and] is cured of the principal fault I Ever knew him to have.”⁶⁶ While still young in the 1790s, John Jr.’s privileged social French and British background and his intimate knowledge of the Great Lakes Indian communities made him an important individual to the British military and to Indians in the years to come.

At Detroit, John Askin responded to his misfortunes as he had after Pontiac’s Rebellion in the 1760s through forgiving creditors, arranging marriages, and locating new partners. His earlier trading partnerships and endeavors in the upper Great Lakes, eventually evolved in the North West Company, John Askin tried to recreate these earlier successes in the Ohio Valley and Illinois Country, which had been the dream of his late father-in-law, Charles Andre Barthe. Like all of Askin’s efforts, it was an ambitious undertaking. In 1786, Askin collaborated with several established British and French merchants at Detroit, and together, they formed and capitalized the Miami

⁶⁵ John Askin to Isaac Todd, (London) 9 July 1793, *Askin Papers* 1: 68 – 69. See original document in: John Askin, Box 2

⁶⁶ John Askin to Isaac Todd, (London) 9 July 1793, *Askin Papers* 1: 68 – 69. See original document in: John Askin, Box 2

Company with Isaac Todd and James McGill as their principal suppliers.⁶⁷ Askin provided roughly ten thousand pounds of borrowed money, and played a central role in the company's accounting and exchange process and outfitted the traders with merchandise.⁶⁸ The Miami Company hoped to monopolize the fur trade at the Maumee-Wabash River Valley in the Illinois Country and sent Frenchmen Paul Gamelin to Vincennes, Joseph Guibault to Sandusky, and Adhemar St. Martin to Miamitown as company traders.⁶⁹ However, almost as soon as the company began its operations, it had already begun to fail. The ongoing violent conflict between the United States and the Western Confederacy of Indians caused havoc throughout the Ohio Valley, which diminished the fur trade. At Montreal, James McGill wrote that he was "persuaded [that] deer Skins have sold badly & [he] fear[ed] Beavers & Otters" prices fell as well.⁷⁰ Likewise, the Frenchman Louis Lorimier, a minor agent of the company, complained of "The persistent menace of an influx of Americans...induces me to think of going elsewhere, and thus avoid the pillage they threaten to all engaged in the Indian

⁶⁷ Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Detroit), 20 December 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 274 – 275. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁶⁸ Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Detroit), 20 December 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 274 – 275. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁶⁹ See: Joseph Guibault to John Askin, (Detroit), 22 June 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 256 – 259; John Askin to Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Montreal), 24 June 1786. *Askin Papers* 1: 254. See original documents in: John Askin, Box 1

⁷⁰ James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 12 April 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 236. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

trade.”⁷¹ By 1789, just three years later, the Miami Company collapsed; the partners divided the merchandise, furs, and debts; Askin received the company’s power of attorney, and he went further into debt.⁷²

By the time John Askin helped finance the Miami Company, his principal creditors and long time partners, Isaac Todd and James McGill were already worried about his financial situation. Writing to Askin, in 1786, they begged him to “leave no stone unturned in order to make remittances” as they had also suffered from the American Revolution and post-war uncertainty.⁷³ Askin owed roughly twenty four thousand pounds for rum and other merchandise he had purchased since 1784.⁷⁴ He hoped the Miami Company would find success, but it did not. By the early 1790s, Askin’s debt remained around twenty thousand pounds; Todd and McGill, fearful that its interest might further cripple Askin, sought to give the Detroit merchant “a fair chance” of paying it off by asking only for a five thousand pound payment.⁷⁵ Then they would take the remaining sum off Askin’s books for five years and without interest. With

⁷¹ Louis Lorimier to John Askin, (Detroit), 24 November 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 271. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁷² See: Divisions of Debts of the Miami Company, (Detroit), 9 September 1789, *Askin Papers* 1: 325 – 330; Power of Attorney from the Miami Company to John Askin, (Detroit), 22 September 1789, *Askin Papers* 1: 331 – 332; Assignment of Claims of the Miami Company, (Detroit), 22 September 1789, *Askin Papers* 1: 332 – 334. See original documents in: John Askin, Box 2

⁷³ James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 12 April 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 235. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁷⁴ Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Detroit), 20 December 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 274. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁷⁵ James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 24 January 1792, *Askin Papers* 1: 402. See original document in: John Askin, Box 2

several new ventures opening up for Askin – the supplying of the Michilimackinac military garrison, his reentry into Great Lakes shipping, and the trade with the Western Confederacy at Fort Miami and the Wabash River Valley – he wrote to his clerk and partner, William Robertson, that a “favorable Change” in his affairs was due.⁷⁶ But by 1794, after years of chronic debt and persistent shortfalls, James McGill wrote Askin: “If therefore you have for us that regard & friendship which I never doubted...prevent us from being the greatest Sufferers that can probably be instanced in Trade to your part of the world.”⁷⁷ The forbearance of Todd and McGill was a testament to their opinion of their old colleague; Askin hoped to repay their patience through his extensive land speculations.

