

Teacher's Guide to *Colonial Fur Trade in Florida* Exhibit

<https://myfloridahistory.org/education/exhibit/fur-trade-florida>

Hosted by the Florida Historical Society



(Clockwise from top left) Heading from Panton, Leslie & Co. ledger, Greenslade Papers / 19th century lithograph "Yaha-Hajo" by J.T. Brown's Lithographic Establishment, 1842 / Promissory note dated Pensacola, November 4, 1793 Cruzat Papers / Drawing of Panton, Leslie & Company headquarters in Pensacola, from *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Panton Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847* by William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson

Introduction:

In 1763, Spain ceded the Florida territory to Britain in exchange for the Havana, a result of allegiances during the French and Indian War. Known as the British Period (1763-1783) it marked the beginning of England's colonization attempts on the peninsula. The dividing line between East and West Florida became the Apalachicola River, with the British colony of Georgia to the north, and the Mississippi River to the west. The territory was sparsely populated with most of the European colonists living in and around St. Augustine in East Florida, and Pensacola in West Florida, the capitals of each colony respectively. The groups now moving into Florida when the British took over colonial control were an amalgamation of many smaller Native American clans and familiar groups who were loosely linked by language and custom in the southeastern U.S. The British began in earnest meeting with the local leaders within these Indigenous communities and established ties that led to trade agreements. Key to the economic success of the British Floridas was a successful, trusting, and fruitful relationship with the various Indigenous groups living in and bordering the Floridas. The primary commodities coming out of the wooded backcountry were deer and otter pelts, more so the former. Items being imported and traded for the aforementioned peltry were Europeans metal goods such as firearms, gunpowder, jewelry, clothing and alcohol. Although the economy of the colonies was important, the other, and arguably the more pressing reason that the British catered to the needs and wants of the Indian population was strategic military alliances. During the French and Indian war, the British relied upon the provision of Indigenous American warriors to fight alongside the white colonists and the British army to defend her colonial possessions.

The North American continent presented a wealth of resources beyond just precious metals such as the ones mined from Central and South America. More importantly, the continent possessed natural resources and ample land for agriculture which by the 18th century would prove to be a driving force in the rapid immigration of Europeans into the Americas. Control of raw materials produced in the Americas became the motivating force between European traders and Indigenous inhabitants during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This competitive environment proved perfect for the emergence of large-scale trading operations which could handle the volume of necessary arms and goods coming into North America, but also the volume of deerskins and other peltry being exported out. It was through political coercion, complex trading networks, and opportunistic dealings that the partners and traders involved were able to procure so much wealth in the span of only a few decades. The enormous financial successes of the Panton, Leslie & Company and its successor, John Forbes and Company, are not the key issues explored in this project. Rather, it was the effect on Creek and Seminole Indian culture and trade that paved the way for hostilities between Anglo settlers and Indians in Florida during the Creek Civil War and the Seminole Wars period. The exertion of soft power upon the Indigenous populations led to the breakup of the clan systems and eventually led to the aforementioned armed conflicts. It is through the exploration of original documents, combined with the presentation of these materials in the form of podcasts that the long-term impacts of the late colonial period Indian trade can be better understood.

[*This supplemental guide is to be used in conjunction with the *Colonial Fur Trade in Florida* digital exhibit, hosted by the Florida Historical Society. Sample questions and discussion topics are provided to help further the discussion in the classroom.](#)

Primary Source Guide Page

Q: What is a Primary Source?

A: According to the Library of Congress, “Primary sources are the raw materials of history — original documents and objects which were created at the time under study.” The key to remember is that primary sources were created during the time period being studied.

Q: Are primary sources exclusively written documents?

A: No! It’s true that many primary sources take the form of written accounts, like newspapers, letters, and journals. However, primary sources can take many forms. Remember the key to a primary source is that it was created in the time period being studied. Therefore, photographs, film footage, paintings, maps, clothing, architecture, everyday objects, and many other items can also be seen as primary sources.

Q: Is my textbook a primary source?

A: No. Resources like textbooks, biographies, research papers, histories, and encyclopedias are not primary sources. This is because they were created after the time period being studied. Therefore, sources about certain periods in history, but not created during that period of history, are not primary sources.

Q: If textbooks and similar sources created after the period of history being studied are not primary sources, what are they? Are they reliable?

