

Westward Expansion: The Louisiana Purchase

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TOP: The third signing of the Louisiana Treaty, which occurred in New Orleans, is depicted. MIDDLE: Official White House portrait of Thomas Jefferson. BOTTOM: Map showing the extent of the Louisiana Purchase. Photos from: Wikimedia Commons.

Thomas Jefferson believed that the ideal government was an agrarian democracy. A democracy is a system of government in which the citizens exercise power by electing their representatives. An agrarian democracy is one whose economy is based on the production of crops.

Jefferson was president of the United States from 1801 to 1809. During his presidency, he felt that American's agrarian society was at risk. The United States had just become its own country. The growth of city-based industry, and the transition from farming to factory work, threatened to take away the financial independence that Americans enjoyed as farmers.



Jefferson worked to help farmers

Jefferson's vision was not anti-modern. He had too brilliant a scientific mind to fear technological change. He supported global commerce, which would benefit farmers, and he wanted to see new technology incorporated into ordinary farms to make them more productive.

Yet Jefferson had identified a difficult problem. America's new government promised its citizens equality by law. How could this be maintained when economic and social changes might increase inequality? Across the Atlantic Ocean, England's industry was just beginning to grow, and its workers experienced awful conditions in these early factories. Jefferson saw this as a terrifying example of what could happen at home.

For Jefferson, western expansion was an alternative to industrialization. As long as hardworking farmers could acquire land at reasonable prices, America could advance as a republic of equal and independent citizens.

French leader threatened to block access to port

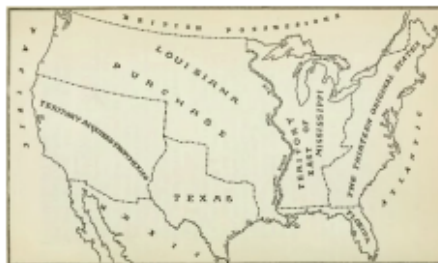
This vision was threatened, however, when France regained control of Louisiana. French leader Napoleon Bonaparte had risen to power in the French Revolution. He threatened to block America's use of New Orleans as a port for trade. New

Orleans, a city in Louisiana, sits on the Mississippi River. Blocking America's access to New Orleans was a grave threat to American business. New American settlements west of the Appalachian Mountains depended upon the river to transport goods for sale. Sending these products by land was much too expensive.

President Jefferson considered changing his foreign policy to join the British in their fight against Napoleon. Before deciding, he sent a U.S. official to France to bargain for continued trade access along the Mississippi. James Monroe, the top American negotiating in Paris, wanted to purchase New Orleans and West Florida for \$2 million to \$10 million.

Land purchased for \$15 million

Surprisingly, Napoleon offered much more. His military was overextended and he needed money to continue his war against Britain. Napoleon also knew that he could not force Americans out of the land France possessed in North America. So Napoleon offered all of Louisiana to the U.S. for \$15 million. The huge territory stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. It more than doubled the size of the United States.



Napoleon's asking price worked out to be about four cents an acre.

The decision to make this purchase was not easy for Jefferson. He felt strongly that the central government should stay small and simple, and spend little. As president he reduced the size of the federal government by ending taxes on individuals' property and the goods they purchased. He also reduced the size of the army and navy. His desire to limit the federal government flowed from his strict interpretation of the Constitution. Spending an enormous amount on land was in direct opposition to Jefferson's long-held principles.

Some were not happy about deal

Nevertheless, the deal was struck in April 1803. Not everyone was happy about it. Some complained that Jefferson had clearly not followed his own strict interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. They argued that the Constitution didn't allow the federal government to purchase new land.

In the end, Jefferson decided that the Constitution did allow him to make the purchase. He said that it fell under his powers to make treaties, agreements with other governments. Most of the Senate agreed. The Louisiana Purchase easily passed, with 26 votes in favor of the purchase and 6 against it.

The large growth of the country's size also contradicted Jefferson's wish to quickly reduce the national debt. Although \$15 million was a small sum for such a large amount of land, it was still an enormous price tag back then.

New territory leads to 13 new states

The Louisiana Purchase demonstrates Jefferson's ability to make sensible political decisions. Although the purchase was contrary to his principles, it guaranteed western growth, which was more important to Jefferson's overall vision for the new country. He took bold action and the gains were big. The new territory would in time add 13 new states to the country.

In 1812, Louisiana became the first state to join the country from land bought in the purchase. Louisiana was allowed to enter the United States with its French legal ways largely in place.