Vectors of Colonialism: The Smallpox Epidemic of 1780-82 and Northern Great Plains Indian Life

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Vectors of Colonialism: The Smallpox of Epidemic of 1780-82 and Northern Great Plains Indian Life

“We must do what we can to recapture and to try to understand, in human terms, what it was that was crushed, what it was that was butchered. It is not enough merely to acknowledge that much was lost.”

-David E. Stannard, American Holocaust

The coming of the European and African to the “New World” forever changed the lives of its indigenous peoples. As Alfred W. Crosby demonstrates in his pioneering work, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492, the intrusion of the Old World into the Americas resulted in an exchange of biological entities such as plants and animals that profoundly altered ecosystems and Indians’ cultural practices. Yet, the impact of these organisms paled in comparison to the onslaught of infectious diseases which were alien to the indigenous peoples of North and South America. Unfamiliar with the plagues that the conquistadores carried over the Atlantic, Indians suffered a terrible fate when they contracted them. Fortunately for historians, European observers left a revealing chronicle of the deadly Columbian Exchange. As Crosby accurately points out, “The records of every European people who

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have had prolonged contact with the native peoples of America are full of references to the devastating impact of Old World diseases.\textsuperscript{2}

Smallpox quickly emerged as the most lethal foreign disease that Indians encountered. When the first known instance of a smallpox outbreak in the Americas occurred in late 1518 or early 1519 in Santo Domingo, Spanish contemporaries reported that it killed between one-third and one-half of the island’s Indian population. Soon after the disease began ravaging Santo Domingo, it struck Puerto Rico and the islands of the Greater Antilles. Once it reached the Yucatan, smallpox facilitated perhaps the most legendary conquest of a New World population. Although Hernando Cortes’ first effort to take the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan failed, his army left behind an unexpected and powerful ally to weaken the Indians, smallpox. As the Aztecs confronted this overwhelming and unknown illness which vastly reduced their population and killed most of their leaders, the Spaniards reorganized and bolstered their forces by gathering reinforcements from among the Aztecs’ Indian enemies. After some two months, the Spaniards launched their triumphant final assault on the beleaguered city. Smallpox, rather than Spanish technology or military might, was the decisive force that enabled Cortes to claim victory, but it did not stop there. It soon dispersed through Central America and into South America, where it spread among the Incas, sealing their fate as well.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{2} Alfred W. Crosby, \textit{The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492} (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1972, 2003), 42.

The devastation in Central and South America was only the beginning. During the following centuries, the fallout of the Columbian Exchange continued as the whole of the American Indian population at one time or another felt the wrath of European-introduced infectious diseases. Even as American colonials fought to free themselves from the grip of the British Empire during the late eighteenth century, smallpox still swept across the North American continent. Between 1775 and 1782, a massive smallpox pandemic touched the Atlantic coast, reached from deep into Mexico to the Pacific coast and spread onto the Great Plains and into the Rocky Mountains, ranging well into Canada. Indeed, as Elizabeth A. Fenn points out, "Variola ravaged the greater part of North America, from Mexico to Massachusetts, from Pensacola to Puget Sound." As the future of the young United States hung in the balance in the East, smallpox transformed a great piece of its future territory, the northern Great Plains, leaving it forever scarred. The fact that no land north of Mexico felt the wrath of smallpox more than the arid, windswept, yet rich prairies surrounding the Missouri River is a major part of the reason that Indian life in the region changed so greatly during the late eighteenth century.

Even though precise figures are impossible to obtain, scholars estimate that somewhere between one-third and one-half of the northern Plains Indian population perished as a result of the pandemic, which swept the plains between 1780 and 1782. Some groups, such as the semisedentary Arikara, who numbered perhaps 24,000 before
1780, lost as many as seventy-five to eighty percent of their people to the regional epidemic.\textsuperscript{5} The Arikara’s neighbors, the likewise village-dwelling Mandans and Hidatsas, suffered similarly appalling numbers. Nomadic groups were also struck by smallpox, but generally not as hard as those who lived in the static, dense, highly populated, and, therefore, very disease-prone villages on the Missouri. While some, like the Sioux, suffered relatively few losses, other nomads such as the Crows, Assiniboines, and Crees were not so fortunate, as smallpox reduced their numbers by one-third to one-half.\textsuperscript{6}

Overall, according to Fenn, who bases her calculations upon a low infection rate of usually between thirty-three and fifty percent, along with a mortality rate of forty-three percent (most witnesses reported a mortality rate between fifty and seventy-five percent), a minimum of approximately 32,000 northern plains inhabitants died. Although Fenn concedes that actual casualties likely exceeded these conservative estimates, exact statistics are not essential to this study. What is important is that northern Plains Indians

\textsuperscript{5} Colin G. Calloway, ed., Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indians Views of How the West Was Lost (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1996), 40; Loretta Fowler, “The Great Plains from the Arrival of the Horse to 1885, in The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, Vol.I, Part II: North America, ed. Bruce G. Trigger and Wilcomb E. Washburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20-21; Colin G. Calloway, One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 419. This thesis utilizes the broadest definitions of the terms “pandemic” and “epidemic.” The former, according to Webster’s Dictionary, is when a disease becomes “prevalent over a whole area, country, etc.” That dictionary defines an epidemic as “a rapid, widespread occurrence or growth.” A pandemic is then, according to that dictionary, an “epidemic over a large region.” So, in short, the 1780-82 Northern Great Plains smallpox epidemic as a part of the larger 1775-82 pandemic. See Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed., s.v. “epidemic” and “pandemic.”

contracted smallpox by the droves between 1780 and 1782 and that a considerable portion of them perished. The disproportionate losses between different groups, a phenomenon which assumes a prominent role in the post-epidemic history of the northern plains, will also be a major point of interest in this study.\(^7\)

However, as David E. Stannard points out, “It is not enough merely to acknowledge that much was lost.”\(^8\) As the quotation that opens these pages suggests, historians must labor to discover how deeply the impact of infectious diseases upon aboriginal societies resonated. Of course outbreaks of smallpox and other maladies took a ghastly toll upon “virgin” populations, but their influence consisted of much more than simply killing thousands. What scholars need to do is reveal what significance epidemics had beyond their immediate effects, how they altered the lives of not only survivors, but future generations. Scholars must examine how epidemics affected Indians’ cultural, social, and political institutions in order to help us to better understand how their everyday life changed after an outbreak transpired.

Building upon Crosby’s *The Columbian Exchange*, this study seeks to shed light on what happened on the northern Great Plains between 1780-82 and during the following decades, up to the early years of the nineteenth century, when Meriwether Lewis’ and William Clark’s legendary expedition through the northern plains marked the region’s formal introduction to the United States. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the epidemic of 1780-82 constitutes a major turning point in northern plains history, qualifying George E. Hyde’s statement that, “[t]he great smallpox epidemic of 1780-81
may be taken as the event that presaged the dawning of modern times in the plains. This work contends that in just over two short decades, between 1780 and 1805, the fallout of the epidemic transformed the region so much that the plains of the former date little resembled those of the latter.

Simply, the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82, as this thesis demonstrates, heralded the dawn of a new order on the northern Great Plains. For some groups it marked a decline, but for others an opportunity to expand as the previously powerful groups such as the Shoshone and semisedentary Missouri River tribes ceded strength to other Indians, namely the tribes of the Blackfoot “Confederacy” and the many Lakota Sioux bands. However, this new order was but a transitional phase, for just over another century passed before these peoples relinquished command of the plains to the United States. Indeed, the transfer of power was not quite as immediate and complete as it was in Latin America two and a half centuries earlier. The following chapters make it clear that the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic was the first of a series of catastrophic events that culminated in the tragic fall of the Plains Indian.

Crosby’s *The Columbian Exchange* has inspired scholars to examine how later epidemics affected Indian populations in specific geographical regions of the Americas. James H. Merrell’s *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* provides insight into how European colonialism, namely diseases, traders, and settlers, transformed the southern piedmont region by destroying the native way of life and thrusting them into a whole “new

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The most recent such study is Paul Kelton’s provocative *Epidemics and Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe in the Native Southeast, 1492-1715*. In this work, Kelton perceptively points out that the transmission of person-to-person infectious diseases such as smallpox was contingent upon a number of ecological factors. Simply, the arrival of a disease in an area did not necessarily mean that it would spread like wildfire. As Kelton writes, “Instead of assuming, then, that the mere presence of the Europeans ignited region-wide epidemics, it must be asked whether indigenous peoples had disease ecologies that made them vulnerable to particular germs.”  

In the case of the indigenous peoples of what became the southeastern portion of the United States, products of European colonialism, particularly the native slave trade, became the means by which local outbreaks escalated to epidemics. 

No work, however, offers a similar treatment of the northern plains. Although anthropologist Michael K. Trimble, in his dissertation entitled “Epidemiology on the Northern Plains: A Cultural Perspective” acknowledges that “epidemics represent one of the major factors responsible for altering traditional societies in the northern Plains,” his

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emphasis is on the epidemic that struck them in 1837-38. This thesis responds by asserting that the 1780-82 epidemic had a much greater effect.

Often, studies of the region often focus on how two other European-introduced elements alone, the horse and the gun, each transformed the plains, shaping its warriors into the well-known (albeit stereotypical and not entirely accurate) mounted warriors of the modern American imagination. The purpose of this study is not to dispute the clear significance of the horse and gun in shaping northern plains history, but to assert that disease, too, had a heavy hand in determining the region’s fate. This was especially true after 1780, when smallpox and other diseases superseded the horse and gun as the dominant influence on northern Great Plains life. Throughout history, as William H. McNeill masterfully demonstrated in his classic *Plagues and Peoples*, diseases act as dynamic players in human affairs, from ancient times through the modern era. The case of the northern Great Plains is no exception. While the integration of the horse and the gun into plains societies through the fur trade brought significant changes to regional life, historians largely neglect their role as vectors of smallpox and other infectious diseases. This analysis reveals that it was not until the late eighteenth century that a disease ecology capable of producing an epidemic existed on the Northern Plains. That ecology resulted from the changes in northern plains life following the introduction of the horse

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and gun to the region. Furthermore, the ecology developed, in part, as a result of shifting climatic conditions within the region. In short, environmental and colonial forces aligned with one another to produce an unprecedented event in the region’s history. By using the lens of colonialism, this work simply seeks to fill a void in northern plains historiography by examining this process and highlighting the underemphasized role of smallpox in determining the course of the region’s history.\textsuperscript{16}

The most comprehensive work to date on this particular epidemic is Fenn’s \textit{Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82}.\textsuperscript{17} In this study, Fenn explores the whole of the 1775-82 continental outbreak (which is most likely the first North America-wide epidemic in history), emphasizing in particular its deadly influence on War for Independence, but her brief treatment of the American and Canadian plains, however, provides readers with a glimpse of how the epidemic reached the plains and the tremendous loss of life that resulted from its arrival. In addition to providing staggering statistical estimates of how many Indians fell victim to the illness and its immediate effect on tribal life, Fenn explains how smallpox influenced the balance of power between the many groups inhabiting the region, weakening some tribes and allowing others to become dominant forces. This shift constitutes the major theme of Anthony McGinnis’ \textit{Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738-1889}. Although the horse and gun remain at the forefront of the epic,
*Counting Coup* shows how diseases not only influenced an Indian group’s power, but also how they necessitated changes in warfare patterns, largely eradicating sizeable “pitched” battles and inaugurating an era of near-constant small scale horse raiding. This thesis elaborates upon the findings of Fenn and McGinnis by conducting a more thorough examination of the fallout of the epidemic. In the process, it reveals the deeper, less visible effects of the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82.

Existing studies that devote significant attention to how smallpox influenced northern Plains Indian life often focus on nineteenth-century outbreaks. These later epidemics occurred after the United States acquired the region, so the proximity of these outbreaks to pivotal late nineteenth century events renders them more prone to scrutiny than earlier, more remote episodes. Furthermore, as the nineteenth century progressed, increasing numbers of adventurers filtered into the region and produced vivid accounts of their Indian contacts’ experiences with disease. However, it is essential to examine the disastrous precursor to those outbreaks, for it, more than any other, shattered the world of northern Plains Indians and laid the foundation for later events. As George Catlin, the great artist of the American West, observed during the 1830s, smallpox “has several times before our days, run like a wave through the Western tribes, over the Rocky Mountains, and to the Pacific - thinning the ranks of the poor Indians to an extent which

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no knowledge, save that of the overlooking eye of the Almighty, can justly comprehend.”  

Indeed, it appears that scholars’ focus on nineteenth-century outbreaks obscures some of the importance of the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82. For instance, Trimble writes that, “As a result of the horticulturalists’ collapse [after the 1837-38 epidemic], these nomadic populations [such as the Sioux and Blackfeet] became the most powerful aboriginal groups residing on the Plains.” As this thesis clearly demonstrates, it was not the 1837-1838 epidemic that shattered the strength of the Missouri villagers, but that which occurred nearly a half-century earlier. While the 1837-38 outbreak undeniably obliterated the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, it simply weakened what were already vastly diminished populations. Thus, in the wake of the 1780-82 epidemic, nomadic groups assumed their commanding position on the northern plains. The later epidemic merely tightened their grasp. This thesis, especially its final chapter, contributes to the historiography by revealing how the 1780-82 epidemic, rather than its predecessors, laid the foundation for the critical developments of the nineteenth century.

Utilizing contemporary journals and narratives produced by traders and explorers, which sometimes contain discourses on the experiences and even the views of their Indian contacts, this work builds off of the findings of Fenn and McGinnis while utilizing Kelton’s methodology. Using the powerful lenses of ethnohistory and environmental history, this study examines famous accounts of the West and those produced by lesser-

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known men, who came from a variety of backgrounds. Some worked for Canadian trading companies, others for the French or Spanish. Some were simply curious explorers from England or the American colonies. What these men all had in common was a deep interest in the seemingly primitive people they encountered. The result was a number of detailed written descriptions which have been translated and published. Of course, these explorers and traders carried preconceptions about Indians with them into the West, in addition to a vastly different culture, which often compromised the accuracy and adequacy of their descriptions of native life. As a result, ethnohistorians must lift the veil of prejudice generated by European values to more clearly interpret what travelers observed and their Indian contacts told them. Every word must be analyzed for its possible meaning, for what it suggests the trader or explorer witnessed. In an effort to as accurately as possible depict an Indian world shattered by disease, this work aims to do just that.

By extracting information from the chronicles produced by these men, this study traces events stemming from the arrival of the epidemic on the plains through the first decade of the nineteenth century. Therefore, this work offers readers the opportunity to see how those who lived through the epidemic, as well as their descendents, found themselves living in a world quite different from that which existed in 1780. Even though tribes began to recover soon after the plague passed from the region, deep scars remained visible not only upon the bodies and in the minds of survivors, but also in their social, political, and cultural fabrics. In an attempt to offer as clear of a narrative as
possible, this work is divided into four chapters, each of which deals with a distinct thematic aspect of the 1780-82 northern plains smallpox epidemic.

In order to accurately assess what changes occurred during and after the outbreak that forever transformed the northern Great Plains, it is first necessary to discuss the state of affairs on the plains in 1780. While doing so provides this thesis with the means of demonstrating what exactly smallpox altered, it simultaneously reveals what allowed the disease to spread so far and wide. As Trimble accurately points out, the spread of epidemic diseases was not a matter of mere biology, but also the result of the impact of “social and cultural features.”

The development of the regional trade system during the course of the eighteenth century thus becomes the focus of this chapter. This trade network grew and became increasingly intertwined commerce centers beyond the plains because of the introduction of two valuable European commodities to the plains, the horse and gun, both of which revolutionized indigenous societies in many ways. Their military and economic implications are of particular interest to this thesis. As the waves of those European-introduced elements swept across the plains as the century progressed and Indians accumulated more of each, trade, travel, and warfare intensified. This network of native contact is important because, as Fenn points out, it was the means by which smallpox reached the northern plains and dispersed throughout it, for this great epidemic occurred before frequent or sustained white contact with the region occurred.

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21 Trimble, “Epidemiology on the Northern Plains,” 82.
22 Fenn, Pox Americana, 222-3.
This thesis, however, not only elaborates upon Fenn’s brief treatment, but adds further dimensions to it. First, the main point that this chapter attempts to drive home through this analysis is that the region simply did not have a disease ecology capable of producing a region-wide epidemic long before 1780, for it was not until just before that time that natives throughout the entirety of the northern plains accumulated significant supplies of horses and, to a lesser extent, guns. In other words, although isolated smallpox outbreaks occurred on the plains earlier in the eighteenth century, it is highly improbable that the ecological conditions that enabled the disease to achieve epidemic status in 1780 were mature enough to do so long before that time. This challenges the conclusions reached by those such as Michael K. Trimble and Anne F. Ramenofsky that epidemics possibly ravaged the northern Great Plains long before 1780.\textsuperscript{23} Second, this chapter discusses how climactic developments produced a famine that coincided with heightened trade and warfare to dramatically increase indigenous contact and, therefore, exposure to disease.

The second chapter of this study discusses how the arrival of smallpox on the plains in 1780 shattered the world as natives knew it. Detailing how smallpox spread from Mexico to the northern plains, then throughout the region, chapter two reveals how the colonial elements previously discussed, the horse and gun, as well as famine resulting from severe droughts triggered by strong La Nina activity, dispersed the disease, ultimately turning the outbreak into an epidemic. Making extensive use of primary sources, this section continues by providing an account of how natives, particularly those

\textsuperscript{23} Trimble, “Epidemiology on the Northern Plains,” 3; Anne F. Ramenofsky, \textit{Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).
living on the Great Plains’ northernmost reaches near the Saskatchewan River, reeled from the stunning blow of this malady once it arrived. After detailing as accurately as possible how many individuals each tribe throughout the entire region lost and why they suffered so terribly, this study investigates how those who did not perish struggled to survive in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak. Not only were Indians shaken psychologically and spiritually, but they faced a desperate need for food and other material goods. As a result, they focused on their survival to ensure that they did not follow their departed tribesmen and kinsmen into the next world. Thus, intertribal conflict nearly, if not completely, ceased for several years following the epidemic. Furthermore, the very trade system which helped the disease reach epidemic proportions nearly collapsed.

Chapter three reveals how the effects of smallpox surpassed those of the horse and gun during the years following the great epidemic of 1780-82. As this chapter demonstrates, the road to recovery was a difficult one that required many adaptations on the part of Indians. While some groups reorganized and relocated, intertribal warfare resumed. Most tribes, even some of those that were once offensive powerhouses, took on a more defensive nature than they ever had before because of their vulnerable state. Significantly weakened, Indians remained wary of enemy activity and their fortifications became more important, especially for the semisedentary tribes of the Missouri, the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, who found it necessary to resort to unconventional sources within their populations to defend themselves. Fighting on the plains after the epidemic was usually smaller-scale than before and pursued less risky objectives.
Furthermore, Indians actively worked to rebuild their populations not only by defending those already living in their villages, but also by incorporating those from other groups into their tribe. The upshot was that the boundaries between distinct tribes became increasingly blurred.

The fourth chapter deals with the most visible aspect of the new order on the northern plains, the rise of the Sioux and the final fall of the Shoshone, showing how the smallpox epidemic upset the regional balance of power. Evidence indicates that warfare increased considerably by the time Lewis and Clark explored the northern plains, as the ravages of smallpox gave two groups, the Sioux and Blackfeet, a golden opportunity to wrest power and land away from their rivals. In short, the epidemic of 1780-82 made it impossible for the semisedentary tribes of the Missouri to resist Sioux pressure from the east any longer. Their strength sapped by smallpox, the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras had little choice but to consolidate their meager numbers and constantly relocate in an effort to escape the Sioux, whose migration westward, according to Jeffrey Ostler, resulted largely from “pragmatic calculations” based upon variables such as their enemies’ strength.24 Further, by elaborating on Fenn’s findings, this study shows how the disease produced detrimental social and political stresses within individual tribes, such as the Arikara, rendering them more vulnerable to their enemies. Finally, most of the Shoshone, who were already being pushed off the plains by their firearm-equipped Blackfoot enemies at the onset of the epidemic, found it impossible to remain on the plains after disease struck them, leaving them at the mercy of their adversaries. Those

who chose to continue their life on the plains sought refuge with old enemies, such as the Crows. With their people scattered in small groups in the Rockies or on the plains with other tribes, the Shoshones’ fall from being the dominant force on the plains was complete. This final chapter concludes by looking at how these shifts in the balance of power affected Americans’ views of the different northern plains groups, especially the new powers.

The numerous contemporary documents that describe the 1780-82 epidemic provide a study of that event with the opportunity to be particularly insightful. As interest in the region’s rich fur supply and a route to the Pacific Ocean grew during the later portion of the eighteenth century, men of various nationalities and trades visited the northern plains and left a lasting record of their experiences. Although most did not tour the plains until years after the epidemic occurred, the Indians they visited told horrifying tales of the hardships they endured during and after the smallpox outbreak. In order to preserve essence of their writings, minimal changes have been made to the quotations extracted from them. The few alterations are noted where they occur. Furthermore, white travelers’ observations of the land and its inhabitants reveal that the Indians did not necessarily need to explain everything that happened. Rather, their actions sometimes revealed much more about the tragedy than their voices did. Furthermore, this study makes use of Plains Indian winter counts, usually those of the Teton Sioux, to shed light on the epidemic and its aftermath. These annual drawings, which depict significant events that occurred during the previous year, not only provide tremendous insight into general trends and developments on the plains, but also, as historian Ronald T. McCoy
points out, reveal “much about the way The People [Tetons] lived, a considerable amount about what their way of life was like, and reveal a wealth of information about the points in their history which The People chose to commemorate and pass on to their posterity.”\textsuperscript{25} Winter counts, a valuable historical record produced by natives themselves, are therefore an immensely valuable resource.

This study strives to unite these two narratives, the Indians’ voices and whites’ observations as much as possible to produce an analysis of a critical period of Western and American Indian history. Furthermore, this thesis makes heavy use of existing historical scholarship to place its content within a contextual and analytical framework. At the same time, it does not neglect relevant works produced by researchers in other fields, particularly anthropology and the natural sciences. Using this diverse pool of primary and secondary sources allows this thesis to integrate both traditional historical research with dynamic approaches from other fields while probing the causes and effects of the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82.

Ultimately, this study reveals that a utilization of the approaches of ethnohistory and environmental history, informed by a critical reading of a deep pool of primary sources and interdisciplinary secondary works, offers a deeper understanding of how profoundly disease, with the help of horses and guns, influenced the history of the northern plains, how the Columbian Exchange persisted as an agent of change well beyond initial European contact with the New World. Not only does such an examination add another dimension to northern plains historiography, but it also provides

scholars with a deeper look into how European colonialism fits into the Indian experience. Furthermore, this study contributes to a fuller comprehension of colonialism by explaining how events that occurred decades prior to the expansion of the United States onto the plains helped paved the way for the subsequent “winning of the west.”
CHAPTER 1

The Development of the Northern Plains Disease Ecology: Trade, Warfare, and Climate to 1780

“[E]very year, in the beginning of June, there arrive at the great fort on the bank of the river of the Mandan, several savage tribes which use horses and carry on trade with them…there is one tribe which said they came from the setting of the sun, where there are white men living in towns and in forts made of bricks and white stone.”

-Pierre Gaultier de Verennes de la Verendrye, 1740

It is a simple yet overlooked fact that diseases need vectors in order to spread. Some diseases require insects to carry them from person to person. Others, including smallpox, do not need such a vector, for they can spread directly from one human to another. As Paul Kelton points out, it is important to remember that smallpox simply did not appear in a region and spread through it like wildfire. In other words, extensive networks of contact between individuals, a disease ecology, was necessary in order for the fatal virus to spread. Since there was neither a prolonged nor frequent white presence in the region by this time, the networks of native interaction thus become the focus of this examination. As anthropologist John Taylor writes, “The pattern of diffusion of epidemics on the Northern Plains was necessarily a result of the patterns of social interaction among the Native American ethnic groups in this area since only

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2 Paul Kelton, Epidemics and Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe in the Native Southeast, 1492-1715 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xix.
humans can carry [smallpox]." Even in the case of the western interior of Canada, where a few traders dealt with Indians, Jody F. Decker concludes that natives spread the disease to one another. Consequently, the environment of the northern plains, the world shaped by its natives, becomes the focus of this chapter. As Michael K. Trimble points out, environment, which “embraces those factors external to the individual human,” is a key component of epidemiology, or the spread of diseases. Without such an examination of the formation of the northern Great Plains disease ecology, one cannot hope to understand the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic.

By showing how the spread of horses and guns increased intertribal contact during the eighteenth century, this chapter traces the development of the networks of native contact that enabled a distant smallpox outbreak to reach the region in 1780 and become epidemic in nature. In the process, it demonstrates that prior to that time, the systems of trade and warfare on the plains remained too incomplete and contact too infrequent to allow such a catastrophic event to occur. While this study does not refute the conclusions made by Douglas W. Owsley, Anne F. Ramenofsky, Linea Sundstrom, and Michael K. Trimble that smallpox reached the northern plains prior to 1780, it recognizes these earlier instances for what they were: isolated, local outbreaks, not

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epidemics. In this respect, this thesis agrees with Jody F. Decker when she writes that, “there may have been earlier visitations of the disease.” Furthermore, this chapter provides this work with the means of corroborating its thesis, for by providing readers with a look at the pre-epidemic world of the region’s indigenous peoples, it reveals exactly what transformations occurred as a result of the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic.

Long before the first Europeans arrived on the Great Plains of North America, the region’s native peoples began the process that ultimately created the network of extensive trade that carried smallpox from tribe to tribe in 1780. This intricate trade system began with commerce between semisedentary horticultural villages along the Missouri River, then included nearby nomadic groups who eventually introduced goods acquired from faraway European traders. These goods, particularly the horse and gun, became articles of great value to northern Plains Indians, who integrated them into their existing trade network. As a result, the indigenous northern plains trade system that existed prior to the eighteenth century experienced a boom as new items drew more tribes into it, forging a truly region-wide economic system.

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7 Decker, “Tracing Historical Diffusion Patterns,” 1. The emphasis is mine.
The horse and gun not only stimulated northern plains trade, but they also heightened intertribal conflict. Quickly recognizing the military benefits offered by horses and firearms, Indians integrated them into their military life, hoping that their use would give them a decisive advantage over their enemies. Each good, however, descended upon the plains from a different direction. From the southwest and west, Spanish horses spread onto the plains. Naturally, those tribes living nearest to the source of horses acquired them first and in great numbers before they passed them on to farther groups. Similarly, firearms filtered onto the plains from the northeast, traded to Indians by the French and English in the Great Lakes region. Indians who carried guns onto the northern plains prudently ensured that they and their allies accumulated firearms in numbers and their rivals did not. As these two colonial elements advanced onto and across the plains during the eighteenth century, intertribal warfare intensified as tribes used their newfound military might to confront their hated enemies. On the other hand, those who desperately wanted to acquire those powerful commodities conducted their own raids aimed at taking them away from opponents. Thus, military conflict, combined with increasing trade relations, created a web of contact on the northern plains that facilitated the spread of smallpox in 1780.

Unfortunately for the region’s indigenous peoples, the maturation of this network coincided with powerful climatic forces that produced another vector for disease. As Trimble perceptively points out, environmental factors must be considered when scholars attempt to reveal how a disease spread throughout a region. In the case of the 1837-38 smallpox epidemic, Trimble revealed that climatic shifts likely provided the disease with
another means of spreading throughout the northern plains. The final portion of this chapter suggests that this theory is applicable to the 1780-82 epidemic.³

Archaeological evidence suggests that the first agricultural Indians inhabited the plains along the Missouri River as early as 900 A.D. Two distinct farming cultures developed, one on the northern plains in modern-day North and South Dakota, the so-called “Middle Missouri Tradition,” and another in what would later be Nebraska and Kansas, the “Central Plains Tradition.” Remains of pottery and other items indicate that these two groups conducted some degree of trade. Although it appears that early relations between the two groups revolved around commerce and were therefore largely peaceful, as early as 1100, however, contact between these two tribes became more military in nature. The development of intricate fortification systems, especially in the case of the northern group, suggests that warfare between the two occurred, although archaeological remains cannot reveal the scale or intensity of such conflict. After 1400, the Central Plains Tradition gradually relocated northward along the Missouri, a factor that might be attributed to climatic shifts unfavorable to agricultural production, particularly decreased precipitation. Thus, the northern movement of the Central Plains Tradition may have resulted from the desire of its people to cultivate the less arid lands further upriver. As it becomes clear later in this chapter, climatic developments would continue to shape the course of northern plains history, especially in the case of the 1780-

82 smallpox epidemic. This northward migration on the part of the Central Plains tradition parallels a proliferation in the number and complexity of fortifications surrounding Middle Missouri settlements. Furthermore, the Middle Missouri villages, identified as those of the tribe later known as the Mandan, were formerly sprawling settlements spanning a considerable amount of land, but the advance of the central plains peoples, later known as the Arikara, necessitated a consolidation of Mandan manpower. The Arikara settlements, however, remained largely unfortified, indicating that they little feared the peoples they pressured northward.⁹

As the end of the precontact era on the northern plains rapidly approached, these two horticultural groups, especially the Mandan, prospered from commerce with nearby nomadic hunters and more distant tribes. This trade mostly involved foodstuffs, as the villagers exchanged their corn, beans, native tobacco, squash, and sunflower seeds for antelope and buffalo hides, dried meat, and prairie turnip flour with nomads such as the Crow, who journeyed to the Missouri on foot. The benefits that both groups reaped from this exchange led to them specializing their own products to satisfy trade demand. As a result, both nomadic groups and horticultural villages became increasingly dependent upon each other for basic necessities which their increasingly specialized societies did not produce. Furthermore, acting as middlemen between nomadic groups with different products to exchange, the semisedentary villagers became the nexus of a trade network that reached well beyond the northern plains. From the area now included in

Yellowstone National Park, the Missouri tribes received obsidian. Crees and Assiniboines traveling to the northern plains from the northeast brought native copper from the Great Lakes. Even items from the Gulf Coast, such as goods made from conch shells, reached the Missouri trading centers.  

The role of the northern plains trading centers within the larger indigenous market, however, paled in comparison to its commanding position after the arrival of the horse and gun, both of which natives integrated into their existing trade system. Even before northern plains natives encountered Europeans themselves, they eagerly incorporated “Old World” products into their increasingly complex trade network. While these commodities diffused throughout the plains by means of a previously established system of commerce, that network itself was drawn into an international economic system that reached from Mexico through North America and across the Atlantic into Europe. In the process, the regional trade network simultaneously expanded to encompass a greater portion of the northern plains and experienced intensified native participation. Furthermore, the native cultures that came into contact with the trade forever changed, as the exchange dispersed new technology and the immensely useful horse.

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As early as 1540 the Spanish brought horses to the Rio Grande valley, but hesitated to distribute them to natives on a large scale. Viewing Indians as subject peoples, the Spanish understood that providing them with mounts would enable them to challenge Spanish authority. During the seventeenth century, however, it appears that the Spanish desire to gain access to the intertribal trade network of the Southwest, which offered them captives and products of the hunt, such as hides, led to a relaxed policy. As a result, some Indians acquired small quantities of horses and the animal gradually diffused northward. The floodgates burst open in 1680 with the Pueblos’ uprising that temporarily pushed the Spanish colonizers out of the region, giving the natives access to the horses and mules that they left behind. Once the Pueblos acquired horses in great numbers, the useful animal quickly spread beyond the Southwest.¹²

Horses reached the northern plains by way of the Shoshone connection with southern plains tribes that had economic and military ties with natives of the southwest. Most horses that eventually reached the northern plains through trade were probably taken by the Shoshones’ relatives, the Comanches, during raids on southwestern tribes and Spanish settlements. Also, Shoshones acquired horses from Utes, who inhabited the Great Basin and had trade contacts with the Southwest themselves. Once the Shoshones acquired horses in approximately 1700, when they resided in the Great Basin and on the

¹² Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading Through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42; Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 39-40; Fowler, “Great Plains,” 6, 8; Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 267. These captives or “slaves” were Indians, usually women and children, that warriors took during attacks on enemy villages. This thesis will devote more attention to Indian captives in chapter three.
western reaches of the Great Plains, they moved further onto the plains. Adopting the nomadic life, Shoshones spread north, east, and south as they pursued the great herds of bison which grazed on the plains. In the process, they clashed with tribes already inhabiting the plains and those living on its fringes. Within decades, the area of Shoshone domination on the northern plains was tremendous, as they roamed from the high plains to the Saskatchewan River on the north and the Missouri on the east. Traveling along the former waterway in 1772, Matthew Cocking of the Hudson’s Bay Company observed that, “this day hunters saw several Horses up the branch of the other side: they are all in general afraid, supposing the horses belong to Snake Indians with whom they are always at variance.” Simply, the Shoshones became the most powerful tribe on the northern plains during the eighteenth century as the horse enabled them to easily outmaneuver their pedestrian enemies.