A: These types of sources are known as secondary sources. However, that does not mean they do not contain good information. Textbooks, histories, biographies, and other sources about historical periods are constructed from the information found in primary sources. Therefore, the information contained in primary sources give people in later time periods the necessary information to create summaries and draw conclusions about the past. Furthermore, many secondary sources include primary sources like photographs or excerpts of personal accounts to support their interpretations of the past.

Q: What should I look for when I am studying a primary source?

A: There are many things to look for when viewing a primary source. Of course, it depends on the nature of the source you are looking at. For example, if you are reading a letter from someone you should look for things like the type of language used, author biases, dates mentioned, the purpose of the letter, and to whom it was being addressed. Naturally, if you are viewing something like a painting as a primary source you will be looking for different things, such as what the painting depicts, what type of materials were used in its creation, and an artist’s signature.

Q: Why study primary sources?

A: Primary sources are the most important link we have to the past. They reveal the important events, thoughts, opinions, styles, attitudes, and customs of the past. Primary sources are the most dependable way to get information about the past because they were created by those who lived it.

Section One

“The Trade on the Ground”

Introduction:

The trade between indigenous groups and the Anglo-European merchants in late-18th century Florida, centered on an amicable understanding of material culture and demand for particular goods at certain times. For the merchants, this meant long period living amongst the various indigenous groups in an effort to establish long-term relationships which both sides could feel comfortable with.

The mercantile system was a tiered hierarchy, with the junior-most employee usually doing the most amount of work, for the smallest cut of the profit. It took years for individual traders to establish good relations with both the trading houses that supplied the raw goods for the trade, as well as the various indigenous communities within which they lived for long stretches of time. These traders became expert diplomats, as well as shrewd business people. Those who could not handle this delicate balance of needs from both sides, often would not last long in the trade. However, those who managed to establish long standing ties, found profit not only in the trade, but also benefitted from the acquisition of land.

Sample questions about this section:

- What types of items were being traded by both sides?
- What type of currency was utilized for these transactions?
- Do you think one side benefitted more from these transactions than the other?
- Who were the traders and what type of relationship did they have with the indigenous populations?
- Could the indigenous representative read and write this document? Why or why not?
- Can you identify products that we still use today?
- Why was deerskin such an important commodity to the Europeans?
- Was other information shared in these letters to the company headquarters?
- Why would this type of information be important for the company owners to know?

Glossary of terms:

Duffel: A course woolen cloth with a thick nap. These woven blankets became popular among indigenous groups during this time period.

Taffia: A type of alcoholic rum drink distilled from sugar cane. It was popular in the Caribbean region and was used widely in the trade as a barter item.

Gun Flints: Small pieces of quartz rock that when struck against the steel of a gun's frizzen created a spark, thus igniting a main charge within a firearm, and unloading the contents of the firearm. This type of firing system was common in the late 18th century and was utilized in the deerskin trade.

Section Two

“Talks with Native Americans”

Introduction:

The nature of the fur trade in the southeast was such that it became a conduit for political and social communication and change throughout the Indian country during this time period. The traders were the generally the only people routinely in contact with the various indigenous groups of Florida and the southeast, and thus, were perfectly suited as ambassadors for their respective colonial allegiances.

The documents in this portion of the exhibit demonstrate the role in which “talks” or meetings between the Panton, Leslie & Company traders and the various indigenous groups was mutually beneficial in many ways. Often requests for goods on credit were discussed, as are broader issues surrounding the relationships some tribal members had established with certain traders. In this section, try to imagine these discussions playing out in real time. Try to understand the vantage points of both sides.

Sample questions about this section:

- Why do you think these meetings were known as “talks?”
- What types of topics were discussed?
- Where were these talks taking place? Do you think that location is important?
- Who attended these talks?
- Who actually wrote the documents that you are looking at today? Who was the intended audience and do you think that translations were accurate?
- What do these “talks” tell us about power and agency in the backcountry?
- Was there an attempt to unify the various indigenous tribes during this time period?
- If so, why would that be beneficial/disadvantageous?

Section Three

“Land Cessions”

Introduction:

By the end of the 1790s, a large number of Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw and Choctaw groups had received trade goods from the Panton, Leslie & Company stores on credit. This meant that the company had an enormous volume of debtors on their rolls. When William Panton, one of the last founding members of the company died, and the population of white-tailed deer in the southeast diminished, the new partners decided to devote an increasing amount of time of debt collection rather than the fur trade.

