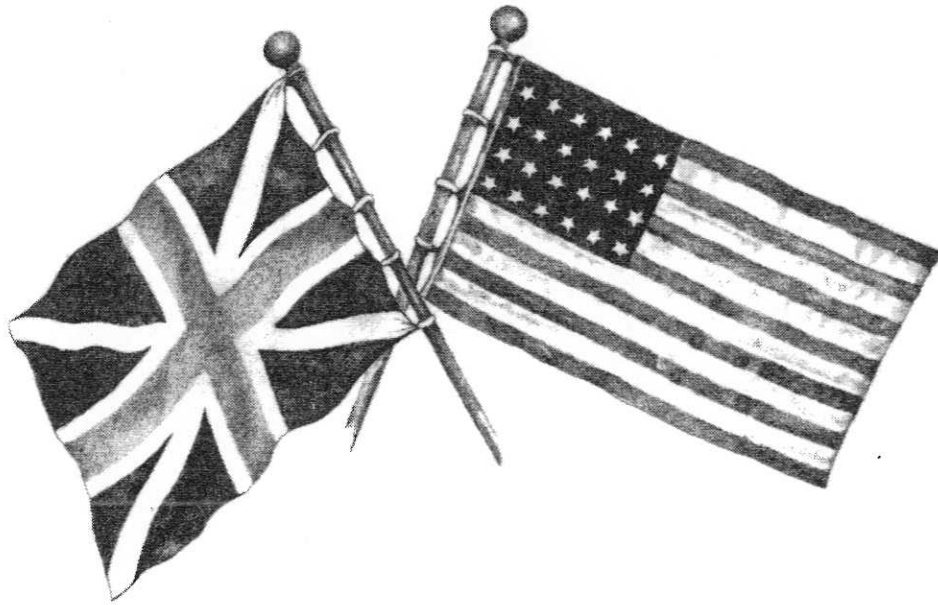


A Fur Traders' Fight

• 1825 •



The race for fur was on. From New Mexico to Canada, from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean, men searched for beaver. The demand for fashionable top hats made from felt of beaver fur had fueled an enterprise. The hunt for pelts opened up new routes for westward immigration. It also pitted French, British, and Americans against each other in their rush for more furs.

One notable battle between these competing national interests occurred in what is now northern Utah when three fur-trapping groups converged on the same area at the same time.

Britain's Hudson's Bay Company put Peter Skene Ogden in charge of an expedition to the Snake Country region of the northern Rocky Mountains. One of Ogden's goals was to eliminate the beaver in the Northwest; the Americans would then have no reason to colonize or explore the area. If the Americans came anyway, the British would at least deprive the invaders of profits from beaver skins.

Read the story.
Write a 12-15
sentence
summary.

By the time Ogden's group reached the Great Salt Lake in May of 1825, they had struggled through deep snowdrifts and achieved a hazardous mountain crossing. War parties of Bloods and Blackfeet had attacked, costing them the lives of both horses and men.

Around the same time, Etienne Provost entered the Great Salt Lake area. A French-Canadian fur trader, Provost led a motley group of Canadian, Spanish, and even Russian mountain men out of Taos, New Mexico. Provost had run into trouble with the Spanish government in New Mexico over his trapping activities and had spent time in Santa Fe dungeons. Now he looked to provide beaver pelts for Spanish Trail traders.

On this May, 1825 trip to the Great Salt Lake, Provost ventured farther north. He soon found himself in the same territory with the British group under Peter Skene Ogden. To crowd matters further, John Weber showed up with an American party trapping for fur traders William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry. With all these men in the same area after the same limited resource, trouble was inevitable.

Before they encountered Ogden, Provost's party met up with Weber and the Americans. The Canadian and his men listened to the talk of Jedediah Smith, an American trapper working for William H. Ashley. Smith had been in Oregon Territory on business. He had left there at the same time as Ogden. During the trip south, he had kept an eye on Ogden's party. As soon as Smith heard Weber was in the area, he set off to find the American leader with a report that could not be ignored: Ogden was flying the Union Jack and talking as if this country belonged to Britain.

Johnson Gardner, a member of Provost's group, grew angry as he listened. Before joining Provost, Gardner had trapped the Missouri River with William Ashley and had traversed South Pass with Weber. An independent mountain man, Gardner considered himself a loyal American. The trapper led both parties to a vote to show Ogden he was not in British territory; they would pay the British a visit in the morning.

On May 23, 1825, Johnson Gardner and twenty-five others rode past Ogden's camp, brazenly flying their American flag. For unknown reasons, Weber and Provost did not accompany their men. That night, while both parties camped nearby, Gardner spoke with Ogden and his clerk, William Kittson. In no uncertain terms, he informed them that they were trespassing on American territory and must leave immediately. Gardner offered to pay \$3.50 a pound for their beaver pelts, which was much more than they would get from Hudson's Bay Company. Most damaging of all, Gardner accused the company of treating its men like slaves. He offered to help any mountain man in Ogden's company who wanted to desert and join Provost's group.

Such an offer got Ogden's men thinking. Many Hudson's Bay Company trappers were Iroquois and Canadian freemen. They recognized the truth in Gardner's words. They paid high prices to the company for supplies and received low prices for their furs. They were always in debt to the company. After heated words and minor fighting, a small group of trappers from Ogden's company left with Gardner.

But Gardner wasn't finished. He returned to the British camp the next morning and demanded that Ogden tell everyone in which country they were camped. Ogden replied that no one was sure who owned the valley. It belongs to the United States and the British must leave, Gardner thundered back. (What Ogden—and perhaps even Gardner—didn't know was that they were actually in Mexican territory according to the Adams Onis Treaty of 1819.) Ogden insisted he would not leave until his government told him to do so. If Ogden didn't leave, Gardner threatened, the British trappers would be in danger.

Gardner left Ogden's tent and went to the lodge of John Grey, a part-Indian, part-white leader of the Iroquois who were trapping for Ogden. Gray agreed that his people had been treated poorly by the British. The only reason they had not deserted sooner, he told Gardner, was because they had not met the Americans.

On Grey's order, the Iroquois dismantled their lodges. Ogden saw his supplies disappearing as well. While Gardner and his men pointed guns at Ogden, he ran here and there, trying to recover as much property as he could. He managed to salvage goods from men who were not in camp that day, including three thousand beaver skins. His clerk, Kittson, hurried to save the horses they had lent the Iroquois.

The Americans fired no shots, but they hurled plenty of insults and obscenities at the outnumbered British. Ogden and his remaining men could only watch as twenty-one more deserters took piles of beaver pelts over to the American camp.

Gardner and his men made camp for the night about half a mile away. At the British camp, Ogden doubled the watch, fearing the deserters would return to kill his men and steal everything. He decided to leave for safer territory the next morning.

As the British broke camp, Gardner and company showed up again and took two more of Ogden's men with them. Gardner rode off bragging that he would see Ogden at the Columbia River and at other northern posts the British thought they owned.

More men deserted Ogden as he headed north. However demoralized he was by his losses, he knew the deserters had a point. American fur companies paid trappers eight times what the British paid for beaver pelts. Ogden returned and made his report to Hudson's Bay Company, and the company changed the way it treated fur trappers, thus avoiding further revolts.

By 1850, most of the beaver were gone; the mountain men disappeared with them. One of the most colorful events in trapping history took place at what is now Ogden's Hole, a pretty mountain valley above the city of Ogden.