Indeed, horses offered a number of tremendous advantages to the Shoshones and all other plains tribes. Obviously, they provided natives with a convenient means of travel and transporting goods. Using horses, Indians could cover great distances in much

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less time than on foot and carry much more baggage than they could using dogs. More importantly, the acquisition of horses enabled natives to pursue the enormous buffalo herds throughout the plains. Prior to the arrival of the horse on the plains, Indians could only follow bison so far over the arid plains before having to return to one of the few sources of water. As a result, during the pre-horse era on the northern plains, few nomadic groups actually roamed the plains. Simply, the integration of the horse into northern plains societies enabled tribes to adopt the fully nomadic lifestyle that the Plains Indians became widely identified with. Furthermore, the horse helped Indians carry buffalo and other game killed at great distances from camps back to their kinsmen. As Cocking observed, the northern plains were “[a] plentiful Country of provisions, for when the present stock is expended, an Indian need only mount his Horse, taking his Gun or Bow, & in a short time return with his Horse loaded with meat, supplying his neighbours also.”

Horses altered not only northern plains Indians’ economies and cultures, but their military capabilities as well. As the case of the Shoshones demonstrated, their acquisition of the horse gave them a clear advantage over the pre-horse societies that they encountered as they fanned out onto the plains during the early eighteenth century. Naturally, their enemies fought back by acquiring horses themselves, through both trading and raiding. The evolution of northern plains native economies inaugurated by

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the use of the horse also led to armed confrontations between various groups as they encroached upon one another’s territory while pursuing bison. Furthermore, nomads had to relocate periodically as their horse herds grazed out an area, sometimes instigating further clashes in the process. Intertribal warfare also resulted from the fact that horses became increasingly representative of an individual’s wealth and social status. In many tribes, horses became the principal commodity of exchange and, therefore, the primary form of personal property. In determining an individual’s social status, some groups, such as the Cree, placed great value upon his ability to give gifts. Since the horse became the ultimate gift that one could give to another, because of its immense value, natives wanted to accumulate as many as possible to give away in order to ascend their tribe’s social hierarchy. Inevitably, horse raiding resulted in casualties, which led to victimized groups seeking vengeance on the warpath.¹⁸

In order to maintain and increase their dominion over the plains, the Shoshones had to find a valuable yet convenient, commodity to offer in exchange to their contacts in the Southwest. This led to the Shoshones tapping into the slave trade of the Spanish Southwest through their Great Basin and southern plains middlemen. As they spread throughout the northern plains, the Shoshones actively warred on the peoples they encountered in an effort to procure as many captives as possible to barter for horses. Since the value of captives was not dependent upon their tribal identity, Shoshones indiscriminately attacked other tribes, solidifying other groups’ perception of the

Shoshone as the ultimate threat in the region. Furthermore, Shoshone raiding led to the creation of a loose alliance between its victims, the Blackfeet and their neighbors, the Gros Ventres of the Plains, Crees, and Assiniboines. As the Shoshones increasingly became identified as the enemy, a perpetual cycle of raiding and retaliatory expeditions developed. Reprisals, of course, helped these other groups obtain Shoshone horses.¹⁹

As the eighteenth century progressed, the Shoshone integration of horses into their military life dramatically altered the scale and nature of northern plains warfare. Previously, large war parties of pedestrian warriors aimed to locate, surprise, and destroy small enemy camps. On occasion, such expeditions met opposition from a similar party of enemy warriors. In the ensuing battle, the opponents confronted one another from afar, took cover behind their shields and fired arrows at one another. Unless one side possessed a significant numerical superiority over the other and found it feasible to make a charge, few casualties resulted. After the Shoshones acquired horses, however, they gained an advantage over their enemies by using their mounts to launch terrifying surprise attacks on bewildered enemy villages. In such assaults, they overwhelmed those who opposed them and took the young captive, especially women.²⁰ The Piegans, one of the several tribes that comprised the larger Blackfoot “confederacy” and lived on the edge of Shoshone territory, probably suffered more than another group from such assaults. According to Saukamappe, a Cree by birth but a Piegan by adoption, confusion reigned in his Cree village when his people learned that Shoshones used a strange new

¹⁹ Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 417; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 297-6; Secoy, Changing Military Patterns, 38.
animal to attack the Piegans. In the battle, the Piegans lost several of their best warriors as Shoshones charged on their horses and struck their opponents’ heads with weapons made of stone. Saukamappe recalled that, “This news we did not well comprehend and it alarmed us, for we had no idea of Horses and could not make out what they were.”

By the 1740s, the Shoshones gained a reputation as a powerful, merciless tribe because of their thundering mounted assaults and the devastation that followed. As the Chevalier de la Verendrye, a French explorer, observed in 1742, “this Serpent tribe is considered very brave. They do not content themselves in a campaign with destroying a village, according to the custom of all the savages; they keep up the war from spring to autumn.” Even worse for the Shoshones’ enemies, “[t]hey are very numerous, and woe to those who cross their path!” The Chevalier witnessed firsthand the fear that the Shoshone instilled in other northern plains Indians as he accompanied a war expedition comprised of warriors from several tribes westward from the Missouri toward the Rocky Mountains. Although it is not clear which groups comprised this party, their reaction to reports of a nearby Shoshone village illustrated how menacing the Shoshone presence on the plains was at this time. A dismayed Chevalier watched as his hosts panicked at the news and promptly turned around to hurry homeward.

The Shoshone advance onto the northern plains led to other tribes acquiring horses. On the northwestern reaches of the high plains, the Kutenai and Flathead obtained horses from the Shoshone, with whom they allied. The “Shoshone

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21 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 242.
22 Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 412.
23 Ibid., 420-1.
Rendezvous,” a major trade fair in what is now Wyoming, the Shoshones further dispersed horses among their contacts. This major event linked the peoples of the Great Basin to the Plateau peoples such as the Nez Perce and Salish, spreading horses northward along the Rocky Mountains. Through this trading rendezvous, as well as direct trade with many of the tribes which attended it, the Crows acquired horses, which they received in exchange for produce and, later, European goods dealt by Crees and Assiniboines who dealt with French and English traders, which they picked up from the Mandan and Hidatsa trade centers on the Missouri. The Crows began accumulating horses between 1725 and 1730. On occasion, Crows even walked great distances down the Missouri River or over the Continental Divide to obtain more horses. As a result of such exploits and their lucrative trade that they carefully guarded, the Crow were well-supplied with horses within two decades and roamed the plains as a fully equestrian people.24

Crow middlemen, shuttling goods between the horticultural Missouri villages and the Shoshone and other western groups, were not only the primary dealers of horses to the Mandans and Hidatsas, but the means by which the Missouri villages became enmeshed in a larger system which included the Spanish southwest. Although the Crow took many goods to the Missouri, trafficking products of the buffalo hunt, such as dried meat, skins, clothing, and lodge-making materials, horses were the single most important commodity they brought. The Crows, however, were not the semisedentary villagers’

only source of horses. Other northern plains and southern plains tribes, such as Cheyennes, Kiowas, Arapahos, visited the Missouri settlements on occasion, especially those of the Arikara, who lived nearer to the southern plains than their Mandan and Hidatsa neighbors. As one might expect, when the Chevalier de la Verendrye explored to the west of the Missouri in 1742, the territory of the Crows, Cheyenne, and other tribes that supplied the Mandans and Hidatsas with horses, he remarked that, “All the tribes of those countries have a great many horses, asses, and mules.”

Evidence suggests that sometimes the Missouri villagers had contact with tribes who obtained horses directly from the Spanish. When the Chevalier de la Verendrye’s father visited the Mandans in 1738, he left behind two Frenchmen to learn the language and ways of the Indians. They learned that once each year, parties from several equestrian tribes visited the Mandans, bringing mostly dressed buffalo skins to trade. One of the tribes claimed that they made the journey all the way from “the setting of the sun, where there are white men living in towns and forts made of bricks and white stone.” Furthermore, the Mandans claimed that they previously made the journey to meet the Spaniards and the trip took a whole summer. When the Chevalier visited what was probably an Arikara village, he met an Indian who claimed that he grew up among the Spanish. He stated that it took approximately twenty days to reach Spanish settlements by horseback because of the dangers posed by the Shoshone. Although it does not appear that the semisedentary villagers possessed many horses by this time, it

27 Ibid., 366-7.
was apparent that their trade network reached not only into the surrounding plains, but well beyond them.\textsuperscript{28}

The Arikara passed horses to their eastern neighbors, the westward-expanding Teton Sioux. The Teton, or Lakota, bands then passed the horses on to their Dakota, Yankton, and Yanktonai kinsmen at pan-Sioux trade fairs conducted in modern-day Minnesota, expanding the horse trade network beyond the eastern reaches of the plains. Although western Sioux bands acquired their first horses as early as the first decade of the eighteenth century to address their need for a means to more efficiently pursue buffalo, their accumulation of the animal was gradual. The Battiste Good winter count suggests that the Brule Sioux band obtained their first horses in either 1708 or 1709 from the Omahas, who dwelled on the central plains.\textsuperscript{29} During the following decades, the Battiste Good counts state that the Brules took more horses from other groups, but the quantities of horses acquired were usually small. Because of such a slow rate of accumulation, it was not until the 1750s or 1760s that the western Sioux had obtained enough horses through both warfare and raiding to become a fully equestrian bison-hunting people.\textsuperscript{30}

Like the Crows and semisdentary villagers, the Plateau peoples acted as middlemen in the diffusion of horses throughout the northern plains. According to

Saukamappee, he did not encounter his first horse until probably the 1730s, when his people killed a Shoshone “Big Dog.” But by the 1740s, it appears that the Blackfeet and Gros Ventres, who inhabited the northwestern plains, were fully equestrian as a result of their commerce with Flatheads, Kutenais, and Nez Perces. The Blackfeet bolstered their stock of horses by raiding their Shoshone enemies’ plentiful herds and even traveling far to the southwest to trade for them.\textsuperscript{31} When Anthony Hendry trekked into Blackfoot country in 1754 in an effort to draw the Blackfeet into the Hudson’s Bay Company trade, his party tracked the Blackfeet by “their horses dung and foot-steps.”\textsuperscript{32} Finally encountering the Blackfeet, Hendry marveled at their expertise in handling their mounts, noting that they used them to pursue and kill buffalo, which were plentiful in the region. By this time, the Blackfeet began to turn the tide against their Shoshone enemies as they gathered increasing numbers of horses and used them on the warpath.\textsuperscript{33}

To the east, the Assiniboines and their Cree allies obtained horses from the Blackfeet and Gros Ventres, as well as the Missouri River trade centers. Although the Verendryes did not report their Assiniboine contacts having horses between 1738 and 1743, they possessed great numbers of them by the 1770s.\textsuperscript{34} According to Alexander Hendry, these horses “were originally procured from the white people, with beards, who

\textsuperscript{32} Hendry, “Journal of a Journey,” 330.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, 335, 338; Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 297.
live to the southward; that is, the Spanish colonists, in New Mexico." The Assiniboines passed some horses on to their eastern neighbors and allies, the Crees, who obtained more horses by raiding their Sioux and Shoshone enemies. 

Thus, by 1780, every tribe inhabiting the northern Great Plains acquired horses through trade, warfare, or, in many cases, a blend of the two. During the course of approximately a century, an intricate intertribal exchange network, with its center at the Missouri trading hubs, had spread horses from the Spanish southwest to the plains of Canada. As a result, a region that previously had a relatively small population outside of the horticultural tribes residing along the banks of the Missouri experienced a proliferation in the number of Indian inhabitants, for many groups found the nomadic life not only a possible way of life, but a bountiful one. Although the tribes residing closest to the Spanish southwest owned by far the most horses, natives living farther out on the plains eagerly sought to increase their own supplies. Consequently, Colin G. Calloway writes, "the routes of exchange by which horses spread continued to pulse with activity." This intense trading activity, however, was not solely due to the value of the horse, as northern plains natives actively pursued another element of European colonialism.

At about the same time that Shoshones began to introduce horses to the northern plains from the southwestern reaches of the region, Crees and Assiniboines acquired guns and started spreading them onto the plains from the northeast. As early as the 1670s, the

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38 Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 419.
Crees obtained their first firearms from British Hudson’s Bay Company traders. When the company established Fort York on the western shore of Hudson’s Bay in 1684, Crees had easier accesses to supplies of European products, especially guns. Like the Shoshones, Crees had to offer the European contacts a valuable commodity in return for their coveted goods. The result was the development of the fur trade network. Each season, Crees gathered cargoes of beaver pelts, made the long journey via canoe to Fort York, traded their pelts for guns and other items, and then returned home.\textsuperscript{39} During the 1730s, the Crees possessed enough guns to use in hunting, but they apparently did not have a great supply of them, for Saukamappee reported that lances, as well as the bows and arrows, were still the primary weapons used in native warfare. Thus, it appears that the advance of the gun throughout the plains was at first gradual.\textsuperscript{40}

The fur trade intensified during the first half of the eighteenth century as French traders established posts in the Lake Winnipeg country. A heated rivalry erupted as British traders strove to maintain their control over the trade with Indians. By giving gifts of tobacco and ammunition, the British and French sought to win the loyalty of their native contacts. Furthermore, the French in particular strengthened ties with indigenous groups by sending employees, usually lower-class individuals, to live among them. These agents not only encouraged the natives to increase their catch of beaver, but they

\textsuperscript{39} Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 267, 298; McGinnis, \textit{Counting Coup}, 6; Lehmer, “Other Side,” 95. Although the volume of trade in beaver pelts never came close to matching that of the exchange in buffalo hides during the next century, it was considerable enough to serve as a medium of exchange for European goods. Lehmer points out that bulky buffalo hides did not become the focus of the fur trade until the nineteenth century, when Americans began to use the Missouri River to transport large loads. Lehmer, “Other Side,” 98. For more on the beaver pelt trade see Isenberg, \textit{Destruction of the Bison}, 49-50.

\textsuperscript{40} Thompson, \textit{David Thompson’s Narrative}, 241; Lehmer, “Other Side,” 98.
sometimes married Indian women, in the process tightening the bond between that tribe and the French.  

Growing competition between the British and French ensured that tribes other than the Cree would gain access to their goods. This was particularly true in the case of the Cree’s close allies, the Assiniboines, who gained direct access to the fur trade when the French moved into the country surrounding Lake Winnipeg. Formerly, the Assiniboines participated in the fur trade through Cree middlemen who ferried not only their beaver pelts to Fort York. In exchange for the furs, the Crees provided the Assiniboines with goods obtained from the British. As a result, Assiniboines began acquiring guns in about 1690. Prior to that time, the two groups were enemies, as the Crees clashed with the Assiniboines and their Sioux kinsmen. Using guns, the Crees gained the upper hand over the Siouan peoples and the Assiniboines abandoned the Sioux, opting to join forces with the better-armed Cree. Logically, the Crees strengthened their new allies by supplying them with firearms. Soon, the Assiniboines, too, were fully enmeshed, directly and indirectly, in the rapidly growing fur trade and possessed guns in considerable numbers by the time Verendrye visited them in 1738.

The Cree and Assiniboine accumulation of guns enabled both groups to expand onto the northern plains, in the process increasing regional intertribal conflict as they displaced groups such as the Sioux and Gros Ventres. Formerly a strictly forest people, the Crees and Assiniboines prudently expanded onto the plains of southern Canada.

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during the early eighteenth century to maintain their lucrative position in the fur trade. Although the Crees and Assiniboines did not advance far onto the plains during the eighteenth century, since the focus of the fur trade on beaver pelts necessitated that they remain close to the rich sources of these commodities in the forests and marginal lands of Canada, their numbers and firepower made them a formidable force on the prairies.  

Once they acquired firearms, the Crees and Assiniboines, much like the Shoshones, acted as middlemen by linking the European trade centers to other tribes. The primary network that the Cree and Assiniboine middlemen tapped into was that which existed on the Missouri River. Taking some of the guns, ammunition, knives, axes, and other Old World products to the Mandan and Hidatsa trading centers, the Crees and Assiniboines bartered them for produce, but more importantly, the horses that they coveted. As a result of this trade connection, the Assiniboines were not only familiar with the route to the Mandan villages by the time Verendrye accompanied them to the Missouri villages in 1738, but the Frenchman’s gifts of ball and powder to his Mandan hosts indicate that they had acquired guns by this time.  

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43 Andrew Graham, “Extract from “Observations on Hudson’s Bay,”” in James Isham, Isham’s Observations and Notes, 1743-1749, ed. E.E. Rich (London: The Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1949, 1968), 311; Henry, Travels and Adventures, 303; Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 322; Newcomb, “Causes of Plains Warfare,” 322; Fowler, “Great Plains,” 15; Secoy, Changing Military Patterns, 33, 42-3, 47; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 5; Mandelbaum, Plains Cree, 178; Dale R. Russell, Eighteenth-Century Western Cree and their Neighbours (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991), 199, 218. As middlemen from these tribes spent an increasing amount of their time on the prairies, some warfare between the Blackfeet and the migrating Crees and Assiniboines erupted and persisted well into the eighteenth century. For the most part, however, the Crees and Assiniboines on one side, and the Blackfeet on the other, remained allied in order to better oppose their mutual enemy, the Shoshones.  

44 Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 323-4; Meyer, Village Indians, 16; Wood, Early Fur Trade, 8; Lehmer, “Other Side,” 95, 97; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 2; Ewers, Indian Life, 35, 37. Although the Mandans and Assiniboines were normally at war, they established periodic truces so that they could conduct a mutually beneficial trade.  

The Mandans and their Hidatsa neighbors further distributed firearms throughout
the northern plains. The Crow middlemen who trafficked Shoshone horses into the
semisedentary villages often received guns in exchange. In turn, it appears that the
Crows traded some firearms to their Shoshone and Flathead contacts. During the
eighteenth century, however, the Shoshones acquired very few guns. Since the Spanish
refused to sell or trade firearms to their Indian “subjects,” the Shoshones had to rely upon
the British and French supply filtering in from the northeast. Those that did make it as
far as the Shoshones were usually expensive. On the whole, the spread of guns
throughout the northern plains occurred at a slightly slower pace than did that of the
horse, so it took longer for the Crows to amass an ample stock of guns before they could
pass them along to other peoples than it did for them to build up an adequate supply of
horses.\textsuperscript{46}

While the Shoshones failed to acquire a significant number of firearms, their
enemies, led by the Blackfeet, did not. Often, the Blackfeet provided the Crees and
Assiniboines with horses in exchange for firearms.\textsuperscript{47} As a result of this commerce, as
early as perhaps the 1730s some Blackfoot tribes acquired a few firearms. Oftentimes,
however, the Cree and Assiniboine used the guns for several years prior to offering them
to the Blackfeet. Once they did, they shrewdly marked up the prices to earn themselves a
handsome profit. The ability of the middlemen to do so suggests that guns were a hot
commodity on the plains. In an effort to retain their monopoly on guns, the Cree and

\textsuperscript{46} Ewers, \textit{Indian Life}, 37; Calloway, “Snake Frontiers,” 87-88.
\textsuperscript{47} Although the Cree-Assiniboine alliance and the Blackfeet sometimes warred, they, like the
Assiniboines and Mandans, established truces to barter for goods that would help them better resist their
mutual enemies, the Shoshone.
Assiniboine middlemen discouraged the Blackfeet from traveling to distant Fort York to directly participate in the trade. Although this limited the Blackfeet to only acquiring firearms from the Crees and Assiniboines, they gained enough of an advantage from their small quantity of guns to gradually gain the upper hand over the hated Shoshones.48

Indeed, Saukamappee’s testimony suggests that the arrival of guns on the northern plains in the hands of the Cree, Assiniboine, and, later, the Blackfeet, began to turn the tide in their conflict with the Shoshones. Although Blackfeet peoples migrated onto the plains from the Saskatchewan country to hunt early in the eighteenth century, their powerful Shoshone enemies held their further advance in check.49 That was, until the Blackfeet began to acquire firearms. In what was probably the late 1730s or early 1740s, Saukamappee joined a group of Crees and Assiniboines that recruited some Piegans to go on the warpath against the Shoshones.50 According to Saukamappee, “between us [the Crees] and the Stone [Assiniboine] Indians we had ten guns and each of us about thirty balls, and powder for the war, and we were considered the strength of the battle.”51 As the fight began, the Piegan chief, eager to witness the effect of the guns, remained near those who possessed them. In the ensuing engagement, the well-armed Crees and Assiniboines carried the day, for their gunfire “caused consternation and dismay along their whole line,” killing and wounding many Shoshones, forcing the survivors to make a

49 Isenberg, The Destruction of the Bison, 35.
50 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 241-2.
51 Ibid., 242.
hasty retreat. At the ceremony following the battle, the Piegan war chief extolled the Crees and Assiniboines for their contribution to the battle and persuaded the warriors to remain with his people, for they would not only be adopted as Piegans, but each would receive a beautiful young wife. Saukamappee and his comrades politely refused the generous offer, then returned home, where Saukamappee and his fellow warriors anticipated praise and honor from their people for their victory. Instead, Saukamappee found that his wife had left him for another man. He promptly forsook his kinsmen and returned to the Piegan camp where he received a “hearty welcome,” and the war chief made good on his previous offer, giving the young man his eldest daughter as a wife. This episode reveals not only how guns dramatically influenced northern plains warfare, but also how tribes clearly recognized this fact and reacted accordingly, by acquiring more guns and conducting fewer large scale military operations.

Ultimately, their shortage of guns constituted a major disaster for the Shoshones. Anthony McGinnis concludes that, “the imbalance in the white man’s “gifts” to the Indians helped bring about the Shoshone demise.” Like horses, firearms provided northern plains tribes with a tremendous military asset. While the Shoshones’ bitter enemies gradually built up considerable supplies of horses and firearms during the eighteenth century, the Shoshones had to base their military strength almost solely upon their superiority in horses because they had virtually no access to guns. At first, before the Blackfeet, Crees, Assiniboines, and other tribes amassed a significant number of

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52 Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 243.
53 Ibid., 243-5.
horses, they opposed the Shoshone cavalry-style warfare with an infantry-style approach, armed with guns. As they acquired more horses, however, they wisely used the horse and gun in conjunction with one another while on the warpath and Shoshone power on the northern plains began to wane. Realizing the helplessness of their hated enemies, the Blackfeet and their allies vigorously pressed the assault, steadily pushing the Shoshones southwestward after midcentury. Relying mostly on the tactics used by the Shoshones themselves, making surprise attacks on small camps and avoiding large pitched battles, the allied tribes demonstrated the tremendous influence that the gun could exert on intertribal conflict. Of course, the Shoshones went to great lengths to acquire firearms, much as other tribes tried to obtain horses from them. Thus, intertribal contact through warfare further intensified as tribes tried to take guns from those who possessed them while, at the same time, the latter actively worked to ensure that they did not.\textsuperscript{55}

Yet, as Matthew Cocking observed in 1775, the Shoshones still remained a significant threat to neighboring tribes. Commenting on their northern plains neighbors, “[t]he Natives in general are afraid of the Snake Indians.”\textsuperscript{56} In fact, the Shoshone presence on the plains remained menacing enough that Blackfeet and Assiniboines making the long journey to trade at Fort York remained alert for Shoshone attacks. This partly resulted from the effects of the fall of New France in 1763 after the Seven Years War. Following the French defeat, the fur trade faltered as competition between traders representing two rival countries disappeared. Although independent traders gradually


\textsuperscript{56} Cocking, “An Adventurer from Hudson Bay,” 106.
moved in to fill the void left by the French, the trade slowed for a time and as a result, fewer guns flowed onto the plains. This brief respite helped the Shoshones temporarily maintain their tenuous hegemony.\textsuperscript{57}

The Crees were not the only tribe that introduced firearms to the northern plains. The westward-expanding Sioux also played a significant role in the growing fur trade. At the pan-Sioux trade fairs held along the Minnesota River, and, later, the Cheyenne and James Rivers to the west, the plains Sioux bands, the Teton, Yankton, and Yanktonias, traded furs and horses acquired from the Arikaras to their eastern woodland kinsmen, the Santees, for European goods, especially guns. The western Sioux kept most of these guns for themselves, but also bartered a small quantity of them to the Arikaras for more horses. Since the Arikaras had to rely almost solely upon the Sioux for guns, since they were enemies of the Mandans and Hidatsas, the Sioux had a great advantage over them in trade. Not only did Sioux bands market guns to Arikaras at high prices, but they occasionally forced the villagers to rely on them for buffalo products by driving bison herds away from the Arikara settlements. Sometimes, the Arikaras refused to trade at unfair rates and vicious Sioux attacks followed. Although the Sioux carried on a considerable trade with the Arikara, their relationship with the nearby Mandan and Hidatsa villages was not so cordial. Using their mounting military might, the Sioux made every effort to disrupt the semisedentary villagers’ commerce with their hated enemies, the Crees and Assiniboines.\textsuperscript{58}


Utilizing the guns acquired through trade, the plains Sioux, like the Crees and Assiniboines, advanced further onto the northern plains as the eighteenth century progressed in pursuit of beaver pelts to trade and, for subsistence, buffalo. By 1725, Sioux bands moving westward from the Minnesota River clashed with the expanding Cree-Assiniboine alliance. As previously mentioned, the Crees and Sioux had a long, violent history before these two groups met on the northeastern plains. Before the Sioux had any guns, the Cree wealth of firearms enabled them to displace Sioux bands living on the headwaters of the Mississippi southward. Eventually, the overwhelming Cree strength won over the Assiniboines, who joined the Crees and forever earned the enmity of their Sioux kinsmen. Thus, when the Sioux moved onto the northeastern plains during the 1700s after breaking the Cree-Assiniboine monopoly on guns by opening trade with the French, they renewed an old rivalry.\textsuperscript{59}

When the first Sioux peoples filtered onto the northern plains early in the eighteenth century and reached the Missouri by the 1740s, they possessed guns, but their

\textsuperscript{59} Ostler, \textit{Plains Sioux}, 22; White, “Winning of the West,” 21-2; Fowler, “Great Plains,” 16; Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 309; Fowler, “Great Plains,” 16; Calloway, “Snake Frontiers,” 87. The westward relocation of the annual pan-Sioux trading fair during the seventeenth century reveals the rapid pace of Teton, Yankton, and Yanktonai migration. As late as 1700, the fairs were held near the mouth of the Minnesota on the Mississippi River, for the plains Sioux had few, if any, horses at this time. Unable to travel vast distances to trade, it is highly unlikely that many of their people had ventured far beyond the fringes of the plains. By 1750, however, the yearly rendezvous took place on the headwaters of the Minnesota, near the modern-day Minnesota-South Dakota border. By the end of the century, the James River, which now spans both North and South Dakota, became home to the fair. Tracing the westward shift of this important Sioux meeting makes it clear that it paralleled a migration of the bulk of the Sioux people in the same direction. According to Jonathan Carver, who visited eastern Sioux country during the late 1760s, eleven total Sioux groups existed in America. Of those eleven, only three remained in the Mississippi country; the other eight were already plains peoples. Jonathan Carver, \textit{Travels through the Interior Parts of North America, in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768} (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1956), 59-60; George E. Hyde, \textit{Red Cloud’s Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937, 1957), 8, 14, 18; Secoy, \textit{Changing Military Patterns}, 69-74.
deficiency in horses left them weaker than the numerous semisedentary groups. As a result, early relations between the plains Sioux and Arikaras were largely trade-oriented. However, on occasion, Sioux bands raided Arikara settlements when the opportunity presented itself. Arikara war parties responded by making mounted attacks on the Sioux camps east of the Missouri. After midcentury, as the Sioux accumulated horses and more bands moved onto the prairies, the nature of their relationship with the Arikara changed dramatically. Sioux attacks on the Arikara, as well as those on the Mandan and Hidatsa, intensified as the Sioux, like the Blackfeet to the northwest, fused horses and guns into their warfare patterns. Although the Teton remained on the whole friendly with the Arikara, their Yankton and Yanktonai kinsmen became increasingly hostile toward the horticultural peoples in general. Their pressure became so great that sometime soon after midcentury, the Arikara relocated upstream to a stronger defensive position.\(^{60}\)

At about the same time, the Mandans found it necessary to move their villages nearer to those of the Hidatsas in order to better resist Sioux pressure. The growing Sioux presence on the plains east of the Missouri became a significant threat to the Mandans as early as 1738, when they requested that Verendrye and his company aid them in the event of a Sioux attack. The Mandan and Hidatsa situation was further troubled by the fact that they and the Arikaras had long been bitter enemies. As a result, Arikara warriors sometimes accompanied Sioux war parties that set off to raid the Mandan and Hidatsa villages. Although the Arikaras were clearly on unfriendly terms

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with some Sioux bands, their relations with some groups provided them with military and economic benefits. 61

Fortunately for the semisedentary villagers, by the mid-1760s, the tide of Sioux expansion slowed and ground a halt. Following the defeat of the French in 1763, which temporarily hampered the fur trade, the plains Sioux suffered from shortages of guns and ammunition. Losing their ability to conduct a lively offensive against the Missouri tribes, an uneasy equilibrium settled upon the region. A contributing factor may have been the fact that the Sioux remained relatively small in number compared to the villagers and possessed fewer horses. 62 George E. Hyde estimates that in approximately 1760, “the Arikara towns contained a population perhaps equal to that of the entire Sioux nation.” 63 According to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who visited the Arikaras during their expedition to the Pacific Ocean early in the nineteenth century, their hosts informed them that their population once consisted of “ten large tribes.” 64 Their Mandan enemies, on the other hand, inhabited between seven and thirteen villages prior to 1780. The higher number likely includes the settlements of Mandans’ close allies, the Hidatsas. Colin G. Calloway’s estimation supports this conclusion, for he states that prior to 1780, the Mandans numbered approximately 9,000 people living in six villages, while the Arikara population was around 24,000. 65

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63 Hyde, Red Cloud’s Folk, 16.
64 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 6, 89.
65 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 271; Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol 5, 347; Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 6, 90; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 419, 421; As a
The Sioux advance also faltered because vast fortifications surrounded the Missouri villages. The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, of course, established the villages themselves on bluffs overlooking the Missouri River valley. When Verendrye visited a Mandan village in 1738, he marveled at his hosts’ defensive provisions. According to the Frenchman, “The fort is built on an elevation in mid-prairie with a ditch over fifteen feet deep and from fifteen to eighteen wide. Entrance to the fort can only be obtained by steps on pieces [of wood] which they remove when threatened by the enemy.” Clearly astonished by the sophistication of these works, Verendrye continued, “Their fortification, indeed, has nothing savage about it.” As Frank Raymond Secoy accurately points out, “Every feature of these villages…was the result of the dominating idea of defense.” Considering their great numbers, superior supply of horses, and extensive defensive networks, it was not at all surprising that Clark observed in 1804 that “all the nations before this maladey [the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic] was affr[d]. of them.”

During the eighteenth century, warfare and trade placed the semisedentary Missouri tribes at the center of regional affairs. Tribes from the east, north, and west all made regular visits to the Missouri trading centers to participate in the exchange of horses, guns, furs, produce, and many other goods, both indigenous and European. As matter of fact, it appears that at least a portion of the Oglala Sioux band made peace with the Arikaras, settled among them, and assumed a horticultural lifestyle shortly before disaster struck in 1780. White, “Winning of the West,” 323-4.

66 Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 339-40; Fowler, “Great Plains,” 2, 16; Hyde, Red Cloud’s Folk, 16; Secoy, Changing Military Patterns, 72-3.
68 Ibid., 340.
69 Secoy, Changing Military Patterns, 72.
70 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 220.
this chapter detailed, the trading hubs on the Missouri acted as distribution centers for horses and guns, which reached the villages from two opposite directions. Naturally, tribes inhabiting the plains beyond the frontier of these two items wanted to obtain them, so they made long journeys to the Missouri to trade for them. Once these tribes acquired guns or horses, they passed some on to their neighbors, who in turn traded them to others. In the process, the Missouri villages became the center of a trade network that encompassed much more than the northern plains; goods exchanged at their villages reached the southern plains, the Pueblo exchange along the Rio Grande, the Columbia River network, as well as the European system centered in Montreal.  

