

History

Louisiana Purchase

When President Thomas Jefferson offered Napoleon Bonaparte \$12,000,000 for the French province of Louisiana, which stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, he believed he was obtaining "an empire for liberty" that would absorb America's land hunger for generations to come. He also believed that the long-standing disputes between colonists and Indians over land rights could be resolved by creating special territories for the Native Americans on the western side of the Mississippi River. By the time Jefferson made the deal, however, thousands of Americans had already moved into those lands, carving farmsteads out of tribal lands and shipping their produce down the Mississippi for sale in New Orleans.

Jefferson's purchase was legally questionable for several reasons. First, he was not certain that his constitutional powers as president allowed him to make the acquisition. Second, no one knew exactly how far west the continent stretched. He planned to resolve this question by sending an expedition, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, to find a route to the Pacific Ocean. He sent with them a large quantity of trading goods to stimulate goodwill among the Native Americans they met and to interest them in trading with the United States.

The third of Jefferson's problems was that French title to the territory was unclear. The French had lost the Louisiana territory to Spain in 1763 under the [Treaty of Paris](#) (1763), but they had recovered it through secret deals with Spain in 1801 and 1802. Napoleon had planned to create a new colonial empire to replace the lost French Canada, but a revolution in Santo Domingo by African-American Toussaint Louverture and threats from the British Navy ended his dreams. Because the French had recovered the territory so recently, it remained largely unknown to Europeans, with its borders undefined. Borders were later worked out with Spain and Great Britain, but despite their limitations the Louisiana Purchase effectively doubled the land area of the United States.

For Native Americans, the Louisiana Purchase meant two things. First, western tribes would soon encounter U.S. settlers and government forces and be faced with the same pressures to sell their land that the eastern Indians had undergone for the previous 200 years. Second, it gave the U.S. government a reason to compel the tribes still living on their own lands in the east to move west of the Mississippi. Presidents Jefferson and Madison hoped that the Mississippi would be a barrier between the United States and the Native Americans. They believed that most Indians would relocate voluntarily, encouraged by the concept of a world free from non-Indian intrusion. Madison suggested this in a special message to Congress late in 1824.

Many of the Indians at whom this concept was aimed, including the [Cherokee](#), [Creek](#), and [Chickasaw](#), adamantly resisted the idea of Removal. Between 1789 and 1825, the tribes had surrendered lands in 30 different treaties; they did not want to give up any more of their ancestral territory. However, state and federal pressures eventually forced all of them to be removed to lands in the Louisiana Purchase. The Creek ceded most of their territory to the state of Georgia by 1826. The last of it was seized by Governor George M. Troup, despite threats of federal intervention by President John Quincy Adams. The Cherokee tried to protect their land rights through the U.S. legal system, but the passage of the [Indian Removal Act](#) (1830) forced all but a small group to move west of the Mississippi. The Chickasaw left their eastern homeland in 1837.

Jefferson's and Madison's belief that the Mississippi River would place a barrier between Indians and the United States was a gross miscalculation. Within a decade after Jefferson's death in 1826, settlements were being established throughout the new territory. By the end of the century the United States had claimed all the territory Jefferson had wanted to reserve for the Indians, and more. Instead of providing for the peace, the Louisiana Purchase brought the U.S. government into conflict with new tribes and led to the great Indian wars of the 19th century.

Further Information

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