A faltering trade and a substantial debt staggered John Askin, but since he relocated from Michilimackinac in 1780, the British merchant had been quietly purchasing foreclosed lands. In fact, his movement towards land speculator coincided with British attempts to politically integrate Detroit into Upper Canada. At Detroit, John Askin became a Justice of the Peace, a church vestryman, and a militia officer. Increased political organization helped routinize land deeds, sales, and disputes; this encouraged British and French speculation despite United States’ claims and treaty provisions. The ambiguity of ownership proved encouraging. Askin purchased lands around Detroit at auction. Three years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, John

⁷⁶ See: John Askin to William Robertson, (Detroit), 24 June 1793, *Askin Papers* 1: 475. See original document in: John Askin, Box 2

⁷⁷ James McGill to John Askin, (Detroit), 10 January 1794, *Askin Papers* 1: 487. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

Askin had “the large Sum of £8000 [York Currency] real property.”⁷⁸ This figure shocked James McGill. He wrote to Askin that holdings were “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.”⁷⁹ However, through land speculation, John Askin hoped to recapture his former wealth and dominance. During the mid-1790s, once the United States suffered serious defeat at the hands of the Indians, Askin’s land speculation efforts intensified. He acquired a tract of land from Richard Cornwall on Belle River, a foreclosed farm by St. Anne’s Paris, and property on the River Raisin.⁸⁰ To the south, in the Ohio Valley, John Askin purchased Presqu Isle in the Maumee River.⁸¹ He took great pains to ensure the Indians sold the lands legally. By 1795, the scope and ambition of Askin grew just as Jay’s Treaty and the Battle of Fallen Timbers threatened his investments in the Ohio Valley.

As John Askin’s speculation continued throughout the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley, the United States and Great Britain were desperate to avoid conflict and open warfare. Since 1783, Great Britain continuously defied the Treaty of Paris by

⁷⁸ Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Detroit), 20 December 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 275 – 276. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁷⁹ Isaac Todd and James McGill, (Detroit), 20 December 1786, *Askin Papers* 1: 276. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

⁸⁰ Grant of Land to Richard Cornwall at Belle River, (Detroit), 28 December 1780, *Askin Papers* 1: 178 – 180; Sale of Etienne Laviolette’s Land, (Detroit), 25 March 1791, *Askin Papers* 1: 370 – 372; Deed of Sale of Joseph Cadet’s Farm, (Detroit), 1 November 1790, *Askin Papers* 1: 368 – 369. See original documents in: John Askin, Boxes 1 and 2

⁸¹ See: Grant of Presqu’ Isle to Joseph Réaume, (Detroit), 28 July 1780, *Askin Papers* 1: 172 – 173. See original document in: John Askin, Box 1

maintaining its hold on western military posts within the borders of the United States. Moreover, in the eyes of many Americans, the British at Detroit and Michilimackinac were responsible for the violence and warfare caused by Indian resistance to United States' expansion. Furthermore, the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, General John Graves Simcoe, encouraged Indian resistance and American animosity by building Fort Miami on the Maumee River in 1794, breaking the Treaty of Paris. However, following the French Revolution, and the continental warfare that ensued, Great Britain became increasingly involved in its struggle with France during the late 1780s and early 1790s. Ignoring the neutral United States' stance, the British Navy seized American ships heading to France; they confiscated the vessels, goods, and impressed American sailors into British service. Outraged by this practice and its dismissal of American sovereignty, the United States embargoed Great Britain, and open warfare seemed likely. George Washington and the Federalists sent John Jay, the Chief Justice of the United States to London to negotiate a treaty with Great Britain in 1794. Jay's Treaty called for the establishment of a new, less-vague boundary line with Canada, the repayment of American and British debts, and for Great Britain to surrender the forts it held in the Ohio River Valley and the Great Lakes by June of 1796.⁸²

The Battle of Fallen Timbers underscored the changes in Jay's Treaty. In 1792, General Anthony Wayne raised an army that defeated the Western Indian Confederacy.⁸³ On August 20, the two forces met in a battle that lasted roughly an

⁸² For the text of Jay's Treaty, see: "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Jay Treaty, 19 November 19 1794," Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jay.asp (accessed May 30, 2010)

⁸³ Sword, *President Washington's Indian War*, 256 – 257

hour and resulted in only a handful of casualties, but the American victory proved decisive. Fleeing from the Americans, the Indians sought refuge and protection at Fort Miami, but the British soldiers refused to open the gates.⁸⁴ Betrayed by the British and their false promises; impoverished by decades of constant warfare; and desirous for peace, the nations of the Confederacy sought to negotiate with the United States. Alongside Jay's Treaty, the Battle of Fallen Timbers seemed to clear away the obstacles standing in the way of United States' control over the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes. Askin, who spent the last decade collecting land, saw his investments slipping away.

