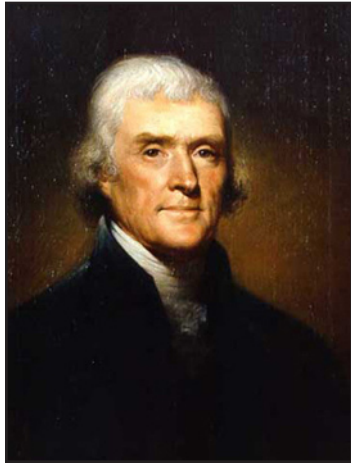


THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 9-12 Lessons :

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE LOUISIANA TERRITORY



Thomas Jefferson. Portrait by Rembrandt Peale, The White House

No measure of Thomas Jefferson's presidential administration captured the public imagination, and no policy approach so significantly affected the character of the nation, as did the acquiring of the Louisiana Territory.¹ Yet long before his presidency, Jefferson was keenly interested in the land to the west of the Mississippi River. For example, just after the Revolution, he had heard that some British capitalists were putting up large sums of money to explore the country from the Mississippi River to California. Jefferson wrote George Rogers Clark, who had won the Northwest for the United States, "Some of us have been talking here in a feeble way of making the attempt to search that country. . . . How would you like to lead such a party?" Clark told Jefferson such a venture would take four or five years, and at the moment, he couldn't spare the time. Nothing ever came of it.²

In 1792, the American sea captain, Robert Gray, had identified the latitude and longitude of the mouth of the Columbia River on the West Coast. From that, and from information advanced by earlier explorers, Jefferson understood that the continent was three thousand miles across! That figure did not discourage him; rather, it spurred him on. Now the distance was a known quantity. He proposed that the American Philosophical Society launch a fund-raising effort to sponsor an expedition, with the goal of finding the "shortest and

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most convenient route of communication between the U.S. and the Pacific Ocean, within the temperate latitudes.” By early 1793, the society had enough money from donors, including George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, to hire someone to undertake the expedition. The person chosen was a French botanist, André Michaux. The emphasis was on practical, useful knowledge. Jefferson told Michaux, “Take notice of the country you pass through, its general face, soil, river, mountains, its productions, animal, vegetable, and mineral so far as they may be new to us and may also be useful.”³ But beyond the knowledge goal was a stronger mission. As Stephen E. Ambrose states in *Undaunted Courage*: “Jefferson and his subscribers wanted to tie the two coasts together, using the Missouri-Columbia waterway to form the knot, in order to create a continent-wide empire for the United States. It was a breathtaking vision.” The vision wouldn’t see reality with this plan: Michaux turned out to be a secret agent for the French. His mission was to raise a force of men to fight the Spanish in the Louisiana Territory. Jefferson, as secretary of state, insisted that the French government recall Michaux, and it did.⁴

Years passed, and Thomas Jefferson did not actively work toward another expedition to the West. In the interim, as the result of a constitutional election quirk, he had become vice-president to the Federalist John Adams. Despite that position, as the leader of the Republicans Jefferson was fully occupied opposing various Federalist policies, especially those having to do with postrevolutionary France and the hated Alien and Sedition Acts. Even when he won the presidency in 1800, he was in no hurry to rush expansion westward. After all, Spain, now a weak power in Europe, held the Louisiana Territory. It was only a matter of time before Spain would release its grip on a huge area of land increasingly hard to defend, and then the natural spillover of the East would create American farms and villages in the West. For the time being, farmers from the Ohio Valley had permission from the Spanish to deposit their goods at the port at New Orleans for shipment abroad. The vision could wait.