The John Forbes & Company, as the organization was known after 1803, began in earnest working with the Spanish colonial government to put pressure on the various indigenous tribes to cede large tracts of land in Florida and other areas as payment for their debts. As seen in some of these documents, the issue was a divisive one amongst the Indians. Many felt that they could not give in to the pressure of American and European encroachment on their lands, while others cared very little and were happy to transfer ownership to the company partners. These discussions lasted for years, and lengthy litigation continued even longer, but eventually the John Forbes & Company acquired one of the largest single land parcels in Florida’s history – nearly 1.2 million acres in the northwest part of the state between the Flint and Apalachicola rivers.

Sample questions about this section:

- What do these documents tell us about land ownership and the perception of land ownership during this time?
- Who were these documents created for? For what purpose?
- Who created these documents?
- Who was writing these documents and who were the primary actors involved?
- Were other alternatives proposed for absolution of debt?
- Who can be faulted for the indebtedness? Why?
- Were only Indians in debt to the company? If not, then who else?
- What can these documents tell us about the interaction between the indigenous groups and the white traders?

Section Four

“Place and Time”

Introduction:

Maps can help us understand a particular place in time, and provide a visual context to the letters and other documents used for research. Beginning in 1783, Both East and West Florida were transferred back to Spanish control from the British. It was because of their involvement with the fur trade during the British reign that Panton, Leslie & Co., was able to continue their work under a new colonial government. The Spanish were eager to establish cordial trading relationships with the Creeks and Seminole in order to parlay those relationships into formal treaties.

The interior of Florida and much of the southeast had not yet been fully mapped or explored by Europeans at this point. Much of what was known, and later transcribed into maps by European cartographers, was gathered by fur traders. Locations of indigenous villages, trails and the meanderings of various rivers and lakes are all elements important for these early traders to understand.

By the end of the 18th century, many indigenous tribes were deeply indebted to Panton, Leslie and Co., and as a result made large land offerings in exchange for absolution of that debt.

Notice in the maps in this exhibit how the influence of American and Spanish traders changed the shape of Creek and Seminole boundaries. You’ll also notice that in later maps, more trails and roads are depicted, which indicates more people moving, living and trading in the region.

Sample questions about this section:

- When were these maps created?
- Who were these maps created for?
- What type of map are you looking at (topographical, artistic, political)?
- What might be missing from the map?
- Can you name towns, cities and villages?
- Has anything changed over time since these maps were first created?
- Can you identify place names mentioned in earlier letters with areas located on the maps?
- Are any of these place names still in existence?

Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSS this exhibit helps to meet:

4th Grade

Social Studies:

SS.4.A.1 – Analyze primary and secondary resources to identify significant individuals and events throughout Florida history.

SS.4.A.1.2 – Synthesize information related to Florida history through print and electronic media.

SS.4.A.3.2 – Describe causes and effects of European colonization on the Native American tribes of Florida.

SS.4.A.3.8 – Explain how the Seminole tribe formed and the purpose for their migration

Geography:

SS.4.G.1.1 – Identify physical features of Florida

SS.4.G.1.4 – Interpret political and physical maps using map elements.

5th Grade

Social Studies:

SS.5.A.4.5 – Explain the importance of Triangular Trade linking Africa, the West Indies, the British Colonies and Europe.

Geography:

SS.5.G.1.1 – Interpret current and historical information using a variety of geographic tools.

SS.5.G.2.1 – Describe the push-pull factors (economy, natural hazards, tourism, climate, physical features) that influenced boundary changes within the United States.

Economics:

SS.5.E.1.1 – Identify how trade promoted economic growth in North America from pre-Columbian times to 1850.

SS.5.E.2.1 – Recognize the positive and negative effects of voluntary trade among Native Americans, European explorers, and colonists.

8th Grade

Social Studies:

SS.8.A.1 - Use research and inquiry skills to analyze American History using primary and secondary sources.

Geography:

SS.8.G.4 – Understand the characteristics, distribution and migration of human populations.

SS.8.G.6 – Understand how to apply geography to interpret the past and present and plan for the future.

9-12th Grade:

Social Studies:

SS.912.A.1 – Use research and inquiry to skills to analyze American history using primary and secondary resources.

Geography:

SS.912.G.2 – Understand physical and cultural characteristics of places.

SS.912.G.4 – Understand the characteristics, distribution and migration of human populations.

SS.912.G.6 – Understand how to apply geography to interpret the past and present and plan for the future.