This vast trade network made the semisedentary villages increasingly prosperous. Although the villagers produced goods that were valuable to others, namely agricultural items, their greatest profit came from horses and guns, both of which the Missouri settlements excelled at amassing and marketing.  

While visiting the Mandans, Verendrye noted that their village was “very well provided with cellars,” where the natives stored their skins, meat, and agricultural produce. In those “cellars,” “they had provisions in reserve far beyond our requirements.” These observations lend credence

\[71\] Henry F. Dobyns, “Native American Trade Centers as Contiguous Disease Foci,” in Disease and Demography in the Americas, ed. John W. Verano and Douglas H. Ubelaker (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 215; Lehmer, “Other Side,” 95, 98; Meyer, Village Indians, 20; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 302; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 1, 15; Ewers, Indian Life, 24.  This trade, however, consisted of more than material goods. Cultural exchanges occurred as well. Indian groups adopted whole or parts of native ceremonies after they experienced them while visiting others. In some cases, this exchange led to the creation of new rituals comprised of a hybrid of elements from a number of groups’ ceremonies. For instance, the Sun Dance, a ritual which became important to many northern plains nomadic tribes, was probably forged from a combination of Arikara, Mandan, and other tribes’ practices. Fowler, “Great Plains,” 4-5, 17.  

\[72\] Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 301; Lehmer, “Other Side,” 99.  

\[73\] Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 342.  

\[74\] Ibid., 330.
to Donald J. Lehmer’s conclusion that Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa villages “were, in
effect, warehouses where the horses of the western tribes were held against the ultimate
exchange for guns, ammunition, and other trade goods brought in by the eastern tribes,
and where these goods were held in readiness for visits from the western hunters.”
Indeed, the Mandans, as well as their fellow semisedentary middlemen, exacted a
handsome profit from the regional trade network that centered around their villages.

Verendrye also learned that his Mandan hosts were skilled in the art of trade.
Before the Frenchmen arrived at the Mandan village, they had a rendezvous on the plains
with a small party of men from that village. Recognizing the potential profit which he
and his people could make by hosting Verendrye’s party, which included a number of
Assiniboines, a Mandan chief eagerly invited the expedition to his village. As the
Mandans bartered with the Assiniboines for guns, ammunition, axes, knives, kettles, and
other goods, Verendrye witnessed the trade savvy of the Mandans at work, noting that
they “are much more crafty than the Assiniboin in their commerce and in everything,
they always dupe them.” In short order, the Mandans “clean[ed] the Assiniboin out of
everything they have” to trade. The Assiniboines, however, did not depart after they
finished their business and overstayed their welcome. Taking advantage of the Mandans’
hospitality toward the Frenchman, the Assiniboines consumed considerable amounts of
their hosts’ provisions. The Mandans desired to get rid of the troublesome visitors, but
did not want the Frenchman to leave as well. At the same time, they did not want to

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76 Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 320-4.
77 Ibid., 323.
78 Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 332.
alienate the Assiniboines, who they certainly hoped to do business with in the future. So, the crafty Mandans spread a rumor that a band of Sioux was in the area, making sure to inform Verendrye of their plan. As expected, the Assiniboines, not willing to risk an encounter with their enemies, hastily left the Missouri.\footnote{Ibid., 332-3; Meyer, Village Indians, 19.}

The very trade that brought the Missouri villagers great wealth paradoxically weakened them by strengthening their enemies, particularly the Sioux, with horses and other goods. Emboldened by their growing military strength, northern plains nomads pressured not only the semisedentary villagers, but neighboring hunting tribes. Warfare between the Cree-Assiniboine alliance and the Sioux increased as both sides sought control over trade with the Mandan, Hidatsu, and Arikara. While Cree and Assiniboine middlemen retained their monopoly over the fur trade with the Mandan and Hidatsu because of their longstanding partnership, the growing Sioux presence downstream ensured that they could not reach the Arikara villages. Thus, each opposing force claimed hegemony over the commerce of one of the major Missouri trading centers. To the west, the Shoshones fiercely defended their valuable connection to the sources of Spanish goods in the Southwest.\footnote{Verendrye, Journals and Letters, 413; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 6; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 303; Meyer, Village Indians, 16.}

During the eighteenth century northern plains tribes met one another on the field of battle for many additional reasons. Of course, natives fought over not only access to trading, but also territory. Since the survival of most northern plains tribes depended one way or another upon the hunt, vicious warfare occurred over buffalo-rich lands.\footnote{Newcomb, “Causes of Plains Warfare,” 324, 328; Isenberg, Destruction of the Bison, 52.}
as Anthony McGinnis points out, “The warfare was rooted in strong feelings of tribalism. Each tribe called itself “The People,” or a term with similar meaning, and each was hostile toward outsiders.”\(^{82}\) Proud of their tribal identity, natives energetically defended what belonged to their people, whether it was horses, guns, or land. Furthermore, a man’s wealth, power, and social status, as well as that of his family, hinged more upon fighting than any other activity, for through warfare, men could gain honor. Of course, tribe’s desire for revenge after sustaining an enemy attack fueled intertribal warfare.\(^{83}\)

Driven by many tribal and individual motivations, frequent armed conflict occurred on the northern plains during the second half of the eighteenth century. Even though engagements were not nearly as large as they once were, warfare became an increasingly bloody affair as the horse and gun made warriors extremely deadly. The days in which massed groups of warriors assaulted enemy camps on foot were over. With guns increasing the ability of individual warriors to inflict damage on the enemy, warfare favored small groups over large ones. Furthermore, since enemy defenders often possessed guns, smaller war parties deceased the number of losses a tribe might sustain if an attack went awry.\(^{84}\)

Increasing numbers of raids meant that native camps had to remain alert at all times. Visiting the Blackfeet in 1754, Anthony Hendry noted that one of the native leaders “orders a party of Horsemen Evening & Morning to reconitre [reconnoiter].”\(^{85}\) This band of Blackfeet appeared to be quite active on the warpath, as Hendry observed

\(^{82}\) McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 2.
many dried scalps hanging outside of this chief’s tent.\textsuperscript{86} Just over two decades later, Alexander Henry noted that the Assiniboines behaved much in the same manner. According to Henry, “We arose at day-break, according to the custom of the Indians, who say, that they follow it in order to avoid surprises; this being the hour at which the enemy uniformly makes his attack.”\textsuperscript{87} Such observations on the defensive measures adopted by northern plains natives after the arrival of the horse and gun reveal just as much about the offensive approach of their enemies. Clearly, ambushes constituted the main form of regional warfare and such attacks occurred quite frequently.

Through this lively warfare, successful war parties took many captives from enemy camps. Although, as Henry observed, “the men of the country never suffer themselves to be taken, but always die on the field, rather than fall into captivity,” noncombatants, especially women and children did not and, as a result, they often fell into the hands of a victorious enemy.\textsuperscript{88} Once these unfortunate souls arrived in their captors’ camp, they became slaves. It was not uncommon for natives to mistreat older captives “in a most shocking & deliberate manner,” as Matthew Cocking commented.\textsuperscript{89} Young women and children, on the other hand, usually received not only kind treatment, but sometimes became members of the tribe that enslaved them. As families lost young people to war and sickness, they commonly adopted war captives to replace them. Sometimes, natives exchanged captives as gifts. Young Indian women were especially valuable, as their captors often trafficked them westward to white traders at their eastern

\textsuperscript{86} Hendry, “Journal of a Journey,” 339.
\textsuperscript{87} Henry, \textit{Travels and Adventures}, 294.
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibid.}, 278.
\textsuperscript{89} Cocking, “An Adventurer from Hudson Bay,” 112.
posts. So, as intertribal conflict increased as the eighteenth century progressed, the movement of individuals from one tribe to another through the taking and trafficking of war captives did so, too.\textsuperscript{90}

While warfare intensified on the northern plains throughout the 1700s, so did trade. Direct French and, later, British contact with Indian groups did much to foster the growth of commerce in the region. Verendrye’s visit to the Mandans in 1738 not only marked the beginning of this process, but revealed how eagerly some tribes welcomed foreign traders. In this case, the Mandans enthusiastically welcomed the Frenchman as they approached their village. Verendrye recalled that, “A great many people came to meet us, but that was nothing in comparison to what we saw on the rampart and along the ditches.”\textsuperscript{91} Once the trading party entered the village, they found themselves at the center of crowds of Mandans who only became more excited when they learned that their visitors planned to remain with them for a prolonged period. When Verendrye departed after about two weeks, the Mandans expressed deep sorrow.\textsuperscript{92}

During the 1750s and 1760s, French and British rivals reached westward from the Great Lakes and Hudson’s Bay to make direct contact with more natives. Facing increased competition as the French conducted expeditions such as Verendrye’s, the


\textsuperscript{91} Verendrye, *Journals and Letters*, 327.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 327, 329, 352-3.
British Hudson’s Bay Company found it necessary to adopt a similar approach.\textsuperscript{93}

Anthony Hendry’s journey westward to the Blackfoot country in 1754 was one manifestation of this new policy. On its way to the Blackfeet, Hendry’s company encountered a band of Assiniboines that he called the Eagle Indians. Discovering that these people never traded directly with Europeans, he encouraged them to travel to Fort York. Their chief agreed to gather some furs and do so. Apparently, the chief made good on his promise, for fellow trader Andrew Graham noted that, “Since 1775 the Eagle-Eyed Indians have traded annual[ly] at For[t] York, & are highly valued.”\textsuperscript{94}

Continuing his journey, Hendry eventually found the Blackfeet and persuaded a chief to agree to send some young men to Fort York. Some Blackfeet, however, did not wait to make the trip to Fort York; they traded some wolf hides to Henry while he visited. Furthermore, while Hendry encouraged the natives to trade with the Hudson’s Bay Company, he at the same time persuaded them to stay away from the firm’s French competitors. Although other Blackfoot chiefs hesitated to commit to sending men to trade or declined the invitation outright, Hendry’s presence among them revealed that the northernmost reaches of the plains were becoming increasingly connected to the fur trade. Of course, as northern plains tribes became more involved with the trade, they obtained more guns and ammunition, further fueling regional warfare.\textsuperscript{95}

The fall of New France in 1763 dramatically altered the fur trade. Until about 1770, the removal of French traders left a void in the exchange network that reached into

\textsuperscript{93} Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 299; Fowler, “Great Plains,” 14; Lehmer, “Other Side,” 92-3. Competition became so fierce that British traders catered to Indians’ needs by offering lighter guns that were easier to handle on horseback.

\textsuperscript{94} Hendry, “Journal of a Journey,” 331.

\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Ibid.}, 337-8, 348-9, 350-1; Secoy, \textit{Changing Military Patterns}, 51.
the northern plains. However, independent traders, derisively called “peddlers” by Hudson’s Bay Company agents, moved in and built up their business by making extensive direct contact with natives. Competition reached unprecedented levels and the British felt more compelled than ever to send agents onto the plains. With more employees working in Indian country, far away from Fort York, the Hudson’s Bay Company had to find an efficient way to supply them with food. The answer was pemmican, which traders began to procure from natives, in addition to furs. Thus, ties between foreign traders and their Indian contacts became much stronger, for the livelihood of the former now hinged upon the cooperation of the latter. Replying upon this arrangement, the Hudson’s Bay Company rapidly expanded into the Saskatchewan River country during the 1770s, establishing Cumberland House in 1774 and, in 1780 on the eve of the epidemic, Buckingham House in Blackfoot country. Consequently, the commerce in firearms swelled.

Even while the Hudson’s Bay Company built permanent forts on the outskirts of the northern plains, it continued to send agents to native camps. In 1775, Matthew Cocking made a journey similar to Hendry’s earlier trip. Along the way, he visited some Assiniboines, whom he encouraged to open direct trade at the forts, but they “seemed unwilling” to do so, preferring to “send their furs by their friends who yearly visit the forts.” Continuing on his way, the agent grew discouraged as the Blackfeet, who conducted a brisk trade with Cree and Assiniboine middlemen, proved to be elusive.

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the end, Cocking did find the Blackfeet, but they appeared disinclined to make the long journey to the nearest post. As the dejected agent made his way back to the east, he heard of “pedlars” operating throughout the country, intercepting natives traveling to the British posts and providing them with liquor and ammunition. Cocking ardently encouraged all Indians that he encountered not to do business with them.98

Still, the Crees remained the most active native participants in the fur trade. Although the Assiniboines apparently continued to obtain most of their European goods through Cree middlemen, their direct contact with traders increased as the century progressed.99 According to Alexander Henry, “The quantity of furs brought into the fort was very great. From twenty to thirty Indians arrived daily, laden with packs of beaver-skins.”100 At the same time, Henry noted that competition between the Hudson’s Bay Company and the independent traders over native furs remained fierce. Although the rival forces cooperated on occasion, much to the disadvantage of the natives, they usually did not and, as a result, native traders prospered. Success, of course, encouraged them to intensify their efforts.101

Finally, climactic factors contributed to the development of the northern Great Plains disease ecology. As Jody F. Decker points out, factors such as precipitation and temperature “may help to determine where the disease will occur.”102 Trimble concurs, writing that environmental factors such as climate, along with biological, social, cultural,
and disease characteristics play a role in disease epidemics. What Decker, Trimble, nor any other scholar noticed is that La Nina teleconnections, or “linkages between climate anomalies at some distance from each other,” appear to parallel climatic developments on the northern plains during the years immediately preceding the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic. According to scientists Joelle L. Gergis and Anthony M. Fowler, the years of 1778-1780 witnessed intense La Nina activity. One of the effects of La Nina, a phenomenon “characterized by unusually cold ocean temperatures in the eastern equatorial Pacific,” is that it triggers climatic shifts throughout North America. During La Nina events and for several months following them, temperatures in the northwest portion of the modern-day United States during the winter season are significantly colder than normal. Furthermore, below average precipitation typically accompanies the unusually cold weather that sweeps the Great Plains, making life for both humans and their prey quite difficult. Although Michael Glantz points out that observers must keep in mind that La Nina studies are not as complete as those conducted on El Nino, because of the lack of activity on the part of the former in recent history, evidence does suggest that La Nina events produce droughts in the midwestern United States. Also, research

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103 Trimble, Ethnohistorical Interpretation, 3-4, 11. While the current chapter deals primarily with the cultural and environmental causes for the spread of smallpox between 1780 and 1782, the next discusses the biological, social, and disease-related factors that diffused smallpox throughout the plains.
indicates that the impact of La Nina teleconnections “depends upon a variety of potentially intervening factors: how long the anomaly lasts, how intense it is, the season in which it occurs, the distance between the climate perturbations, the location of its impacts, and so forth.” So, a particularly intense La Nina event such as the one that Gergis and Fowler suggest occurred between 1778 and 1780 likely meant especially harsh weather conditions on the plains.

For the native inhabitants of the northern plains, a region noted for its aridity and cold winter seasons, sustained drought posed a serious problem. As Andrew C. Isenberg points out, “The historic Great Plains environment was characterized by both stability and dramatic, frequent, and destructive change.” The drought generated by La Nina in 1778-1780 was clearly an example of the latter case, for, as Isenberg continues, droughts, especially on the western plains, meant that not only the shortgrasses which bison fed upon, but the bison themselves perished in “considerable numbers.” Simply put, La Nina teleconnections deprived the indigenous peoples of the northern plains of their primary means of subsistence. Several years of drought also undoubtedly had a negative impact on the productive ability of the horticultural Missouri villagers, for as Donald J. Lehmer writes in his discussion of plains climatology, “Successful corn growing was obviously dependent upon a favorable combination of precipitation, summer temperatures, and length of growing season.”

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108 Glantz, *Currents of Change*, 133.
109 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 12.
110 Ibid., 11.
111 Lehmer, “Climate and Culture,” 60.
As one might expect, during the winters immediately preceding the epidemic, traders at Hudson House, a Hudson’s Bay Company post located on the Saskatchewan just beyond the northernmost reaches of the plains, made routine reports of starving natives arriving at the post from the nearby “Barren Grounds.” On December 26, 1780, Robert Longmoor, the master of Hudson House, reported that, “One Indian arrived for Tobacco for One Tent of Indians that is coming in Starving, they have eat three Dogs and part of their Beaver Skins for want of provisions.” Two weeks later he noted that, “three Indian men and their families arrived from within, they have neither furrs nor provisions, but almost starved for want.” Furthermore, it appears that the indigenous practice of burning the grasses of the plains, which aimed at keeping traders from obtaining furs for themselves, complicated matters. As Longmoor noted in November 1780, “Three Indians arrived from across the River, starving for want of provisions, the Ground being all burnt and no Snow on the Ground, so as they cant hunt nor see a track.” This comment suggests that both climatic and indigenous activities led to the severe food shortage. As the traders’ observations further indicate, famine forced Indians to move about in pursuit of game more than they normally would during the winter months, a time during which they largely remained stationary. As natives searched for food, they came into contact with other Indian groups. A lack of adequate nutrition, of

114 Ibid., 174.
115 Ibid., 167.
course, meant greater vulnerability to infectious diseases. Thus, on the eve of the epidemic, climatic shifts created another vector for disease.

The diffusion of the horse and gun throughout the northern plains during the seventeenth century thus brought the region’s inhabitants into more frequent contact with one another and European traders. By intensifying both warfare and commerce, the elements of colonialism, the horse and the gun, forged an increasingly interconnected region. Trade routes and warpaths experienced heavier and more frequent travel as Indian and European middlemen carried goods to native trading centers from sources outside of the region and vice versa. Therefore, when smallpox reached the northern plains in 1780, the means by which it could diffuse throughout the region already existed. The events of the previous century had finally forged a disease ecology capable of escalating a disease outbreak into an epidemic.

Climatic evidence also supports the argument that it is highly improbable that a smallpox epidemic swept the northern plains prior to 1780. The findings of Gergis and Fowler indicate that the last major La Nina event which occurred prior to the 1778-80 episode was one that spanned the years 1750-58. As this chapter demonstrates, both the horse and gun had not yet diffused throughout the northern plains by that time, so the trade network which then existed, as well as military encounters, were not as extensive as they were over two decades later. So, prior to the late 1770s, the forces of colonial

Trimble writes that climate also played a role in the 1837-38 smallpox epidemic. Unseasonably heavy rains forced many Indians to remain inside their dwellings and as a result, when disease arrived in their villages, it spread with great rapidity and was, therefore, more deadly. Trimble, *Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 47-9.
elements and climatic circumstances never aligned the way that they did on the plains in 1780 to act, in tandem, as vectors of infectious diseases.\footnote{Gergis and Fowler, “A History of ENSO,” 57.}
CHAPTER 2

A World Shattered: The Arrival of Smallpox on the Northern Plains, 1780-82

“The men that went out to the Barren Ground October the 15th came home this day starving No Buffalo to be found, They inform me of the Indians all dying in the Barren Ground, and the Tents all standing, the bodies inside unburied, and hardly a live Indian to be seen.”

-William Walker, Hudson House, December 2nd, 1781

By 1780, European colonialism had dramatically altered the disease ecology of the northern Great Plains, establishing the means by which disease could disperse throughout the region and achieve epidemic status. As the previous chapter illustrated, the arrival and spread of two elements in particular, the horse and the gun, generated an intricate fur trade network that linked tribes throughout the plains. In addition to increasing trade, the horse and the gun intensified native warfare, initiating further contact between different groups and creating another vector for disease. The staggering toll that smallpox had on the indigenous population of the northern plains resulted from the complex disease ecology which was forged during the eighteenth century, as well as the fact that the Indians were unfamiliar with the physically and psychologically traumatic virus. Furthermore, the maturation of the regional trade system coincided with

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international environmental activity, namely La Nina, which caused a great drought on the plains which, in turn, led to famine. As a result of these developments, the arrival of smallpox on the northern plains in 1780 constituted a demographic catastrophe for the region’s Indian inhabitants.

Indeed, the impact of epidemic on the indigenous peoples of the northern plains was tremendous, as it took thousands of lives. That heavy death toll, combined with the many debilitating effects of the disease, left survivors both physically scarred and mentally shaken. Consequently, they struggled to adjust to a vastly different world that tested their spiritual beliefs and traditional practices, a subject which scholars have hitherto neglected entirely or only mentioned in passing, with little documentary support. The resulting analysis reveals that smallpox survivors simply found it quite challenging to resume daily life, for the epidemic inhibited their ability to procure material goods. This study contributes to the historiography by demonstrating not only how smallpox itself deprived tribes of their primary food suppliers, able-bodied men, but how native practices and climatic activity contributed to famine. The loss of so many men necessitated that tribes halt their military activities, as they could not risk further losses on the battlefield. Also, the regional trade system that enabled the disease to spread in the first place faltered and nearly collapsed. Although traders’ business suffered as a result of the epidemic and that problem remained at the forefront of their writings, their sympathy for the plight of their Indian contacts emerges through both direct statements and descriptions of traders’ actions.
By expanding upon and adding to existing scholarship on the immediate effects of the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82, this chapter addresses the overarching argument of this thesis that the epidemic constitutes a thus far overlooked turning point in northern Great Plains history. Although the transformations detailed in this chapter are in themselves quite significant, their importance transcends their initial impact. Simply, the changes that occurred during the years 1780-82 triggered further transformations during the following decades. Severe population losses and the accompanying demoralization profoundly shaped the face of the region, so much so that the plains of 1780 bore little resemblance of the plains of the early nineteenth century. That, however, is the subject of later chapters. The present one looks at the immediate changes which triggered the transformation process.

Before one can examine the death and destruction caused by smallpox on the northern plains, it is necessary to examine the nature of the disease and why the region’s indigenous peoples suffered so greatly from it. Smallpox would infiltrate the body through the respiratory tract, usually by dust particles or drops of moisture, then incubate for approximately ten days to two weeks.² During this time, no symptoms emerged, making it impossible for the infected individual to know that they carried the disease at all. The early symptoms that followed included a high fever, vomiting, headache, backache, and anxiety. The fever usually subsided after a day or two, but it often returned by the fourth day, when the first skin eruptions, the “pocks,” appeared on the

victim, rendering him or her contagious. The first pustules appeared in the mouth, throat, and nasal passages, making simple functions such as drinking a burden. As a result, dehydration sometimes resulted, further complicating matters. Within twenty-four hours, the rash spread over the inflicted person’s entire body and massed precisely in the areas that caused the patient the most pain, the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands, the face, neck, and back. Although smallpox usually progressed in this manner, it sometimes concentrated beneath the skin, hemorrhaging. Victims who suffered from this condition soon died, bleeding from orifices, such as the eyes, nose, and gums. In extreme cases, the eruptions merged with one another to form what was known as confluent smallpox. Turning the victim into “a single oozing mess,” confluent smallpox not only heightened the physical and psychological trauma of the process, but it also increased the chance of death. Even if this extremely disfiguring case did not develop, smallpox, within a matter of days, transformed a healthy individual into a figure hardly recognizable by his or her family members. As Clyde D. Dollar writes, “The advanced stages of the disease are particularly offensive, both to sight and smell.” Indeed, the progression of smallpox, although transient, was one of violent and dramatic transformations in its hosts. As a result, both victims and those around them became subject to deep emotional distress. Furthermore, the later stages of Variola Major infection usually left patients delirious,

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4 Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 18.  

and, in some cases, comatose. Infected individuals, therefore, were not only physically attacked by the disease, but also mentally ravaged, as were those who witnessed their deterioration.\(^6\)

Approximately seven to ten days after they first emerged, the pustules began to scab over. Although scabbing was painful in common smallpox cases, victims suffering from the confluent form of the disease experienced excruciating agony as scabs formed over almost the entire body. Any attempt to move led to unbearable pain. After the scabs fell off, the victim was left with the scars which gave the disease its name and, at this point, the disease was no longer communicable. From the time that the initial symptoms emerged, however, until the scabbing process completed, a period of nearly three weeks, a smallpox victim was highly contagious. Variola, the virus which caused smallpox, could also be transmitted through material goods contaminated with the disease. For instance, a healthy individual could become infected by coming into contact with a victim’s bedding or clothing, which in some cases remained contagious for months. Furthermore, the bodies of those who succumbed to smallpox remained infectious until they were either buried or burnt.\(^7\) There is no doubt that Indians’ unfamiliarity with the disease contributed to its dispersion throughout the plains, as Saukamapppee’s comments to the trader David Thompson indicate. According to


Saukamappee, an old Cree man, “We had no belief that one Man could give it to another, any more than a wounded Man could give his wound to another.”

An individual’s ordeal with smallpox lasted about a month, provided he or she survived, of course. Smallpox survivors became immune to the disease for life. Their immunity, however, was not hereditary, for their children were susceptible to later outbreaks of the virus. If a patient survived to the point where scabbing began and the severe fever started to subside, the chance that he or she would perish decreased significantly. On the other hand, it was during the days leading up to the onset of the healing process that the probability of death was the greatest. In the case of northern plains natives, however, it appears that many perished even before the disease’s trademark lesions manifested. The observations of William Tomison at Cumberland House indicate that natives of the Saskatchewan region died in significant numbers before the signs which indicated that they suffered from smallpox became evident. According to the trader, “there is something very malignant…either in the Constitution of the Natives or in the Disorder, those that Die before the small pox breaks out is tormented with great pains and many of them Die within 48 Hours.” On another occasion, the trader reported that “they chiefly die within the third or fourth night.” Such evidence lends credence to the assertion that the 1780-82 epidemic brought most northern plains

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11 Ibid., 231.
peoples into contact with smallpox for the first time, a point which will be discussed momentarily.

For those who survived the epidemic, the loss of family members and fellow tribesmen only continued the horror which began with the emergence of the first symptoms of smallpox. Since smallpox was a particularly painful and often revolting malady, tremendous human suffering marked the years 1780-82, for both those who ultimately perished and those who recovered. For survivors, writes Crosby, “the horror was only diminished,” as they bore lasting marks of the ravages of smallpox.12 Not only were victims covered by ugly pockmarks, but many were left blind by the disease.13 During his tour of the Northwest during the first decade of the nineteenth century, Alexander Henry visited a band of Piegans and made note of “a young man who had become perfectly blind by the smallpox.”14 Malnourishment brought about by famine made individuals more susceptible to the disease and weakened the body’s ability to combat disease. Furthermore, it exacerbated the lasting effects of smallpox on the body, causing blindness, bone deformity, and arthritis, among other chronic conditions.15

Furthermore, since the region’s natives had no immunity to the disease because they had little previous contact with it, if any at all, and because they were largely unfamiliar with it, they were highly susceptible to contracting it. As William H. McNeill

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12 Crosby, *Columbian Exchange*, 57.
points out, most Europeans came into contact with smallpox when they were children and subsequently developed an immunity to the disease. On the other hand, “virgin” populations that had no previous exposure to smallpox suffered tremendous losses to the malady. While certain endemic or chronic diseases, ones that commonly occurred, circulated among Native Americans prior to European contact, their impact paled in comparison to those from overseas. Unfortunately for the natives of the northern plains, it appears that the strain of smallpox that reached them “was likely haemorrhagic smallpox,” the particularly devastating form of the disease discussed above.

As this chapter demonstrates, indigenous lifestyles, natives’ extensive trade and warfare relations with one another, and their responses to the alien germ, made smallpox especially devastating when it infected them. Reasons such as these, rather than simple genetic deficiencies, argues Paul Kelton, explain why Old World diseases were so fatal when natives of the southeast came into contact with them. Evidence presented in this chapter suggests that ecological reasons also help to explain why smallpox spread rapidly throughout the northern plains and why natives suffered tremendous losses to the disease. Because of ecological factors, as well as the previously discussed effects of the

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disease itself, the indigenous experience with smallpox was a traumatic one which had a deep emotional and psychological impact upon its victims.\textsuperscript{19} As Crosby observes, “The psychological effect of epidemic disease is enormous, especially of an unknown disfiguring disease which strikes swiftly.”\textsuperscript{20}

On October 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1781 the first smallpox-stricken Indian man arrived at Hudson House on the Saskatchewan River.\textsuperscript{21} His appearance at that trading post just beyond the northernmost reaches of the Great Plains marked the beginning of its traders’ seven month-long chronicle of smallpox among local natives. During that time, Hudson’s Bay Company agents received numbers of ailing Indians, many of whom perished soon after their arrival at the post. As a result, the traders spent a considerable amount of time during those winter and spring months gathering firewood and provisions for the sick, in addition to burying those who did not survive. The sheer numbers of Indian dead made the traders fear that epidemic would leave not a single one alive.\textsuperscript{22} Within weeks of the appearance of the first smallpox victim at Hudson House, the post’s master, William Walker, reported that, “the Small Pox is raging with such great Violence over this Country, not hardly sparing any that takes it, that in a short time I do not suppose they will be a staid Indian living.”\textsuperscript{23} Agents sent into the “Barren Ground,” the nearby plains,

\textsuperscript{19} Fenn, \textit{Pox Americana}, 276; Crosby, \textit{Columbian Exchange}, 56; Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 424.
\textsuperscript{20} Crosby, \textit{Columbian Exchange}, 56.
\textsuperscript{21} Walker, “Hudson House Journal,” 262; Fenn, \textit{Pox Americana}, 175.
\textsuperscript{22} Rich, \textit{Cumberland House Journals}, lxiii; Fenn, \textit{Pox Americana}, 175.
\textsuperscript{23} Walker, “Hudson House Journal,” 265.
reported similar destruction. Walker and his employees, however, witnessed only the final phases of smallpox’s devastating tour of the northern plains.

The epidemic that eventually reached the Saskatchewan River originated in Mexico in 1779. After killing tens of thousands south of the Rio Grande, smallpox reached into New Mexico and Texas, where it likely met another strand of the disease moving westward from Louisiana. In 1780, the Comanches contracted the disease while raiding the Spanish settlements of the Southwest, thus taking the malady, along with their stolen horses, to the southern Great Plains. From there, it appears that Shoshones contracted the disease from their Comanche neighbors via the horse trade, facilitating its movement northward. As Elizabeth A. Fenn perceptively points out, since only humans and their possessions could host smallpox and remain carriers for but a brief period of time, only equestrians could carry the disease over the vast distance from the southwest to the plains. Therefore, the Shoshone, the main agents of horse diffusion on the northern plains, also became the means by which Variola reached other Indians. One of the greatest legacies of Spanish colonialism, the horse, thus proved to be a major ecological vector of smallpox, for it made it possible for the disease to reach the plains, and then disperse throughout the region.

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Intertribal warfare also helped smallpox find new victims. Once the disease reached the plains, some tribes contracted smallpox while attacking their infected neighbors by combating and scalping sick warriors, as well as looting their contaminated material goods. In the aftermath of the epidemic, William Tomison of Cumberland House informed Matthew Cocking at Fort York that the Saskatchewan country tribes

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27 Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 222-3; Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell*, 40.
contracted the disease from the Shoshones while on the warpath. Many died while returning home, but those who survived spread the malady to their uninfected tribesmen. “Since then,” lamented Tomison, “it has run with great rapidity through the whole country above here.”28 William Walker, at Cumberland House’s outpost, also noted that contact with the Shoshone brought about the suffering of the Indians in his area. Thus, the proliferation of horse and firearm use on the plains, which created new warfare patterns prior to 1780, helped the smallpox outbreak reach epidemic proportions.29

Increased warfare also resulted from the Shoshone need for war captives. As Frank Raymond Secoy points out, during the eighteenth century the Shoshone “raided for captives continuously and on a large scale…while the victimized tribes raided for vengeance and to acquire badly needed horses.”30 Thus, the desire for horses fueled a vicious cycle of intertribal conflict on the northern plains which led to more frequent contact between various groups, providing smallpox with another possible means of spreading. Human trafficking, of course, meant that individuals— and whatever germs they carried— moved from place to place, sometimes over great distances. As a result, the Shoshone captive exchange, an activity closely linked to regional warfare and the fur trade, conceivably functioned as a vector of smallpox.

On the northwestern reaches of the Great Plains, the Blackfeet contracted smallpox while warring on the Shoshone. In 1787, David Thompson of the North West

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Company spent the winter with a camp of Piegan, one of the tribes which comprised the Blackfoot “confederacy.” While there, he spent many evenings listening to the tales of the old Cree man, Saukamappee, who had lived among the Piegans since his youth. One of the many stories that the Indian told Thompson was of how smallpox came to his people. According to Saukamappee, the tragedy began when a party of Piegans scouting for enemies discovered a large Shoshone camp. They became suspicious when they saw no men in the camp and few horses nearby, but a herd of buffalo grazing not far from the village. Wary that another, larger Shoshone camp lay nearby, the Piegans searched for one, but found nothing and resolved to attack the village. According to Saukamappee, the assault began, but “there was no one to fight but the dead and dying, each a mass of corruption. We did not touch them, but left the tents, and held a council on what was to be done.”