Incidents and Opportunities

Then came some news that foretold changes in the status quo. First was the revelation that in late 1800 Napoleon Bonaparte had secretly negotiated a treaty transferring Louisiana from Spain to France, a retrocession. By the time President Jefferson heard this news, in April 1802, he understood immediately that there had been an important power shift. He wrote the U.S. minister to France, Robert Livingston, “It completely reverses all the political relations of the U.S.”⁵ Secretary of State James Madison cautioned Jefferson that Louisiana in French hands would “cause daily collisions.” Alarmed, Jefferson feared for a time that Napoleon might force him to reconsider his position of “no entangling alliances” with European nations. He told Livingston that there was “on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of three-eighths of our territory must pass to market,” adding that, “the day France takes possession of New Orleans . . . [we will be forced to] marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation.”⁶

The second disturbing change came with a proclamation by the Spanish administrator at New Orleans in October 1802 that the right of deposit at the port of New Orleans was to be suspended, though the privilege was guaranteed in the Pinckney Treaty of 1795. Without that right, the lower Mississippi would be virtually closed to American shippers, a situation not to be tolerated. As James Madison had said, “The Mississippi is to them [Americans west of the Appalachians] everything. It is the Hudson, the Delaware, the Potomac, and all the navigable rivers of the Atlantic states, formed into one stream.”⁷ Indeed, Westerners were upset, and clamored for a solution, even if it meant war with France.



Napoleonic Headaches

Jefferson understood perfectly that action must be taken, but he was in a dilemma. Though he had threatened it, the president really did not want to form an alliance with Great Britain; neither did he want to go to war with France, a nation whose revolution he had vigorously supported. Jefferson acted decisively but carefully. He asked and received funds from Congress for an expansion of the army and the construction of a river fleet. It left the distinct impression that American forces just might, under the right circumstances, descend the Mississippi to New Orleans. At the same time, he tried peaceful negotiations. In March 1803 he commissioned James Monroe as envoy extraordinary to France, with a set of instructions for himself and the regular minister, Robert Livingston, in Paris. They were to offer up to \$10 million dollars for the purchase of New Orleans and part of the Floridas. If France refused, they would offer to buy the city of New Orleans alone. Finally, if Monroe and Livingston could not work out a satisfactory arrangement, they were to cross the English Channel and begin discussions with the British. What amazed Monroe when he arrived in Paris was that Napoleon's finance minister, Barbé-Marbois, had already approached Livingston to ask what the Americans would pay for the whole of Louisiana! When Livingston relayed the news to Monroe, he could hardly believe it. They both realized that purchasing all of Louisiana was certainly outside their bargaining instructions. Yet, thinking it wasn't a good time to quibble over the instructions, they signed the treaty on April 30, 1803.⁸

That the leader of France was considering ridding himself of Louisiana wasn't as surprising as it seemed at the outset. Napoleon had suffered some setbacks in his vision to re-establish a French empire in North America, with Louisiana as its centerpiece. There had been a slave revolt in the French-held island of Santo Domingo. Crack French troops—five thousand in all—had been sent to quell the revolt, but tropical mosquitoes had brought yellow fever and death to thousands of them. Perhaps the French could hold the island, but at a huge cost. The troubles there had prompted Napoleon to exclaim, "Damn sugar, damn coffee, damn colonies!" That wasn't all. France was about to resume war against England; Napoleon needed a war chest. Moreover, considering the power of the English navy, the British might well prevent the French from taking possession of such a significant portion of land in North America, and President Jefferson had flatly declared that if the French attempted to land troops in Louisiana, there could be war. If Napoleon Bonaparte couldn't defend the land he owned, why not be rid of it, and in the process re-establish an alliance with the United States?