In the disastrous aftermath of the Battle of Fallen Timbers and controversial announcement of Jay's Treaty in 1794, John Askin worked feverishly to protect his investments. In 1795, John Askin and a consortium of Detroit and Montreal merchants: Patrick McNiff, John Askwith, Israel Ruland, and Alexander Henry planned an extensive land deal with "the Chiefs and principals leaders of the Ottawa and other nations of Indians" in "the Western District Ceded to the American States."⁸⁵ The British merchants purchased a large swatch of land south of Lake Erie centered on the Cuyahoga River. The partnership quickly decided that Patrick McNiff, John Askwith,

⁸⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 466 - 488

⁸⁵ A large portion of the documents related to John Askin's land speculation along the Cuyahoga River were published in Askin's collected correspondence, but the map created by the partnership can be found in Askin's archive at the Burton Historical Collections housed at the Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. See: John Askin Manuscripts, Folder 9, 1796. See, also: Syndicate for Promotion of Cuyahoga Purchase, (Detroit), 17 June 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 546. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

and Israel Roland, prominent Detroit merchants and traders, would go south and survey the land they purchased from the Ojibwe and Potawatomie and then would travel to the United States' treaty council at Greenville.⁸⁶ Once there, they were to press their claims to any one who would listen. As the wealthiest and most respected merchant, the partnership gave Alexander Henry, then fifty-six years old, their power of attorney and ordered him to New York City, where he would petition the United States' Congress to ratify their claims in the Ohio Valley.⁸⁷ John Askin remained in Detroit, where by chance, he oversaw the activity of his son, who was asked by "Several Indian Chiefs of the Chippewa and Ottawa Nation" to serve as their "faithfull Interpreter and friend."⁸⁸ John Askin saw this as an important opportunity; the Indians provided the partnership a way of validating their land claims, if all else failed. With a flurry of activity, Askin planned for his son to use his position to ensure that the Indians would confirm their purchase along the Cuyahoga River openly at the treaty council. They would insist on their right to sell their lands to whomever they chose, flaunting United States' policy, which constitutionally required Indians sell to the government and not individuals.

Before John Askin Jr. left Detroit with the Indians, he went to his father's house and John Askin advised his son to "use [his] Utmost Influence, not only with the Indians but also with all others...to Endeavors that the first article of the Treaty...Should be that

⁸⁶ Syndicate for Promotion of Cuyahoga Purchase, (Detroit), 17 June 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 546. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁸⁷ Power of Attorney to Alexander Henry, (Detroit), 8 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 556 – 558. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁸⁸ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 560. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3.

[the Indians] are sole Masters of their Lands.”⁸⁹ Without this guarantee, he told John Jr., there would be no peace between the Indians and the United States, and no prosperity either.⁹⁰ With the decline of the fur trade at Detroit and Michilimackinac in the 1780s and 1790s, Askin believed that land sales would be a long-term source of wealth for the Indians without which they would be forced into persistent poverty and desperation.⁹¹ However, if the Americans bullied the Indians into alienating their lands and their right to sell to whomever, John Askin told his son to “produce your Claims and take the necessary steps to secure them” in open council.⁹² While “it [was] necessary to provide against the worst,” Askin stressed the importance of not betraying the Indians or their interests.⁹³ In other words, he ordered his son to walk a very tight rope: one that insisted on Indian rights, even if it led to continued war and violence with the United States, while ensuring that Indians were not betrayed or harmed by the partnerships’ activities. It was a testament to how much Askin trusted his son; if John Askin were younger, no doubt he would have gone himself.

⁸⁹ John Askin to John Askin Jr, (Detroit), 5 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 550. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3.

⁹⁰ John Askin to John Askin Jr, (Detroit), 5 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 550. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁹¹ John Askin to John Askin Jr, (Detroit), 5 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 550. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁹² John Askin to John Askin Jr, (Detroit), 5 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 551. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁹³ John Askin to John Askin Jr, (Detroit), 5 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 551. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

Beneath the advice Askin gave to his son existed a developed understanding of Indian sovereignty that arose from his experience as a fur trader and British subject, which differed markedly from competing American policies. The United States viewed Indian peoples in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley as conquered, and therefore, relinquished their claims to the lands they inhabited. However, since the failed policy of Jeffery Amherst in the 1760s, John Askin and many of his colleagues learned that cooperation and conformity to Indian cultural norms led to success in the fur trade. While relationships between the British and Indians were sometimes fraught, successful merchants like Askin appreciated the centrality of French and Indian peoples to the processes of trade and every day life. Dispossession gave way to cooperation. In a letter to Francis Vigo, an Italy-born American soldier and fur trader, John Askin came close to articulating a vision of land speculation that resonated with his understanding of his trade during the previous decades. Askin wrote that the land deals he made were between “one people and another,” and therefore, Indians had the right to sell to whomever “they favored.”⁹⁴ Perhaps, thinking about his ousting from Michilimackinac by Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair, the fifty-five year old merchant stated that “dealings free from compulsion” are “much more effective” when unshackled from “political interference.”⁹⁵ The implication of Askin’s view suggested that Indians would favor people in his position: British and French merchants who maintained close connections with Indian peoples, and who sought cooperation over conflict.