The Piegans determined to take some of the Shoshone tents and other goods, in addition to the few horses that were around, and return home. Thus, the Piegans took smallpox home along with their plunder of war.

Both the Shoshones and Piegans suffered heavy losses to smallpox. Saukamappee informed Thompson that about one-third of the people in his village perished, “but in some of the other camps there were tents in which every one had died.”

Overall, the old man placed Piegan casualties at about fifty percent. Later explorers noted that the Blackfoot confederacy as a whole sustained considerable losses during the epidemic of 1780-82. However, the fact that the Blackfeet lived in many

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31 Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 246.
small, separate groups helped to minimize their casualties. While some bands such as Saukamappee’s suffered greatly, others remained untouched by the plague.\textsuperscript{34} Although precise figures are difficult to obtain in regard to the Shoshone, it appears that they lost more people during the epidemic, probably somewhere between one-third and one-half of their population. Their actions support this assertion, for after the epidemic passed, they abandoned the plains country to the Piegans, moving southwest toward refuge in the Rocky Mountains.\textsuperscript{35} Twenty-five years later, when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark visited them in the Rockies, the impact of smallpox on the Shoshone remained evident, as Lewis observed that “these people have suffered much by the small pox.”\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, as the historian George E. Hyde writes, smallpox “badly shattered” the Shoshone.\textsuperscript{37}

It appears that Shoshones transmitted smallpox to their Crow neighbors, most likely through the horse trade. When Francois Antoine Larocque visited the Crows in 1805, he learned that just before the disease struck, they occupied some two thousand lodges. As a result of the 1780-82 epidemic, as well as some later outbreaks, according to his hosts, they now counted but three hundred lodges. Hyde estimates that their losses were about fifty percent during the first major outbreak.\textsuperscript{38} Such mortality among the


\textsuperscript{37} Hyde, \textit{Indians of the High Plains}, 165.

Crow may have been even greater had they not scattered into smaller family-sized bands when they learned of the sickness, as did many other nomadic groups, such as the Sioux. It was in this manner, perhaps, as well as through trade, that Crows gave the malady to their western neighbors, the Flathead and Kutenai, who also interacted with the Shoshone.  

The Crow likely transmitted Variola to the semisedentary Missouri River tribes. Constituting a major link in the commerce between the Shoshone and the Missouri trading centers, Crows shuttled both goods and diseases to the unfortunate villagers. The semisedentary villages, acting as the major trading hubs of the northern plains, were the destination for many horses traded to the Crow by the Shoshone, so it would be logical to conclude that smallpox-infected individuals directed horses to the markets on the Missouri. Since these tribes, the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara, lived in static, highly-populated villages, the disease ran rampant among them. As a result, their casualties far surpassed those of other northern plains tribes, for they suffered from what Trimble refers to as “acute crowd infections.”  

Whereas nomadic tribes like the Crow dispersed and infected those who took them in, semisedentary peoples circulated the disease throughout the confines of their compact villages. As Colin G. Calloway points out, “villages that

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*Indians of the High Plains*, 165. Hyde, however, indicates that the Crow numbered not two thousand on the eve of the epidemic, but one thousand. Regardless, Crow losses were staggering.


40 Trimble, “Epidemiology on the Northern Plains,” 108.

had been palisaded for safety became death traps when European diseases ran along trade
routes that formerly brought prosperity. On the other hand, the nomadic buffalo-
hunting peoples suffered fewer casualties because their lifestyle provided them with the
ability to evade the disease and escape it once it reached their group.

Indeed, smallpox simply ravaged the Missouri villagers. In 1806, William Clark
noted that the Mandan formerly populated seven large villages, but only inhabited two
small ones when he visited them. Similarly, the number of Mandan clans, or intervillage
kinship networks, fell from thirteen to seven. At about the same time, Alexander Henry
of the North West Company found the Hidatsa living in about 130 lodges. They
informed the trader that they once occupied 900. Downstream, the Arikara population
also declined considerably. Pierre Antoine Tabeau, who visited the Arikara during the
first years of the nineteenth century, reported that his hosts occupied only three villages;
they had eighteen before 1780. Formerly able to send four thousand men on the warpath,
the Arikara could muster but five hundred warriors after smallpox ravaged them.

Scholars place overall losses for the three Missouri River tribes at nearly seventy percent.
Donald J. Lehmer conservatively estimates that the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa lost a
total of some 13,000 individuals, a mortality rate of sixty-eight percent. Lehmer, however, concedes that losses probably reached closer to seventy-five or eighty percent.\textsuperscript{46}

The semisedentary villages themselves were a major vector by which smallpox spread throughout the plains. Since these settlements were major trading centers, Indians from surrounding tribes gathered in them to conduct commerce and, as Henry Dobyns points out, this helped to further disperse smallpox, for “[f]oreign merchants increased trading center population, in itself a demographic shift conducive to contagion.”\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, not only could indigenous traders transport smallpox to the Missouri villages, but they could also carry it away with them. Thus, the very trade network that made the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara villages popular locations to obtain merchandise, especially guns and horses, also dispersed smallpox. The lengthy incubation period ensured that Indians could pick up the disease and carry it far away before signs of illness appeared. According to Hyde, a group of Assiniboines who conducted trade in an infected Missouri village contracted Variola and when they reached home, it wiped out their entire camp. Indeed, once the disease reached these trading centers, it spread quickly.\textsuperscript{48}


Warfare also spread smallpox beyond the upper Missouri villages. The explorer Alexander MacKenzie, commenting on how the epidemic reached the Saskatchewan natives, noted that it “was generally supposed to be from the Mississoury, by a war party.” MacKenzie may be referring to a story of how the Cree, Assiniboine, and Ojibway contracted smallpox. In 1781, a party comprised of warriors of all three tribes departed from a village near the Red River of the North and headed westward toward the Missouri River. Upon reaching the Missouri, the war party attacked a large Hidatsa village. Finding only light resistance, the surprised Cree, Assiniboine, and Ojibway vigorously pressed their assault. Tearing into the Hidatsa lodges, they found them filled with dead bodies. Appalled by the horrid sight and terrible smell, the warriors collected the scalps of the village’s few defenders and withdrew. During their journey home, the warriors mounted an “exceptionally large” scalp that they had taken in the attack on a stick and each night they planted the stick in the ground while they encamped. After awakening on five consecutive mornings to find the scalp leaning toward the west, they became fearful. Soon after this ominous sign aroused their suspicions, one of the warriors suddenly sickened and died. The party hastily discarded the scalp and hurried homeward, but each day during the rest of the trip, a few warriors became ill and soon perished. Out of the “considerable body” of warriors who participated in the attack, only four returned to their village and proceeded to spread the plague to their fellow tribesmen. Those who tried to flee from the disease only spread it further and before

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long, several thousand Indians died. Survivors renamed the river upon which they lived “Ne-bo,” or “Dead River,” forever preserving the memory of the disaster. Smallpox then continued its devastation, reaching into the lake and forest country of Canada.  

All three tribes that participated in the attack on the Hidatsa village subsequently suffered terrible losses to smallpox. When the trader Mitchell Oman encountered an Assiniboine camp along the Saskatchewan in 1781, he found its pockmarked inhabitants recovering from the malady. These survivors, who told Oman that they had lost about three-fifths of their fellow tribesmen, had moved only about two hundred yards from the village which they inhabited when the disease struck. The trader surveyed the abandoned camp, noting that its tents were filled with rotting corpses. David Thompson and Edwin Thompson Denig, who lived on the plains during the mid-nineteenth century, recorded that the Nahathaway, or Cree, lost half of their people in 1782 and that entire villages simply ceased to exist. Historian Colin G. Calloway supports the explorer’s assertion, adding that all six major Cree groups were simply “obliterated” by the outbreak. Some two thousand Ojibway perished. Although little information is available regarding the precise casualties sustained by the Gros Ventres of the Plains, a neighbor of the Cree and

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Assiniboine, evidence suggests that smallpox left their population “diminished very much.”

The wealthy semisedentary villages were also a prime target for the Sioux bands living immediately to the east of the Missouri River. At the time that smallpox reached the plains, Lakota and Yankton warriors, emboldened by their wealth of guns, pressured the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa with frequent raids as they attempted to expand westward into the buffalo-rich lands west of the Missouri. During these attacks, Sioux bands likely contracted the dreadful malady. Seven separate winter counts produced by Sioux bands record that smallpox killed many people during the years 1779, 1780, 1781, and 1782. Of those counts, six of them reported consecutive years of smallpox. The number of losses that the Lakota and Yankton Sioux sustained, however, is difficult to gauge because the winter counts do not provide any numerical estimation of the destruction. Linea Sundstrom suggests that Sioux losses were considerable, as “[a] high mortality rate can be inferred from the use of the phrase “[smallpox] used them up.”

Sioux culture, too, provides historians with an important clue. Ranging along the Missouri, from the central plains northward beyond the Great Bend, the Sioux congregated in small groups (bands) which had limited interaction with one another. As

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54 Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 2, 531.
56 Mallery, *Picture-Writing*, vol. 1, 308, vol. 2, 589; Ronald T. McCoy, “Winter Count: The Teton Chronicles to 1799,” Ph.D. diss., Northern Arizona University, 1983, 217-224. One of these counts refers to consecutive years of measles ravaging the Sioux. McCoy points out that this could have very well also been smallpox, for smallpox was often mistaken for measles at the time. This study counts it as an instance of smallpox, for it is likely that it was part of the larger epidemic.
Richard White perceptively points out, this fact, combined with their nomadic nature, made them far less susceptible to epidemic diseases than their semisedentary enemies. Therefore, “their losses were slight when compared to those of the Arikaras, Mandans, and Hidatsas.”

Frederick E. Hoxie concurs, crediting Sioux resilience not to their lifestyle, but to their more extensive contact with Europeans and their germs during their time near the headwaters of the Mississippi. Since the winter counts do not indicate how many bands contracted smallpox, one is left to wonder if it was only a few groups. Chapter four of this study suggests that this was likely the case.

What is clear, however, is that once smallpox infected Sioux bands, they further facilitated its movement among both their own kinsmen and other plains peoples. The intense rivalry between the Sioux and the Cree-Assiniboine alliance likely helped to spread Variola. David Thompson provides insight into another way which the Sioux came into contact with the epidemic and fostered its dispersion. According to Thompson, the “Plains Sioux” got smallpox, in 1780, by attacking infected white settlers. After attacking the settlers and presumably killing them, the Indians donned their contaminated clothes. Having thus contracted the disease, they spread it to their neighbors during battle. Also, it seems possible that the plains Sioux contracted smallpox from their eastern counterparts, the Dakota, who would have picked up a strand of the disease from

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58 White, “Winning of the West,” 325.
59 Hoxie, Parading Through History, 75.
60 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 236; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 423.
the Great Lakes region and transmitted the disease to their kinsmen during their annual meeting along the James River to conduct trade.\textsuperscript{61}

Famine complemented the forces of warfare and trade in expanding the proportions of the epidemic. As pointed out in the last chapter, the years 1778-80 were marked by intense La Nina activity, which meant prolonged drought and unusually cool temperatures on the northern plains. Indeed, both Indians and traders reported that the winters of leading up to and during the epidemic were particularly hard ones on the inhabitants of the northern plains. They told Thompson that prior to the arrival of smallpox, game roaming the vicinity of the Saskatchewan was plentiful, but during that winter, bison, moose, and deer were inexplicably scarce.\textsuperscript{62} Hudson’s Bay Company agents at the major Saskatchewan trading centers, Hudson House and its parent post, Cumberland House, noted all winter long that they, along with their Indian contacts, suffered greatly for want of food.\textsuperscript{63} Acute food shortages such as the one that occurred on the northern plains during the cold winter months of 1780-82 often paved the way for disease outbreaks to occur. Already weakened by malnourishment, Indians were even more vulnerable to smallpox than when healthy. The impact of famine, however, did far more than simply heighten indigenous susceptibility to Variola. Sheer desperation for scarce foodstuffs likely forced natives to search more widely for game than they normally


would. Whereas the winter months were normally a time when Indians did not move about much, famine left them with little choice but to leave their camps if they hoped to survive. In the process, hungry Indians wandered into infected camps and took the disease home to their starving tribesmen. Thus, the colonial forces which escalated the smallpox outbreak to epidemic status, the horse and gun, were augmented by environmental factors stemming from global phenomena, increasing the destruction.64

Evidence suggests that Indians’ reactions to illness, particularly their use of traditional healing practices, increased the number of smallpox fatalities. A common remedy used on the northern plains was the sweat bath. In this practice, an ill Indian sat in a sealed lodge which contained a fire that made him or her sweat profusely. Then, the native would plunge into a cold river or lake. Some smallpox victims were so weak that they simply drowned. Victims who emerged from the water usually died soon after, as sweat baths intensified the symptoms of smallpox.65 As Saukamappee told Thompson, “We did not suffer so much as those that were near the river, into which they rushed and died.”66 According to Thompson, men usually tried to remedy their sickness in this manner, so they died in greater numbers than both women and children.67 Writing about the epidemic during the 1830s, Catlin reported that in response to smallpox, many northern plains natives resorted to sweat baths and “the poor creatures, who fled by hundreds to the river’s edge, and by hundreds died before they could escape from the

64 Sundstrom, “Smallpox Used Them up,” 317-20; Fenn, Pox Americana, 22, 187.
65 Decker, “Tracing Historical Diffusion Patterns,” 20-1; Fenn, Pox Americana, 24-25; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 11; Ray, Indians in the Fur Trade, 106.
66 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 246.
67 Ibid.
waves, into which they had plunged in the heat and rage of a burning fever.”

Unfortunately, the historical record does not indicate how much the ineffectiveness of such remedies diminished natives’ faith in them, if at all.

When the great epidemic finally subsided, its toll on northern plains tribes was staggering. Indeed, as Alexander Mackenzie explained, once smallpox reached the northern Great Plains, it “spread its destructive and desolating power, as fire consumes the dry grass of the field.” Scholars’ best estimates place overall Indian losses between one-third and one-half. The Canadian plains alone, which were not even home to the groups which bore the brunt of the outbreak, lost some thirty thousand natives. As if such heavy casualties were not devastating enough, the epidemic swept the entirety of the northern plains in less than a year and a half. During the course of approximately fifteen months, tens of thousands of Indians sickened and died. According to Donald J. Lehmer, these tremendous population losses simply “threatened the very existence of the individual tribes” of the region. Smallpox nearly annihilated some groups, leaving their few survivors broken and struggling to survive. Furthermore, the compression of such severe mortality into a short period of time undoubtedly amplified the psychological effect of the disease upon survivors.

Considering the great mortality of smallpox and the many disfiguring physical effects of the disease discussed earlier in this chapter, it is easy to see why the

69 Mackenzie, *Voyages*, 22.
Assiniboine Indians who Mitchell Oman encountered in 1781 “were in such a state of
despair and despondence that they could hardly converse with us.” Traders observed
that Indians’ shaken mental and physical conditions contributed to furthering suffering
after the epidemic passed, for few of those who began to recover were in any shape to
hunt and otherwise provision their village. Although some European witnesses, such as
Oman, attributed natives’ decreased hunting activities directly to the ravages of the
disease, others credited it to their customs regarding mourning. At Hudson House,
William Walker bitterly wrote of the Indians that, “if they should have the misfortune to
lose one of their family, that they have not the courage to hunt Provisions for themselves,
let alone killing of furrs for that Season.” Although the trader’s remark reveals that he
did not fully understand native ways, it provides insight into why Indians continued to
suffer after smallpox left them.

Natives elsewhere on the northern plains also endured severe psychological
trauma as a result of the ravages of smallpox. Reflecting on the epidemic, Saukamappee
said that, “When at length it left us, and we moved about to find our people, it was no
longer with the song and the dance, but with the tears, shrieks, and howlings of despair
for those who would never return to us.” Therefore, “[o]ur hearts were low and
dejected, and we shall never be again the same people.” The severe depression to
which Saukamappee refers struck many other tribes that suffered terrible losses to the
disease as well. Charles Mackenzie’s observations suggest that the loss of many children

73 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 236.
74 Ibid.
76 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 246.
77 Ibid.
to the epidemic caused great suffering for many tribesmen. According to Mackenzie, the Indians, like most peoples, were “extremely attached to their children” and if one perished, “such is their distress that they throw away all their property, [and] cut off joints of their fingers.”78 The many horrors springing from the epidemic remained strongly etched in survivors’ memories for years to come. Survivors undoubtedly had a difficult time forgetting the sight of wolves dragging sick or deceased family members from lodges to feed upon them. Traders reported that the even the natives’ own dogs feasted upon the dead. The canines that did so lost much of their fur, reminding the Indians of what they had done. Many times, however, the natives killed them. As tribes struggled to cope with not only the loss of many family members and even more fellow tribesmen, but the mutilation of the dead, their mental states made it even more difficult to resume daily life.79

Life could not and did not continue for some natives. Even before the epidemic subsided, some Indians killed themselves in order to escape the painful symptoms of the disease. The American Horse winter count notes that in 1784 “a man afflicted with smallpox sat inside a tipi, sang his death song and shot himself.”80 Others committed suicide because they desperately wanted to avoid the fate of those around them who contracted smallpox. It was not uncommon, wrote Alexander Mackenzie, “for the father of a family, whom the infection had not reached, to call them around to him, to represent

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79 Mackenzie, Voyages, 22; Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 237; Hyde, Indians of the High Plains, 165.

the cruel sufferings and horrid fate of their relations...and encouraged them to kill
themselves, or have him do it, to thwart the plague.”

The ravages of the disease were so horrible that it drove uninfected natives to choose certain death rather than live and risk the possibility of contracting it. Furthermore, the epidemic took so many lives and left survivors in such deep sorrow that some of them elected to join their beloved in the afterworld. As Colin G. Calloway, writes, “As their world fell apart and loved ones rotted to death, many survivors lost the will to live.”

The inability of survivors to conduct hunting activities heightened the effects of the regional drought caused by La Nina. Drought, of course, not only killed many animals, such as bison, but forced many others to seek nourishment elsewhere. Also, during the winter months bison became elusive as they dispersed into smaller groups, for the grasses that they lived on were less rich and thinner than during the summer. These developments all made hunting difficult for northern plains natives. As Saukamappee reported, men spent considerable time away from the camps in pursuit of animals, “but the Bisons and Red Deer were also gone, we did not see one half of what was before, whither they had gone we could not tell.”

The natives themselves apparently contributed to this phenomenon. In 1780, for instance, Robert Longmoor at Hudson House reported that natives set fire to the plains. Indeed, Indians often burnt the grass of the plains in order to limit traders’ hunting activities. With little grass left to feed on after the natives’ fires scoured the prairies,

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81 Mackenzie, Voyages, 22.
82 Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 424.
83 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 237; Isenberg, Destruction of the Bison, 22-3.
84 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 237.
buffalo and other game sought nourishment elsewhere, leaving the natives, healthy and sick, in dire straits. Although this was not a new practice, its use in 1780 coincided with drought to produce disastrous consequences.\textsuperscript{85}

As a result of these factors, all throughout the winter of 1781-82, traders at Hudson House and Cumberland House routinely noted that local natives starved and begged for food. Agents’ writings reveal that they were sometimes utterly appalled by infected Indians’ conditions. On one occasion, Tomison recorded that, “Starved Indians arrived, Indeed their condition is too shocking to be described by pen.”\textsuperscript{86} As a result of this widespread starvation which stunned even traders, many Indians who, had they received proper nourishment might have survived, sometimes did not because of food shortages. Reporting that some infected natives arrived at his post, Walker wrote that, “Some of them in a fair way to recover, only are in want of nourishment for to keep them alive.”\textsuperscript{87}

This continued suffering also resulted from the fact that those who formerly provided Indian villages with food were no longer alive. As Saukamappee’s comments about sweat baths indicate, the epidemic took the lives of many men, thus depriving Indian populations of their primary hunters. As a result, women, children, and elders found themselves without the means of nourishing their bodies.\textsuperscript{88} Tomison’s


\textsuperscript{86} Hudson and Tomison, “Cumberland House Journal,” 232.

\textsuperscript{87} Walker, “Hudson House Journal,” 277.

observation of “six invalids Women and Children that has got over the small pox now laying on the plantation starving, there being no friends or relatives alive to take care of them” reveals the impact of the loss of this vital component of Northern Plains societies. William Walker received similar refugees. During January of the dreadful winter of 1781-82, he noted the arrival of “two small Indian Boys, the whole family being dead, only themselves recover’d but not having necessaries to rig themselves, One of them is very much froze.” Abandoned by much-needed family members and fellow tribesmen who departed for the afterworld, northern plains inhabitants who managed to persevere through the smallpox epidemic faced only further hardship as the disease “undermined traditions of mutual support.”

The same starvation that troubled the Indians of the Saskatchewan plagued tribes living throughout the northern Great Plains. Throughout the entire region, smallpox and famine combined to leave few individuals healthy enough to care for themselves let alone the many others who were in much worse condition. Those who were able to hunt, however, had to focus their energies on providing food for many invalids. As Saukamappee recalled, “To hunt for our families became our sole occupation and kill Beavers, Wolves, and Foxes to trade our necessaries.” Furthermore, “[w]ar was no longer thought of,” said Saukamappee, “we had enough to do to make provisions for our

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91 Fenn, Pox Americana, 187. Trimble refers to this development as “community disintegration.”
92 Mackenzie, Voyages, 22; Fenn, Pox Americana, 24.
93 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 246-47.
families, for in our sickness we had consumed all our dried provisions.”94 The fact that northern plains tribes lost a considerable number of men to smallpox made warfare even more impractical. With a lower proportion of men than usual available to hunt, it was unwise for them to risk their lives in battle. The ravages of Variola brought general warfare on the plains to an abrupt halt as tribes had little choice but to turn inward to ensure their own survival. Indian groups simply did not have the manpower to conduct the military operations that they did prior to 1780.95

Some Indians chose to explain not only the game shortage, but the smallpox epidemic itself, in spiritual terms. As Tabeau wrote, “among the Sioux and still more among the Ricaras, there prevails no natural sickness, as all sickness is either the result of the vengeance of some angry spirit or a succession of evil deeds of a magician.”96 Thompson recorded that the Piegan had a similar interpretation of sickness, for Saukamappee believed that “the good Spirit had forsaken them for a time, during which the evil spirit destroyed them.”97 Saukamappee’s testimony indicates that since the Piegans had apparently displeased the “good spirit” by attacking the disease-stricken Shoshones, it allowed the “bad spirit” to reign over their village and punish them with sickness for their excessive warring, especially on the helpless. Thus, the Piegan had further reason to cease their war expeditions, for they did not want to further displease to the good spirit.98 According to the explorer John McDonnell, the Indians of the Red

94 Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 246.
97 Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 49.
River of the North and Saskatchewan also dreaded this evil spirit. They feared the evil spirit so much that they made sacrifices to prevent it from doing mischief. Natives took similar actions once the bad spirit’s misbehavior began. For instance, when smallpox struck the Piegan, Saukamappe recalled, “What little we could spare we offered to the Bad Spirit to let us alone and go to our enemies.”

Sacrificing earthly goods in an attempt to thwart and evil spirit manifested in the form of disease was a common practice on the northern plains. Matthew Cocking observed that, “When sick they are very foolish, for they throw away many necessaries.” Of course, such sacrifices did little more than exacerbate the problems that the Indians already faced. The offering of foodstuffs, horses, and other necessities only deprived Indians of materials that they desperately needed. Furthermore, “the Great Spirit having brought this calamity on them, had also taken away the Animals in proportion as they were not wanted… if there were no Men there would be no animals.” Thus, some Indians did not perceive the smallpox epidemic or the concurrent famine as a result of human and environmental activity, but as the work of spiritual beings.

When Thompson traveled to reach the Piegan camp in which Saukamappe lived, he and his party passed a significant landmark which reveals how deeply some natives

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98 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 246-48. Far to the east, the Iroquois, who suffered from smallpox and other “Old World” diseases over a century earlier, also interpreted epidemics not as natural phenomena, but the work as spirits or evil persons. Richter, Facing East, 63; Richter, Ordeal of the Longhouse, 60.


100 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 246.


102 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 238.
believed the smallpox epidemic to be a spiritual matter. According to Thompson, the “One Pine,” the only Aspen standing for over a hundred miles, was an object of the natives’ spiritual reverence. At the onset of the epidemic in 1780, a band of Piegan camped near the tree. As the disease decimated the group, a man appealed to the tree in desperation to save himself and his family. He burned sweet grass, offered all three of the horses that he owned, his bow and arrows, and all of his other possessions so that the onslaught would spare his people. Out of his “large” family, however, only himself, one of his wives, and a son did not perish. Once he regained strength after successfully battling the malady, the Piegan took back all of his sacrifices from the tree, then took his axe and climbed about two-thirds of the way up the tree. There, “out of revenge for not having saved his family,” he cut off the top of the tree.103

In some cases, mutual support fell victim to conscious decisions of the Indians themselves. Terrified by what the mysterious malady did to their family members and tribesmen, natives sometimes abandoned them.104 Walker condemned Indians for this action, angrily writing that, “These natives are such a Dastardly kind of people that, that if any of their Relations should be bad with this disorder, they think they need not look for Recovery, they just throw them away.”105 Usually those who were unable to walk found themselves on their own, for natives who determined to relocate often chose to ease their burden by leaving their disabled kinsmen behind. Left to their fate without any

103 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 237-38.
105 Ibid., 264.
assistance to regain their strength, many Indians perished.\textsuperscript{106} Even more horrifying, those left to their own devices did not simply die, but were sometimes “devoured by the wild beasts.”\textsuperscript{107}

The result was a desolate, scarred landscape that reflected a further breakdown of native traditional practices. Often, only a few individuals remained in a village after the few uninfected natives departed. So, the few survivors, having managed to somehow recover from the ravages of Variola, had little strength to dispose of the cadavers of those who did not. Examining Indian villages after the epidemic passed, traders often found entire lodges filled with the bodies of the deceased. Simply, the high mortality of smallpox rendered it impossible for most northern plains natives to practice important burial customs.\textsuperscript{108} As Edwin Denig, who studied the inhabitants of the northern plains firsthand during the mid-nineteenth century wrote, “Ordinarily Indians are not buried in heaps… But when pestilence such as smallpox prevails, attacks the whole nation at the same time… hundreds are consigned to the same general burial ground.”\textsuperscript{109} Therefore, many traders took it upon themselves to bury the dead. Indeed, the pages of the Hudson


\textsuperscript{107} Hudson and Tomison, “Cumberland House Journal,” 231.

\textsuperscript{108} While most northern plains woodland peoples and some tribes to the south, such as the Arikara, typically buried their dead, most others, particularly the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Sioux, utilized both immediate burials and scaffolding. In the case of the latter, the deceased would be placed either in a tree or, more likely, on a wooden scaffold for some time prior to burial. In either case, the labor required would have been great, especially if considerable numbers of individuals had to be buried at a given time. Unsurprisingly, white visitors to the plains proper after 1782 reported seeing few scaffolds and burial sites. Instances of the dead lying in their tents or throughout a Mandan village after the 1837 smallpox epidemic suggest that this likely occurred in 1780-82 as well. See: J. Signe Snortland, “Northern Plains Woodland Mortuary Practices,” in \textit{Skeletal Biology in the Great Plains: Migration, Warfare, Health, and Subsistence}, ed. Douglas W. Owsley and Richard L. Jantz (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 52-3.

House and Cumberland House journals composed during the winter of 1781-82 are filled with entries which mention Hudson’s Bay Company agents spending their time digging graves for the Indian dead. Further out onto the plains, however, the traders were unable to provide the assistance that they could in the Saskatchewan country.\textsuperscript{110} Agents visiting stricken villages found that sometimes wolves destroyed Indians’ tents, then “devoured the Bodies” of the dead.\textsuperscript{111} Unable to obtain the traders’ assistance to dispose of the dead, which far outnumbered themselves, natives inhabiting more remote areas of the northern plains likely suffered further emotional trauma as they could not only administer proper burial practices, but their inability to do so resulted in further desecration of the deceased.

An experience that Alexander Henry had near the forks of the Red River of the North provides insight into how smallpox disrupted native burial customs. While camping in this area, Henry complained that “swarms of water-snakes” troubled his party by entering the traders’ tents and even slithering into their beds. The snakes, wrote Henry, “appear to lurk and breed in the old graves, of which there are many, This spot having been a place of great resort for the natives in 1781-82; and at that time the smallpox made such havoc many hundreds of men, women, and children were buried here.”\textsuperscript{112} Similarly, Denig reported that there was a large mound near the Assiniboine River which contained the remains of most of the inhabitants of a 230-lodge Cree camp


\textsuperscript{111} Walker, “Hudson House Journal,” 269.

\textsuperscript{112} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 46.
that contracted the disease. According to the trader, “The natives to this day look upon this depository with horror and on no consideration will they consent to its being opened under the apprehension that this terrible disease, though buried for nearly a century, might gain spread among them.”

These tales of horror reveal how natives sometimes had little choice but to bury their dead tribesmen in great numbers, in a small area. In such instances of mass burial, it is difficult to imagine that the few smallpox survivors were able to provide each of the dead with a proper burial ceremony before having to move onto the next body. It seems that the creation of such “cemeteries” among the tribes of the northern plains only occurred during desperate times such as the one which followed the smallpox epidemic.

Traders further noted that specific portions of the native population suffered disproportionately from smallpox. There seemed to be a high mortality rate among children and the elderly. Also, smallpox was more likely to kill women who were pregnant than those who were not. Therefore, scholars must take into consideration the fact that such instances resulted in the loss of more than one life. By taking the life of both mother and the unborn child, smallpox not only reduced existing native populations, but also had a deeper demographic impact by killing off future members of Indian societies. The loss of children, both born and unborn, impaired tribes’ reproductive capacities for decades following the epidemic. As the next chapter demonstrates,

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113 Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 115.
however, Indians responded to this problem in ingenious ways that fostered rapid population recovery.\textsuperscript{114}

The epidemic had demographic importance beyond the fact that it simply killed off a significant number of northern plains inhabitants. In many cases, it was detrimental to the body’s reproductive system, inhibiting male fertility and reducing females’ abilities to bear fetuses through the entire term of pregnancy. Since the smallpox epidemic also struck the younger portion of the northern plains population particularly hard, it diminished the number of individuals living to reproductive age. Thus, the epidemic’s destruction of life extended well beyond the months during which smallpox scoured the plains.\textsuperscript{115}

As one might expect, the epidemic had a profound effect on the northern plains economic system. Prior to the arrival of smallpox on the plains, Indians generally enjoyed the fruits of trade with Europeans and other Indians, through both direct and indirect means. Since natives perished in vast numbers and those left alive were either too weakened by the malady or too busy caring for invalids, commerce ground to an abrupt halt. Furthermore, the loss of so many people to epidemics included many specialists who produced unique, and therefore, valuable, goods. For instance, anthropologist Donald J. Lehmer points out that archaeological evidence “unequivocally demonstrates an abrupt and major deterioration of Mandan and Hidatsa pottery after 1780,” which suggests that many skilled potters died during the epidemic.\textsuperscript{116} While

\textsuperscript{114} Hudson and Tomison, “Cumberland House Journal,” 236; Fenn, \textit{Pox Americana}, 21, 22; Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 424.
\textsuperscript{115} Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 424.
pottery was clearly not a major commodity in the fur trade, it was but one element of that trade and its rapid decline left the beleaguered villagers with one less item to exchange.

No records offer a clearer picture of this unfortunate turn of events than the journals kept by the traders on the Saskatchewan River. The discourse which follows necessarily provides a perspective skewed toward that of the traders. At the same time, that point of view is valuable because it offers readers a revealing look at the suffering of the Europeans’ indigenous contacts.

Throughout the winter of 1781-82, agents from Cumberland House and Hudson House conducted searches for local Indians who had not appeared at the post to trade for quite some time. Such expeditions usually resulted from the reports of the few natives who visited the posts and said that they had not seen any other Indians for several months. These searches, however, typically yielded discouraging results. Sometimes the traders found only corpses which were often disfigured by animals. On one occasion, agents returned to Hudson House to report that the natives were “lying around the Barren Ground like Rotten Sheep, their Tents left standing and the Wild Beasts devouring them.”

