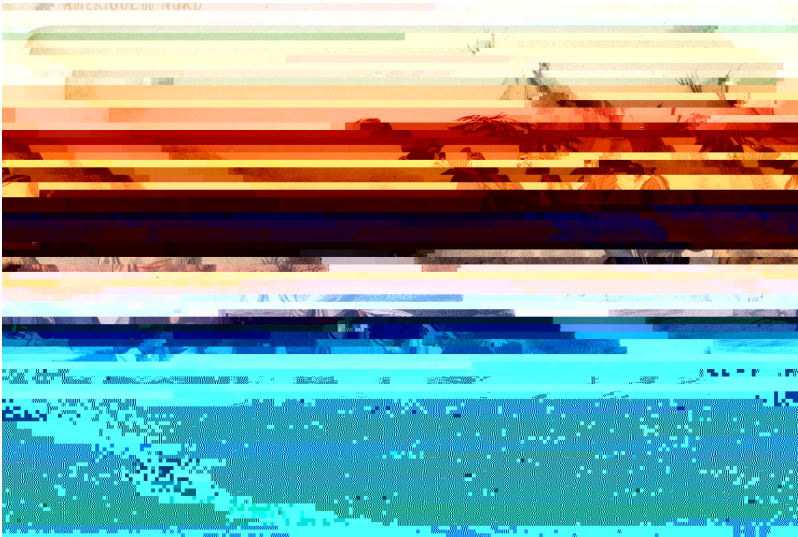


IDEASESSAY

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In the winter of 1783, officers of the Hudson's Bay Company, a powerful British trade organization, crossed the Atlantic on the American ship . As they talked together on the upper deck, a 19-year-old German emigrant traveling in steerage listened in. He learned that the money to be made by trading beaver fur was fantastic: a prime pelt that sold for 40 shillings in London could be obtained from willing Native Americans in exchange for trinkets and knickknacks worth no more than three or four shillings.

Johann Jacob Astor did the math. It had taken him four years of working as a laborer in London to save up enough money for the fare to America. His plan was to open a music business, and he brought seven flutes which he planned to sell when he reached New York. He had so little money to spare, he had wrapped the flutes in his clothing to avoid paying the extra charge for freight. Now he resolved to find out more about this lucrative fur trade.

Astor's ability to sell Canadian beaver

trading centers of Detroit and Michilimackinac. Those beaver pelts were so dark and lustrous they sent the London prices rocketing.

Astor flourished in a world of frontier lawlessness and cutthroat competition. But his great triumph came when the size of the U.S. doubled with the Louisiana Purchase. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson organized the famous Lewis and Clark expedition to explore these new lands west of the Mississippi. A few years after he returned, Lewis wrote bluntly of one of the goals of their expedition: "With hope of future gain from the fur trade."

All along the way they had carefully noted the presence of wildlife but recorded with particular attention and enthusiasm the presence of beaver. The men of the Corps of Discovery shot elk, deer, and later bison, but according to Lewis they were all keen for beaver. On May 2, 1805, Lewis noted that the "flesh of beaver is esteemed a delicacy among us." They particularly loved boiled beaver tail, which Lewis described as tasting like cod. Lewis also made one of the earliest observations of beaver adaptation. Back east, where beaver were voraciously hunted, they had become mostly nocturnal and crepuscular. In Montana Lewis observed them during daylight hours, writing in his journal that the beaver he saw "in consequence of not being hunted are extremely gentle and out during the day."



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As soon as he returned to the East, Meriwether Lewis strongly urged President Jefferson to make haste and create a trading center on the Pacific. Jefferson was keen but lacked the funds. Johann Jacob Astor knew his moment. He visited Jefferson and the two fueled each other's imaginations, talking for days as they developed visions for the limitless possibilities offered

by West Coast settlement. Jefferson's thinking was geopolitical—he wanted to extend the reach of the young nation and understood the importance of opening trade with the Pacific.

Astor's goal was to create a trade monopoly. His American Fur Company, with its subsidiary the Pacific Fur Company, was a legal mirage. On paper it appeared to be run by a board of 25 stockholders, but Astor had convinced friends and associates to lend their signatures