⁹⁴ John Askin to Major Vigo, (Detroit), 2 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 549. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁹⁵ John Askin to Major Vigo, (Detroit), 2 July 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 549. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

John Askin Jr. and his party of Indians left Detroit on July 2 and arrived at Fort Defiance on the Auglaize and Maumee Rivers nine days later. Travelling south into American held territory put John Jr. in an awkward situation; he fought as a militiaman alongside the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Moreover, as John Jr. related to Colonel Richard England, the British commander of Fort Detroit, that an acquaintance of John Askin Sr. left Detroit before his party and spread the news of his involvement in the battle of Fallen Timbers. At Defiance, John Jr. met with a “cool reception” from the American military commander and almost turned back to Detroit, out of fear his efforts would already be stymied.⁹⁶ However, once the Americans found that “the Indians would follow [John Jr.],” they urged the young translator and his party forward.⁹⁷ They left the community with Blue Jacket, one of the principal leaders of the Indians’ resistance to the United States expansion, and traveled south to Fort Adams, then to Fort Recovery, and after three long weeks of marching, they arrived at Greenville on July 21, where the council had been in session for over a month. Wayne’s scribe noted their arrival: “In the evening of this day, Blue Jacket, and thirteen Shawanese, and Masass with twenty Chippewa arrived, and were received in the council house.”⁹⁸ Once settled and greeted by General Anthony Wayne, the Indians, interpreted for by Askin, began to spell out their grievances and understandings.

⁹⁶ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 561. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁹⁷ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 561. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

⁹⁸ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 561. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

Of John Askin Jr.'s party, Omissas, or Masass, a Chippewa chief, rose first to speak after Blue Jacket, the most prominent Indian leader there, had spoken. "The Ottawa, Pattawatomies, & his nation" had chosen him to speak, Omissas said. "Should any one say that they advised us to come to this Council or say they brought us to this place, it's false."⁹⁹ He paused. "We came of our own free will and have brought this English man...with us to repeat to us what you say in Council and that we may be instructed with everything that will be said to us, and not be so ignorant of this Council."¹⁰⁰ In the translation, the American scribe who recorded the council minutes called John Jr. French; identity at treaty meetings was often shifting and malleable.¹⁰¹ Councils were nebulous events where ambiguity and opportunity often reigned. After Omissas finished, the meeting ended. The Indian chief had shown a keen understanding of how treaty councils worked. He had been at the Treaty of Fort Harmar in 1789, where he witnessed, first hand, the duplicity of the United States when it came to Indian lands. During that council, General Arthur St. Clair threatened violence, and when that failed, he bribed the Indians who showed up to sign the document. It was a disaster for both sides. At Greenville, Omissas choose John Jr. to be better prepared; the young Englishman proved more than adequate to interpret for them. However,

⁹⁹ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 562. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰⁰ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 562. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰¹ See: "Minutes of a Treaty with the tribes of Indians called the Wyandots, Delwares, Shawanese, Ottwas, Chippewas, Pattawatamies, Miamies, Eel Rivers, Kicapooos, Piankeshaws, and Kaskaskias, begun at Greenville, on the 16th day of June, and ended on the 10th day of August, 1795." *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* 1: 568. In John Jr.'s telling, Omissas refers to him as: English, while in the American rendering John Jr. becomes "French."

there is little to suggest that Omissas and his brethren knew about John Jr.'s own ulterior motive.

The Americans suspected John Askin Jr., even if his Indian brethren did not. On July 23, two days after the first council meeting, a colleague informed John Jr. that if he tried to take part in the council American guards would bar his entrance.¹⁰² However, this did not stop John Jr. from being told about the treaty negotiations from other sources, but more importantly, he could still advise the Indians to resist American demands. The situation became increasingly tense; a week after John Jr. arrived in Greenville, he petitioned General Wayne, on July 28, for a "pass to return home" to Detroit.¹⁰³ The following day, he met with Wayne at his headquarters, where the General presented him with an opened letter; it was from his father.¹⁰⁴ He wrote to remind his son of the conversation they had before John Jr. left Detroit. Wayne asked John Jr., "If [he] knew the hand writing?"¹⁰⁵ John Jr. affirmed that the letter was from his father. It told Wayne all about the partnership, their land speculation, and John Jr.'s efforts to subvert American aims. Wayne told the British interpreter that he "looked

¹⁰² John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 563. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰³ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 564. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰⁴ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 564. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰⁵ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 564. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

upon [him] as a Spy & that [he] deserved death.”¹⁰⁶ Before being arrested, searched, and watching the partnership’s land deeds confiscated, John Jr. replied that he “knew of no Spies in time of Peace.”¹⁰⁷ The Americans took him to Fort Jefferson, several miles away from Greenville, where they kept him under guard for the remaining days of the conference.

Between July 29 and August 7, John Askin Jr. saw no one but his guards, and outside of his prison cell, the treaty negotiations continued. John Jr. wrote to Colonel Richard England that, “The Indians who went out with me would neither consent to ratify the [previous] Muskingum Treaty” until he was “some days in Confinement.”¹⁰⁸ John Jr. stated his belief that the Indians would not have ratified the treaty “had I not been confined and deprived of giving them advice.”¹⁰⁹ They were intimidated, John Jr. informed the commandant of Fort Detroit. “General [Anthony Wayne] sa[id] he would drive them back into the Sea if They did not acquiesce.”¹¹⁰ Tired, war torn, and disillusioned with the British and their false promises, the Indians of the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley acknowledged American claims, if only temporarily. They signed

¹⁰⁶ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 564. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰⁷ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 564. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰⁸ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 565. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹⁰⁹ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 565. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹¹⁰ John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 565. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

the Treaty of Greenville, which confirmed older treaties, and forced the Indians to relinquish what would become the state of Ohio, parts of Indiana, Chicago, and Fort Detroit for roughly twenty thousand dollars in cash and goods on August 2, 1795.¹¹¹ The day before, the Indians that John Askin Jr. traveled with delivered to General Wayne a “white Belt of Wampum” and demanded his release, and the General promised to do so in two days, but then waited for more than a week.¹¹² Wayne effectively silenced John Jr., and forestalled his father’s land speculation efforts, but more importantly, he ended British involvement in western expansion.