The daily entries of the Saskatchewan trading post journals reveal that the traders exhibited genuine sympathy for the natives’ plight. Appalled by what he witnessed, Tomison wrote that, “it cuts me to the Heart to see the Miserable condition they are in & not being able to Help them.” Yet the traders did try to help Indians by providing them

with food, shelter, and what little medical assistance they could. Many smallpox victims, however, already suffered from starvation by the time they arrived at the trading posts. Furthermore, the agents admitted that they did not have the necessary medicines to combat the effects of smallpox. There indeed was little that the traders could do to ease Indians’ suffering. The most they could effectively do was quarantine uninfected individuals who arrived at the post in order to prevent them from contracting the disease.120

Despite their obvious concern for the natives, the fur trade remained the foremost of the traders’ troubles. As Walker lamented, “It is very shocking to see the poor creatures in such a deplorable condition, it does not lay in our power to help them, and So we shall find to Your Honors great disadvantage.”121 Although such statements reveal the traders’ compassion for the Indians, they just as clearly illustrate that that the traders worried about the state of their business because it was closely tied to the health of the Indian population which supplied them with furs. According to Matthew Cocking, “Much of the greatest part of the Indians whose Furrs have been formerly & hitherto brought to this place are now no more, having been carried off by that cruel disorder the Small Pox.”122 As the comments of these men suggest, the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 violently disrupted the northern plains fur trade network. Rendering the region’s natives unable to hunt and travel, the disease brought commerce to an abrupt halt, for it not only took away the natives who provided traders with furs and other materials, but it

122 Cocking, letter to Jarvis and Hutchins, August 1782, 297.
killed those very same Indians who were an outlet for traders’ goods. In short, the very colonial forces which forged the northern plains trade system, the horse and the gun, almost destroyed that network by also spreading an epidemic disease. Although a handful of natives still continued to take furs to Cocking and his associates during the epidemic, he reported that those few eventually perished as well.

Furthermore, traders not only feared that the Indians would bring in no more furs, but they fretted that those already in debt to the company would die if they had not already. So, when traders conducted searches for Indians who had not shown up to trade for awhile, they sought not just missing customers, but indebted clients. On many occasions, the agents did find their Indian debtors, but they were usually dead. If such was the case, the traders did not hesitate to take what furs and provisions they could find, even if they came directly off of corpses. In such desperate times, this action appeared to become widely accepted and practiced. For instance, William Tomison recorded that he sent out a party to “search for Sandfly to see whether he & his family be dead or alive, if Dead, to take their Coats away they being all Debtors.”  Although both traders and survivors seeking items to trade confiscated robes and other materials from the dead, they scavenged meager amounts of goods.

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124 Cocking, letter to Jarvis and Hutchins, August 1782, 297.
126 Hudson and Tomison, “Cumberland House Journal,” 244.
127 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 236; Mackenzie, Voyages, 23; Fenn, Pox Americana, 180-81.
In addition to relying upon the Indians for furs, traders also needed the natives to supply them with pemmican and other provisions. Thus, when smallpox destroyed entire villages which did business with the traders, the latter found themselves desperately short of food. The Indians who did survive had little strength to provision themselves, let alone obtain a surplus to trade to the agents. As a result, the food shortage became so acute that the master of Hudson House, William Walker, had to cut back his men’s allowances of provisions. Reporting that only a few young boys remained from an entire lodge situated near his post, Walker lamented that, “This Tent was my whole standby for provisions.” On another occasion, Walker wrote that a few Indians arrived at the post and that he would send one of the men hunting on the following day. He realized, however, that the relief was only temporary and grieved that, “When these die, I have nobody to kill a Beast for Us.” When natives did arrive at the posts with provisions, agents placed greater trade value than normal on them. On one such occasion at Hudson House, Walker did so because he not only desperately needed the goods, but also because he wanted to encourage the Indians to return soon with more. The traders, however, were merely trying to salvage what proved to be a harrowing year for them. As Walker wrote to his counterpart at Cumberland House, smallpox left few of his

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., 267.
Assiniboine contacts alive, “which will make this One of the Worst Years that even the Honble. Hudson’s Bay Company’s servants has seen both in Furrs and Provisions.”

The traders, however, could count themselves fortunate on one account, as evidence suggests that the onset of the epidemic saved their lives by foiling an Indian revolt. In 1780 and 1781, some of the natives living near the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Rivers finally grew resentful enough of the traders’ encroachment on their land to stage an attack on local posts. At Poplar Fort, a Cree assault killed two traders and their native allies, forcing the survivors to abandon the post to the attackers, who pillaged it for goods. Likewise, the traders at Eagle Hill Fort came under attack and abandoned the post, leaving it to the mercy of the Indians. Fortunately for the traders, “the small Pox seizing the Natives & sweeping off three fourths of them, compelled them, to lay aside their intentions of cutting off all the white men in the interior country as providence would have it.” Their own survival in serious jeopardy, the natives had to abandon the warpath, thus sparing the lives of the traders.

All told, the winter of 1781-82 was a difficult season for the traders on the Saskatchewan River. As many of the epidemic’s victims sought refuge at their posts, the agents found themselves spending a considerable amount of their time caring for sick natives. Lacking adequate provisions for their own subsistence, the traders had to redouble their efforts if they hoped to ensure the survival of their Indian patients. As a

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133 Mackenzie, Voyages, 21; McDonnell, “Red River,” 82; Henry and Thompson, New Light, 292-94, 499; Stearn, Effect of Smallpox, 47.

result, the entries of the Hudson House and Cumberland House journals describe how company agents spent the bulk of their time cutting firewood and catching sturgeon during that desperate time. When the agents were not fulfilling these tasks or participating in one of the expeditions to search for missing natives, they had to bury the bodies of those who succumbed to smallpox. In the midst of the difficult winter, Tomison confessed, “Indeed, it is hard labour to keep the House in fuel and bury the Dead.” As the winter wore on, a sense of hopelessness settled upon the men at the Saskatchewan trading posts. Reflecting upon the horrors of the winter months, Tomison solemnly concluded that, “God knows what will be the End thereof.”

The traders began to show some signs of relief, however, as spring neared and small groups of Indians untouched by smallpox began to arrive at their posts. Not only were these natives isolated enough that they did not contracted the disease, but some of them had not even heard that it ravaged their country. Writing to Tomison in May of 1782, Walker reported that, “there is a good few Indians alive Up here Yet” and that they had begun to resume business, gathering their own furs and those of the deceased to trade. The despair of the winter months gradually gave way to the optimism that spring brought. As the epidemic subsided and traders began to see the living rather than the dead and suffering, their hopes for the future buoyed. For the natives of the northern

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135 Fenn, Pox Americana, 179-80.
137 Ibid., 225.
Great Plains, however, the struggle to recover continued. There was simply no chance that they could return to life as it was before the epidemic; smallpox shattered that world. Consequently, the indigenous peoples of the northern Great Plains created a new world for themselves.
CHAPTER 3

Adjusting to a New World: The Ramifications of Smallpox on Northern Plains Life, 1782-1810

“The natives here are so surrounded by their different enemies at all seasons, and particularly when the fruit is ripe, that the women dare not to leave the villages to gather it… Even when they go out to hoe their corn, young men well armed keep on the roads at short distances to prevent surprise from an enemy. This is a necessary precaution as they have frequently been attacked while working in the fields.”

-Alexander Henry, Mandan villages, 1806

By creating a new world, the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 continued to shape the lives of the northern plains natives long after it passed from the region. Indeed, during the years following the catastrophe, a number of dramatic changes occurred on the northern Great Plains, especially in the military sphere. This chapter explores those transformations, with the aim of revealing how natives’ efforts to adapt to the tremendous losses suffered to Variola induced them. Although historians acknowledge many of these changes, they usually attribute them to the impact of the horse and gun. While this work does not dispute the fact that horses and guns profoundly influenced northern plains warfare patterns, as the research conducted by Anthony McGinnis and Frank Raymond Secoy demonstrate, it contends that their analyses understate the influence of

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infectious disease, namely smallpox.\textsuperscript{2} While Secoy almost entirely neglects the subject of infectious diseases, McGinnis’s treatment devotes significant attention to the subject. However, even after smallpox struck on the plains, according to McGinnis, horses and guns continued to have the greatest effect on regional warfare. This chapter asserts that this was not the case. It contends that after smallpox struck in 1780, it superseded the horse and gun as the primary molder of northern Great Plains native life, military or otherwise.

In order to support this argument, this chapter deals with three distinct themes. One is the further transformation of offensive warfare. By demonstrating how the ravages of smallpox gave natives little choice but to resort to raids and other small-scale operations rather than field large war parties to prevent excessive casualties, this chapter shows how variola continued and accelerated the changes begun by the horse and gun. On the other hand, the ravages of smallpox gave northern plains warriors a decidedly opportunistic approach, for assaulting vulnerable enemy villages proved immensely valuable to recovering tribes. This was because doing so allowed warriors to capture enemies, usually women and children, take them back to their home village, and gradually assimilate them into their tribe, thereby boosting their population growth. Although the integration of war captives into native societies was far from a new practice, the ravages of smallpox dramatically increased its need.

Another theme is the striking defensive posture adopted by many northern plains groups after smallpox vastly reduced their numbers. While horses and guns forced few tribes to adopt significant defensive measures prior 1780, the ravages of smallpox compelled most to do so afterward. As frequent small-scale warfare erupted after the epidemic passed, semisedentary and nomadic Indians alike employed a large variety of defensive measures to guard against enemy incursions. Sometimes, however, groups that had sufficient strength to defend themselves prior to 1780 found themselves simply unable to do so afterward. Therefore, some tribal groups, or bands, consolidated with others in order to better resist enemy pressure. Other times, tribes moved to locations to be nearer to their allies, or sometimes, among them. As historian Colin G. Calloway points out, such new communities “cut across ethnic boundaries.”3 This study contributes to historiography by revealing how exactly these communities formed, how well they fulfilled their purpose, and the impact of smallpox-induced merging on native cultures.

The final theme is the role of trading in post-epidemic life. Smallpox-weakened tribes became increasingly reliant upon traders for material goods that they perceived would help them better defend against their opposition. On the other hand, their enemies who suffered fewer losses to smallpox tried to minimize their trading activity in order to solidify their dominance. As tribes vied for traders’ business, the very colonial elements that brought about the cataclysmic scourge of smallpox became more deeply entrenched in plains life. At the same time, trade increasingly focused not upon acquiring hoses and

guns because of their inherent advantages, but because of what those advantages could mean to Indians in the post-epidemic world. Simply, trade became linked to survival rather than wealth. As a result, trading activity, especially direct commerce with Euro-Americans, swelled and reached unprecedented heights after 1780.

When David Thompson spoke to Saukamappee during the winter of 1787-88, the old Piegan provided great insight into post-epidemic life on the northwestern plains. According to Saukamappee, his people conducted no war expeditions for several years after the epidemic as they focused on rebuilding their weakened society. Two or three years after the epidemic, however, the Shoshones annihilated a small group of Piegans who separated from the rest of their band to hunt. Although only a few years earlier the Piegans had entirely abandoned the warpath because they believed that the Great Spirit sent smallpox to punish them for their aggressive conduct, they determined to avenge the loss. In renewing their rivalry with the Shoshones, the Piegan chiefs decided that the attackers must ensure that they kill only opposing warriors, not women and children. The women and children, then, would be taken captive and brought back to the Piegan village. “Thus,” said Saukamappee, “the Great Spirit will see that when we make war we kill only those who are dangerous to us, and make no more ground red with blood than we can help, and the Bad Spirit will have no more power on us.”4 He continued by stating that the Piegans thereafter generally followed that policy, but more so with girls

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than boys, for “while it weakens our enemies [it] makes us stronger.”⁵ In making this statement, Saukamappee revealed that he and other Indians clearly realized that women were an integral part of population recovery in the wake of epidemics. By taking women from their enemies, they not only boosted their own ability to reproduce, but also hindered that of their rivals.

Although they sought revenge, the Piegans, with their many losses to smallpox fresh in their mind, did not recklessly pursue the Shoshones. Rather, they organized a war party “under the guidance of those who had showed courage and conduct in going to war, for we cannot afford to lose our people, we are too few.”⁶ The expedition set out and soon found its quarry. However, the leader of the party decided that the Shoshone village was too large for his small group to attack. Rather than risking the lives of his men, the war chief instead elected to steal some of the enemy mounts. Although the raid proved successful, as the party returned home with dozens of horses and mules, the warriors were not all happy.⁷ Dissatisfied that the revenge expedition evolved into a mere raid, a young warrior who participated in the effort complained to his father that the war chief was not brave. The older man replied that the warrior was lucky to be under the command of such a wise and cautious chief who ensured that all of his men returned home. Turning to the other young men present, the man continued by declaring, “that it required no great bravery for a War Party to attack a small camp, which they were sure to master; but that it required great courage and conduct, to be for several days in the face of

⁵ Thompson, _David Thompson’s Narrative_, 248.
⁶ _Ibid._, 249.
⁷ _Ibid._, 248-50.
a large camp undiscovered; and each of you bring away a horse from the enemy, instead of leaving your own scalps.” In defending the war chief, this Piegan man perfectly articulated the reasoning for the proliferation in the number of raids as opposed to overt attacks on the plains after the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82. Vastly reduced tribes simply could not afford to lose any more men.

While the effects of colonial forces prior to 1780, namely the horse and gun, primarily transformed the offensive sphere of northern plains warfare, the germ profoundly affected both offensive and defensive patterns. Like the Piegans, other northern plains tribes adopted a largely defensive stance for several years as they began to recover from smallpox. Unwilling or unable to risk men in combat, most tribes kept them at home to defend against possible enemy attacks. Quarreling tribesmen quickly set their differences aside so that they could confront their enemies when they came to war. Duncan M’Gillivray noted that both the Crees and Gros Ventres suffered tremendous losses to smallpox, and they thereafter vastly reduced their warring upon one another. Consequently, “their hostilities amounted only to the death of a few of either party… ‘till the summer – [17]93.” To the southwest, the Crows organized few war expeditions during the years following smallpox, for the Canadian trader Francois-Antoine Larocque noted that, “they pass for brave and courageous among their

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9 McGinnis, Counting Coup, 12.

neighbors; they seldom go to war, or to steal horses but defend themselves with courage when attacked.”

Although the Crows’ Hidatsa relatives continued to conduct many offensive actions against their enemies, they efficiently protected their villages in the wake of the epidemic, as Meriwether Lewis and William Clark remarked in 1805 that they had thus far resisted Sioux pressure quite well.

The Hidatsas’ Mandan neighbors, however, became noted for their aversion to offensive warfare. One of the tribes hardest hit by the epidemic, the Mandans had little military strength afterward. Upon their visit to the Missouri River settlements, Lewis and Clark observed that, “The Mandans ar at war with all who make war [on them, at present with the Seaux] only, and wish to be at peace with all nations, Seldom the aggressors.”

Although the Mandans did not send out war parties, they offered stout resistance to those who dared to attack them. According to Alexander Henry, “The Mandanes have the reputation of defending themselves to the last moment when attacked by and enemy; let the number be ever so great against them, they scorn to fly, and fight to the last man.”

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14 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 220. The entire quotation is the original authors’.
15 Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 1, 372-3. The Mandans’ Arikara enemies, however, learned that even the Mandans had only so much patience. For years after the epidemic, the Arikaras, although themselves weakened by smallpox and unable to prosecute warfare as they did before 1780, habitually harassed the Mandans. Eventually, the Mandans decided to retaliate and killed several dozen Arikaras. The Arikaras then sued for peace, which the Mandans gladly accepted, for they wanted to be able to hunt and work in their fields without fear. Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 214-5; Pierre Antoine Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative of Loisel’s Expedition to the Upper Missouri, ed. Annie Heloise Abel,
In the aftermath of the epidemic, fortifications surrounding the Missouri settlements became more important than ever with fewer warriors available to man them. Small in number and less mobile than the surrounding nomads, the semisedentary villagers absolutely needed these fortifications if they hoped to survive. Reporting on the Mandans, the North West Company trader John McDonnell wrote that, “These Indians live in settled villages fortified round about with Palisades which they seldom ever abandon.” Lewis and Clark found that within the confines of those fortifications the Indians stockpiled corn, beans, and other produce to use in the event of a siege. Henry clearly questioned the defensive ability of the works he viewed, for he noted that they had a “miserable appearance and is daily falling to pieces.” Nevertheless, his hosts informed him that, “upon any emergency it can be put into a tolerably good state of defense at very short notice, as every man, woman, and child lends a hand.”


16 W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, eds., Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818 (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1985), 8; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 15. As the first chapter of this thesis demonstrated, these fortifications existed long before the horse and gun arrived on the northern plains; their use was not a response to the arrival of those colonial elements.


18 Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 1, 362. Thus not only did the ravages of smallpox reduce a tribe’s ability to defend its noncombatants, but it thrust them onto the field of battle, turning them into viable targets for the enemy. Furthermore, having women garrison fortifications challenged traditional gender roles by making warfare, an exclusively male activity, one in which women, by necessity, had to participate. Unfortunately, the historical record does not indicate how native men or women felt about this dramatic change. Their silence suggests that both accepted it as a necessary means of survival that did not elicit complaint. Anthony McGinnis points out that the women’s “sphere” in northern plains life largely consisted of domestic duties, including farming. McGinnis, Counting Coup, 1-2. John C. Ewers’ examination of the woman’s role in plains warfare reveals that they traditionally participated in very little combat. John C. Ewers, “Women’s Roles in Plains Indian Warfare,” in Skeletal Biology in the Great Plains: Migration, Warfare, Health, and Subsistence, ed. Douglas W. Owsley and Richard L. Jantz (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 325-31.
As warfare gradually resumed on the plains during the years following 1782, natives took any and all measures to ensure their safety while conducting everyday business. Their livelihood already challenged by losses to smallpox, they realized that further losses to opportunistic enemies would further endanger their position. Pierre Antoine Tabeau, who traversed the Missouri at about the same time as Lewis and Clark, noted that such caution was necessary, because “[n]either in any place or at any time do they enjoy perfect security. Near their village or camp, in their fields of maize, and even in the village itself, individuals are massacred by small parties.”\(^{19}\) Therefore, it was little surprise that when Henry approached the Mandan villages, his group “soon met a Mandane, well armed with his gun, etc.; he accompanied a party of women hoeing corn, and served as their guard.”\(^{20}\) Likewise, John Bradbury noted that the Arikaras “scarcely ever appear without arms beyond the limits of the town.”\(^{21}\) If the Crees discovered an enemy lurking about their villages during the course of everyday activity, they only engaged them if they possessed a vast numerical superiority. Otherwise, they retreated to their lodges and prepared to ward off an attack. While the arrival of horses and firearms induced a similar development prior to 1780, it was not as pronounced as that which occurred after smallpox ravaged the plains peoples.\(^ {22}\)

Even during important tribal ceremonies, sentries kept watch over their villages or camps. While Henry visited the Mandans, he witnessed a ritual in which about two

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19 Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative*, 204.
20 Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 1, 324.
dozen nude men and women danced throughout the village, singing. All throughout the ceremony, “the young men kept watch during the night, sitting on the tops of the huts or walking around the village, singing amorous songs to their particular favorites.” On occasion, such a nervous lifestyle nearly led to disaster. For instance, Larocque, who traveled with a large Crow band in 1805, watched as his hosts became alarmed because they perceived that a group of children playing in a river outside of their camp was actually an enemy preparing to make an attack. The startled Crows fired upon the children, but they apparently inflicted no casualties before they realized their mistake.

Smallpox-stricken societies also found it difficult to safely perform hunting activities. Whereas they conducted routine hunts prior to 1780, they found it increasingly difficult to do so afterward after smallpox reduced their ability to send out sizable parties on a consistent basis. Lewis and Clark noted that both the Mandans and Arikaras “hunt immediately in their neighborhood.” Since game did not always congregate in the areas surrounding their villages, the semisedentary villagers sometimes had to mount hunting expeditions to pursue game elsewhere. They quickly learned that such parties needed to be large enough to deter enemies from attacking them, as Tabeau noted that the Arikaras only hunted in large numbers after a Crow attack wiped out a pair of lodges. The Hidatsas usually sent out parties consisting of about two hundred men and nearly as many women and children. Upon encountering a party of some 500 Mandans on the hunt, Henry Marie Brackenridge noted that, “They sometimes go on hunting parties by whole

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25 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 89, 90.
villages.”\textsuperscript{27} Piegan summer camps commonly consisted of between 100 and 200 lodges, for during the summer season enemy war parties were most active.\textsuperscript{28}

In response to the perilous world around them, northern plains tribes placed great emphasis on preparing themselves to confront an enemy attack. Thompson observed that the Piegans, “[b]eing a frontier tribe, they lead a more precarious and watchful life than other tribes, from their boyhood are taught the use of arms, and to be good warriors.”\textsuperscript{29} When Henry visited the Mandans, he found that they and their Soulier neighbors held six-mile footraces nearly every day. According to Henry, they conducted these “in order to be prepared for the emergency of being dismounted and obliged to fly from their enemies at war.”\textsuperscript{30} They also raced horses and “performed their warlike maneuvers on horseback, feigning their different attacks upon the enemy, giving their strokes of the battleax and thrusts of the spear, and defending themselves in turn by parrying blows and covering themselves with their shields.”\textsuperscript{31} These observations reveal that after smallpox took the lives of many warriors, northern plains tribes wisely addressed this problem by training their few remaining warriors to be the best that they could.

Alliances and other forms of outside assistance became increasingly valuable to tribes after smallpox stripped them of much of their defensive strength. Much as horses and guns empowered certain tribes and forced their rivals into alliances prior to 1780, diseases compelled groups to cooperate in order to resist mutual enemies that sustained

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 723.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Thompson, \textit{David Thompson’s Narrative}, 252.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 362.
\item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, 362-3.
\end{itemize}
relatively few losses. For instance, in the Saskatchewan country, the Saulteurs and the Assiniboines formed a loose alliance to defend against the Sioux. Such relationships were not always wholly beneficial for both parties, however. On at least one occasion, Henry disdainfully remarked that a drinking match between the two tribes led to a Saulteur murdering an Assinboine, thus causing some intertribal strife. The Piegans, too, relied upon some allies for defensive support, but “they studiously avoid[ed] the company of their allies further than is necessary for their own safety in guarding against their common enemies.”

Yet, some northern plains tribes found that these defensive provisions were not enough. Consequently, they adopted more extreme measures to address the problems posed by the need to defend a smallpox-weakened society. Scholars widely acknowledge that one way in which the natives did so was by consolidating the remains of their many shattered villages or camps into fewer, stronger communities, for they found small villages difficult to sustain. These “refugee camps,” as W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen refer to them, helped their inhabitants better resist enemy attacks because more individuals gathered into a single polity provided for better defense than did many smaller, scattered groups.

32 Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 1, 257.
35 Wood and Thiessen, Early Fur Trade, 8.
The semisedentary villagers commonly utilized this prudent method to protect what remained of their formerly numerous populations. Although the Mandans occupied six or seven large villages prior to 1780, Lewis and Clark found them inhabiting only two in 1806. James McKay reported in 1787 that they and two smaller groups, the Wattasoons and Minatares, inhabited a combined five villages along the Missouri, all of which were nearly in sight of one another.36 Similarly, the Arikaras merged their vastly reduced communities together. They informed Jean Baptiste Truteau that they once “counted thirty-two populous villages, now depopulated and almost entirely destroyed by the smallpox… A few families only, from each of these villages, escaped; these united and formed the two villages now here, which are situated about half a mile apart.”37 Tabeau wrote that he found them in three villages; they once had eighteen.38 According to Lewis and Clark, the group of Indians known as the Arikaras was actually comprised of “the remains of ten different tribes of Panias,” forced together by enemy pressure and the wrath of smallpox.39 Although the term “bands” rather than “tribes” better described the different Arikara groups, Lewis and Clark’s observation nevertheless indicates that smallpox gave geographically separate groups little choice but to merge if they hoped to survive. The evidence provided in chapter one suggests that this process little occurred

39 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 89.
prior to the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82, even after the arrival of the horse and gun.

Nomadic groups also consolidated their smallpox-stricken populations. After smallpox struck the Crows, Larocque noted that, “Since the great decrease of their numbers they generally all dwell together…they seldom part,” for, “collectively they can repulse a greater party of their enemies, than when divided into small bands.”40 At times of the year when an enemy attack seemed unlikely, however, they briefly disbanded into smaller groups.41 This evidence appears to refute the conclusion made by historian Frederick E. Hoxie that, “the Crows of 1805 were a dispersed community of hunters and their families… they dispersed themselves across an immense, borderless landscape.”42 He continues, “Larocque’s summer exploration of the Crow homeland also makes clear that in the years ahead the forces of incorporation in the form of traders, military enemies, government agents, and new technologies would begin to bind the Crows together, drawing them steadily into a new and common history.”43 Larocque’s testimony suggests that this process began in 1780, when smallpox reduced Crow numbers and forced the various bands to cooperate much more often than they had in the past. They were not the “dispersed” people that Hoxie describes.

The merging of various groups caused by smallpox depopulation, however, sometimes led to serious domestic issues. Henry’s notes on his visit to the Mandans suggest that there was a continual state of unrest among those villagers. According to

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41 Ibid., 206; Hyde, Indians of the High Plains, 177.
43 Hoxie, Parading through History, 59.
Henry, disagreements stemmed “from misunderstandings the people have either with the chiefs of the village, or with their own neighbours; when, finding the situation unpleasant and likely to lead to quarrels, they shift their quarters.”\footnote{Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 338.} Such turbulence likely stemmed from the fact that these peoples, the haphazard remains of many communities, suddenly found themselves having to share space and power with strangers. Likewise, it appears that the Assiniboines also suffered from chronic internal strife following the ravages of smallpox. Henry reported that, “They would be a happy people, were it not for their continual wars and the frequent quarrels among themselves, which generally end in bloodshed.”\footnote{Ibid., 307.}

Yet, consolidation itself often did not provide adequate defense for a beleaguered people. Therefore, a number of groups relocated during the years following the epidemic, to be nearer to their allies. The most visible example of such a migration was that of the Mandans, who retreated up the Missouri during the 1780s and 1790s toward their Hidatsa allies after smallpox left them vulnerable to their enemies, particularly the Sioux. In doing so, they left behind a trail of abandoned villages that explorers observed as they trekked up the river. Upon encountering one such village, Lewis and Clark remarked that from that point, the Mandans had moved some forty miles upstream. Within a few years, they moved again, even closer to their allies. By the time of Lewis and Clark, the Mandan and Hidatsa villages sat less than five miles from one another.\footnote{Lewis and Clark, \textit{Original Journals}, vol. 1, 200-5; Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 323; Wood and Thiessen, \textit{Early Fur Trade}, 6; John C. Ewers, \textit{Indian Life on the Upper Missouri} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 48; Meyer, \textit{Village Indians}, 27. A similar process occurred far to the east, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. James H. Merrell reveals that, on the southern
When they visited a Mandan village, the Americans discovered why relocation to the proximity of the Hidatsas was so necessary, for despite consolidation, “this village is small and contains but few inhabitants.”

On the other hand, evidence suggests that the Hidatsas did not move downstream to meet the advance of their allies. As Lewis and Clark noted, “their tradition relates that they have always resided at their present villages.” Apparently, the Hidatsas suffered slightly less from the epidemic than the Mandans and, in all probability, their location provided them with considerable defensive advantages over their enemies. The fact that the Mandans sought protection from Hidatsa presence led to some conflict between the two groups, however. Henry observed that as a result of their greater numbers, the Hidatsas often imposed their will upon their weaker allies and “this causes continued jealousy, and one day may break out in war. Open rapture has, in fact, frequently been imminent, though by the interference of persons of consideration it has thus far been prevented, but seldom without bloodshed, and perhaps a death or two on each side.”

Despite such problems, relocation proved to be an invaluable method of defense. For instance, Henry’s Mandan hosts told him of how, sometime during the 1790s, a Sioux war party cut one of their villages off from the nearby river and opened a vicious piedmont, smallpox ravaged many tribes and they found it necessary to coalesce. “The result,” writes Merrell, “was a kaiedescopic array of mergers.” James H. Merrell, *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 22-23. Over time, this merging formed the many groups into one tribe known to whites as the Catawbas. James H. Merrell, “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 41, 4 (1984): 547-8. Similarly, Richer points out that the Cherokees, Creeks, Wyandots, and Iroquois also emerged from the remains of many different groups that joined one another in response to devastating diseases and common enemies. Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 167-180.

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47 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 1, 208.
48 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 91.
49 Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 1, 372.
attack on it. Although the Sioux might have been able to overwhelm the Mandans had they been isolated, “the Big Bellies [Hidatsas] came to the assistance of their neighbors, and a severe battle was fought on the level plain between the village and high bank.”\textsuperscript{50} The odds thus evened, the battle continued for some time as both sides tried to break the stalemate. Fortunately for the semisedentary villagers, one of their allies, the Crows, were in the area. Their mounted warriors stealthily circled around to the flanks and rear of the Sioux and launched their own attack. The Sioux assault rapidly collapsed and the defeated nomads retreated from the Missouri.\textsuperscript{51}

Downstream from the deserted Mandan villages, Lewis and Clark discovered a similar succession of abandoned Arikara settlements. The explorers reported that, “The remains of the villages are to be seen on many parts of the Missouri, from the mouth of the Tetone River to the Mandans.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, following 1780, the Arikaras, too, gradually moved northward in order to escape Sioux pressure after smallpox gave the latter an opening to crush former, which stood as an obstacle to further westward movement. Although they were not always on friendly terms with the Mandans, it appears that the two sides agreed on periodic truces to defend against their common Sioux enemy. However, as their trade with southern tribes such as the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Kiowas began to falter during the 1790s because of their northward migration, at least a portion of the Arikaras again moved downstream to improve their business.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 361.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 361-2.
\textsuperscript{52} Lewis and Clark, \textit{Originals Journals}, vol. 6, 89.
Nomadic groups also found new areas to roam after smallpox depleted their strength. As Saukamappee told Thompson, the Shoshones abandoned the Bow River country to the Piegans during the 1780s and moved southwest to join their Flathead and Kutenai allies. The Piegans tried to send a peace commission to their enemies to provide themselves with some time to recover from the onslaught of the epidemic, but the Shoshones were nowhere to be found, for they had withdrawn into the Rocky Mountains. Similarly, the Assiniboines migrated away from the Assiniboine and Red Rivers to be closer to their trade contacts, the Mandans.⁵⁴

All of this social fluidity, this merging and relocation, inevitably led to an unprecedented blending of societies, cultures, and ethnicities as different groups increasingly encountered and interacted with one another. This development is similar to the process described by Daniel K. Richter, whose research focuses on natives living in the Great Lakes region. As Richter points out, losses to smallpox and disease forced the Huron, Ottawa, Miami, Illinois, Ojibwa, Potawatomie, and Fox peoples together under the name “Wyandot.” Although these groups sometimes lived amongst one another, they more commonly settled near one another for common defense. Likewise, the Creeks and other groups came together after infectious diseases shattered the populations of many separate tribes. Thus, it appears that what transpired on the northern plains in the wake of the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 was part of a larger trend.⁵⁵

On the upper Missouri, although the Mandans, Hidatsas, and the other smaller groups living together all retained their own identities, the boundaries separating them became increasingly indistinguishable. Henry observed that the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Souliers lived very close to each another, in some cases amongst one another, and therefore shared many characteristics. Yet, they retained their distinct languages. “[F]rom proximity,” wrote Henry, the Souliers “have acquired the manners and customs of the other nations, though they continue to live by themselves.”\(^{56}\) Lewis and Clark confirmed Henry’s observation, writing that the Souliers “differ but very little, in any particular, from the Mandans.”\(^{57}\) They also noted that some tribes actually completely merged with the Hidatsas, losing all but their old name. For instance, the “Shoeman Village Indians” formerly lived some thirty miles away from the Hidatsas, but a combination of disease and enemy pressure compelled them to join forces with the more numerous Hidatsas.\(^{58}\) According to the American explorers, these natives “intermixed” with the Mandans and nearby Minetares.\(^{59}\) As for the Hidatsas, “[i]n their customs, manners, and dispositions, they are similar to the Mandans.”\(^{60}\) As anthropologist John Taylor suggests, this process of assimilation seemingly received a boost from the fact that traditional native spiritual beliefs failed to prevent, curtail, or explain the devastating effect of smallpox and natives likely became more open to the ideas of others, particularly those who suffered fewer losses to the malady.\(^{61}\)

\(^{56}\) Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 1, 343-4.
\(^{57}\) Lewis and Clark, *Originals Journals*, vol. 6, 91.
\(^{58}\) Lewis and Clark, *Originals Journals*, vol. 1, 270-1.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., 271.
\(^{60}\) Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 91.
The Arikaras, who consolidated their many villages into a few settlements after smallpox ravaged their population, were actually comprised of ten distinct bands who common enemies forced together. Thus, smallpox not only continued a process of unification already started before 1780, but accelerated it. However, it appears that the different villages forged in the wake of the epidemic developed differently, for Lewis and Clark remarked that, “The corruption of the language of those different Tribes has so reduced the language that the Different Villages do not understand all the words of the others.”

