

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE:

Was It a Good Deal?



In 1803, the United States purchased the Louisiana territory from France. Thomas Jefferson, who was president at the time, considered various factors in determining whether to approve or reject the Louisiana Purchase. Read the historical context below, and then follow the instructions on page 2.

Jefferson's Big Decision

In the 1790s, Spain controlled the Louisiana territory, including the Mississippi River. The United States had negotiated permission from Spain to use the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans for trade. Soon after becoming president in 1800, Thomas Jefferson learned that Spain had given its control of the region to France. Jefferson feared that France would take away the United States' access to the river and to New Orleans.

The Mississippi River was critical to the U.S. economy for a few reasons.

- ◆ As a slow-moving river, it was ideal for transporting goods and people.
- ◆ Its incredible length (over 2,300 miles!) allowed people and goods to travel long distances.
- ◆ It flowed through New Orleans, a strategic southern trade port. The New Orleans port allowed traders to avoid carrying crops across the rugged Appalachian Mountains.

Jefferson did not want France to control the Mississippi River or New Orleans. Some believe he was even willing to go to war to protect American access to them. In 1803, the United States offered to buy just the New Orleans transport stations. France made a surprising counter offer. Napoleon Bonapart, the ruler of France, offered to sell the entire Louisiana territory to the U.S. instead!

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What should President Jefferson do?

Read each piece of information and consider its impact on President Jefferson's decision to accept or reject the Louisiana Purchase deal.

- ◆ Place a **+** on the line in front of statements you think represent a reason Jefferson should accept the Louisiana Purchase deal.
- ◆ Place a **-** on the line in front of statements you think represent a reason Jefferson should not accept the Louisiana Purchase deal.

1. _____ The land for sale included the Mississippi River and 828,000 square miles to its west. The land would double the size of the United States.
2. _____ Congress authorized buying the port of New Orleans but for no more than \$10 million. The price of the land was \$15 million dollars.
3. _____ The price was not negotiable and due immediately. Adjusted for inflation, \$15 million in 1803 would be worth over \$300 million today. The U.S. did not have easy access to so much money.
4. _____ It was so much land that the price per acre was actually quite low—less than 3 cents an acre (42 cents today).
5. _____ The U.S. Constitution did not specifically address a president's power to buy land from a foreign government. Jefferson often argued that leaders only had the powers expressed in the Constitution.
6. _____ Owning the territory west of the Mississippi River would allow U.S. merchants to trade freely and support economic growth.
7. _____ Owning so much additional territory would allow Americans to expand farming in the western territories.
8. _____ New England farmers opposed the purchase. They feared additional farming in the new territory would lower the value of New England's crops.
9. _____ Many members of the House of Representatives opposed the purchase. They called for a vote to stop the purchase.
10. _____ Westward expansion would provide a geographic buffer for the country, keeping Great Britain and France away from U.S. economic interests along the Mississippi River.
11. _____ Officials in Spain threatened to oppose the deal, arguing that Napoleon had control over the territory but not the right to sell it.
12. _____ Congressman Fisher Ames questioned the wisdom of the purchase, saying, "We are to give money of which we have too little for land of which we already have too much."
13. _____ Jefferson wanted westward expansion to be part of his presidential legacy.

