History of Trade and the Beaver Wars

The fur trade in North America began with the earliest contacts between American Indians and Europeans. A few years after Europeans arrived in the New World, French, British, and Dutch fur traders were competing to trade with the American Indians, mainly members of the Iroquois Confederacy. In Europe, there was a good market for furs and in American there were many fur bearing animals.

Fur traders offered the American Indians goods in exchange for furs, including iron axes, knives, hatchets, fish hooks, cloth, woolen blankets, linen shirts, brass kettles, jewelry, glass beads, muskets, ammunition, and gun powder. They also brought alcohol to trade. Europeans wanted beaver pelts, but also took otter, mink, fox, bear, and deerskins as payment for goods. Manufactured goods replaced some of the items that American Indians had made for themselves. In many cases trade between Europeans and American Indians was collaborative.

Competition and conflict between tribes over hunting grounds became more common as more European settlers came to the New World. As fur-bearing animals like beaver became more scarce the Iroquois moved west to find more. The Iroquois went to the rich hunting grounds of their neighbors in the Ohio Country. The American Indians in Ohio Country including the Myaamia were weakened by European diseases that had killed many of them. Armed with guns, the Iroquois killed or drove out the Indians they found living here. This struggle over the Ohio Country became known as the Beaver Wars. They claimed the land for the Iroquois, but most Iroquois hunters and warriors did not live in the Ohio Country. They came primarily to hunt the deer and beaver, returning to their homes in the East after a hunting expedition.

The Myaamia were a powerful tribe and brought together a confederacy of their neighbors to collaborate against the Iroquois. The Myaamia and their allies kept the Iroquois from building settlements and continuing to hunt in the Ohio Valley. As the Myaamia started to trade with Europeans they also acquired guns giving them more control over the Ohio Valley and pushing the Iroquois back east.