Some Arikaras, however, chose to join other groups, as Lewis and Clark found when they met “a considerable Chief of the Mandans,” a man named Coal, who was by birth an Arikara.

Similar trends were visible in the actions of nomadic groups. In the Saskatchewan country, Henry noted that Assiniboines and Saulteurs commonly married one another. Remarking that a Saulteur man had recently married an Assiniboine woman, he pointed out that the Saulteur would prove to be a valuable interpreter for the two allied groups. While accompanying the Crows through the Yellowstone country, Larocque learned that a group of twenty Shoshones lived among his hosts. Unwilling to abandon the plains along with the bulk of their kinsmen, these brave Shoshones instead elected to entrust the Crows for protection. Apparently, other Shoshones adopted this idea, for in 1800 Henry learned that approximately fifty of them encamped with some Crees near the Pembina River. Historian Colin G. Calloway also points out that the

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62 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 188.  
63 Ibid., 265.
Crees, who actually lived in six distinct groups prior to 1780, suffered terrible losses to smallpox and thereafter became known under a single collective name. After smallpox devastated those living on the fringes of the plains, other Cree groups, from the north and east, as well as some Ojibways, moved in to fill the void. In the process, the different groups living together and in close proximity increasingly found themselves being merged under a single identity; references to the individual groups simply ceased.\(^6^4\)

As Saukamappee’s testimony at the beginning of this chapter suggests, when warfare resumed on the northern plains after the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 passed, two major forms of military action dominated the region, both of which aimed at minimizing casualties. Tribes strove to curtail combat losses after smallpox ravaged them, and one way of doing so was to conduct smaller-scale operations. Such tactics, of course, emerged as dominant forms of warfare during the eighteenth century with the integration of the horse and gun into regional warfare, but smallpox entrenched them as the standard. Offensive operations, unlike defensive actions, remained, with few exceptions, a male activity.

The first and most common form was the raid, which Indians usually used to obtain enemy horses. In this type of action, a small native war party silently approached an enemy village, usually under the cover of night, snuck into its horse herds, and whisked away as many as they could without alerting their victims.\(^6^5\) Scholars largely


\(^{6^5}\) McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 12.
attribute rampant horse-raiding to natives’ pursuit of wealth and social status, but often fail to link the popularity of the activity to the fact that it was a relatively low-risk, high-reward form of warfare that enabled warriors from smallpox-stricken tribes to continue to pursue social distinction.\textsuperscript{66} As a result, horse raids became so prevalent that, by the early nineteenth century, even traders and explorers visiting the region expressed perpetual worries for their mounts. François Antoine Larocque was no exception, for he lamented that, “We are in a Continual state of alarm for our horses.”\textsuperscript{67}

Although traders and their Indian contacts reported that virtually every northern plains tribe was guilty of horse theft, the Assiniboines were by and far the most notorious raiders. When M’Gillivray traveled to the Saskatchewan River country in 1794-95, he heard that the Assiniboines routinely raided trading posts throughout the region. One such operation resulted in the theft of 84 horses. Clearly unimpressed by the Assiniboines’ valuable skill, M’Gillivray reflected that, “they are a worthless indolent tribe, entirely addicted to sloth & laziness and if they can boast of any peculiar excellence, it is their dexterity at stealing Horses.”\textsuperscript{68} Navigating the same area just over a decade later, Alexander Henry indicated that the Assiniboines were still quite active raiders, for he remarked that, for them, “Stealing horses is quite a necessary trade.” They


\textsuperscript{68} M’Gillivray, \textit{Journal of Duncan M’Gillivray}, 27.
actively raided the semisedentary villagers, their Sioux and Blackfoot neighbors, and even traders.\textsuperscript{69}

Other plains tribes also conducted rigorous horse-raiding activities because it was the most practical type of warfare after disease took the lives of many fighting men. The Assiniboines’ close allies, the Crees, were a major culprit, as Henry observed that they were also “much addicted to horse stealing.”\textsuperscript{70} Encountering members of both tribes on another occasion, Henry remarked that, “they have seemed honest so thus far, but they are all horse-thieves.”\textsuperscript{71} The Crees took great care to ensure that their enemies remained ignorant of their presence until after they had made their escape. Entering hostile territory, Cree raiding parties traveled at night, slept during the day, and sent two of their most skilled warriors ahead of the main body to scout. Upon reaching an enemy camp or village, they infiltrated by pairs under the cover of night.\textsuperscript{72} The Mandan villages were a chief target of the not only Cree and Assiniboine horse-raiders, but others as well. As Lewis noted in 1805 while visiting the Mandans, “the Indians in our neighborhood are frequently pilfered of their horses by the Recares [Arikaras], Siouxs, and Assiniboins.”\textsuperscript{73} The Arikaras, observed Brackenridge, victimized the distant Shoshones, who had been weakened greatly by smallpox and had a rich supply of horses that they could little protect. Raiding on the northern plains was so intense during the years following the

\textsuperscript{69} McDonnell, “The Red River,” 92.  
\textsuperscript{70} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 513.  
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, 210.  
\textsuperscript{72} Mandelbaum, \textit{Plains Cree}, 296-7.  
\textsuperscript{73} Lewis and Clark, \textit{Original Journals}, vol. 1, 258. The Mandans, however, did not simply allow raiders to escape, for Larocque observed that while during his visit, a party of Assiniboines stole sixteen horses from his hosts. The villagers promptly sent out a group of some sixty warriors to retrieve the stolen mounts; they managed to return four of them. Larocque, “Missouri Journal,” 143-4.
epidemic of 1780-82 that raiding parties often stole from others. For instance, Lewis and Clark learned that a Sioux party had stolen some horses from the Hidatsas only to encounter an Assiniboine expedition that killed the thieves and took their loot.\textsuperscript{74}

Such rampant raiding made it necessary for traders and northern plains natives to adopt some measures to protect their valuable horses. Usually, with the exception of incidents such as the one above, well-armed guards deterred Indians from targeting traders’ herds. However, Indians visiting posts to conduct business often fell victim to those who lived nearby. The semisedentary villagers, on the other hand, prevented theft by keeping their horses in their lodges with them at night.\textsuperscript{75} As one might imagine, traders found this to be a wise, but unpleasant provision, for, as Henry observed, “It is customary for these people [Mandans] to occupy one side of the hut and the horses the other; their habitations consequently have an offensive smell to the nose of a stranger.”\textsuperscript{76} Although the Arikaras avoided this situation by tying their mounts immediately outside of their lodges, their horses were slightly less secure. During the day, Indians took their horses out to graze, but they remained alert for enemy raiders. Regardless, raiding continued, especially at the northernmost of the Mandan villages, leading its chiefs to discuss moving further downstream, as they believed that greater distance from the Assiniboines and closer proximity to other villages would reduce horse theft.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Lewis and Clark, \textit{Original Journals}, vol. 1, 219, 258, 267.
\textsuperscript{76} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 325.
\textsuperscript{77} Tabeau, \textit{Tabeau’s Narrative}, 131; Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 328; Larocque, “Missouri Journal,” 144.
The second common post-epidemic military exploit was the surprise attack, or ambush. Whereas the number of large-scale expeditions declined during the eighteenth century as horses and guns made warfare increasingly deadly, the epidemic of 1780-82 virtually brought an end to such expeditions.\(^{78}\) As Tabeau observed, “it is seldom that the nation entire is attacked and still more seldom that such an attack is successful in one place or another.”\(^{79}\) Assaults on large villages and camps had the potential to be too costly. During an ambush, on the other hand, a small war party approached a small, seemingly unsuspecting enemy encampment under the cover of night, then, at dawn, would “fall upon their enemies when they are fast locked in the Arms of sleep.”\(^{80}\) After a successful attack, the party would hasten homeward, usually by a different route than the one that they took on their approach, by day and night if the warriors anticipated a pursuit. Sometimes, war parties constructed crude temporary fortifications when they encamped for the evening, in case an enemy spotted them.\(^{81}\) Such expeditions were popular and, therefore, common, as M’Gillivray observed that, “when an opportunity offers of annoying a neighboring nation, without incurring much danger, they generally

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\(^{79}\) Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative*, 204.

\(^{80}\) Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 214. Larocque also reveals how the Crows spiritually prepared for impending attacks. To paraphrase him, members of war parties, especially the leaders, ensured that they brought their “medicine” along with them on any expedition. Prior to the attack, the warriors sung songs, smoked, and opened their “medicine bags” to increase their chances of success. The war chief always carried along a “magic” lantern with figures painted on the glass, since through this token, spirits helped him in battle. Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 214-5.

embrace it, whether the provocation be recent or not.”\(^{82}\) However, the northern plains warrior was not rash, as M’Gillivray continued, “he seldom endangers his own safety by rushing headlong into danger. He watches the motions of his enemy for many days with the most astonishing patience, and if he cannot attack without risking his own life he restrains his resentment ‘til another occasion.”\(^{83}\)

M’Gillivray’s notes indicate that although many ambushes took place on the plains, many more expeditions aborted their plans. As Tabeau observed, “Surprise is so essential to the attack that, without it, the attack does not usually take place.”\(^{84}\) Furthermore, because able-bodied men were so important to tribes, especially after so many died during the epidemic, war leaders exercised great caution in determining whether or not to spring an ambush. As Tabeau wrote, “A victory, however complete, must not be bought at the price of one of his warriors.” Should a chief return home having lost one of his men, “[h]e is loaded with reproaches instead of cries of joy and delight; he sees everywhere only grief and sorrow as after a general defeat.”\(^{85}\) Thereafter, the reputation of that chief would be tarnished, for his people held leaders who had never lost a man in battle in higher esteem than those who had. Therefore, many war chiefs led their warriors away from villages or encampments that seemed likely to offer considerable resistance. Consequently, Tabeau noted that approximately fifteen out of every twenty war expeditions returned home without making an attack.\(^{86}\) The epidemic

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\(^83\) *Ibid.*, 63.
\(^84\) Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative*, 205.
\(^85\) *Ibid*.
of 1780-82 contributed, along with horses and guns, to war chiefs being more prudent in their exploits.

Since smallpox-ravaged northern plains war parties chose highly vulnerable targets, a common victim emerged by the early nineteenth century. Their power shattered by smallpox and still possessing few guns, the hated Shoshones, their past aggression far from forgotten, suffered from what appeared to be endless assaults from their plains neighbors. In the mid-1790s, John McDonnell reported that, “Most of the Red River Indians go to war during the absence of the Canoes at the grand Portage, upon the Rocky Mountain Snake Indians.” Likewise, a Mandan warrior informed Charles Mackenzie in 1805 that he had recently participated in an attack on the Shoshones and that his effort yielded a young female slave. That same year, Lewis and Clark arrived at the Hidatsa villages and learned that a son of one of the chiefs was on the warpath in the Rockies, against the Shoshones. The Crows also pressured the Shoshones on occasion. Similarly, many northern plains tribes targeted the Shoshones’ Flathead allies and other small Rocky Mountain groups. Lewis and Clark noted that because the Flatheads were “a timid, inoffensive, and defenceless people” who “are said to possess an abundance of horses,” the Missouri villagers often plundered their camps. Similarly, Henry reported that the Snares, a Rocky Mountain tribe that had no guns and dwelled in small camps of

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89 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 6, 111.
three or four lodges, often fell prey to the Crees, who traveled a great distance to
overwhelm this weak enemy.\(^{90}\) Lewis and Clark remarked that two small tribes of
semisedentary villagers who lived among the Mandans and Hidatsas, the Souliers and
Minetares, also went to war against the Shoshones. The Americans realized that the
prime opportunities offered by such distant, yet vulnerable neighbors would make it
“difficult to induce them to desist.”\(^{91}\)

On the plains, small encampments suffered a similar fate as those in the Rockies.
As Larocque journeyed through the high plains with the Crows in 1805, he watched
firsthand as his hosts stumbled upon a group of about 35 Assiniboines. Although the
Assiniboines quickly retreated from the area, the Crows managed to kill two of them.
Two days of dancing and celebration followed the victory. Tabeau reported that the
Crows also took advantage of a hunting party of Arikaras, consisting of two lodges,
killing or capturing the majority of the defenders. Likewise, the Sioux seized the
opportunity to plunder small, unassuming camps. Lewis and Clark solemnly reported
that during their stay with the Mandans, a small hunting party set out against the advice
of their chiefs and fell victim to a Sioux attack, losing five men as a result. Shortly
thereafter, another Sioux party relentlessly attacked a Saulteur village of less than twenty
people on the Tongue River, a tributary of the Yellowstone River, slaughtering fourteen
and taking four captive.\(^{92}\)

\(^{90}\) Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 2, 596.
\(^{91}\) Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 91.
\(^{92}\) Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 185-7; Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative*, 149-50; Lewis and
Sometimes, Indians even intentionally targeted undermanned trading posts, realizing what material gains they could make with little or no sacrifice. M’Gillivray recounted a particularly illustrative example during his stay in the Saskatchewan country during the mid-1790s. In 1793, wrote M’Gillivray, a party of Crees fell on a village of unsuspecting Gros Ventres, one of their hated enemies. Both tribes had suffered great losses to smallpox and subsequently avoided armed conflict with one another.\(^{93}\) Now, the Crees renewed the rivalry and “like hungry wolves and with remorseless fury butchered them all in cold blood except a few children whom they preserved for Slaves.”\(^ {94}\) Thereafter, the other Gros Ventre bands, struck with terror, refused to retaliate against the Crees. Instead, they resolved to direct their military actions at local trading posts, for the traders, who the Gros Ventres believed to be supporting the Crees, comprised a much more rewarding and vulnerable target.\(^ {95}\) When approximately 100 Gros Ventres approached one of these forts, however, a volley delivered by its few defenders “discouraged them so much that they retired in confusion behind a Rising ground, that effectually covered them from the Shot of the Besieged.”\(^ {96}\) The Gros Ventres opened fire on the post from their cover and continued to do so until their leader fell while trying to rally his warriors to renew their advance. Although “a little perseverance” would have allowed the Gros Ventres to seize control of the fort, the party retreated after the loss. The warriors then moved on to another nearby fort, where they


\(^{95}\) Ibid., 62-4.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 14.
found better luck.\textsuperscript{97} “The savages finding no resistance,” continued M’Gillivray, they “broke into the Fort and began a scene full of horror and destruction.”\textsuperscript{98} The Gros Ventres killed all of the post’s inhabitants, and then pillaged its goods. In addition to potential material gains, ambushes also provided smallpox-strickened northern plains tribes with a means of replenishing their diminished populations. When the opportunity presented itself, warriors participating in ambushes usually captured young enemies and took them home where they became slaves. Usually, families adopted these young slaves and thus incorporated them into their tribes to replace those lost to sickness and war. Although the assimilation of war captives into northern plains societies was not a new practice, for the Shoshones, Blackfeet, Crees, and other tribes used it prior to 1780, they placed greater emphasis on it than ever before as they desperately worked to counteract the devastating effects of smallpox.\textsuperscript{99} As Saukamappe recounted to Thompson, when the Piegans determined to resume warfare against the Shoshones, the chiefs declared that, “the young women must all be saved, and if any has a babe at the breast, it must not be taken from her, nor hurt; all the Boys and lads that have no weapons must not be killed, but brought to our camps, and be adopted amongst us, to be our people, and make us more numerous and stronger than we are.”\textsuperscript{100} The Crows also actively sought war captives, as Tabeau observed that when a Crow party assaulted an Arikara camp, “A few

\textsuperscript{97} M’Gillivray, \textit{Journal of Duncan M’Gillivray}, 14-5.  
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 15.  
\textsuperscript{100} Thompson, \textit{David Thompson’s Narrative}, 247.
men, women, and children escaped, but watched six women and children their relatives get carried off into slavery, and their husbands and brothers killed.”¹⁰¹ The Arikaras themselves procured a significant number of enemy captives, for Brackenridge noted that they had “a much greater number than I had supposed.”¹⁰² Explorers and traders also noted that the Sioux, Crees, Hidatsas, and other northern plains tribes also integrated war captives into their tribes to offset losses to smallpox and warfare. Unsurprisingly, the vulnerable tribes inhabiting the Rocky Mountains served as a source of captives for their prairie-dwelling neighbors.¹⁰³

Some captives found that life among an enemy tribe presented tremendous opportunities that they might not have had if they stayed with their native people. The most famous example is Sacagawea, the Indian woman who served as a guide and interpreter for the Lewis and Clark expedition. In 1799, Sacagawea and her Shoshone tribesmen lived near the forks of the Madison, Jefferson, and Gallatin Rivers, which merge to form the great Missouri, when a Hidatsa war party launched an attack on their village. The Shoshone men quickly escaped, leaving their women and children to the mercy of the Hidatsas, who took many of them prisoner. One of them was the young Sacagawea, who lived among the Hidatsas on the upper Missouri for several years before her captors presented her to the French trader Charbonneau as a wife. It was in this capacity that she came into service of the famous American explorers in 1805. Thus,

¹⁰¹ Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 149-50.
smallpox, in its own way, played a significant role in one of the cornerstone moments in American history, Lewis and Clark’s legendary journey to the Pacific.\textsuperscript{104}

Northern plains tribes also used polygamy as a means of increasing their population in the aftermath of smallpox. Like the adoption of war captives, this was not a new practice, but it received new life after smallpox decimated Indian groups. Larocque remarked that Crow men had a general “plurality of wives,” most having two or three while some had as many as twelve.\textsuperscript{105} Traversing the northernmost reaches of the plains, Henry noted that among the Assiniboines, “Polygamy is very common.”\textsuperscript{106} As for the Blackfeet, “Many of them have six or seven wives.”\textsuperscript{107} On another occasion, the Northwest Company trader encountered a Piegan man with three wives, one of which

\textsuperscript{104} Mackenzie, “Some Account,” 238; Hyde, Indians of the High Plains, 176; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 24. Other war captives taken in the wake of the epidemic became influential figures within their adopted tribe. When Henry encountered some Assiniboines in 1809, he met Star, a chief who once held great power among those people. According to Henry, “He is a Kootonois [Kootenai] by birth, who was taken in infancy at war, and by his great bravery acquired influence.” Although Star had apparently lost much of his power by the time he met Henry, his case demonstrates that an individual’s capture by an enemy did not necessarily mean that he or she had little to look forward to in life beyond harsh treatment and misery. Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 2, 549-50.

The case of Woman Chief reveals that captivity enabled even women to accomplish nearly unthinkable feats. When she was about ten years old, a party of Crows took Woman Chief (her former name is unknown), a Gros Ventre, prisoner. While she grew up among the Crows, her “owner” encouraged her “masculine habits” and even though she still wore the attire of a woman, she became a hunter and warrior. Woman Chief became a tribal hero when, during a Blackfoot attack on her adopted people, she confronted the assailants while other warriors refused to do so and killed three of them. After this act of bravery earned Woman Chief the admiration of the Crows and led them to sing about her, her “master” fell in battle and she became the head of her adopted family. Woman Chief successfully directed later expeditions, enabling her to earn the distinction of being the third highest-ranked chief in a band of 160 lodges and become an important figure in tribal ceremonies, an honor usually reserved for men. In 1854, this extraordinary woman perished while on a peace mission to her native people, the Gros Ventres. Woman Chief’s ascendency revealed that Indian women, even captives, could challenge their traditional roles in northern plains societies. Although men generally viewed women as inferior to themselves and did not allow them to voice their opinions in regard to tribal matters, there were certainly exceptions to the rule. Furthermore, this case reveals how an activity encouraged by the ravages of smallpox forever influenced the history of an entire tribe. Edwin Thompson Denig, Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 196-200.

\textsuperscript{105} Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 207.
\textsuperscript{106} Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 2, 517.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 526.
was “a Cree who had been for several years with the Piegans and was considered one of their people.”

Thus, the Piegans blended polygamy and war captive adoption to address the losses they sustained to smallpox and the approach worked brilliantly. According to Henry, the populations of the Piegans and their larger affiliation, the Blackfoot confederacy, increased rapidly during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Historian John Ewers estimates that the Piegan population alone doubled between the end of the epidemic and 1809. Thus, even though men continued to fall in battle and on the hunt, those who did not had multiple wives and were therefore able to reproduce at high rates.

The Hidatsas used an additional approach to encourage population growth. While individuals from other tribes visited their village peacefully, regardless of whether or not they were enemies of the Hidatsas, the hosts “protect all strangers from insult or injury while they remain within the limits of the village.” The Hidatsas also freely provided visitors from other tribes with war captives for their “happy liberty.” As a result, the Hidatsa villages became a sort of friendly sanctuary for natives from neighboring tribes who might have somehow alienated their own people. It is likely that this policy not only encouraged more than a few “outsiders” to remain among the Hidatsas, but the hosts also gained valuable interpreters and ambassadors who they might send to other groups. Of course, this policy also led to further mixing of northern plains ethnicities. On occasion,

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109 *Ibid.*, 530, 722-3; Ewers, *Blackfeet*, 37; Arthur J. Ray asserts that the Assiniboines were also able to stimulate rapid population recovery, but does not indicate how they did so. Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 106.
however, this approach backfired, for sometimes Indians killed some of their hosts, took their scalps, and returned to their native people to obtain forgiveness for the offense that led to their expulsion. On one occasion, an Arikara guest among the Mandans gave his hosts’ secrets to their enemies, thereby causing “much bloodshed to his protectors as a result.”

It appears that the Arikaras also utilized a similar policy, for when Brackenridge visited them, he noticed not only an abundance of “slaves,” but also a number of “those of foreign tribes who have domiciliated [domesticated?] themselves here.”

Finally, northern plains natives also understood that treating white visitors, particularly traders, with hospitality might provide them with tremendous economic and material advantages that they desperately needed after smallpox weakened them.

Although natives’ interest in trading blossomed during the eighteenth century as the tremendous advantages offered by the horse and gun encouraged them to actively engage in the trade, the devastating effects of smallpox made Indians view these items in a whole new light. Those commodities introduced by Euro-Americans were not then simply a means of better competing with rival tribes, but a necessity if a group hoped to survive. Consequently, post-epidemic trading had an air of necessity rather than one of mere profitability. Especially in the case of the semisedentary Missouri villagers, trade was no longer a means of acquiring a few helpful weapons and mounts, then passing the surplus

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on to their neighbors for a handsome profit. It was now necessary to accumulate these commodities for the sake of survival.

A look at the conduct of the natives, particularly those settled along the Missouri, reveals that they did their utmost to ensure traders to return to their villages in the future to conduct further business. Increased exchange with traders, of course, meant that they could obtain more goods, particularly guns and ammunition, to help their smallpox-stricken populations fare better in warfare. Consequently, northern plains groups devastated by the epidemic of 1780-82 became increasingly dependent upon traders’ goods during the years following it. Thus, it is little surprise that Bradbury, upon visiting the upper Missouri, remarked that, “When the generally thievish character of those we call savages is considered, the Indians of the Missouri are superlatively honest toward strangers. I never heard of a single instance of a white man being robbed, or having any thing stolen from him in an Indian village.”

The actions of the semisedentary villagers reveal that they clearly understood the value of traders’ business after smallpox placed them in a precarious situation. When James McKay visited the Mandans in 1787, he discovered firsthand how well those people treated traders. According to McKay, “they received me with all the Affability possible, many of their Chiefs Came to Meet me, at some distance from their village, and would not permit me to enter their village on foot, they carried me between four men in a Buffaloe Robe, to the Chiefs tents.” Then, the villagers prepared a great feast for the

115 Bradbury, Travels in the Interior, 166-7.
116 McKay, “Captain McKay’s Journal,” 496.
trading party. Lewis and Clark found that the Mandans “are the most friendly, well disposed Indians inhabiting the Missouri.” Similarly, when Mackenzie reached the Hidatsa villages in 1804, he marveled that, “the natives flew in crowds to meet us.” Larocque, trekking westward with the Crows a year later, recorded that, “Any person of any nation going into their camp will be well treated and received.” Brackenridge found his Arikara hosts so eager to please he and his associates that they offered their women to them. Since many men had multiple wives, who they clearly viewed as inferior, this was not an uncommon practice. It was Tabeau, however, who correctly deduced the intentions of the shrewd Arikaras, for he commented that, “Hospitality and the protection of one’s hosts, according to established usage, give an incontestable right to extractions without limit and entail excessive expenses.”

Sometimes, however, Indians curtailed their hospitality to express how they were beginning to understand how traders irrevocably altered their way of life through not only the goods that they brought, but also by bringing terrible diseases. Surprisingly, a Mandan chief made one of the most revealing speeches to the traders about how their intrusion brought not only increasingly needed goods, but also destructive elements. The

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117 Likewise, on another date, the Mandans also received McKay’s associate, John Evans, with great fanfare. After Evans presented his hosts with gifts of flags and medals, the natives pledged their loyalty to the Spanish whom the two whites represented. McKay, “Captain McKay’s Journal,” 496; John Evans, “Extracts of Mr. Evans Journal,” in Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804, ed. Abrahm P. Nasatir, vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 496; David Williams, “John Evans’ Strange Journey: Part II, Following the Trail,” The American Historical Review, 54, 3 (1949): 520.
118 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 6, 90.
120 Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 214. On the other hand, should strangers approach their camps at night or be “seen skulking about need not expect mercy.” Ibid.
121 Brackenridge, “Journey of a Voyage,” 129.
122 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 145.
chief told Mackenzie, “[i]n my young days there were no white men – and we knew no wants... The white people came, they brought with them some goods; but they brought the small pox, they brought evil liquors – the Indians Since are diminished, and they are no longer happy.”

Despite this declaration, the Mandans continued to maintain a strong relationship with the traders. By this time, they were so weak that they had little choice but to do so if they hoped to persist against mounting enemy pressure.

Arikara-white relations, on the other hand, rapidly deteriorated after 1780. This resulted from the direct and indirect effects of smallpox. Drastically weakened population-wise by the disease, the Arikaras wisely sought to ensure that traders deposited as many of their goods as possible in their villages. Although traders paying a visit to them received kind treatment, those who tried to push upstream to visit the Mandans or others found that Arikara hospitality had its limits. When he traveled up the Missouri in 1796, Evans found that the Arikaras “would not permit me to pass their Village and carry any Goods to those nations that reside above them, they said, they were themselves in want of Goods & c. finding then that all me Efforts were in vain, to get on, I was obliged to stay among them.”

In particular, the Arikaras demanded guns, ammunition, knives, and other goods useful in warfare. A decade later, Tabeau found the situation little changed, for the Arikaras looked “upon the whites as beneficent spirits who ought, since they can, to supply all its needs and it looks upon the merchandise, brought to the village, as if destined for and belonging to it.”

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124 Evans, “Extracts of Mr. Evans Journal,” 495-6.
125 Ibid., 496; Williams, “John Evans’ Strange Journey,” 520.
concluded that the Arikaras were “not a fit subject for a special trade expedition. Their pressing needs always require a large consumption of merchandise and the cost always exceeds the value of the peltries which they can furnish.” Thus, the Arikaras’ desperate need for traders’ goods and their unwillingness to offer much in exchange for them led whites to perceive them as a greedy and hostile people. Furthermore, the Arikaras began to increasingly accept and understand the fact that smallpox and other diseases were the white man’s germs. Ultimately, anger over smallpox and whites’ refusal to allow the Arikaras to monopolize the trade exploded into armed conflict with the Americans in 1807 after an Arikara chief died while visiting Washington, D.C.

The Mandans also recognized their need for traders’ goods in the wake of the smallpox epidemic and acted on it. As a result, traders found that the Mandans sometimes tried to obstruct their dealings with other tribes in order to maintain their villages’ status as the central trading hubs of the northern plains. Direct dealings between traders and Indians west of the Missouri would diminish the commerce flowing through the Missouri settlements. As Mackenzie observed, “they [the Mandans] asserted that if the white people extended their dealings to the Rocky Mountains, the Mandans would thereby become the great sufferers- as they…would lose all benefit which they had hitherto derived from their intercourse with those distant tribes.” Therefore, the Mandans did what they could to deter whites from going beyond their villages. Furthermore, individual Mandan villages competed with one another for traders’

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126 Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative*, 134.
business. For instance, when Henry’s party attempted to leave one Mandan village to visit another, the Canadians found that since “every village being ambitious of getting as many European articles as they can, particularly arms and ammunition,” their hosts would not help them transport their goods across the river.”  

Henry, however, acknowledged that this was a “good policy,” for each Mandan village needed all the goods it could get to help its inhabitants ward off their enemies, particularly the Sioux. Because of the Sioux threat, “[a]rms and ammunition are, therefore, necessary articles, and everyone has a stock of ball and powder laid up in case of emergency.”

The Mandans, as well as their Hidatsa neighbors, also realized that if they restricted traders from going west of their villages, they would cut off their enemies’ access to much-needed goods. As a Hidatsa explained to Mackenzie, “If the white man could furnish the Serpents [Shoshones] as they furnish us with arms,” said the chief, “we should not carry away so many of the Serpents’ scalps.” In other words, the Hidatsas feared that direct trader contact with the western tribes would lead to those groups obtaining significant quantities of firearms, and, therefore, no longer be an easy target for Hidatsa war excursions. However, Henry remarked that the Hidatsas were, on the whole, a bit less friendly than their Mandan neighbors. He wrote, “Were it not that they must have traders to bring them the arms and ammunition of which they stand in such great need, being surrounded by enemies, a white man would stand a poor chance for his life

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132 Ibid., 330.
and property among this set of savages.”\textsuperscript{134} Such a comment suggests that the Hidatsas only tolerated white intrusion because of the tremendous benefits that their goods offered.

The Crows themselves strove to maintain their enviable position as middlemen between the Missouri settlements and the Rocky Mountains. As they did throughout the eighteenth century, the Crows trafficked horses from the west and southwest to the Missouri, where they exchanged them for guns, ammunition, and other European goods.\textsuperscript{135} Before 1805, the Crows traded few, if any of those firearms to their Shoshone contacts to the west, but Larocque noted that the Shoshones “as well as the Flatheads trade as yet no guns from the Ererokas [Crows] but this year the Ererokas intend selling them a few as they have many.”\textsuperscript{136} Thus, the Crows wisely built up their own supply of firearms before passing them on to their less fortunate neighbors. Accumulating many guns, of course, helped them to balance out some of their many losses to smallpox. Indeed, their trade with the Mandans for guns and ammunition began to pay off by 1805, for Larocque remarked that, “They are excellent marksmen with the Bow and arrow, but poor shots with the gun, but they practice dayly as of late years they have more ammunition than normal.”\textsuperscript{137}

To the northeast, the Crees and Assiniboines also used trade to offset their losses to smallpox. They struggled to maintain their status as middlemen, but with less success than the Missouri villagers. Henry discovered this as he trekked westward and a messenger informed him that “the Crees had assembled at Battle River, and were

\textsuperscript{134} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 334.
\textsuperscript{136} Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 220.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 215.
determined to stop us, in order to prevent the Slaves [Blackfeet] from receiving arms and ammunition.” Likewise, a party of Canadian traders that desired to reach the Missouri, which included Larocque and Mackenzie, had to wait for an opportune moment to slip away from the Saskatchewan country Assiniboines, who would obstruct their progress for the sake of preserving their commerce. Despite such efforts, as traders increased their activities throughout the region in response to the natives’ stunning losses to smallpox, the Assiniboines and Crees lost their grip on their highly profitable position as middlemen between the Missouri settlements and Saskatchewan trading posts. Apparently, the epidemic of 1780-82 showed the Canadian traders how dangerous it was to rely upon native middlemen, for they could easily succumb to foreign diseases. Furthermore, the creation of the North West Company in 1779 led to heightened competition on the plains during the subsequent decades as that firm competed with the Hudson’s Bay Company, as well as those funded by the Spanish operating out of St. Louis. The upshot of increased direct contact between traders and the semisedentary villagers was that the Indian middlemen watched former services become less valuable, almost unnecessary.\footnote{Mackenzie, “Some Account,” 229; Larocque, “Missouri Journal,” 135; Elizabeth A. Fenn, \textit{Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 194-5; Calloway, \textit{One Vast Winter Count}, 299-300.}

The net result of Indians’ efforts to obtain and preserve monopolies with traders was that they became increasingly dependent upon their goods. Weakened by smallpox between 1780 and 1782, many northern plains natives, especially the semisedentary Missouri villagers, understood that the goods offered by traders, especially firearms,
could help them rebuild their strength, or at least compensate for some of their losses. The rivalries and quarrels between supposed allies, as mentioned above, reveal how deeply tribes needed traders’ business. Simply, those goods, which were certainly important to pre-epidemic life, as the first chapter demonstrated, became central components of plains societies by the time the northern plains became part of the United States of America.\footnote{Meyer, \textit{Village Indians}, 46; McGinnis, \textit{Counting Coup}, 15-16.}

Thus, within three decades, between 1782 and 1810, northern plains tribes dramatically transformed militarily, socially, economically, and demographically. Warfare patterns that began to shift throughout the eighteenth century in response to the arrival of the horse and gun accelerated as smallpox obliterated tribes and forced them to adopt new strategies. As the previous pages demonstrate, it was the fallout of the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82, not the horse or gun that dominated traders’ and explorers’ discourse on regional affairs. Indeed, the effects of the epidemic resonated long after \textit{variola} itself passed from the plains. It caused marked changes in natives’ abilities to conduct offensive warfare and defend themselves. Furthermore, population losses led to a growing dependence upon traders for material goods that might help tribes better repel their hated enemies who tried to take advantage of their weakness. Finally, new communities formed as individuals from varieties of backgrounds mixed together for their common defense. In sum, the transformations sparked by the horse and gun, as
outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, paled in comparison to the violent changes brought about by smallpox.

