

15.2 The Louisiana Purchase

America's first opportunity for expansion during the early nineteenth century involved the vast territory to the west of the Mississippi River, then known as Louisiana. The United States wanted the port city of New Orleans, near the mouth of the Mississippi River. By 1800, thousands of farmers were settling the land to the west of the Appalachian Mountains. To get their crops to market, they floated them down the Mississippi to New Orleans. There they loaded the crops onto ships bound for Europe or for cities on the East Coast.

The farmers depended on being able to move their crops freely along this route. "The Mississippi," wrote James Madison, "is to them everything. It is the Hudson, the Delaware, the Potomac, and all the navigable rivers of the Atlantic States formed into one stream."

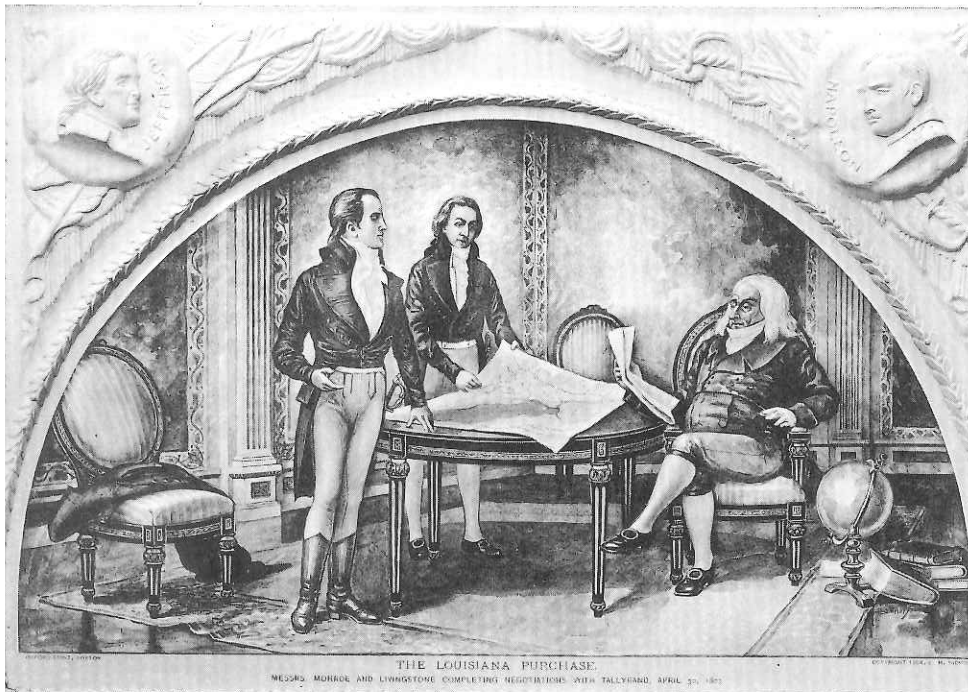
Louisiana Across the Mississippi lay the unexplored territory of Louisiana. This immense region stretched from Canada south to Texas. From the Mississippi, it reached west all the way to the Rocky Mountains. First claimed by France, Louisiana was given to Spain after the French and Indian War. In 1800, the French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte convinced Spain to return Louisiana to France.

Napoleon had plans for Louisiana. He hoped to settle the territory with thousands of French farmers. These farmers would raise food for slaves who toiled on France's sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

Napoleon's plans alarmed frontier farmers. New Orleans was part of Louisiana. If Napoleon closed the port to American goods, farmers would have no way to get their crops to market.

"A Noble Bargain" President Thomas Jefferson understood the concerns of American farmers. So, in 1803, he sent James Monroe to France with an offer to buy New Orleans for \$7.5 million. By the time Monroe reached France, Napoleon had changed his plans. A few years earlier, a slave named Toussaint L'Ouverture had led a slave revolt in the French Caribbean colony known today as Haiti. The former slaves defeated the French troops who tried to take back the colony. As a result, Napoleon no longer needed Louisiana.

In addition, France and Britain were on the brink of war. Napoleon knew that he might lose Louisiana to the British. Rather than lose



American diplomats (standing) work out the final details of the Louisiana Purchase with Talleyrand, the French foreign minister.

Louisiana, it made sense to sell it to the United States.

Napoleon's offer to sell all of Louisiana stunned James Monroe. Instead of a city, suddenly the United States had the opportunity to buy an area as big as itself!

It didn't take long for Monroe to agree. On April 30, 1803, he signed a treaty giving Louisiana to the United States in exchange for \$15 million. Said the French foreign minister, "You have made a noble bargain for yourselves, and I suppose you will make the most of it."

The Purchase Debate To most Americans, the Louisiana Purchase looked like the greatest land deal in history. The new territory would double the country's size at a bargain price of just 2 to 3 cents an acre!

