



Louisiana Purchase

1803

The purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 helped assure the country's rise to a world power. At a cost of *less than three cents an acre*, the nation was doubled in size with the addition of the 827,987 square miles of resource-rich land. Moreover, the purchase of this vast territory helped avoid a possible war with France.

When Thomas Jefferson was sworn in as President in March 1801, a major problem was brewing which could have erupted in war between the United States and France. For years, people living west of the Appalachian Mountains had taken their surplus farm products to New Orleans for shipment to the East Coast and to Europe. Though the round trip from farm to port was often more than 1,000 miles, the network of rivers flowing into the Mississippi made the transporting of goods by boat to New Orleans convenient and profitable.

Initially, New Orleans was a Spanish

possession and a treaty assured American citizens the right to store and ship goods there. This tax-free "right of deposit" was the key to the economy of the people living in what was then America's West. In October 1800, however, France obtained the Louisiana Territory from Spain and the political climate began to change. Then, as a major step in accomplishing his dream of establishing France as a major empire, French dictator Napoleon Bonaparte ended the right of deposit in 1802.

Thus New Orleans — the only outlet for goods produced in the West — was closed to Americans. This so infuriated the Americans directly affected, that thousands of men were ready to take the port city by force. This would probably have resulted in the war with France which President Jefferson wanted very much to avoid. He knew the importance of keeping the port open for American shipping and realized that the

United States could join with England in an alliance against France. But he chose to negotiate for the purchase of New Orleans. Jefferson empowered ambassador to France Robert Livingston and special representative James Monroe to deal with the French. Awaiting the outcome, Jefferson was faced with a quandary. He loved peace, yet he believed that he had no power under the Constitution to purchase the territory.

The envoys were instructed to use every effort to purchase New Orleans or, at the very least, obtain a new right of deposit. Ironically, before the talks could get under way in earnest, Napoleon's vision of building an empire in North America was shattered by political and military problems on other fronts. These problems were compounded by the fact that the French treasury was nearly empty. Napoleon needed money fast if he were to continue his campaign to dominate Europe.

This, along with realization that American troops could easily seize the unprotected territory if war were declared, prompted Napoleon to agree to sell New Orleans if the United States would also buy all of the Louisiana Territory. Napoleon told his finance minister to accept \$11,250,000 in cash and have the United States assume responsibility for the \$3,750,000 France

was in debt to American businessmen. When Livingston and Monroe were told of the decision to sell the entire territory, including New Orleans, for a total of \$15 million they found it hard to believe.

Though the offer exceeded the limits of their instructions, it was so favorable to the United States that the men quickly agreed to the purchase before Napoleon had a chance to change his mind. So on May 2, 1803 they signed the treaty for the Louisiana purchase. Livingston was overjoyed by the terms of the treaty. As he signed the historic document he said: "We have lived long, but this is the noblest work of our whole lives . . . From this day the United States take their place among the powers of the first rank."

All the members of Congress did not agree with that statement, but after some debate and a very liberal interpretation of the constitution, the treaty was approved. The vast wilderness between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River that eventually became all or part of 15 states was annexed to the United States. Indeed, the purchase of the Louisiana Territory was, as envisioned by Jefferson "... an ample provision for our posterity, and a wide spread for the blessing of freedom and equal laws."