

HBCA Information Sheet: HBC 'point' blankets

The Hudson's Bay Company has been trading 'point' blankets since 1780 and blankets for a century before that. The multi-striped blankets were introduced in 1798. The blankets have always been made in England.

The points are the narrow black lines at one corner of the blanket. It is often stated that the points represent the number of beaver pelts required to obtain the blanket in the fur trade days. This is not so. The points indicate the size and weight of the blanket. The larger and heavier the blanket, the more it cost, of course, but the one-to-one ration was not often in effect. Nobody had to cut a beaver skin in half to get a 2 ½ point blanket! The value of one prime beaver pelt, known as a 'made beaver', was the unit of exchange used in the fur trade. All trade goods and all pelts (not just beaver) exchanged for trade goods were valued as worth so many 'made beaver'. When the HBC first borrowed the idea of 'point' blankets from the North West Company, the HBC rate for a 2 point blanket was 4 made beaver. The HBC briefly introduced a one-to-one rate soon after but because of the fluctuating value of furs this was not maintained.

The blankets originally came in sizes from 1 point to 3 point. This was because they were made to fit men, women and children as wearing blankets. Today, since they are used on beds, 3 ½ point blankets are the smallest available. The 6 point (Queen size) and 8 point (King size) were introduced in the 20th century to suit modern beds.

Blankets were provided in pairs until the 20th century. The pair could simply be folded over to give a blanket of double thickness, or a small cut could be made and the pair neatly torn into two separate blankets.

The blankets and blanket coats could resist wind and water and yet still be breathable. When they got really wet they could be dried without becoming stiff, as skin garments tend to do. They could—and did—last for years. The predominantly white colour of many of the blankets made them excellent camouflage for winter hunting. Highly versatile, blankets were put up as sails for boats and sleds or used as burial shrouds. Strips could be torn off them to make wadding for bullets.