

The Weekly Historical Note

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The Iroquois, The Dutch, and the Fur Trade

The previous issue of *The Weekly Historical Note* examined the explorations of Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert, a Dutch explorer sent to re-establish trade negotiations between the Dutch and the Iroquois. Van den Bogaert's explorations into the Mohawk and Oneida homelands offered valuable insights into the life and culture of the Oneida, however, a second look at his writings offers a closer look at the beginning years of the Great North American Fur Trade.

Van den Bogaert's chief purpose to visit the Iroquois was to re-establish trade between the struggling Dutch Colony and the Iroquois. The Dutch, like the French, came to the Americas looking to develop colonies for the purpose of exporting goods and making money. It did not take long for the colonist to realize the large profits could be made from beaver fur. The European upper class and the emerging middle class were willing to pay high price for the soft fur, which was an excellent material for making hats, gloves and other goods.

Upon his arrival to the Oneida Castle, van den Bogaert and his companions could see that the Iroquois had received much for their furs from the French. All around could be seen "good timber axes, French shirts, coats, and razors." An Oneida headman called the Dutch "scoundrels," and said that the Dutch were "worthless because [they] gave them so little for their furs." During his time at the Oneida Castle van den Bogaert explained that he could not promise that the Oneida would get more for their furs, but he did promise that he would return with an answer in the spring. However, it appears that van den Bogaert was wrong and the Dutch were not able to raise their payout for the furs; van den Bogaert never returned to the Oneida Castle.

In the decades that followed, the Dutch lost more and more ground in the race to extract furs and ship them to Europe. The English began to arrive in ever greater numbers on the North American Coast.



The Quahog Shell

English merchants had also created a monopoly on the extraction of wampum from the coast. Wampum beads come from the Quahog shell and were the principle commodity traded with the Iroquois in order to obtain furs. Through the 1640's the English began to produce more and more wampum until finally the colonial economy was flooded with it and prices fell so low that English merchants began to sell it as fast as possible. The Dutch merchants, eager to regain their prominence in the market

