

# ED479236 2003-08-00 Teaching about the Louisiana Purchase. ERIC Digest.

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The year 2003 marks the bicentennial of the 1803 Treaty of France, by which the United States of America acquired the Louisiana Territory, an area of more than 828,000 square miles. Upon this acquisition, known as the Louisiana Purchase, the territory of the United States doubled. Historians consider the Louisiana Purchase to be a landmark event or turning point in American history. This Digest discusses (1) President Jefferson's decision to purchase the Louisiana Territory, (2) the significant consequences of this decision in American history, and (3) methods of teaching about the Louisiana Purchase.

## THE DECISION TO PURCHASE LOUISIANA.

President Thomas Jefferson faced an important decision during the summer of 1803. Napoleon, the emperor of France, had offered to sell the territory of Louisiana to the United States for \$15 million. This vast territory extended westward from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and southward from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico and the Spanish lands of what is now Texas and New Mexico.

Jefferson had offered to buy for \$2 million only the region around the mouth of the Mississippi River, which included the port and city of New Orleans. The President wanted to protect the interests of farmers in the Ohio River Valley, who depended on access to New Orleans. They sent their crops down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, from which ships took the products to cities along the Atlantic coast of the United States. Americans feared that the French might interfere with their trade by imposing high taxes on products and ships moving through New Orleans. Even worse, the French might close the port to Americans.

President Jefferson was astonished by Napoleon's offer to sell not only the region around New Orleans, but also the entire Louisiana Territory. Although the total purchase price seemed high, it was not beyond the means of the United States to pay it.

Jefferson wanted to buy Louisiana, but he was reluctant to stretch too far the constitutional powers of the federal government. Jefferson believed that the powers of the federal government should be limited precisely to those explicitly granted in the Constitution. According to his strict constructionist interpretation of the Constitution, the President could not buy Louisiana because no part of the supreme law, the Constitution, granted this power to the government. Despite his reservations about the constitutionality of purchasing Louisiana, Jefferson decided to do it, the Senate ratified the decision, and Congress appropriated the money to carry out the decision. The President justified his decision with these words, "Is it not better that the opposite land of the Mississippi should be settled by our own brethren and children than by strangers of another family" (Morris 1973, 57).

## CONSEQUENCES OF JEFFERSON'S DECISION.

The Louisiana Purchase was a landmark event in American history. One consequence of the purchase was that the United States nearly doubled its land mass and became one of the world's largest countries. Eventually all or parts of 13 states of the United States were formed from the Louisiana Territory: Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Later on, Americans learned that the territory included vast tracts of fertile soil and other natural resources. Louisiana turned out to be a richer prize than anyone had imagined at the time of its purchase.

In 1828, the United States Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of Jefferson's decision to purchase Louisiana. In *AMERICAN INSURANCE COMPANY V. CANTER*, the Court ruled that the federal government could acquire new territory under the treaty-making clause of the Constitution (Morris 1973, 57).

The decision to purchase Louisiana was one of Thomas Jefferson's most important decisions as President. He added greatly to the size and wealth of the United States. And he contributed substantially, though reluctantly, to the precedent that, when necessary to serve the public good, the Constitution may be interpreted broadly.

## TEACHING METHODS.

The topic of the Louisiana Purchase is embedded solidly in curricular standards for the teaching and learning of U.S. history. For example, the following indicators of student performance pertain to the Louisiana Purchase (National Standards for History 1996, 92):

1. Compare the arguments advanced by Democratic-Republicans and Federalists regarding the acquisition of Louisiana. [Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas]
2. Analyze how the Louisiana Purchase influenced politics, economic development, and the concept of Manifest Destiny. [Evaluate the implementation of a decision]
3. Assess how the Louisiana Purchase affected relations with Native Americans and the lives of various inhabitants of the Louisiana Territory. [Explain historical continuity and change]

Notice that these standards combine core content with skills of historical thinking, such as comparative analysis, analysis and evaluation, and explanation of continuity and change. A key characteristic of effective teaching methods is the integration of content and cognitive processes. "Historical thinking skills cannot be divorced from content" (National Standards for History 1996, 70).

Effective teaching of history includes the application of geography to the interpretation of events in history (Patrick and Stoltman 1991, 1-4). For example, in learning about the

Louisiana Purchase, students should examine how the geographic theme of location can be used to explain and evaluate President Jefferson's interest in acquiring the port of New Orleans for the United States (Patrick and Stoltman 1991, 15-18).

Effective teaching of events in history involves students analyzing primary documents. For example, students can read and interpret a letter from President Thomas Jefferson to Robert R. Livingston, the U.S. Minister to France (April 18, 1802). In this letter, Jefferson tells Livingston his reasons for wanting to acquire from France the port of New Orleans (Patrick and Stoltman 1991, 21-22).

## USING INTERNET RESOURCES.

The Internet is a rich source of primary documents in United States history. The following Web sites include documents and related information about the Louisiana Purchase and its consequences in United States history:

### LOUISIANA PURCHASE EXHIBIT.

Portions of the Louisiana Purchase Exhibit at the Old State Capitol in Baton Rouge are presented through this Web site, which is maintained by the Louisiana Secretary of State: <[www.sec.state.la.us/purchase/purchase-index.htm](http://www.sec.state.la.us/purchase/purchase-index.htm)>.

### THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: COLLECTION CONNECTIONS.

This section of the American Memory Collection contains documents from the earliest periods in United States history, including documents pertaining to the Louisiana Purchase: <[lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/revolt/index.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/revolt/index.html)>.

### NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS

### ADMINISTRATION: DIGITAL CLASSROOM,

TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTS. This site contains reproducible copies of primary documents and teaching activities based on those documents pertaining to periods of U.S. history from the American Revolution to the present. Documents about the Louisiana Purchase are included at this site:

<[www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/teaching\\_with\\_documents.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/teaching_with_documents.html)>.

## REFERENCES AND ERIC RESOURCES.

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World

Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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