Yet, there were further changes, for even as the above transformations occurred, two great waves swept over the plains from different directions. In the northwest, the Blackfeet resumed their advance into Shoshone territory, which the epidemic briefly halted. In the east, the Sioux found that smallpox offered them a golden opportunity to continue their westward migration. The expansion of these two peoples, discussed in the next chapter, further altered the course of northern Great Plains history.
CHAPTER 4

The New Order on the Plains: The Rising Tide of Sioux Expansionism and the Blackfoot Advance, 1782-1810

[The Teton Sioux are] “the vilest miscreants of the savage race, and must ever remain the pirates of the Missouri, until such measures are pursued, by our government, as will make them feel a dependence on its will for their supply of merchandise.”

-Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, 1804/5

[The Blackfeet are] “warlike and ferocious, i.e. they are predatory, are roaming about the country, even into and through every part of the Rocky Mountains, and carrying war against their enemies, who are, of course, every tribe who inhabit the country about them.”

-George Catlin, famed Western artist, 1830s

When smallpox mercilessly swept the northern Great Plains between 1780 and 1782, it not only affected the lives of those who inhabited the region, but it also profoundly shaped the future of the region as a whole. Prior to 1780, the Shoshones, as the first chapter of this work pointed out, began to lose influence as their Blackfoot enemies pushed onto the plains, but remained one of the strongest tribes in the region. On the eastern reaches of the plains, along the great Missouri River, the semisedentary villagers, the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras held the growing numbers of westward-

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expanding Teton and Yankton Sioux bands in check. The coming of smallpox in 1780 changed all of this. Indeed, as the pages that follow will demonstrate, the arrival of variola marked a major turning point in northern Great Plains history, as it forged the power structure that the United States encountered just over two decades later and dealt with for decades to come.

The primary objective of this treatment of Sioux and Blackfoot expansion after 1780 is to reveal how deeply smallpox affected both efforts. At the same time, it reveals how peoples on the other side, those who ceded power to the Sioux and Blackfeet, politically, militarily, and economically responded to their situation. Scholars acknowledge that, in the words of Richard White, smallpox was “far more significant in stimulating Sioux expansion than any deliberate action traders took.”3 While the research conducted for this thesis buttresses this assertion, it does several important things. First, this study emphasizes the ambiguities visible in intertribal relations after the epidemic enabled the Sioux to resume their expansion. In particular, it reveals how the Sioux-Arikara relationship consisted of a strange blend of warfare, trade, and intermarriage. Second, it examines the complexity of the shift in the balance of power. By exploring how smallpox depopulation, subsequent social stresses, and Sioux expansion were deeply intertwined with one another, this concluding chapter attempts to fill a significant void in the historiography. While scholars, such as Donald J. Lehmer, conclude that, “population losses were…responsible for a marked shift in the balance of power among the Indian

tribes,” such statements provide too simplistic of an explanation for the transformation by neglecting the social and political discord created by smallpox which seriously hampered the villagers’ abilities to repel their enemies. Lehmer and others acknowledge this issue, but fail to discuss how it contributed to the rising might of the Sioux. Third, this analysis reveals how smallpox forced weakened populations to rely on trade to compensate for their manpower losses. In regard to Blackfoot expansion, Elizabeth A. Fenn writes, “The Blackfeet…turned the epidemic to their advantage, launching their own hegemonic reign farther north.” On the other hand, Colin G. Calloway contends that smallpox precipitated the final flight of the Shoshones and their allies from the plains. This writer contends that these observations do not accurately portray the nature of the Shoshone-Blackfoot conflict. While the Blackfoot advance into Shoshone territory was well under way prior to 1780, the Shoshones remained a considerable threat to other groups and were not quite ready to relinquish their hold on the prairies. Simply, the arrival of smallpox allowed the Blackfeet to carry out their expansionist designs in the face of a vastly weakened opponent. Calloway continues, “Unfortunately, they [the

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7 Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 421.
Shoshones] found themselves on the cutting edge – or rather the receiving end – of successive waves of change and upheaval as waves of horses, germs, guns, and enemies buffeted their world.\textsuperscript{8} This final section suggests that germs dealt a more devastating blow to Shoshone strength than Calloway and others recognize.

In 1810, when Alexander Henry trekked through the Red River country toward Park River, in modern-day North Dakota, in 1800, he discovered just how powerful the Sioux became after smallpox assaulted their enemies. His Saulteur Indian guides constantly warned him of their dangerous situation, as they feared that Sioux warriors lurked nearby. On several occasions, the guides refused to go any further and Henry had to coax them into doing so; even then, only a few reluctantly agreed to continue their service. One evening, while the travel party encamped, the Saulteurs became alarmed when they thought that a Sioux attack was imminent. They hastily dug trenches around the camp to guard against the assault that never materialized. Resuming their voyage, the party again became distressed when the Saulteurs heard gunfire and later discovered several buffalo that appeared to have gunshot wounds.\textsuperscript{9} Again fearing that Sioux lurked nearby, the Saulteurs caused more trouble for Henry, who reported that, “The Indians are much too alarmed to hunt, and I think it prudent to send my own men.”\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}, 77.
The Saulteurs’ fear of the Sioux continued to hinder Henry’s progress. Nearing Park River, Henry lamented that, “The Indians again told me that if I went higher up than Park river they were determined to return, as they would not risk their families to follow me any further into Sioux country.”

Nighttime encampments continued to be a source of trouble. On many evenings, the Saulteurs sounded false alarms. Mistaking buffalo and their own horses for Sioux warriors, anxious sentries awoke the whole camp to meet phantom ambushes. The Indians’ fear proved to be contagious, for while his men built a trading post on Park River, Henry remarked that, “This would have been a glorious time for my men, had not dread of the Sioux deprived them of their appetite and made them only anxious to finish the fort.”

Even after the completion of the post, Henry’s troubles did not end. He wrote, “They [the Saulteurs] are troublesome and peevish and I wish I would give them some cause to leave me. They are certainly in a chronic state of alarm and always representing to me the danger of their situation.” The smallest provocation was enough to send them into a panic. On one occasion, while some children played outside of the fort, two young boys decided to scare them by crawling through the grass toward them. Some adults saw the boys and mistook them for Sioux warriors plotting an ambush. The entire Saulteur camp retreated into the confines of the trading post and warned the traders of the

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11 Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 1, 86.
12 Ibid., 92-3.
13 Ibid., 95.
14 Ibid., 110.
impending attack. However, the Indians soon uncovered the reality of the situation and they reprimanded the two boys for their joke.  

During the next few years, while he manned the Pembina River Post, located along another tributary of the Red River, Henry had a superb vantage point from which to observe the dominance of the Sioux. Remarking on the surrounding land, Henry noted that, “The proximity to the Sioux country will for many years keep this place stocked with animals, as the Assiniboines and Crees dare not camp here during the summer and remain but a short time in the winter.” Henry’s writings suggest that the Sioux-Saulteur rivalry was once a much more evenly matched contest, but smallpox wiped out many Saulteurs, thus giving the Sioux the upper hand. As a result, the Saulteurs who remained with Henry suffered from endless Sioux hostility. For instance, Henry reported that a large Sioux war party attacked them, but “the Saulteurs had fought like heroes against superior numbers, and obliged them to retreat by which means the camp was saved.” Boldly, the Saulteurs retaliated by sending out a party of some 200 warriors that discovered and destroyed a small Sioux camp. This victory did little to quell the Saulteurs’ fears of the Sioux, for Henry soon wrote that, “they have given over hunting this season, and are collecting about the horses to go northward out of danger.” Soon, the Sioux again assaulted the Saulteurs, forcing the outnumbered Indians into the trading

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16 Ibid., 408.  
17 Ibid., 427.  
18 Ibid., 428. This development proved to be detrimental to Henry’s business, for he continued, “This affair has seriously injured my department; I shall lose two-thirds of the debts I gave out last fall.” Ibid.
post. Sometimes, the Saulteurs formed war parties with other nearby tribes, such as the Assiniboines, to avenge a Sioux attack.¹⁹

Henry’s experiences with the Sioux in the Red River country, while enlightening, only tell a fraction of the story, for by the early nineteenth century, most northern plains natives felt their influence in one way or another. In 1794, John McDonnell reported that the Assiniboines and Crees also suffered from Sioux attacks. According to the trader, “the Sioux or Naudawesse, the most powerful nation in all the interior country,” “massacred” a “large camp” comprised of Indians of these groups situated along the Red River.²⁰ Just over a decade later, the fighting continued as the American explorers, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, noted that a Sioux war party killed some fifty Crees and Assiniboines near the Assiniboine River.²¹

An examination of the semisedentary villagers during the decades following the epidemic of 1780-82 reveals that Sioux supremacy reached well into the heart of the plains. Reaching the Missouri River region in 1806, Henry noted that, “we must be on our guard against the Sioux, the natural enemies of all the tribes in these parts. They perpetually wander about in search of straggling Mandanes or Big Bellies,” other times looking for Crees and Assiniboines.²² Clearly, the Sioux fulfilled their namesake, for

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²² Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 1, 314.
long before they began filtering onto the plains, the Ojibways or Chippewas provided them with their name, which translated to “enemies.”

This, however, as the first chapter demonstrated, was not always the case. As White accurately points out, prior to 1780, “the Sioux were only interlopers in this territory; their power was limited.” Indeed, the numerous, powerful, and well-fortified semisedentary Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara populations held strong against the tide of Teton and Yankton Sioux expansion. As a matter of fact, at least a portion of one Teton band, the Oglalas, responded to their inability to overcome the villagers’ defenses by settling among the Arikaras for a time and adopting their agricultural way of life.

Smallpox irrevocably altered this situation. While the semisedentary villagers suffered population losses of upwards of seventy percent, the nomadic Sioux sustained considerably fewer casualties. Afterward, the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras simply no longer had the manpower to prevent the Sioux from overwhelming them and threatening them with virtual extinction. The Oglalas, of course, saw the dangers that the semisedentary way of life posed and abandoned their efforts to change their lifestyle. Furthermore, their former roadblock, the Arikara population, was now vulnerable and could only feebly oppose Sioux incursions. The Oglalas and other Sioux bands could more easily move west of the Missouri to pursue the vast herds of buffalo inhabiting the

24 White, “Winning of the West,” 324.
region and become increasingly appealing as those to the east dwindled in number. An increase in Sioux firearm and ammunition supplies that paralleled the creation of the North West Company in 1779 bolstered their ability to do so.²⁶

Therefore, during the subsequent decades, the Sioux mercilessly pressured the smallpox-weakened semisedentary villagers as they vigorously pushed westward. As Lewis and Clark observed of the Mandans, “all the nations before this maladey was affi’d (afraid) of them, after they were reduced the Seaux and other Indians waged war, and killed a great maney, and they moved up the Missourie, those Indians Still contunied to wage war, and they moved Still higher,” until they reached their present location alongside the Hidatsas.²⁷ Formerly inhabiting nine or more villages, the Mandans found it unwise to live in more than two after smallpox struck. Sioux numbers were simply too great. Furthermore, the different Sioux bands lived within close proximity to one another along the Missouri and were therefore able to combine their forces to effectively harass the villagers. Consequently, Lewis and Clark reported that “frequent” Sioux attacks


²⁷ Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 220. “Other Indians” likely refers to the allies of the Sioux, the Cheyenne.
continued to reduce Mandan numbers after the epidemic.\textsuperscript{28} When Henry traversed the Missouri shortly after the American explorers, he saw many abandoned Mandan villages that the combination of smallpox and Sioux attacks made untenable.\textsuperscript{29}

The Hidatsas also suffered from constant Sioux incursions. However, they had better luck defending themselves than did the Mandans, for Lewis and Clark noted that, “These people have also suffered considerable by the small-pox; but have successfully resisted the attacks of the Sioux.”\textsuperscript{30} Henry learned this when he visited a Hidatsa burying-ground that contained the remains of a number of Sioux warriors heaped in a “great pile.” In approximately 1790, “when the Sioux formed a scheme to extripate every Big Belly in this country, and take possession of their villages,” a party of several hundred Teton and Yankton lodges laid siege to the nearby Hidatsa village.\textsuperscript{31} Isolating the Hidatsas by making peace with the Mandans, the Sioux placed their enormous force between an enemy village and the Missouri. The Sioux remained there for fifteen days, hoping that cutting off the Hidatsas from their source of water would induce a decisive defeat. The plan appeared to work, for the Hidatsas became desperate and several men tried to fetch water from the river, losing their lives in the process. However, the Hidatsas boldly held out and refused to surrender. Eventually, the attackers retreated

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{29} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 323.
\bibitem{30} Lewis and Clark, \textit{Original Journals}, vol. 6, 91.
\bibitem{31} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 1, 358.
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after sustaining dozens of losses in several skirmishes.\textsuperscript{32} During the battle, “[t]he Sioux compelled the Mandanes to provide them with corn, beans, etc. for their sustenance.”\textsuperscript{33}

Indeed, while smallpox provided the Sioux with an opportunity to overwhelm the Missouri villagers, their advance was not always irresistible. This was because their intended victims sometimes wisely banded together to resist them. After viewing the Hidatsa burying-ground, Henry saw another among the Mandans. This one also contained “the remains of a great number of Sioux.”\textsuperscript{34} On this occasion, another combined party of Tetons and Yanktons attempted to cut a Mandan village off from the Missouri and overrun it. Unfortunately for the Sioux, the Hidatsas came to the aid of their allies and a “severe” battle ensued. Even worse for the Sioux attackers, a party of Crow Indians also happened to be in the area. Wisely, the Crows quietly approached the Sioux rear and “fell in with a great number of women, who had accompanied their husbands, in full expectation of destroying the Mandanes and plundering their village; numbers of them were instantly murdered, and the others retained as prisoners.”\textsuperscript{35} In an unusual situation, the Mandans and their allies outnumbered their hated Sioux enemies and forced them to retreat. Henry concluded that, “Since that time they [the Sioux] have been more cautious in coming to war in these parts, and have never dared to attack the village.”\textsuperscript{36}

While the Mandans, Hidtatas, and Sioux conducted their largely lopsided battles on the upper Missouri, downstream the Arikaras and Sioux had a more ambiguous,
complex, violent, and fortunately for historians, well-documented relationship. Although
the Arikaras once occupied many villages, at least eighteen, the deadly combination of
smallpox and Sioux attacks reduced them to three by the time Pierre Antoine Tabeau
visited them soon after 1800. The Arikaras’ fighting force declined in a similar manner,
from some 4,000 warriors to about 500. In response to Sioux pressure, the Arikaras
gradually relocated upstream during the 1780s and 1790s. Consequently, when Jean
Baptiste Truteau travelled along the Missouri during the mid-1790s, he discovered the
remains of an abandoned Arikara village that had the appearance of a hasty flight. The
Arikaras’ small numbers simply could not adequately oppose the inroads of the
opportunistic Sioux. In 1811, the situation was even worse, for John Bradbury found the
Arikaras living in only two villages. They still claimed to have some 500 warriors, but
Bradbury thought the estimate too high.\textsuperscript{37} It appeared to Bradbury that, the Sioux had
“succeeded so far in effecting their [the Arikaras’] extermination.”\textsuperscript{38} Such a decline on
the part of the Arikaras allowed the Sioux to continue their drive westward.

Further evidence indicates that the relationship between the Sioux and Arikara
became a one-sided affair after smallpox struck in 1780. By the time Lewis and Clark
visited them, the Arikaras “claim[ed] no land except that on which their villages stand

\textsuperscript{37} Pierre Antoine Tabeau, \textit{Tabeau’s Narrative of Loisel’s Expedition to the Upper Missouri}, ed.
Annie Heloise Abel, trans. Rose Abel Wright (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1939, 1968), 123-4;
University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 277; John Bradbury, \textit{Travels in the Interior of America} (Ann Arbor:
Cloud’s Folk}, 19; Ben Innis, \textit{Bloody Knife: Custer’s Favorite Scout}, ed. Richard E. Collin (Bismarck:

\textsuperscript{38} Bradbury, \textit{Travels in the Interior}, 162-3.
and the fields they cultivate. The Tetons claim the country around them.”

Furthermore, they reported that the Teton Sioux “rob them of their horses, plunder their gardens and fields, and sometimes murder them, without opposition.” According to Tabeau, the Sioux carried off Arikara horses daily. Truteau wrote that the Sioux “so often ravaged and carried off the wives and children of the Ricaras” that, among the latter, “their very name causes terror.”

The mere rumor of a Sioux presence in the area sometimes instilled enough fear in the Arikaras that they refused to hunt. Therefore, it was little surprise that when Truteau lived among the Arikaras, he noted that his party’s presence gave his hosts a confidence that they could better oppose the Sioux if they made an assault. Thus, the ravages of smallpox lifted traders from sources of material goods to potential much-needed military support, at least in the eyes of the Arikaras.

Perhaps because of their severe disadvantage in manpower and mobility, the Arikaras, according to Tabeau were “considered the best runners of all the nations and it is probably before the enemy that they have gained this great reputation.” However, evidence does not suggest that this reputation was just. When rumors spread of an impending Sioux attack, noted Truteau, the Arikaras quickly assembled hundreds of warriors behind their fortifications made of earth and wood. Bradbury’s narrative vividly captures the chaos that ensued as the Arikaras prepared to defend themselves. He

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39 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol., 6, 89.
40 Ibid., 89.
43 Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative*, 173.
wrote, “The noise and confusion was such as I have not often witnessed: the war whoop
was heard in every direction, and even the old men in the village were busily employed in
animating the warriors.”\textsuperscript{45} Smallpox might have vastly reduced the Arikaras’ ability to
fight, but it clearly did not stop them from doing so altogether.

Despite the precarious situation into which smallpox losses placed them, the
Arikaras continued to conduct some offensive operations. It appears that such
expeditions were important to Arikara morale after smallpox took so many of their
people while at the same time killing relatively few of their Sioux enemies. Bradbury
reported that during his visit, a horse-raiding party returned to his host village. Although
he did not note who the victim was or how many horses the Arikaras stole, Bradbury
remarked that the party’s arrival “caused an unusual bustle” among the villagers.\textsuperscript{46} The
Arikaras also sometimes sent out large war parties, usually to avenge an enemy attack.
Brackenridge witnessed the return of a war party comprised of several hundred warriors.
Although this expedition took only a few Sioux scalps, the Arikaras celebrated for two
full days after its return.\textsuperscript{47} Bradbury observed the aftermath of another war party’s
homecoming. He wrote, the [e]ngagement had not been a very bloody one,” for each side
lost only a handful of men.\textsuperscript{48} This victory also prompted an extensive celebration, for as
Bradbury explained, “although it had not been attended with so much bloodshed as some

\textsuperscript{45} Bradbury, \textit{Travels in the Interior}, 120.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, 122.
\textsuperscript{47} Brackenridge, “\textit{Journal of a Voyage},” 142-4; Anthony McGinnis, \textit{Counting Coup and Cutting
Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738-1889} (Evergreen, CO: Cordillera, 1990), 15, 19;
Hyde, \textit{Red Cloud’s Folk}, 25. Teton winter counts also reveal that the Arikaras inflicted losses on the
Sioux, for a 1788 record in the American Horse count states that, “an Oglala named Last Badger was killed
by Arikaras.” McCoy, “\textit{Winter Count},” 240.
\textsuperscript{48} Bradbury, \textit{Travels in the Interior}, 160.
battles in Europe have, yet it had for the present driven away an enemy, who had for two or three weeks been hovering around, and threatened us all with starvation.”

Despite such small victories, the Arikaras suffered casualties that proved difficult to replace, especially after smallpox ravaged them. According to Brackenridge, Arikara women “exceed the other sex in point of numbers; the dreadful consequence of the wars in which the nation is constantly engaged.” Thus, by continuing to prosecute a lively warfare with their Sioux enemies, the Arikaras contributed to their increasing weakness by sacrificing the lives of their valuable warriors. Their response, wrote Brackenridge, was polygamy. As he remarked, “Polygamy is general, they have often four or five wives.”

Although they frequently warred upon one another, the Arikaras and Sioux carried on what Lewis and Clark referred to as a “partial trade.” This comment suggests that the commerce between the two, much like their warfare, was heavily skewed in favor of the Sioux as a result of their vast superiority in numbers and, therefore, military might. In the wake of the epidemic that depleted their manpower, the Arikaras had little choice but to cooperate. Tabeau’s testimony supports this assertion, for he remarked that, “The commodities of the Ricaras attract almost all the year a large crowd of Sioux from whom the Ricaras have to endure much without deriving any real benefit.”

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51 Ibid.
52 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 89.
demanded great quantities of Arikara goods in return for them. If the Arikaras dared to challenge the Sioux, the latter used the threat of force to ensure their compliance.\textsuperscript{54}

Sioux dominion over the Arikaras was indeed tremendous after smallpox severely weakened the latter. According to Tabeau, when the Sioux approached the Arikara villages, they not only forced the villagers to “trade,” but they also would “steal the horses and beat the women and offer with impunity all kinds of insults.”\textsuperscript{55} Lewis and Clark simply described the Arikaras as the “farmers or tenants at will of that lawless, savage, and rapacious race the Sioux Teton [original author’s emphasis].”\textsuperscript{56} Although these terms hardly generate an accurate depiction of the Arikaras’ situation, their implication is important, for they indicate that the Arikaras were clearly subservient to the Sioux. Furthermore, because of their contacts with the European and American trade in the east, the Sioux had a great advantage in firearms and consequently had the Arikaras, as historian George E. Hyde writes, “practically at their mercy.”\textsuperscript{57}

Although, as Tabeau observed, the Sioux and Arikaras “live[d] together in a state of war and in mutual distrust,” that did not stop the latter from siding with the former when it was beneficial to do so. Not only did the ravages of smallpox give the Arikaras an opportunity to harass their Mandan rivals, but the Sioux exploited this rivalry by recruiting Arikaras to join them on the warpath.\textsuperscript{58} As Henry learned from the Mandans and Hidatsas, the Arikaras were known for “taking every advantage of their neighbors,

\textsuperscript{54} Lewis and Clark, \textit{Original Journals}, vol. 6, 89; Tabeau, \textit{Tabeau’s Narrative}, 131; Innis, \textit{Bloody Knife}, 5. In exchange for a small quantity of guns, ammunition, kettles, and other manufactured goods, the Arikaras gave the Sioux horses, mules, tobacco, corn, and beans.
\textsuperscript{55} Tabeau, \textit{Tabeau’s Narrative}, 131.
\textsuperscript{56} Lewis and Clark, \textit{Original Journals}, vol., 6, 89.
\textsuperscript{57} Hyde, \textit{Red Cloud’s Folk}, 186.
\textsuperscript{58} Tabeau, \textit{Tabeau’s Narrative}, 131.
favoring the Sioux when they come to war this way, and frequently mixing with them to annoy the Mandanes and Big Bellies.” 59 While visiting the Mandans, Lewis and Clark learned that a war party comprised of Sioux and Arikaras recently surprised and killed several Mandans. As a matter of fact, Lewis and Clark mentioned that Sioux and Arikara pressure forced the Mandans to move up the Missouri after the epidemic. 60 Truteau found that some Arikaras and a band of Sioux actually lived together for a short time to trade. This might have been a common occurrence, as historian Ben Innis also points out that, “Intermarriages with the Sioux were fairly common.” 61 According to Truteau, when the two groups lived together, “[t]hey [the Arikaras] humor them through fear and to avoid making too many enemies among the Sioux, who would inevitably overpower them.” 62 Once the groups concluded their business, the Sioux departed, but would “return to steal their horses and sometimes to kill them.” 63

It is not difficult to fathom that the Arikaras wanted to escape from this precarious situation. Indeed they tried, for Tabeau remarked that during his visit, they sent overtures to the Mandans so that they could make peace, forge an alliance, and finally escape what he called “the slavery of the Sioux.” 64 At the same time, Lewis and Clark recorded that, “those people [the Arikaras] express an inclination to be at peace with all nations,” particularly with the Sioux, who had “great influence over the Rickeres poison their

59 Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 1, 335.
61 Innis, Bloody Knife, 5.
63 Ibid.
64 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 128.
minds and keep them in perpetual dread.”65 Furthermore, they wanted the Americans to discuss peace with the Crows and Assiniboines.66

Naturally, the Sioux opposed such a coalition between the semisedentary villagers. They understood that if the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras made peace and aligned their forces against them, they would have a more difficult time maintaining control over them. As Tabeau explained, “the union of the three nations would become formidable to them” and “they would lose, in the Ricaras, a certain kind of serf, who cultivates for them and who, as they say, takes, for them, the place of women.”67 Not wanting to lose their dominant position, the Sioux made every effort to prevent the village tribes from joining forces with one another.68

The Sioux had little need to worry, however, because the Arikaras had internal problems that made an alliance with the Mandans and Hidatsas both unlikely to occur and nearly impossible to sustain. These issues stemmed from the fact that the Arikaras consolidated their many disease-stricken camps after the epidemic of 1780. Truteau, during the mid-1790s, remarked that the Arikaras once inhabited thirty-two large villages, but now lived in four. A decade later, Lewis and Clark, as well as Tabeau, reported that they lived in three separate villages. The latter noted that the Arikaras formerly occupied eighteen villages. The Americans recorded that they were once eight or ten separate “tribes,” or distinct bands. Others exploring the region between 1795 and 1805 reported the Arikaras inhabiting a mere two villages. Regardless of the exact

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65 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 189.
66 Ibid., 267, 285-6; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 19.
67 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 130.
68 McGinnis, Counting Coup, 19.
numbers, it is clear that their population size and village numbers decreased drastically between 1780 and 1805, mostly because of smallpox, but accelerated by warfare inaugurated by Sioux expansion.  

Internal conflicts arose from the social, economic, and political disruptions produced by the merging of “ten different tribes and of as many chiefs without counting an infinity of others who have remained, after the disaster, captains without companies,” into a few small groups.  

One problem that stemmed from this development, observed Brackenridge, was in their language, for they had “a great diversity in the pronunciation, which I discovered to be partly owing to the circumstance of the present population being composed of the fragments or remains of different tribes.” After spending time among the Arikaras, Tabeau noticed not only that they did not have a single dialect, but that there existed a “division of spirit” that was “baneful to them.” The desire for influence over tribal affairs among the many chiefs led to a lack of unity that prevented harmony and consensus regarding group actions. As Tabeau wrote, “each chief earnestly desires the supremacy… and tolerates no form of dependence. Thus insubordination and discord reign here still more than among the Sioux and make this nation infinitely more unhappy, as much by its internal and destructive quarrels, as by the number of enemies that it

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69 Truteau, “Journal of Truteau,” 299; Lewis, Original Journals, vol. 6, 89; Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 123-4; Collot, A Journey in North America, 284-5; Lehmer, “Epidemics,” 107-8; Meyer, Village Indians, 28; Wood, Early Fur Trade, 8. Again, works on epidemics’ effects on other regions suggest that northern Great Plains developments were part of a larger trend. According to Merrell, the consolidation of the groups that ultimately became known as the Catawbas generated some internal conflicts and stressed the social fabric of such groups. James H. Merrell, “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience,” The William and Mary Quarterly, 41, 4 (1984): 544, 546-7.

70 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 124.


72 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 126.
makes.” On occasion, factionalism spawned by jealousy led to some bands breaking away from the main body to live with other tribes. Truteau learned from the Arikaras that before his arrival, a pair of chiefs, envious of two others’ influence, led their clans away, one to live with the Mandans, the other downstream to the Mahas.

As Truteau observed, this friction sometimes “gave young men the occasion to make trouble and attack nations, which otherwise would wish for peace and union.” These outbursts resulted in more enemies for the Arikaras and, therefore, increased warfare. Tabeau learned of such an incident that nearly led to bloodshed and almost shattered peace talks between the Arikaras on one side, and the Mandans and Hidatsas on the other. As the Mandans extended an offer of peace to the Arikaras, one band of the latter group, called the Laocatas, stole some Mandan horses in an effort to demonstrate its “independence.” Despite this act of aggression, the Mandans did not withdraw their peace proposal. The other nine Arikara bands, however, united and threatened to destroy the Laocatas for their treachery.

Such incidents arising out of intratribal strife contributed to an atmosphere of deep distrust and hostility between the Mandans and Hidatsas on one side, and the Arikaras on the other. For instance, when Henry visited the Mandans in 1806, he watched as the arrival of a group of Arikara peace emissaries caused a “great uproar” in

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73 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 126.
76 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 127-8.
his hosts’ village. During the previous spring, the Mandans informed him, some Arikaras accompanied a Sioux war party that ultimately killed five of their people. The Mandans and Hidatsas retaliated by killing a few Arikaras, but swore further revenge. Infuriated by the repeated hostilities of the Arikaras and their consortium with the Sioux, “both the Mandanes and Big Bellies were determined to exterminate every Pawnee [Arikara] they could find, and lay their villages even with the ground.” Now, even though the Arikaras sought to end the fighting, the wary Mandans and Hidatsas did not trust their representatives and treated them coldly.

With critical junctions between the village tribes thus delayed, the Sioux found it easier to overwhelm each group piecemeal. Also, conflict between the Arikaras and other tribes further reduced the already diminished populations of both sides. Although evidence suggests that the Mandans and Arikaras made peace and lived together at some point between 1782 and 1806, by the time Henry visited the former the alliance no longer existed and they were again the “most inveterate enemies.” The writings of Victor Collot suggest that this happened sometime during the mid-1790s, for in 1796 he noted that, “they [the Arikaras] have lately forsaken to live near the Mandans.” Thus, the path to Sioux expansion further widened.

Even after they made peace amongst themselves, as they did by 1810, the semisedentary villagers pursued another means of overcoming Sioux dominance, trade.

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77 Henry, New Light, vol. 1, 333.
78 Ibid., 334. The Arikaras and Pawnees, who lived on the Central Plains, were closely related peoples. As a result, some contemporaries used their names interchangeably.
79 Ibid., 333-4.
80 Tabeau, Tabeau’s Narrative, 128-9.
82 Collot, A Journey in North America, 284.
By maintaining commerce with white traders, the villagers hoped to acquire guns to help offset the increasing gap in terms of manpower. Unfortunately for the villagers, this was difficult, for the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic diminished the Missouri villages’ trade potential by vastly reducing the number of middlemen and consumers living in them. Consequently, when the trade centered in St. Louis picked up during the early years of the nineteenth century, company agents often disregarded the Missouri settlements altogether, as they sought to establish immediate contact with the larger nomadic groups. Even when they did set up a post in a village, visiting Indians conducted direct business with them, not Mandan or Arikara middlemen. Lehmer accurately summed up the situation when he wrote that, “The invasion of the Middle Missouri by the St. Louis traders unquestionably challenged the villagers’ economic situation for the worse.”

John Bradbury viewed the result of this economic development firsthand when his trading party encountered a party of Arikaras, Mandans, and Hidatsas in 1810. They found the Indians “expecting that on our arrival at the Arikara Town they would obtain a supply of fire arms ammunition, which would give them a superiority over their enemies.” When the traders arrived at the village, the warriors demanded guns and ammunition, but the traders denied them. Soon thereafter, the Arikaras declared that they had to stop all boats on the Missouri that passed their villages unless they first stopped to trade. An Arikara chief justified such actions by pointing to the “poverty” of his people

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84 Lehmer, “Other Side,” 103.
and elucidating that they desperately needed the white man’s trade in order to survive. The loss of power that accompanied the ravages of smallpox forced the semisedentary villagers to heavily rely upon traders’ goods as they struggled to overcome Sioux oppression.

