

## The Louisiana Purchase

Few presidential decisions have had as much impact on history as one Thomas Jefferson made in 1803. In one simple transaction, he doubled the size of the United States. Without that decision, America would likely be a much smaller and much less wealthy nation today.

In the deal, Jefferson bought the territory of land known as Louisiana from the French. Louisiana was originally a French colony that the Spanish had occupied for a few decades. The French had regained the territory in a war and had no interest in keeping it. So, they offered it to the United States.

The Louisiana territory contained parts of fifteen current US states. It was defined by the territories surrounding the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. This means it included a stretch of land from what is today the state of Louisiana to Minnesota, and from Missouri to Montana. Before the purchase, the United States' western border was the Mississippi River, and the most western state was Tennessee. But some believed America should stretch as far west as the Pacific Ocean, as it does today. Buying Louisiana would go a long way towards that goal.

The decision Jefferson made obviously benefited the nation. Still, Jefferson really thought about not making the purchase for a long time. Finally, he convinced himself that purchasing Louisiana was just too good a deal to pass up. But how did he come to that decision?

**The Constitution Question:** At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, America was still a young nation. It had only existed for two decades or so. And just a decade and a half earlier, America had decided to start over as a nation, so to speak. Facing problems, it abandoned its original form of government and created something new. This new government was formalized in the Constitution.

In the Constitution, three branches of government split power. The President has to share power with Congress and the Supreme Court. Some people were still uncertain that this new government could survive, and many did not fully agree on what the Constitution meant.

Jefferson thought the Constitution provided the limit of what the government could do. For him, if the Constitution did not specifically say that the president could do something, then it meant the president did not have the power to do that thing. This is known as strict interpretation of the Constitution.

The Constitution did not clearly say Jefferson had the power to buy land for America. Because of this, Jefferson thought that he had no right to make the purchase of Louisiana. But Jefferson eventually decided the deal was too good to pass up. Even though it went against his own beliefs, the Louisiana Purchase was made.

**Outlining the Purchase:** Jefferson knew the land was valuable and that it would allow Americans to move further west. He envisioned a nation of small farmers, and the new territory offered enough land to make this a reality. But Jefferson did not know what the land had on it.

To find out, he asked Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to make maps of the territory and find a safe route of travel through it. The Lewis and Clark Expedition was also to claim the land for America before other European nations—especially Britain—could occupy the land. Lewis and Clark were successful in doing so, and in the end, the vast Louisiana territory became part of the United States.

**Today:** The Louisiana Purchase was carved into parts of fifteen different states. Without it, the United States would be less than half of what it is today. After all, it would make no sense to acquire the West Coast without also owning the middle of the continent. Jefferson's decision to buy Louisiana seems to

have been an obviously great one. It is incredible to imagine him thinking otherwise while making the decision.

1. According to the passage, each of the following nations at one time owned Louisiana EXCEPT
  - a. the United States
  - b. France
  - c. Britain
  - d. Spain
2. Without the third paragraph, the passage would contain no information about
  - a. the appearance and size of the land that made up the Louisiana Purchase land
  - b. the borders of the land that made up the Louisiana Purchase
  - c. how Thomas Jefferson made the decision to buy the land that made up the Louisiana Purchase
  - d. Thomas Jefferson's doubts about buying the land that made up the Louisiana Purchase
3. The Louisiana Purchase was made into parts of
  - a. 15 states, including California and Tennessee
  - b. 15 states, including Minnesota and Missouri
  - c. 18 states, including Wyoming and Louisiana
  - d. 18 states, including Washington and Virginia
4. The first sentence of paragraph 4 suggests that the author viewed the Louisiana Purchase as being
  - a. clearly valuable
  - b. clearly problematic
  - c. secretly illegal
  - d. secretly great
5. According to the passage, Jefferson did not want to make the Louisiana Purchase because he thought
  - a. he did not have the power to do so
  - b. the land should be owned by no nation
  - c. the land was worthless
  - d. he did not understand what the Constitution said
6. Which of the following describes America at the time Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase?
  - a. tiny and unprofitable
  - b. fragile and unstable
  - c. permanent and unbreakable
  - d. ugly and unattractive
7. As used in paragraph 9, the word "envisioned" most nearly means
  - a. made possible
  - b. was interested in
  - c. prevented
  - d. dreamed of
8. The main focus of this passage is to
  - a. suggest that Jefferson was wrong to make the Louisiana Purchase and to describe what he should have done differently
  - b. describe the history of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and to discuss why Jefferson ordered it
  - c. explain Jefferson's decision to make the Louisiana Purchase and the effects of the purchase

d. argue that France should never have sold Louisiana to the United States and to explain why France did sell it

9. Do you think Jefferson made the right decision when he chose to purchase Louisiana? Why or why not?