More than a month after the Treaty of Greenville, on September 20, 1795, General Anthony Wayne sat down to write the American Secretary of War, Timothy Pickering. He complained that “every obstacle that cou’d be possibly thrown in the way by the British Indian department to prevent a treaty taking place upon any principle whatsoever was attempted.”¹¹³ Wayne must have thought about Alexander McKee, a British Indian agent, who, in one letter, the general once called the “principal stimulator of the War now existing between the United States & the savages.”¹¹⁴ McKee had been one the most visible, outspoken, industrious, and able men in the British Indian

¹¹¹ See the text of The Treaty of Greenville: “The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: The Treaty of Greenville, 1795,” Yale University, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/greenvil.asp (accessed May 30, 2010)

¹¹² John Askin Jr. to Col. Richard England, (Detroit), 19 August 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 564. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹¹³ Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, (Greenville) 20 September 1795. *Anthony Wayne*, 461

¹¹⁴ Anthony Wayne to Henry Knox, (Grand Glaize) 28 August 1795. *Anthony Wayne*, 354

Department, ubiquitous at most Indian gatherings and councils. But in this particular letter, Wayne saved his ire for the “avaricious Land Jobbers [who] ... kept the Ottawas Wyandots & Putawatimes in the Vicinity of Detroit & Raisin river in a State of intoxication for many whilst purchasing their lands for the most trifling Consideration.”¹¹⁵ He named “Mr. Askin & Co” and “Baubee & Co.,” Askin’s French counterpart, as particularly egregious examples of land speculation.¹¹⁶ So egregious, in fact, that Wayne felt compelled to change the language of the Treaty of Greenville by inserting the word “Government” into several articles, so that only the United States had final authority to confirm or deny Indian land sales.¹¹⁷ He made these changes in an effort to free the Indians from coerced sales to the British merchants, but did not comment on the irony of his own colonial efforts.

However, what troubled General Anthony Wayne most was what made men like Alexander McKee and John Askin Jr. influential in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley; their relationship and rapport with Indian peoples. John Askin and John Jr., and “certain [other] influential Characters ... were employed to poison the minds of the Other Nations assembled at this place – advising them to insist upon the Absolute & inherent right of disposing of all of their Lands.”¹¹⁸ But the close partnerships established

¹¹⁵ Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, (Greenville) 20 September 1795, *Anthony Wayne*, 461

¹¹⁶ Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, (Greenville) 20 September 1795, *Anthony Wayne*, 461

¹¹⁷ Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, (Greenville) 20 September 1795, *Anthony Wayne*, 462

¹¹⁸ Anthony Wayne to Timothy Pickering, (Greenville) 20 September 1795. *Anthony Wayne*, 461

between Indian peoples and British agents, traders and merchants were far from poisonous, as Wayne suggests, rather they were rooted in the quotidian and daily lives of the social, economic, political, and familial fabric of the community. In other words, John Askin's efforts represented a unique positioning of Indian interests within a matrix of imperial and national contestation. Like the fur trade, John Askin articulated a vision of the post-Revolutionary Ohio Valley that privileged the face-to-face encounters that had made exchange possible. By acknowledging the Indians right to sell land to individuals, John Askin hoped to profit from his investments, but he also assumed that Indian peoples would be better under a British regime, where they had been protected from the encroachment of settlers, if only in limited ways.

Alexander Henry lamented that failing to make the Indians acknowledge their purchase in open council doomed their efforts completely. All told, Henry estimated they had lost a one million dollar investment; a huge sum for the indebted John Askin.¹¹⁹ Despite the Treaty of Greenville and Jay's Treaty, Askin continued trying to have his title to the Cuyahoga River lands confirmed. He notarized the document at Detroit in January of 1796, but it was too little avail. He even had his son travel to the land to build a house and live on the land, hoping it would establish a claim through upkeep, but that did not work either. Instead, he watched from Detroit as an American partnership called the Connecticut Land Company moved into the region, surveyed the land, and purchased its "ownership" from the regions' Indian peoples.¹²⁰ They followed

¹¹⁹ Alexander Henry to Askin, McNiff, Askwith, Roland, (Detroit), 7 October 1795. *Askin Papers* 1: 579. See original document in: John Askin, Box 3

¹²⁰ See: D. W. Meinig. *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 1: *Atlantic America, 1492 – 1800*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 355 - 357

the same pattern as Askin and his partners, but they had the military backing of the United States government to pursue their claims, something Askin sorely missed. On July 11, 1796, the British merchant stepped outside of his house, walked to the Detroit River, and watched the British Army, dressed in their neat crimson uniforms, cross into Canada, and surrender the city. Thirteen years after of the Treaty of Paris, the British abandoned Detroit, but not their designs on the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley; John Askin became a foreigner in a land where he had spent the vast majority of his life. In 1802, John Askin left Detroit; he moved across the river, where he established a farm called "Strabane," named after his ancestral Irish home.