The economic plight of the semisedentary villagers resulted not only from traders’ actions in response to smallpox, but those of their hated Sioux enemies. Wisely, the Sioux worked to ensure that their enemies along the Missouri did not conduct business with white traders, as well as other plains peoples. By starving the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras of the guns, ammunition, and other goods they could use to defend themselves, the Sioux could more easily overwhelm them. Lewis and Clark observed that the Yankton Sioux “will not suffer any trader to ascend the river, if they can possibly avoid it; they have, heretofore, invariably arrested the progress of all those they have met with, and generally compelled them to trade at the prices, nearly which they themselves think proper to fix on their merchandise.”

Truteau experienced this firsthand when he traversed the Missouri during the mid-1790s to reach the Arikaras. After running headlong into a Yankton camp, his trading party found their further progress blocked. According to Truteau, a chief told him that the “French did very wrong to carry powder and balls to the Arikaras. That this powder would be used to kill the Sioux.” As the Yanktons became increasingly hostile toward them, the traders found it necessary to make an escape. Bradbury had a similar

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86 Bradbury, Travels in the Interior, 96, 110, 112.
87 Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 6, 96.
encounter several years later, when a large party of Yankton and Teton Sioux halted his expedition’s advance. The Indians informed the whites that they had a “decided intention of opposing our progress, as they would suffer no one to trade with the Ricaras, Mandans, and Minatares, being at war with those nations.” Eventually, the traders convinced the menacing Sioux that they intended to see their “brothers,” or other Sioux, and the Yankton-Teton group let them pass. Similarly, the Sioux labored to intercept any natives who tried to trade with the villagers, such as the Crows, Assiniboines, Crees, and those to the south, the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Kiowas. The decline in villager strength after the epidemic, which enabled the Sioux to move west of the Missouri, allowed them to carry out this policy. Of course, this approach worked to weaken other Sioux enemies as well.

Predictably, Sioux opposition to traders’ incursions, part of the fallout of the epidemic, made them appear generally hostile. When Bradbury’s party encamped among the Arikaras in 1810, they kept men on guard at all times during nighttime, for they knew that the Sioux would mercilessly punish them for dealing with their enemies if they found

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91 Ibid., 88, 127; Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 90; Hyde, Indians of the High Plains, 186-7; Innis, *Bloody Knife*, 4-5, 8; Secoy, Changing Military Patterns, 75. Despite the best efforts of the Sioux to economically strangle their semisedentary enemies, those tribes continued to conduct some business. Lewis and Clark noted that the Mandans still dealt with Assiniboine middlemen who brought firearms, ammunition, and other goods to trade for horses produce. In turn, the Mandans bartered some of those products to the Crows, Cheyennes, and other groups for more horses and goods made from the buffalo. The Arikaras also remained considerable middlemen, but mostly because of their business with the Sioux. It appears that the only reason the Sioux allowed some native traders to reach the Arikaras was so that the latter could acquire horses to give to the Sioux. As Lewis and Clark observed, near-exclusive commerce with the Sioux seriously restricted the Arikaras’ prosperity. According to the Americans, if the Arikaras could be rescued from Sioux domination, “their trade would increase rapidly, and might be extended to a considerable amount.” Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 89.
them. When they traveled, the traders maintained a constant lookout and declined to shoot at buffalo when they saw them, for doing so might alert the Sioux to their presence. Likewise, when Francois-Antoine Larocque’s party traveled toward the Mandans in 1805, his men also decided to not risk firing upon the buffalo that they encountered. On another occasion, Bradbury’s expedition encamped on an island in the Missouri one night, which was “a measure we determined to pursue when practicable, as we knew that to fall into the hands of the Sioux would be certain death.”

Although the power of the Yankton Sioux often prevented traders from reaching the semisedentary villagers, Lewis and Clark remarked that, “they seldom commit any further acts of violence on the whites.” On the other hand, the Americans dubbed the many Teton groups “the vilest miscreants of the savage race.” In response to a Sioux attack that resulted in the death of one Mandan, Lewis and Clark cast their lot with the villagers and agreed to help them if the Sioux returned. On another occasion, the Americans gathered a group of their men to assist the Hidatsas if the Sioux came to war, promising to “Chastise the enemies of our Dutiful Children.” Clearly, the explorers perceived that the Teton Sioux, who constantly harassed their plains neighbors, had the

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94 Lewis and Clark, *Original Journals*, vol. 6, 96.
potential to emerge as a major threat to the United States’ interests in the northern plains during the nineteenth century.

Indeed, by the time Lewis and Clark made their famous journey through the West, the Sioux were clearly the most dominant Indians on the northeastern plains. While most Teton bands now ranged on the plains west of the Missouri, toward the Black Hills and still troubled the semisedentary villagers from a new direction, the Yanktons took their place on the eastern prairies applied pressure on the Missouri settlements. The Sioux to the west of the Missouri continued to expand their hegemony and, in the process, they developed strong enmities with new groups. Pressing into the Yellowstone River country, they pushed the Crows westward and subsequently took control of the prairies north and west of the Black Hills. It was there that they United States Army confronted them later in the century. Until that time, their expansion was simply unstoppable.  As historian Ronald T. McCoy writes, “Throughout their remembered history the Tetons were involved in an apparently irresistible advance, a diffusion of a people and an extension of power that might have been momentarily checked but was not stopped, reversed, or seriously threatened until the shattering Plains Wars.”

What is incredible about this is the fact that a simple germ enabled it all to happen.

The great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 also altered the balance of power on the northwestern Great Plains. As the first chapter of this thesis demonstrated, the Shoshones

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were the dominant force on that portion of the prairies for the bulk of the eighteenth century, but Blackfoot pressure pushed them steadily southwestward after midcentury. Although the Shoshones, or Snakes, as their enemies referred to them, possessed vast numbers of horses, even after their gradual decline began, their enemies’ accumulation of guns, as well as their growing horse herds, allowed them to expand into Shoshone territory. Despite this reversal of fortunes, the Shoshones’ strength was far from broken, as they remained a major threat to their enemies, even those residing along the Saskatchewan. Unfortunately for the Shoshones, smallpox dealt them yet another staggering blow, one that proved to be too heavy for them to handle.\footnote{100}

When variola reached the Blackfoot-Shoshone battleground in 1781, it initially worked to the advantage of the Shoshones, for it halted the Blackfoot advance into their country. As the previous chapter detailed, the onset of the epidemic brought Blackfoot expansion to an abrupt halt. In the words of Saukamappee, “we thought of War no more, and perhaps would have made peace with them for they had suffered dreadfully as well as us and had left all this fine country of the Bow River to us.”\footnote{101} Indeed, the Shoshones sustained terrible losses to smallpox, even more than their rivals. Although the disease wreaked havoc on the Piegans, who were but one of the three groups that comprised the Blackfoot “confederacy,” scholars agree that the other bands fared significantly better than the Shoshones.\footnote{102} When Lewis and Clark found some Shoshones in the Rockies

\footnote{100} Also see McGinnis, Counting Coup, 2, 9; Calloway, “Snake Frontiers,” 88; Dale R. Russell, Eighteenth Century Western Cree and their Neighbours (Hull: Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991), 215.  
twenty-five years later, the effects of the epidemic still remained visible, for they observed that the Snakes “have suffered much by the small pox.” Furthermore, the fact that the Shoshones withdrew into the safety of the Rocky Mountains after the epidemic suggests that their losses were tremendous. Apparently, smallpox ravaged their allies as well, for the Flatheads and Kutenais also moved toward and into the Rockies at about this time.

For the better part of a decade, warfare between the Shoshones and Blackfeet was virtually nonexistent as both sides tried to recover from the epidemic. In that 1787, however, Kutenai Appe, a famous Piegan war chief, led 250 warriors against the Snakes. Although this war party apparently did not encounter the Shoshones, who then lived far from the Blackfeet (probably near the Three Forks of the Missouri in modern-day Montana), this expedition marked the beginning of a new phase of Shoshone-Blackfoot warfare.

During the years following the renewal of warfare with the Snakes, the Blackfeet vigorously pushed further onto the plains. Superior in manpower and firepower, they had the upper hand against their hated enemies. Yet, the Shoshones continued to wield some power, for in 1787, Saukamappe informed David Thompson that, “the Snake Indians are no match for us; they have no guns… but they have the power to vex us and make us

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104 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 247; Calloway, “Snake Frontiers,” 88-9; Hyde, Indians of the High Plains, 174-5; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 421-2; Ewers, Blackfeet, 30.
105 Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 247-250, 269; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 300; Colin G. Calloway, Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1996), 42; Hyde, Indians of the High Plains, 171, 174-5.
afraid for the small hunting parties that hunt... They keep us always on our guard."¹⁰⁶

So, while the Piegans remained alert and in considerable numbers, Shoshone attacks
would prove futile. On the other hand, danger loomed when small parties separated from
the main body.¹⁰⁷ The onslaught of smallpox, succeeded by a decade or so of intense
Blackfoot pressure, clearly crushed Shoshone strength.

By the early nineteenth century, the situation further deteriorated for the Snakes.
The Piegan caution of the previous decades was gone. This period of warfare between
the Shoshones and Blackfeet was decidedly one-sided, for Snake power was now
completely broken. Visiting the Blackfoot country in 1811, Henry learned that, “The
Snakes are a miserable, defenseless nation, who never venture abroad. The Piegans call
them old women, whom they can kill with sticks and stones.”¹⁰⁸ On another occasion,
Henry remarked that the Blackfeet easily stole horses from the Shoshones and their
Flathead allies, who “easily fall a prey to the Slaves [Blackfeet], who are tolerably well
provided with arms and ammunition.”¹⁰⁹ Even the weak semisedentary villagers of the
Missouri found the “miserable” Snakes to be an easy target. During the winter of 1805,
Clark discovered this when a Hidatsa chief informed him that he planned to lead a war
party into the Rockies against the Shoshones when spring arrived. Clark was able to
persuade the man to put aside these plans by informing him that if he remained peaceful,
the Great Father would provide his people with many horses.¹¹⁰ The next year, Charles
Mackenzie visited the upper Missouri and observed that one of the villages “did not

¹⁰⁶ Thompson, David Thompson’s Narrative, 248.
¹⁰⁸ Henry and Thompson, New Light, vol. 2, 726.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 526.
¹¹⁰ Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 1, 249.
appear to be so gay as they use to have been.”¹¹¹ The reason, he learned, was that the
Snakes had recently killed several of their warriors. In response, every warrior in the
village went to avenge the loss. Two months later, they returned with only three enemy
scalps. Nevertheless, a great celebration ensued.¹¹²

As a result of incursions such as these, the Shoshones, with few exceptions,
vacated the plains by the time Lewis and Clark passed through the region on their way to
the Pacific. Furthermore, soon after the Americans’ visit, the Shoshones reorganized by
consolidating their many smaller, dispersed bands into two large groups. This
arrangement allowed them to better defend against Blackfoot raiders that made their way
into the Rockies to pursue their quarry. Nevertheless, the Shoshones occasionally
conducted offensive operations, for war honors remained an important part of their
society.¹¹³

The Shoshones prudently maintained alliances with other tribes that the Blackfoot
advance threatened. Of course, the longstanding coalition with the Flatheads and
Kutenais remained strong. Although periodic hostilities broke out with the Crows, they
maintained a largely friendly relationship in the face of their common enemy, the
Blackfeet. In fact, the two groups often lived among one another, as Larocque learned in
1806 when he observed that twenty lodges of Shoshones traveled with a Crow band. The

¹¹¹ Mackenzie, “Some Account,” 270. Mackenzie does not indicate whether this was a Mandan or
Hidatsa village, but one must presume that it was that of the latter, based on the post-epidemic military
dispositions of the two groups discussed in the previous chapter.
¹¹² Ibid., 270-1.
¹¹³ Lewis and Clark, Original Journals, vol. 2, 373; McGinnis, Counting Coup, 25; Ewers,
Blackfeet, 30; Calloway, Our Hearts Fell to the Ground, 42; Merle W. Wells, “Introduction,” in Brigham
D. Madson, The Lemhi: Sacajawea’s People (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1979), 29; Fowler, “Great
Plains,” 15; Secoy, Changing Military Patterns, 54-55; Calloway, “Snake Frontiers,” 89-90; Fenn, Pox
Americana, 263; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, 300.
Crows and Blackfeet, of course, became deeply enmeshed in an intense rivalry as the latter pushed war parties into the former’s Yellowstone country homeland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{114}

The relentless Blackfoot advance after the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 stemmed from the fact that Blackfoot recovery from the disease was rapid. As Henry observed in 1811, “About 20 years ago the Piegans amounted to only 150 tents; so much had smallpox reduced that once numerous tribe; but their numbers are now increasing fast.”\textsuperscript{115} Therefore, it was unsurprising that when he visited them soon after the turn of the century, Henry noted that, “The principal occupation of the Slaves [Blackfeet] is war.”\textsuperscript{116} Of one of the Blackfoot subgroups, the Bloods, he remarked that they were “vicious, bloodthirsty, and turbulent.”\textsuperscript{117} His old hosts, the Piegans, were “always the aggressors” in their warfare.\textsuperscript{118} Only the Crows dared to attack them. None of the tribes to the west, in the Rockies, ever harassed them. Henry learned that all of their neighbors viewed the Piegans as a brave people.\textsuperscript{119}

As a result of their vigorous warfare after the epidemic passed, the Blackfeet rapidly assumed control of the northwestern plains. While they still resided on the Canadian prairies when the epidemic struck, their domain reached into the present-day United States soon thereafter. Their success is partly due to the help of their allies, the

\textsuperscript{115} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 722. This fast recovery resulted from the Blackfoot use of polygamy and the integration of Snake war captives into Blackfoot tribes. Calloway, “Snake Frontiers,” 89.
\textsuperscript{116} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 529.
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Ibid.}, 736.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ibid.}, 726.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ibid.}, 722, 726.
Crees and Assiniboines. Although at times this alliance appeared to be on the brink of collapse because some Assiniboines stole Blackfoot horses, or some other incident, their relations remained, for the most part, at least cordial.\textsuperscript{120} At the turn of the century, Thompson marveled that the Blackfeet dominated such a large portion of the plains. The Blackfeet, he wrote, “by right of conquest have their west boundary to the front of the Rocky Mountains, southward to the north branches of the Missisourie, eastward for about three hundred miles from the Mountains and northward to the upper part of the Saskatchewan.”\textsuperscript{121} Even though they possessed this vast piece of territory, Thompson, Henry, and others remarked that they still went beyond the borders of their land to search for their Snake enemies.\textsuperscript{122}

The Blackfeet also prosecuted a vigorous warfare with the Shoshones’ Flathead and Kutenai allies. As Henry observed, the Blackfeet often pursued to the Flatheads deep into the Rockies and the latter would “fight desperately when attacked,” but “never attempt war themselves.”\textsuperscript{123} On another occasion, the trader noted that a Piegan war party returned to their camp with sixty Flathead horses, only to turn around to steal more.\textsuperscript{124} As Henry remarked, “Horses are the principal plunder to be obtained from their

\textsuperscript{121} Thompson, \textit{David Thompson’s Narrative}, 252.
\textsuperscript{123} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 710.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Ibid.}, 666.
enemies on the W. Formerly the Flat Heads and other tribes became an easy prey, and either were killed or driven away like sheep.”

Blackfoot success on the northwestern plain, like that of the Sioux, resulted in part from their use of economic pressure to solidify and expand their influence. Empowered by their accelerated ascent in the wake of the epidemic, the Blackfeet tightened their enemies’ noose by attempting to monopolize trade with whites. As a result, the Blackfeet gained the reputation of being relentless in their pursuits. As Henry noted of the Piegans, “these fellows torment us for ammunition.”

The Blackfoot confederacy naturally attracted savvy traders who saw the profit they could extract from its populous ranks. Once the North West Company organized in 1779 and rapidly increased its sphere of operations to compete with the Hudson’s Bay Company, it reached further and further into Blackfoot territory, thus swelling those natives’ access to firearms and other goods. The smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 contributed to the growing Blackfoot interaction with traders by reducing the number of Cree and Assiniboine middlemen and forcing the Blackfeet to pursue other means of securing much-needed goods. As a result, their stake in the fur trade increased and, as a result, so did their authority over the plains.

At the same time, the Blackfeet reinforced their power by interrupting their enemies’ trade. Since the Spanish to the southwest maintained their policy of refusing to supply natives with guns, the Blackfeet were able to focus their energies on acting as a

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125 Henry and Thompson, *New Light*, vol. 2, 726.
127 See Chapter 3, page 43 of this thesis for more on the creation and fallout of the formation of the North West Company. Also see Ewers, *Blackfeet*, 30-31; Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 263.
barrier between Canadian traders and their enemies. Consequently, until the early
nineteenth century, the Shoshones, Flatheads, and Kutenais acquired few firearms. On
one occasion, Henry noted that the Piegans resolved to cut off the Flatheads from access
to European and American goods by pressuring Cree middlemen.\footnote{128} Duncan M’Gillivray
noted that the Kutenais suffered a similar hardship. He wrote, “The Coutonees have
already made several attempts to visit us, but they have always been obstructed by their
enemies and forced to relinquish their design with loss.”\footnote{129} The Blackfeet even harassed
the traders themselves, forcing an exasperated Henry to write that the Piegans “are very
troublesome, and frequently complain of our having supplied the Flat Heads with arms
and ammunition to kill Piegans.”\footnote{130} Despite some hostility on the party of the Blackfeet,
their need for traders’ guns prevented them from becoming violent.\footnote{131}

The Blackfoot trade barrier began to break down early in the nineteenth century,
however. As Henry noted, although the Blackfeet actively raided their adversaries in the
Rockies, “within a few years they have acquired firearms and become formidable.”\footnote{132} In
response to one defeat that resulted from the Flatheads’ gaining guns, the Blackfeet did
not send out a simple war party for vengeance. Rather, they “determined to cut off the
latter’s supply of arms and ammunition, and kept a strict watch for that purpose.”\footnote{133} The
Shoshones and their allies also obtained arms through a more indirect route from the
northeast, their Crow contacts. The arrival of Americans in the region also provided the

\footnote{129} M’Gillivray, \textit{Journal of Duncan M’Gillivray}, 56.
\footnote{130} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 655.
\footnote{131} McGinnis, \textit{Counting Coup}, 33.
\footnote{132} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 726.
\footnote{133} \textit{Ibid.}, 643.
beleaguered Shoshones and their allies with a potential source of guns. For instance, in exchange for fresh horses and a guide through the Rockies to the Columbia River country, a Shoshone band that Lewis and Clark encountered, led by Sacagawea’s brother, requested arms and ammunition to use against the Blackfeet. Although the Americans were unable to immediately address this need, they indicated that the coming traders surely would. Despite the fact that Blackfoot enemies began to accumulate some guns, this did not offset their severe disadvantage. As a result, the Blackfeet, although likely a bit more cautious now, continued to direct seemingly endless raids against them.\textsuperscript{134}

Essentially, the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 placed the Blackfeet in the same basic role as the pre-epidemic Shoshones who ruled the plains with their thundering mounted charges. Not only did their aggression simply overwhelm many peoples, but it had the effect of allying those whom it did not. The records produced by the men who visited the northwestern plains during the early nineteenth century bear witness to this. According to Henry, “All the tribes I have mentioned [those in the northwest and in the Rockies] seem to live in peace and amity with one another, and heartily join in opposing the depredations of the Slaves, who perpetually harass them, even in the heart of their own country.”\textsuperscript{135} Of course, plains tribes also banded together, as did the Crows and the few remaining prairie-dwelling Shoshones.

Two decades later, the influence of the Blackfeet continued to grow, according to the American artist George Catlin. He wrote, “The Blackfeet are, perhaps, one of the


\textsuperscript{135} Henry and Thompson, \textit{New Light}, vol. 2, 712.
most (if not entirely the most) numerous and warlike tribes on the Continent. They occupy the whole of the country about the sources of the Missouri, from this place to the Rocky Mountains.”

Furthermore, the Blackfeet remained “warlike and ferocious, i.e. they are predatory, are roaming about the country, even into and through every part of the Rocky Mountains, and carrying war against their enemies, who are, of course, every tribe who inhabit the country about them.” A century earlier, explorers and traders wrote similar descriptions of the Shoshones. Much like the disease did in the east, the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 played a major role in altering the power dynamics of the northern Great Plains. At the same time, by propelling the Blackfeet into control of the northwestern plains, smallpox also gave them the ability to pose a serious threat to American interests in the region despite the fact that, as historian Colin G. Calloway points out, smallpox reduced this “most formidable military power” to “a shadow of its former strength long before the Lewis and Clark expedition encountered it.” Indeed, during the years following the Lewis and Clark expedition, Americans increasingly found themselves in hostile territory as the powerful Blackfoot confederacy contested their intrusion. The stage was set for the so-called nineteenth-century Indian Wars.

Historian Anthony McGinnis perceptively points out that, “By 1800 the military scene on the vast landscape of the northern plains had changed.”

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140 McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 16.
his emphasis is on how horses and guns, with smallpox as a supplementary factor, achieved this, his conclusion is absolutely correct. The eighteenth century brought tremendous change to the northern plains in the form of firearms and horses, but the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 accelerated and entrenched those transformations. Nowhere is this more visible than in the clear shifts in the balance of power in the region. Those smallpox-induced changes forever altered the course of northern plains history, laying the foundation for American-Indian relations during the coming centuries. Not only did the epidemic place certain tribes, the Sioux and Blackfeet, in a position to contest American expansion, but it also cleared the way for others to collaborate with the United States. To the Crows, Shoshones, Arikaras, and other groups that found themselves overrun or caught in an ever-tightening vise, cooperation with the United States army offered the prospect of not only revenge, but freedom and security.

Indeed, a secondary purpose of this chapter was to reveal how smallpox shaped the northern Great Plains that Americans acquired and explored during the first years of the nineteenth century. While the discourse geared toward addressing the primary purpose in itself shed light on this subject, this chapter also provided a glimpse of how the great powers on the northern plains, the Sioux and Blackfeet, appeared to their American contemporaries. Likewise, it showed how Americans viewed those who the Sioux and Blackfeet dominated. This did two important things for this thesis. First, it revealed how quickly and completely the post-epidemic power shift occurred. Secondly, it showed just how much the face of the region transformed between the arrival of
smallpox in 1780 and the first decade of the nineteenth century, when the Lewis and Clark expedition marked the formal integration of the region into the United States.
CONCLUSION

“Small-pox (the dread destroyer of the Indian race)”:  
The Northern Plains Smallpox Epidemic of 1780-82 and Beyond

For many reasons, the arrival of smallpox on the northern Great Plains of America in 1780 was a truly cataclysmic event. Most and foremost, tens of thousands of natives lost their lives as the elements of European colonialism, horses and guns, served as vectors for the disease to spread. As a result, when the United States acquired the region in 1803, it contained approximately one-half the number of natives that it did two decades earlier. Thus, American expansion faced significantly less opposition than it would have had smallpox not decimated the northern plains.

Furthermore, many of those who did not succumb to the deadly virus found their families and tribes utterly broken. The impact of the disease, however, spread far beyond a dramatic population decline and severe psychological trauma. Those who did not perish between 1780 and 1782 could not dwell on the epidemic; their lives had to go on. Therefore, during the decades following the outbreak of that deadly virus, northern plains inhabitants struggled to adapt to a vastly different world from that which they knew prior to 1780. For many tribes, the years following the great smallpox epidemic can be summed up in one word, vulnerability. In response to their precarious situation, everyday life for most peoples, from defensive measures to trade, warfare, political alignments, and interaction with white traders and explorers witnessed tremendous change. Although the
suffering brought about by smallpox led to an immediate halt in regional warfare, within a decade natives conducted more frequent expeditions than ever before as they pursued horses to increase their fighting ability and captives to rebuild their diminished populations. The integration of war captives into different tribes and the defensive shifts that resulted from the ravages of smallpox, the relocation of merging within tribes and with others, led to ethnicities intermixing on an unprecedented scale. Weakened by smallpox, some tribes simply had to swallow their pride and accept the fact that they had to forge close relationships with others if they hoped to survive the pressure asserted by those tribes that suffered far fewer casualties during the epidemic. Thus was little surprise that the Mandans, Hidatsas, and, to a lesser extent, the Arikaras, came to be commonly referred to collectively, as the “semisedentary villagers” or “Missouri villagers.” They were indeed separate peoples, but their close cooperation with one another in an effort to ward off their enemies increasingly pulled them together, especially in the eyes of white observers.

Despite such efforts, the uneven impact of smallpox caused many tribes to lose power on the northern Great Plains and allowed others to gain the upper hand. As the case of the semisedenary Missouri villagers demonstrates, the demographic, social, and political effects of smallpox all combined to render several powerful peoples virtually helpless in the face of their less-afflicted Yankton, Yanktonai, and Teton Sioux enemies. Consequently, when Sioux bands resumed their westward push after 1782, they were able to easily cross the Missouri and assume a dominant position on the plains, where the United States Army confronted them nearly a century later. All of this evidence supports
the argument that the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 constituted a major turning point in northern Great Plains history. The horse and gun were no longer the primary influences on northern plains life. Another colonial element, disease, especially smallpox, became the main vector of change on the northern Great Plains after 1780.

Yet, as terrible as the great smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 was, as momentous as were the transformations that it brought, scholars must consider it within the broader context of northern Great Plains history as a whole. While the epidemic marked a major departure in plains history, it is important to take at least a brief glimpse beyond the scope of this study. In particular, this epidemic must be utilized as a springboard from which to examine the many disease outbreaks that followed it, for as Russell Thornton writes, “Left alone, these populations will return to pre-epidemic size, or surpass it.”

Northern plains peoples were simply not left alone after the 1780-82 smallpox epidemic. As this thesis shows, intense warfare erupted within a decade after smallpox passed from the region. More importantly, later smallpox epidemics thwarted tribes’ efforts to rebuild their strength.

Take the Mandans as a case in point. During their journey westward, Lewis and Clark remarked that the Mandan population, which smallpox ravaged twenty-five years earlier, was increasing.\(^2\) Any hopes of a full population recovery shattered in 1837 when smallpox again swept through the Mandan villages. Only 150 Mandans survived the


onslaught, a mere seven-eighths of numbers on the eve of the disaster.\textsuperscript{3} Elsewhere on the plains, approximately one-half of the Hidatsas and Arikaras perished, as did two-thirds of the Blackfeet. Thus, the 1837-38 smallpox epidemic altered the new order established by the 1780-82 epidemic, which placed the Blackfeet in a position of power on the prairies. After 1837, that tribe had significantly less power than it previously did, and it therefore lost their ability to effectively contest American expansion. The Sioux, on the other hand, suffered significantly fewer losses and therefore retained their ability to do so.\textsuperscript{4}

Overall, the 1837-38 epidemic killed off one half of the northern plains native population.\textsuperscript{5} As devastating as this epidemic was, it in many ways led to a near repetition of the events that followed the epidemic of 1780-82. In both instances, severe population losses led to a breakdown of traditional systems of cooperation within villages, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to subsist. Following the 1837-38 epidemic, business conducted along the Missouri experienced a significant downturn as white traders sought more direct contact with the comparatively numerous nomadic groups. As this thesis showed, a similar phenomenon occurred after the 1780-82 outbreak. Also, the semisedentary villagers, the Mandans, Arikaras, and Hidatsas, all found themselves having to live and work more closely together after both epidemics if they hoped to survive. Last but not least, while the villagers found it increasingly difficult to deal with


\textsuperscript{5} Sundstrom, “Smallpox Used Them up,” 21.
the troublesome nomadic peoples around them, the latter were less affected by both epidemics and were therefore better able to sustain their way of life.6

Thus, in many ways the smallpox epidemic of 1837-38, as well as those that followed it, continued a process begun by the first great epidemic, that which occurred between 1780 and 1782. Those that occurred during the nineteenth century whittled down a native population that was already a shadow of its former self. Also, the military, economic, and political shifts that occurred following later epidemics followed in the footsteps of those that transpired after the 1780-82 epidemic. That epidemic truly marked a watershed in regional history that laid the foundation for the events of the following century.

However, some questions do remain about the linkages between the 1780-82 epidemic and its successors. For instance, it is not completely clear how the transition from European to American colonialism of the plains affected the region’s disease ecology. Future research must address this critical subject if scholars hope to better understand the various colonial forces that shaped western America and its indigenous peoples. Furthermore, research needs to analyze some of the preliminary findings of this thesis, such as the impact of infectious diseases on native gender roles and perceptions.

Finally, it is worthwhile to point out that the significance of this study’s findings not only resonate beyond the eighteenth century, but also well beyond the northern plains. The transformations outlined in this thesis largely parallel those that occurred east of the Mississippi more than a century before, particularly in the southern piedmont

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region and in the Great Lakes area. In the case of the former, the findings of James H. Merrell illustrate how disease weakened individual tribes throughout the southern piedmont, forcing them to join one another, the result of which was “a kaleidoscopic array of mergers” eventually identified as the Catawba. However, as was the case with the Arikaras, such consolidation led to social stresses that bred intratribal conflict. Over time, though, the many individual tribes that lived in the area merged into a single group under a single identity, much like what happened on the Upper Missouri with the village river tribes, but to a much greater extent. Unlike the Mandans, Arikaras, and Hidatsas, who retained their individual identities, the different groups that came together to form the Catawbas took on a new one. Even though these tribes united, their weakened state, due to disease, made them prey to their much stronger enemies. Just like it did for the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras on the plains, and to a lesser extent the Shoshones, “smallpox marked the beginning of the end of the Catawbas’ prominence in the colonial Southeast.”

The findings of Daniel K. Richter reveal even more similarities between what transpired on the northern plains and further east, especially in the Great Lakes region. The outbreak of Old World diseases among the Iroquois deprived many groups of the able-bodied men who provided them with most of their food, much like what happened on the plains. The disease incapacitated the survivors so as to bring everyday life to a halt. Like Saukamappe’s people, as well as other plains natives, the Iroquois and other

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Great Lakes Indians “generally did not regard epidemics as natural phenomena,” but rather the work of some evil force, whether a living person or a spirit.\(^9\) Although the great number of deaths led to many women continually calling for mourning-war, losses to disease hindered tribes’ abilities to conduct offensive campaigns. However, as the Iroquois tribes recovered from the initial impact of the outbreak, they used warfare as a means of obtaining members of other groups to replenish their diminished populations, an objective that, while not new, received greater emphasis than ever before.\(^10\)

In the Great Lakes region, in the wake of the disease epidemics and the Iroquois Wars, many tribes “coalesced into a loose network of refugee villages.”\(^11\) Disease thus set the gears in motion for the Huron, Ottawa, Miami, Illinois, Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Fox, and other groups to become known collectively as the Wyandots. Although these tribes sometimes mixed their villages together, they more commonly lived in close proximity to one another, as was the case on the Upper Missouri with the semisedentary peoples. Similarly, groups such as the Creeks, Cherokees, and Iroquois came into existence after diseases made the integration of neighboring and allied groups a necessity. Despite these mergers, tribes still suffered from overwhelming attacks by enemies who sustained fewer losses to European-introduced diseases. For instance, Richter describes how in the Northeast, the Wampanoags seized the opportunity to drive their weakened rivals, the


Narragansetts, from their territory, much like the Sioux did to the village river tribes and the Blackfeet did to the Shoshones.\textsuperscript{12}

These striking similarities indicate that the Columbian Exchange brought many similar transformations to a wide variety of areas, regardless of time. Although, of course, the details vary, such as the peoples affected and the specific cultural facets that transformed, it appears that general currents of change stemmed from the Columbian Exchange. Despite the vastly different landscapes of the New World, despite the diversity of its native peoples, despite the assorted colonial systems utilized by the Spanish, French, and English, they all provided, through their intrusion, vectors for infectious disease to reach the vulnerable “virgin” peoples of the Americas and ravage them. In light of this conclusion, it becomes clear that Old World diseases, especially smallpox, were the greatest legacy of the European colonization of the Americas. After all, it was smallpox, not the gun, the horse, nor even alcohol, that nineteenth-century artist George Catlin dubbed “the dread destroyer of the Indian race.”\textsuperscript{13}

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  \item \textsuperscript{12} Richter, \textit{Facing East}, 97-98, 167-68, 180; Richter, \textit{Ordeal of the Longhouse}, 53.
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