Map of North America, 1802. Library of Congress



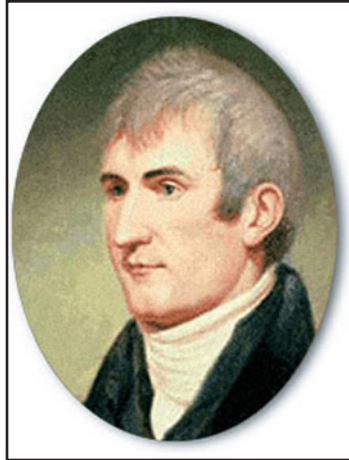
Thinking Beyond the Edge

So it was that the United States acquired the whole of the Mississippi River and its western tributaries, about 828,000 square miles of territory, rich areas of farmland, and fantastic natural resources. The cost was \$15 million dollars, or about three cents an acre.⁹ For the United States, the acquisition of Louisiana came as a windfall of Napoleon's European and colonial troubles. That the treaty was quickly ratified, before the French leader could change his mind, had a lot to do with Jefferson's flexible thinking and vision. As the leader of the Republicans, the president had always presented himself as a strict constructionist of the Constitution. In his way of thinking, the power of a national government was always potentially dangerous. One way to limit that power, especially that of the president, was to apply a strict interpretation to the language of the Constitution. Based on that philosophy, Jefferson had big problems with two aspects of the acquisition. He did not believe that the president had the right to increase the national domain by a treaty of purchase—a real estate deal. Another problem: the treaty stated that the United States was to incorporate the residents of Louisiana into the Union and grant them the same rights and privileges as other citizens. The implication was that sections of Louisiana would become states. Jefferson wondered if he and the Congress had the power to bring into the nation whole groups of people who were outside its original limits?

President Jefferson believed both of these actions required amendments to the Constitution, yet he realized that the process was painfully slow. As his advisors had warned, by the time they were added, Napoleon might have changed his mind and withdrawn the offer. Jefferson understood the importance of Louisiana to the future of the country, and adjusted his thinking accordingly. He would not allow his constitutional fervor to endanger the speedy ratification of the treaty by the Senate. By the time he called the Congress into session three weeks early, Jefferson told James Madison, "I infer that the less we say about constitutional difficulties respecting Louisiana the better, and that what is necessary for surmounting them must be done." While continuing to voice his scruples privately, putting himself on record "as recognizing the dangers of construction against which [in the future] we must ever be on guard," he pressed for the Senate's approval.¹⁰

Certain Federalists argued vehemently that there was no constitutional permission for the Louisiana transfer and that it cost too much at a time when the Republicans were supposedly pledged to a small federal budget. Yet reflecting the positive sentiments of the people regarding Jefferson's move, the Senate ratified the treaty in just four days. Perhaps Jefferson was explaining his actions when, shortly after his retirement to Monticello, he wrote, "A strict observance of the written laws is doubtless *one* of the highest duties of a good citizen, but it is not *the highest*. The laws of necessity, of self preservation, of saving the country when in danger are of higher obligation."¹¹ Jefferson believed that a French Louisiana to the west could be dangerous to the United States. To him it interfered with a clear view he had of America's destiny. An opportunity had presented itself, with implications for the nation's future that were profound; thus, the president behaved in ways that were different from his reaction to "normal events." He was willing to accept the judgment of the people as to his choice, noting, "The line of discrimination between cases is most difficult; but the good officer is bound to draw it at his peril; and throw himself on the justice of his own country."¹² Most believed that, in this case, he had made a good decision.





Meriwether Lewis. Independence National Historical Park



William Clark. Portrait by Charles William Peale, Independence National Historical Park



Jefferson displayed Native American artifacts at the White House and, as pictured here, at his home, Monticello. R. Lautman, Monticello

A Good Book

In December 1803 the French prefect turned the lower part of the Louisiana Territory over to the United States. The upper part was transferred in the spring of 1804 at St. Louis, where Captain Meriwether Lewis accepted the official documents on behalf of President Jefferson. Lewis was in St. Louis because of another decision Jefferson had made as early as 1802. At that time, Lewis, a regular army officer, had been working in the White House as Jefferson's secretary. Jefferson got a copy of a book written by Alexander Mackenzie, a Scotsman who had sought a portage over the Rockies as a means of increasing the British fur trade in the Northwest. The president and Lewis poured over the book, which revealed that Mackenzie had gotten across the Rockies in a one-day portage over a low mountain pass.¹³ Though the river on the other side was not navigable, and thus not practical for trade, it impressed Jefferson that finding a land route across the continent was very much within the realm of possibility. What also struck the president were Mackenzie's words, "By opening the intercourse between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and forming regular establishments through the interior at both extremes. . . . the entire command of the fur trade of North American might be obtained. . . ." As the historian Stephen Ambrose notes, "The news that the British were threatening to set up shop in the Northwest galvanized Jefferson into manic activity and changed Meriwether Lewis's life overnight."¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, President Jefferson chose Lewis to lead an expedition to the Pacific. Jefferson sent up a special, secret message to Congress in January 1803, asking for an appropriation of \$2,500 for the trip. That sum included \$696 for "Indian presents" and money for provisions, mathematical instruments, arms, medicines, and a boat! The president, mindful of the limits of his power, stated, "The interests of commerce place the principal object within the constitutional powers and care of Congress, and that if it should incidentally advance the geographical knowledge of our own continent can not but be an additional gratification."¹⁵ Jefferson's request for this money came just one week after he had asked for funding to pay for what he then anticipated would be the purchase of New Orleans from the French.