CONCLUSION

ALEXANDER HENRY'S LAMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF JOHN ASKIN IN THE BRITISH GREAT LAKES

"It is not only him whom old Age deprives of friends. I must say that I experience every day the want of Old acquaintance. they are all Dead. There is only one alive in Montreal that was here when I came."¹

Alexander Henry to John Askin, May 9 1815

"Yes, dearest, afflicted Mother, no one can appreciate the weight of your sorrow more than we. You have lost the most beloved of husbands and we the tenderest of fathers. Our tears will not bring him back to us, and we must then submit to the will of Almighty God."²

Madelaine Askin to Marie Archange Barthe, November 1815

It was a warm spring day in May of 1815. The inland port of Montreal bustled with activity as ships and canoes traveled up and down the St. Lawrence River carrying furs, supplies, and other goods. The streets were busy and noisy. And early in the morning, one of the richest men in the community, Alexander Henry, seventy-six years old, sat down to write John Askin, his old friend and colleague. Henry was quite forlorn. In his letter, he wrote little about the fur trade, but mostly about old friends. After more than fifty years in the British Great Lakes fur trade, both had many friends in common. Henry informed Askin that Isaac Todd was in England, sojourning at the city of Bath, where "Mineral Waters" relieved his pains, and "if his leg gets better," Henry told Askin,

¹ Alexander Henry to John Askin (Sandwich), 9 May 1815. *The John Askin Papers*, vol. 2. Milo Quaife, editor. (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1931), 782. (Here after referred to as: *Askin Papers*). See unpublished documents in: John Askin Papers, Box 19. Burton Historical Special Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as: John Askin, Box 19)

² Madelaine Askin to Marie Archange Barthe (Sandwich), November 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 784. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

“[Todd] will return...as he has no friends in any other.”³ Todd must have been thinking about his old partner, James McGill, who passed away suddenly in 1814.⁴ With McGill’s death, all three men had lost a dear friend and Montreal lost one of its wealthiest denizens. “It is not only [Todd],” Henry lamented, “whom old Age deprives of friends.”⁵ He asked Askin, “what do you think of our Beaver Club which commenced in 1786?”⁶ The Beaver Club, formed in Montreal, hosted some of the most influential British and French traders and merchants in the Great Lakes.⁷ “Of 16 [original] member[s],” Henry told Askin, “I [am] the only one alive.”⁸ Both men had survived so much in their lives--the Seven Years’ War and Pontiac’s Rebellion, years in the fur trade, debt, prosperity, and the American Revolution--only to watch helplessly as they lost friends one by one and the once familiar world of the Great Lakes disintegrated.

In the 1810s, John Askin and Alexander Henry witnessed the renewed bloodshed between the United States and Great Britain; the latest reiteration of the

³ Alexander Henry to John Askin (Sandwich), 9 May 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 782. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

⁴ See: Isaac Todd to John Askin (Sandwich), 3 February 1814. *Askin Papers*, 2: 76 – 77. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

⁵ Alexander Henry to John Askin (Sandwich), 9 May 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 782. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

⁶ Alexander Henry to John Askin (Sandwich), 9 May 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 782. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

⁷ Alexander Henry to John Askin (Sandwich), 9 May 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 782. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19.

⁸ Alexander Henry to John Askin (Sandwich), 9 May 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 782. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

sixty-year imperial struggle for the region.⁹ For nearly three straight years, from 1812 to 1815, the United States warred with Great Britain and its Indian allies on the lands and lakes of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley.¹⁰ However, the violence quickly devolved into a stalemate. The United States invaded Lower Canada, but was quickly pushed back; Great Britain recaptured Detroit and Michilimackinac. The Americans invaded through Niagara and were again repelled. Battles fought across eastern North America were indecisive. Washington D.C., the republic's new capital, was burned, but the president and government escaped. After Great Britain and a coalition of European states deposed Napoleon in France, a large, battle-hardened British army arrived in the Gulf of Mexico intent on capturing the important port of New Orleans in 1814. They fought a small American army outside of the city, and suffered a tremendous defeat. It occurred two weeks after both combatants signed a treaty of peace at Ghent. The War of 1812 was a peculiar war; fought for many reasons – trade disputes and British impressments, Indian raids and western expansion – but resolved very few. However, the war had a profound effect on American and Canadian identity; it helped solidify the break that occurred during the American Revolution. Both combatants promised to return to *status quo antebellum*; Great Britain returned Detroit and Michilimackinac to the United States. Only the region's Indians, led by Tecumseh, lost. In the generation

⁹ See: *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754 – 1814*, edited by David Curtis Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001)

¹⁰ For a discussion of the War of 1812 in the Great Lakes, see: Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indian Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

after the war, the United States of America faced continued Indian resistance in establishing its authority in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley.