Still, not everyone approved. Some people worried that such a large country would be impossible to govern. Politicians in the East fretted that they would lose power. Sooner or later, they warned, Louisiana would be carved into enough new states to outvote the eastern states in Congress.

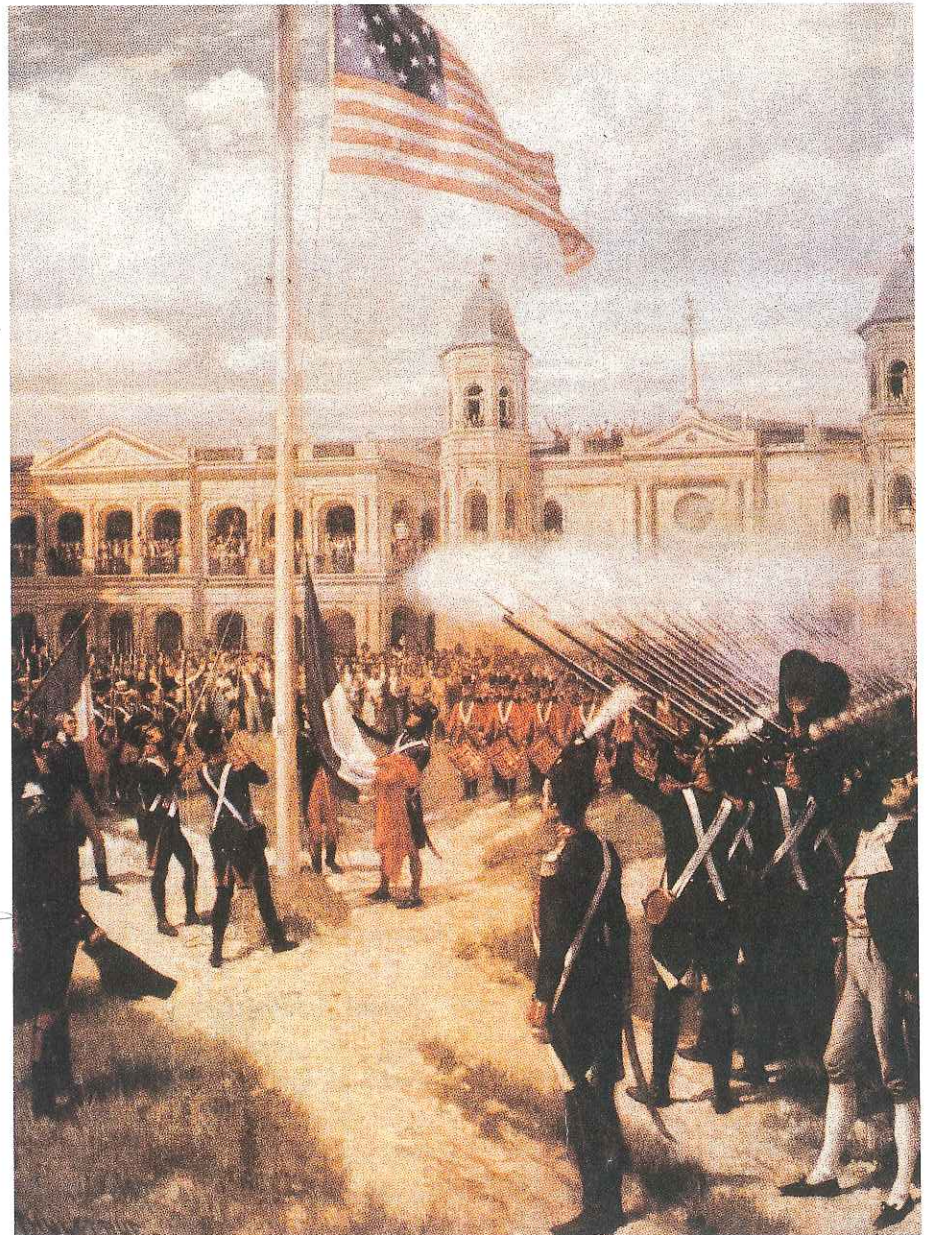
Others fussed about the \$15 million price tag. "We are to give money of which we have too little," wrote a Boston critic, "for land of which we already have too much."

Opponents also accused Jefferson of "tearing the Constitution to tatters." They said that the Constitution made no provision for purchasing foreign territory.

Jefferson was troubled by the argument that the purchase was unconstitutional. Still, he believed that it was better to stretch the Constitution than to lose a historic opportunity.

Late in 1803, the Senate voted to ratify the Louisiana Purchase treaty. Frontier farmers cheered the news. "You have secured to us the free navigation of the Mississippi," a grateful westerner wrote Jefferson. "You have procured an immense and fertile country: and all these great blessings are obtained without war and bloodshed."

In this painting, the American flag is raised in New Orleans as the French flag is taken down. The ceremony marked the official transfer of the Louisiana Territory in 1803.



The Granger Collection, New York