

The louisiana purchase: pathway of westward expansion



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THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE: PATHWAY OF WESTWARD EXPANSION

The Louisiana Territory had always been occupied by another foreign power while the early nation of America developed its identity. The Spanish were tolerated by the Americans and did not provide a major threat to the nation, however, a new threat of Napoleonic France laying a claim to the territory was not something that the Americans would have been able to contend with. Therefore, two American negotiators, James Monroe and Robert Livingston, were sent to France to try to obtain New Orleans from the French. To their surprise, they were offered not just New Orleans, but the entirety of the Louisiana Territory for \$15, 000, 000. During the Jeffersonian Era the purchase of the Louisiana Territory was momentous because it reduced the threat of European powers, enabled access to the Pacific, and increased sectional tension.

The French dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte, had high ambitions for one day taking over Great Britain. In his mind he needed to have an extremely vast empire in order to have the necessary strength to take on and defeat Great Britain. Currently, the Louisiana Territory was in possession of the Spanish. On October 1st, 1800 a secret treaty between France and Spain was signed, giving France the Louisiana Territory back. It was called the Treaty of San Ildefonso. Napoleon already had a plan of attack and goals he wanted to accomplish. Peter and Connie Roop in *Louisiana Purchase* state, " Napoleon was determined that France regain the lands she lost during the French and Indian Wars. He planned to establish forts, farms, and shipyards in Louisiana." [1]However, the dictator knew he had to acquire some means of wealth in order to achieve these goals. His next move to obtain this wealth

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was to take over and seize the island of Saint Domingue, which was currently under the power of the slave revolt leader, Toussaint Louverture. Napoleon sent his step-brother, General Leclerc, to Saint Domingue to oppose the slave revolt leader, Toussaint, with instructions from Napoleon to gain control of the island. Next, the plan was to proceed to the Americas and begin building a French empire. However, the mix of yellow fever, which wiped out the majority of Napoleon's troops, as well as Napoleon's recent actions of favoring slavery in the Caribbean, led all the slaves to become violent and caused the perfect storm for which Leclerc was not prepared.[2]

Meanwhile, in the Americas there was great paranoia over this French threat of increasing their global power. Napoleon had actually kept the fact that he had possession of Louisiana a secret from the world for a little over a year, keeping Spanish troops occupying the territory to deceive the neighboring Americans.[3] This caused great confusion in America and the leaders at this time period were very concerned for the near future of the nation. According to Charles Cerami in *Jefferson's Great Gamble*, "...he and Madison were seeing Louisiana as a threat, not an opportunity. They were mostly concerned about ways to keep it from growing into a great French empire... perhaps caught between the rivals France and England." [4] This was a distinct worry of President Jefferson because of the persistent rivalry between France and Great Britain, he was concerned that the United States would be forced into European conflict, causing the country to choose sides and enter a war upon which they were certainly not ready.

With the French troops fighting a losing battle in Saint Domingue, Napoleon desperately needed funds and soon if he wanted to continue his aspirations
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of seizing Great Britain. Monroe and Livingston had impeccable timing in that case and were able to negotiate with the French, represented by Talleyrand, to purchase the whole of the Louisiana Territory for \$15, 000, 000. This purchase gave a huge relief to Jefferson as he was quoted by Peter and Ronnie Coop in *Louisiana Purchase* , “ This removes us from the greatest source of danger to our peace.”[5]This allowed the once imminent issue to ensure peace, “ by removing the French threat and creating a protective buffer separating the United States from the rest of the world.”[6]This completely extinguished the severe threats of any European power and allowed the ambitious western settlers that had already pushed to Kentucky and Tennessee, to push even further.[7]

The purchase doubled the size of America at the time and it stretched now from coast to coast. With this newly acquired territory and France finally out of the picture, Jefferson could now focus on becoming familiarized with it. He was eager to commission an exploration and assigned the monumental task to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The Corps of Discovery sent off Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition in May of 1804, returning in 1806.

During their expedition they sent back a plethora of, “ maps, soil samples, the skins and skeletons of weasels, wolves and antelope, and live specimens of prairie dogs and magpies...”[8]These maps lured traders as well as trappers and by the right of discovery and exploration led them to declare the Oregon Territory as part of the United States.[9]There were also many descriptive journals that were brought back from the expedition. As claimed by the State Historical Society of North Dakota, “ The most noticeable immediate effect was the rise in the northern plains fur trade between 1806

and 1812.”[10]This will benefit the United States economically by gaining more resources as well as increasing the desire to travel out to the west.

Since 1612, there has been tobacco grown in America and now with it being in the early 19th century the soil is no longer fertile. However, with the prospect of new land from the Louisiana Territory, the Southern planters could relocate to what would be known as The Black Belt. This encompassed the areas where the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas would be created. The stretch of land would provide fresh soil for the farmers, which in turn, could financially benefit the United States because of the potential for a new crop. This permitted the fateful rise in the popularity of growing cotton to be able to aid the United States. As stated by Henry Gates, “ Cotton was the leading American export from 1803 to 1937.”[11]The Louisiana Purchase enabled these planters to reap those benefits, but it would also have consequences as the country would grow dependent on that income.

When the Louisiana Purchase increased movement west, the North and the South had already developed an identity for themselves. Therefore, when these very people moved west, they went to the landscapes and climates that they were accustomed to, as well as kept those same regional identities. The Louisiana Purchase got the ball rolling when it came to the dangerous development of sectional ideas. It was this treaty that empowered Americans to move west through the idea of Manifest Destiny. Even before Jefferson made the land deal, he was speculating the likely consequences of it, “ On

the American worry that an East-West split might break up the Union, for instance, Jefferson was distinctly of two minds..."[12]

The more short-term social conflict was the fact that New England, which contained many of the Federalist party, were apprehensive of the purchase because they believed that it would weaken their standing in the government and decrease their political power. The newly admitted western states would be more influenced to vote more on the Republican side.

[13]The Constitution never directly states the fact that the President could buy land, so Jefferson who typically advocates for strict interpretation, used a loose interpretation so that he could buy the Louisiana Territory. The Federalists and New England were panicking and had the party do a complete moral flip, where they now wanted a strict interpretation of the Constitution in order to provide a counter to the Louisiana Purchase.[14]

The long-term effects of the purchase were a lot more controversial and detrimental. For instance, after the purchase of Louisiana the northern states complained that the newly acquired territory would make the southern states stronger and bring slavery with it.[15]This opened up a whole can of worms that would slowly lead the nation down a path that would not be completely resolved until the conclusion of the Civil War. The most important singular question was whether the institution of slavery would be permitted in the territories. This would be a question that the nation would constantly wrestle with for the next decades to come, contributing to the Missouri Compromise of 1819, The Nullification Crisis, and The Compromise of 1850.

All of these sectional arguments stemmed from the movement west that was spurred by the Louisiana Purchase.

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Without the Louisiana Purchase and its long and short-term effects, the nation would not have looked the same internally as well as externally. The French, that were bullying America with its secretive schemes, were finally put to the side and allowed the obvious threat to be eradicated from America. Economically, the Louisiana Purchase paved the way for westward expansion which helped to increase trading and entitled farmers with more land to work with. However, the purchase did mark a beginning to ongoing sectional arguments for years and years to come.

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12. Cerami, 29

13. Shi, Tindall, 314.

14. Shi, Tindall, 314.

15. Roop, 70.