During the war, John Askin watched his sons and daughters participate, but he was far too old and too tired to take part. His eldest son, John Askin Jr., became an interpreter and a successful Indian leader for the British at Michilimackinac.¹¹ His oldest son with Marie Archange, Charles, fought with the British Army in Lower Canada.¹² His daughter Adelaide watched her husband, Elijah Brush, the American attorney general of the Northwest Territory, flee from Detroit for fear of the British army.¹³ However, the Askin family survived the war unscathed. In fact, they had suffered very little over the preceding twenty years. After 1802, Askin and his wife, Marie Archange, lived a comfortable, respectable, and settled life on his farm “Strabane” outside of Sandwich. Despite being on the British side of the Detroit River, Askin continued to carry on his business and trade among the Americans. He was well liked on both sides of the Detroit River. To satisfy his debts, John Askin relinquished his

¹¹ For a discussion of John Askin Jr. participation in the War of 1812, see: *Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, vol. 1 - 38. Lansing: The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, 1888 – 1912. The MPHSC deals with John Askin Jr.’s actions far better than John Askin’s archive and printed sources.

¹² For letters written to John Askin from the front by his son Charles, see: John Askin Papers, vol. 2, particularly pages 703 – 744, 750 – 772. Charles wrote letters to his father concerning some of the major battles he participated in from Detroit to Niagara as a British soldier. See, also: See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 17, 18, 19, 20. Also, John Askin’s archive at the National Archive in Ontario hosts a large collection of letters of Charles Askin, see: Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. John Askin Papers, 1771 – 1864.

¹³ See: Elijah Brush to John Askin (Sandwich), September 1812. *Askin Papers*, 2: 730. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 18

extensive land holdings to Isaac Todd and James McGill.¹⁴ They had never tried too hard to collect from Askin, their life long partner, colleague, and dear friend. He served as a colonel of the local militia and as a justice of the peace; his tenures were largely uneventful and mostly routine.¹⁵ After a lifetime of heavy involvement in the fur trade, traveling from one community of the Great Lakes to another, Askin spent the final years of his life dedicated to his farm, his small land trade, and his land deals.¹⁶ He was content, although not quite disengaged, from the hustle and bustle of the fur trade, which had completely defined his life.

Not long after Alexander Henry wrote his melancholy letter, John Askin passed away. Henry lived for another ten years; he was fated to live longer than his friends. As a testament to the close-knit nature of John Askin's family, his daughter Madelaine, born from his relationship with Manette, wrote to her adoptive mother to offer condolences. "No one can appreciate the weight of your sorrow more than we," Madelaine wrote to Marie.¹⁷ "You have lost the most beloved of husbands and we the tenderest of fathers. Our tears will not bring him back to us, and we must then submit to

¹⁴ See: James McGill to John Askin (Sandwich), 6 January 1811. *Askin Papers*, 2: 667. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 18

¹⁵ See: John Askin to Colonel De Peyster (Scotland), 30 August 1805. *Askin Papers*, 2: 479. Askin writes that once a year, on the King's Birthday, he puts on his "Cloths & as Colonel Commands the Militia...and make them Fire in Honor to the best of Kings."

¹⁶ For a discussion of John Askin's post-United States late speculation, see: John Clarke. *Land, Power and Economics on the Frontier of Upper Canada*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Madelaine Askin to Marie Archange Barthe (Sandwich), November 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 784. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

the will of Almighty God.”¹⁸ The family felt the loss intensely. According to his will, notarized at Sandwich, Askin wished to be buried simply, “avoiding all unnecessary expenses and vain pomp.”¹⁹ He made his wife “sole executrix” of his vast estate and properties “for her use and at her entire disposal,” and upon her death it would be “equally divided between the whole of [his] children without exception,” and if they should die, then equally among his grand children.²⁰ In the end, after decades of struggle, Askin ensured a comfortable life for his wife and children. They married, grew old, and passed away; the Askin family became firmly ensconced in Canadian society; they served as soldiers, authors, and politicians. Such documents, like John Askin’s will – short and terse – veiled his importance; it belied his preeminent role in the Great Lakes fur trade; it veiled his relationship to the British Empire, and hid the complex and disparate nature of his multi-cultural family.

Competing colonial and indigenous legacies in the Great Lakes region of North America encouraged Askin’s re-inventions and his economic success. The trade that Askin pursued, the partnerships he formed, the family he nurtured, the children he sired, and the struggles and failures he endured demonstrate the negotiated nature of the British Empire in North America. Askin lived in contested landscapes that required him to react to ever-changing situations, make decisions based on limited information,

¹⁸ Madelaine Askin to Marie Archange Barthe (Sandwich), November 1815. *Askin Papers*, 2: 784. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

¹⁹ See: The Will of John Askin, signed November 1808, amended 1811. *Askin Papers*, 2: 786. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

²⁰ See: The Will of John Askin, signed November 1808, amended 1811. *Askin Papers*, 2: 786. See unpublished documents in: John Askin, Box 19

conform to old behaviors, and transgress complex boundaries. His story is part of a much larger story about the nature of Euro-American Empire and reveals the moments and locations where individual efforts shaped the aspirations, limits, and effectiveness of colonial and economic processes. Throughout his life, Askin played the role of the French merchant, the gentlemanly aristocrat, the scheming colonial, and the loving father. Even as these guises sometimes placed him at odds with imperial officials and their directives, Askin always positioned his work as beneficial to both King and country. Histories of marginal men like Askin tell historians about the fraying fabric of empires, and show how disparate and broken ties can be woven and bound anew.