The planning of the expedition was kept in utmost secrecy. Everything, except for the actual outfitting of the trip, was conducted from the President's House, with Jefferson personally involved. That spring and summer of 1803, Jefferson feverishly hurried Lewis's training. The president sent him to consult experts on surveying, astronomy, botany, and mapmaking.¹⁶ He and Captain Lewis talked through every detail of the trip—food needs, whiskey rations, the design of the boat that could be carried past the falls of the Missouri, the number of men needed, the types of weapons and ammunitions, how to interact with the Indians, the kinds of available maps. On and on went the discussions far into many a night.¹⁷ That early summer Lewis began to identify sources for the necessary materials and equipment, an enormous undertaking that, all told, would take almost a year. Then, on July 4, 1803, just before leaving Washington, Lewis heard the good news that the United States had purchased the Louisiana Territory. As Jefferson remarked, "It increased infinitely the interest we felt in the expedition."¹⁸

White House Snakeskins and Skeletons

By May 14, 1804, the expedition, now with a second in command, William Clark, began the trip, leaving St. Louis with a permanent party of thirty-one soldiers; a guide, George Drouillard; and Clark's slave, York.¹⁹ A smaller contingent of soldiers and eight French voyagers began the trip as well, but would accompany the expedition only as far as the Dakotas. Back in Washington, until Lewis got beyond the lines of communications, Jefferson looked forward to his letters. When he got boxes of specimens sent back by the explorers, he displayed them at the White House—"antlers, stuffed animals, snake skins, skeletons, pelts, and Indian costumes."²⁰ White House visitors were fascinated. As Lewis and Clark continued their journey, they met Indian tribes. One instruction Jefferson had given Lewis was that as he came in contact with these tribes, if practical in terms of distance, he should arrange for the Indian chiefs to travel to Washington. Starting in 1805, they came: Osage, Pawnee, Iowa, Miami, and many others.²¹ With their wives and with translators, they visited the White House. Jefferson received them and offered gifts, usually a friendship medal of silver or pewter. Sometimes the Indians performed dances out on the north lawn, wearing their formal paint and attracting crowds. The tribes gave the president gifts—blankets, jewelry, and tomahawks—that were also displayed for visitors. William Seale in *The President's House* writes of the impact these events and displays had on those who saw them:

Some congressmen, senators, and officials might have had trouble imagining the worth of a Lewis and Clark expedition, or even of acquiring an uncharted, perhaps useless wilderness. Jefferson used his house as a place to educate them. They saw physical symbols of a West that was to them an abstraction. The artifacts of Lewis and Clark . . . and the visiting Indians made unforgettable impressions.²²

The expedition was not an abstraction to those who made it. Having spent the first winter with the Mandan Sioux in the Dakotas, Lewis and Clark sought a passage through the Rocky Mountains by summer of 1805. After crossing the Rockies, with the help of the Shoshone, the expedition moved north along the Bitterroot Valley. In the Nez Perce country, they reached a branch of the Snake River, and from there rowed downstream to the mighty Columbia River, reaching ocean's tide by November 7, 1805.²³ As triumphant as it seemed to see the great Pacific Ocean ("Ocan in view! O! the joy"), it was bittersweet. The trip through

