

LOUISIANA PURCHASE

The Louisiana Purchase involved an immense area that was ruled by Spain. The U.S. was interested in two areas within it, the Mississippi River and the city of New Orleans, which were becoming recognized for their value to the economic development of the area. The city of New Orleans controlled the Mississippi River through its location, and New Orleans was already important for shipping agricultural goods to and from the parts of the U.S. west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Interest in the possible purchase of this land arose when Napoleon Bonaparte returned Louisiana to French control from Spain in 1800. Americans were fearful that this transfer would terminate their rights of use to New Orleans. The Jefferson Administration decided that the best way to assure long term access to the Mississippi would be to purchase the city of New Orleans and the nearby portions of Louisiana east of the Mississippi.

Napoleon was faced with the defeat of his armies in the present-day Republic of Haiti. Additionally, in the beginning of the year 1803, war between France and Britain seemed increasingly unavoidable. These circumstances led Bonaparte to abandon his plans to rebuild France's New World empire, and to decide to offer the entire territory for sale. The American negotiators were prepared to spend \$10 million for New Orleans but were dumbfounded when the entire region was offered for \$15 million. The treaty was signed on April 30, 1803. The Louisiana territory was vast. Acquiring the territory would double the existing size of the United States at a cost in the currency of the day of less than 3 cents per acre.

The United States Senate (following a heated debate) ratified the treaty on October 20, 1803. On the following day, it authorized President Jefferson to take possession of the territory and establish a temporary military government. Congress made temporary provisions for local civil government to continue as it had under French and Spanish rule and authorized the President to use military forces to maintain order.

When purchased, the boundaries of "Louisiana" were undefined, and the land itself was generally unexplored. Only the eastern boundary was fixed – the Mississippi River, including its tributaries (which included the Missouri River), from its source to the 31st parallel. The western boundary was generally accepted as the Continental Divide of the Rocky Mountains, which was then also almost completely unexplored. Plans were made for a mission to explore and chart the territory.

This mission would change the focus of the Lewis and Clark expedition, which had already been organized by President Jefferson to explore a water route to the west coast, which was already being occupied by settlers of various nationalities, and to gain knowledge of the flora and fauna along the way. The new focus would contain the previous objectives, but its new primary objective would be to determine the boundaries of the newly acquired territory, to map as much of it as feasible, and to meet with and advise all native peoples encountered of their new Father in far-off Washington. The expedition – which was named the Corps of Discovery by its two leaders - would

ultimately accomplish both goals, producing an excellent survey complete with beautiful maps, and collecting a great number of animal and plant specimens, many new to science.

Almost all of the land purchased from France was occupied by American Indians. It was not the ownership of the land that was purchased so much as the right to purchase the land from the Indians, which was accomplished, piece by piece, over time. The actual price paid for the land of the Louisiana Purchase would therefore ultimately be much higher than the sum paid to France. Nevertheless, it remains the most influential and important land purchase in the history of the nation, a jewel beyond price, that would open the eyes of the American people to possibilities far beyond the imagining of its founding fathers.