John Askin arrived in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley when the British Empire asserted control over former French lands. His rich and varied existence created a rich and varied historical archive that provides an internal glimpse at the Atlantic side of world trade in the eighteenth century. Askin was front and center in many pivotal and well-known developments in British Great Lakes and Ohio Valley history. He survived the violence and turmoil of the Seven Years' War and Pontiac's Rebellion. He served the British Empire as a sutler and then as commissar to the British army. He pushed the fur trade into the upper Great Lakes to compete with the Hudson Bay Company and set the course of the Northwest Company. He prospered greatly from the trade and became one of the region's preeminent traders and merchants; his family and his colleagues found positions within that society. John Askin's response to these historical moments, even his intimate and quotidian experiences, reveals a complex conflict between British imperial demands and the Great Lakes fur trade. Over the course of his long life, John Askin worked diligently to twist, tie, and bind these two competing and

often contradictory impulses – trade and empire - into a workable understanding of what it meant to be a successful British trader and merchant in the Great Lakes.

In many ways, Askin serves as a palimpsest; his eighteenth-century life and struggles point to two important historiographical traditions: one that privileges mobility, fluidity and reinvention; the other that stresses the demands and influences of empire. British imperial policies, officials, and controversies informed, demarcated and constrained Askin's life in the Great Lakes and the Ohio Valley. His relationship to the British Empire proved conflicted; his position as a sutler and then commissary had ensured his continued involvement in the fur trade; they were both lifeline and tether. Yet, Askin's economic misfortunes often came as the result of British imperial mismanagement, the arrogant policies of Sir Jeffrey Amherst, Pontiac's War in the early 1760s, and the jealousy and recalcitrance of Lieutenant Patrick Sinclair in the late 1770s. For Askin, empire had to be negotiated daily; it was not abstract or distant, but a real very presence in the lives of fur trade communities like Michilimackinac and Detroit. Within the limitations and constraints imposed by the British Empire in the late eighteenth century, merchants and traders responded creatively to imperial vagaries. For example, like the French of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Askin counted upon the intimate connections of his family and the solidifying role of kinship to buffer against the stress of imperial connections. Askin's life illustrates the unique ways in which individuals participated, used, and modified the demands of the British Empire in their day-to-day lives.

By building a multi-ethnic network of other traders, merchants, suppliers, financiers and family to help develop a strong trade in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley,

Askin responded to imperial limitations. His trade formed a loose braid of competing colonial, social, political and economic interests and initiatives that made the trans-Atlantic fur trade possible. Askin's household arrangement also played an important role in the Atlantic trade. The sexual and marital relationships that Askin maintained and the children and relatives that resulted from them connected French and Indian communities to new sources of revitalizing British capital, and provided Askin the labor to become a major figure in the Great Lakes fur trade. British capital and credit revitalized French and Indian communities, which in turn helped to ensure and protect future investments. Askin's life reveals a picture of the Atlantic world that was fundamentally shaped by imperial contours, but also demonstrates the numerous possibilities and creative constellations it offered individuals in their day-to-day lives.

Paying closer attention to the social and economic circumstances that defined Askin's life in the Great Lakes in the late-eighteenth-century allows historians to tease out the colonial and indigenous legacies that defined him. Living and existing in a largely French and Indian world, Askin's economic success evolved from a context that privileged re-invention. In other words, in the Great Lakes region, failures were not necessarily permanent, social statuses were often malleable, and identities were quite fluid. Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, for example, Askin weathered bankruptcy and social disgrace by re-inventing himself as a French bourgeois merchant, even as he sought to bolster his position within the British military establishment by serving as the deputy commissary of Michilimackinac. Re-invention is a constant theme in Askin's life and the lives of so many others in this dissertation. Moreover, the fact that this economic and social re-invention occurred so often for Askin within the confines of his

family and household suggests the degree to which intimacy, trade, and empire were tied and bound to each other - - sometimes quite uncomfortably. For Askin, his family proved to be a vital site of re-invention, especially during periods of economic and imperial turmoil. In the 1780s, Askin's marriage to Marie Archange Barthe proved instrumental in his efforts to expand his control over the infrastructure of the Great Lakes fur trade. Likewise, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, John Askin Jr., his son with his Panise, Manette, proved pivotal in Askin's re-invention as a land speculator in the Ohio Valley in the 1790s.

Alexander Henry and John Askin, and many others, were instrumental in transforming the British fur trade from an insular, Albany-based endeavor into a truly trans-Atlantic network of exchange that tied the Great Lakes to major imperial and economic centers in Europe. Their networks of exchange, multi-cultural and multi-focal by necessity, employed Indian trappers, French traders, and British capital created a profitable trade by overcoming rugged landscapes, eighteenth-century logistical shortcomings, and British imperial restrictions, prejudices, and conflicts. These men helped set the agenda and courses for a future generation of British, French, Indian and American traders and merchants, especially the activities of the Northwest Company and John Jacob Astor's American Fur Trade Company. John Askin, whose life is so closely intertwined to the major developments of the eighteenth-century British Empire in North America, offers such an important window into North American history. To understand John Askin, his family, and his trade is to appreciate the large scale and important tensions that defined it; the restrictions of empire and the fluidity of the Atlantic, and the individual's ability to weave and tie both into mutually beneficial binds.

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