

The Louisiana Purchase

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson was very interested in obtaining the port of New Orleans. At the time, the port, surrounding land, and essentially the middle third of what we now know as the Continental United States was all owned by France. Jefferson knew that the port of New Orleans was vitally important to the well-being of an expanding America; New Orleans was the "gateway" from the ocean to the Mississippi River, and since most transportation involving the movement of crops and goods was, at the time, done by boat, control of the river and port would benefit everyone hoping to settle in the surrounding lands.

The Farming Problem

Because farming some crops (especially tobacco, corn, and cotton) robs the soil of its nutrients, farmers can only use a certain plot of land for a limited number of years before it fails to yield a crop. Today's farmers solve this problem by rotating crops -- planting one crop for several years and then letting it recuperate by planting a different crop that *adds* necessary nutrients back to the soil. Through this cycle, farmers can farm the same land indefinitely. However, back in 1803, farmers didn't have this knowledge yet, and they quickly burned out the productivity of their land. When their land failed to produce, these early farmers had no choice but to move their families to new land. Moving east was no option (it was too full), so farmers sought out new land further and further west. Ultimately, these farmers moved closer and closer to the fertile lands near the Mississippi River, making the giant river the best choice for transporting their crops back east. **(1)**

Jefferson Tries to Make a Deal

President Jefferson sent two men to France on behalf of the United States. He sent Robert Livingston, the American ambassador to France, and he sent James Monroe as minister plenipotentiary. Jefferson authorized the two men to initially offer \$7.5 million for the port and told them they could spend up to \$10 million if need be. **(2)**

This offer came to France at the right time. France's leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, was constantly at a threat of war with Britain, and his country could certainly use such a large sum of money. In addition, the French had failed to maintain control of their islands in the Caribbean (including Haiti) where they had hoped to profit from the sugar trade. Therefore, controlling the port of New Orleans and the giant Louisiana Territory now seemed to be an unnecessary expense. **(3)**

Napoleon had his representatives make an offer to Livingston and Monroe. They offered to sell the entire Louisiana Territory to America for \$15 million. Napoleon made it clear that he would not sell just the port of New Orleans to the United States -- it was the entire territory or nothing.

The Deal is Done

James Monroe was excited about the idea of acquiring so much more than the president had expected. However, he knew that he had not been authorized to spend so much money. In addition, he knew that it would take too long for him to send a message to President Jefferson and receive a reply. He had to make the decision himself, so he and Livingston agreed to the purchase. **(4)**

What the U.S. Got...

With one stroke of the pen, Monroe had more than doubled the size of his country. Before the purchase, the United States filled about 434 million acres; the purchase added 529,402,880 acres. After giving France a down payment of \$3 million dollars, America obtained a loan, borrowing the rest of the money for 20 years at 6% interest. The total investment (with interest) amounted to \$23, 527,872.57, or about 4 cents per acre. After making the deal, Livingston contacted Monroe and expressed that he actually felt guilty that the U.S. had gotten too great a deal and had actually taken advantage of France. **(5)**

More than just Land

While America did gain the land that would make up all or part of 15 future states (including all of Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and parts of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, New Mexico, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and of course Louisiana). In addition to the incredible amount of land, America instantly gained about 97,000 new citizens -- those people who had lived in the territory under France. Most Americans viewed these French-speaking people as "heathens in the wilderness" -- a group of uncivilized people that weren't ready to be a part of a democracy. Also, in spite of the fact that slavery was part of territory, southerners were very nervous about the fact that whites associated too freely with their slaves. **(6+7)**

The American Reaction

Surprisingly, the American reaction to the Louisiana Purchase was mostly negative. In spite of the fact that the U.S. had obtained such a bargain in land, most people wondered what, exactly, was on that land? It seemed like a far-away, vast wilderness with boundaries that were uncertain (in fact, it took many years to firmly establish the official boundaries). Others were upset that President Jefferson had done something unconstitutional in (1) obtaining territory and (2) absorbing its inhabitants as citizens. Still others felt that spending so much money was irresponsible. Today, however, the Louisiana Purchase is regarded as one of the greatest deals ever made by our government. **(8)**

Louisiana Purchase -- engagement guide

1. True or False? The Louisiana Territory was very valuable.

***Give two (2) pieces of textual evidence that support your opinion.

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2. What do you think the word, *plenipotentiary*, means?

- a. Give one reason for your guess

- b. Look up and write the actual definition of *plenipotentiary*

3. Which country (France or America) had the strongest reasons for making this deal happen?

***Give two facts that support your opinion

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4. Would *you* have done the deal? Why?

5. Who got the best deal -- America or France?

***Give two (2) pieces of textual evidence to support your opinion

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6. List the six (6) complete future states that were obtained in the Louisiana Purchase:

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7. List the nine (9) partial future states that were obtained in the Louisiana Purchase:

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8. If you were an American citizen at the time, would you have approved of the purchase? Why or why not?