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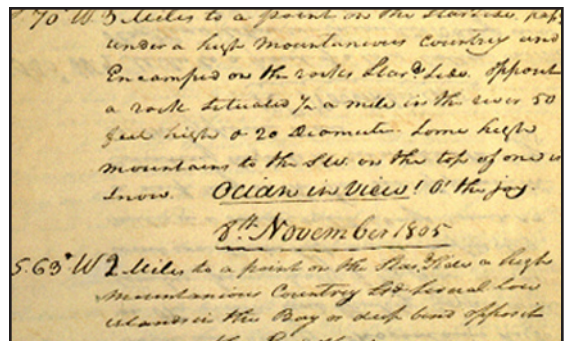


the Rockies revealed there was no easy way across those awesome heights. The portage from the Missouri waters to the Columbia waters was 340 miles, with 140 miles of that distance taking them across an area, that was, as Lewis called it, “the most formidable part of the tract over tremendous mountains which for 60 miles are covered with eternal snows.” The dream of a Northwest Passage, searched for since the days of the earliest explorers, had finally ended—at least until the coming of the transcontinental railroad.

After establishing Fort Clatsop, the Corps of Discovery rested, mended gear, hunted for elk, and made friends with the Clatsop and Chinook Indians. Lewis and Clark spent much of the winter organizing notes from their trip into more and more pages of their journals. On March 23, 1806, they started home, taking divergent paths at some points. They were together again when they arrived in St. Louis on September 23, 1806, where the one thousand inhabitants gathered on the riverbank to greet them. Except for the death of a soldier who died of appendicitis, the entire expedition had returned safe and sound. Captain Lewis wrote Jefferson, “In obedience to your orders we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean, and sufficiently explored the interior of the country to admire with confidence that we have discovered the most practicable route which does exist across the continent by means of the navigable branches of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers.”²⁴ Then he took on the unhappy task of telling the president that all hope of an all-water route linking the Atlantic and the Pacific was gone.



Rocky Mountain Landscape. Albert Bierstadt, The White House



William Clark's journal entry for November 7th, 1805: 'Ocean in view' (sic). American Philosophical Society

Confidence Unbounded

Jefferson's intense interest and commitment to the land beyond the Mississippi had paid off, for the Lewis and Clark Expedition was an amazing success. Despite the fact that the expedition proved there was no “short and convenient route” across the Rocky Mountains, the explorers brought back a treasure trove of new information about western North America, including a large botanical collection and new maps for land areas once considered unknown territory by Europeans. In addition to the impressive advancements in geographic information, the expedition provided important insights into the British fur trade. The trip greatly strengthened the U.S. claim to the Oregon country, which was acquired by 1846. Furthermore, through his timely purchase of this western territory, Jefferson avoided a conflict with

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France and an entangling alliance with England. The nation was able to continue its noninterventionist policy in Europe and become increasingly independent. Westerners, grateful to the president and Congress for having safeguarded their interests, developed a deeper loyalty to the government in Washington.²⁵ For the moment, it seemed that the country could become what Jefferson had at one time envisioned it could be, as described in Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*:

While the Northwest Territory was being settled, the trans-Mississippi western empire could serve as a vast reservation for Indians displaced from east of the river. They could learn to farm and become civilized, so that they could be incorporated into the body politic. Eventually, Louisiana would be available for farmers . . . from the east or . . . from Europe. There was land enough for all in a United States stretching from sea to sea, land enough to sustain the American dream for centuries to come. As Henry Adams wrote: 'Jefferson aspired beyond the ambition of a nationality, and embraced in his view the whole future of man. . . . He wished to bring a new era. . . . [In 1801] he set himself to the task of governing, with a golden age in view.'²⁶

Achieving a golden age would not be that simple, and Jefferson was already altering his vision of a land that would support both white settlers and native tribes that were already there. One could read the "handwriting on the wall" in the undertones of Jefferson's statement to Indiana Territory Governor William Henry Harrison in 1803: "In the whole course of this, it is essential to cultivate their love. As to their fear, we presume that our strength and their weakness is now so visible that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them."²⁷ The working out of such complicated relationships was in the future. For the moment, most felt the flush of victory. In acquiring Louisiana and taking a first step toward exploring its vastness, it seemed that the country had made an impressive start. As John Randolph would say of Jefferson's presidency years later: "We were indeed in the 'full tide of successful experiment.' Taxes repealed; the public debt amply provided for . . . Louisiana acquired; public confidence unbounded."²⁸



*The route of the Corps of Discovery. Outbound route in red, inbound in blue.
Courtesy PBS and Florentine Films*

