

THIS WEEK IN HISTORY

On April 30th, 1803, France sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States.

GENERAL

April 30th, 1803, was a very important day in United States history — but not many Americans could tell you why without looking it up. That was the day that the United States made what has been called “the most significant real estate transaction in the history of civilization.” **From the graphic here, what was this transaction?** (*The Louisiana Purchase.*) In this business deal, the United States bought a large area called the Louisiana Territory. **Do you know how this territory got its name?** (*It was named for King Louis XIV of France.*) How did this amazing sale come about? Let’s learn more about it.

In the 18th century, the United States controlled the area here shown as the Northwest Territory. **What states were eventually formed from the Northwest Territory?** (*Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.*) Farmers in the Northwest Territory sent goods like furs, grains, whiskey, and tobacco down the Mississippi River to trade in Europe. The port of New Orleans was a main link in this trade route. But at this time New Orleans belonged to Spain, which had taken New Orleans from France in 1762 along with the rest of the Louisiana Territory. **Can you see how this would be a problem for the United States?**

In 1800, Spain secretly sold the land back to France. This was such a big secret that Spain continued to administer the territory for the next two years. France’s emperor, pictured on the left, planned a great French empire in the New World. **Do you know who this emperor was?** (*Napoleon Bonaparte.*) Napoleon hoped to use the Mississippi Valley as a food and trade center to supply the island of Hispaniola, which was to be the heart of this empire. **What two countries make up Hispaniola?** (*Haiti and the Dominican Republic.*) But in the two years after the secret sale, Napoleon started getting ready to go to war with England, and

he needed a lot of money very quickly.

The U.S. president, pictured on the right, heard about the secret sale. **Who was the president during this period?** (*Thomas Jefferson.*) Because New Orleans was so important for trade, Jefferson wanted it to belong to the U.S. **Do you think he also wanted to stop France from owning land in North America?** He also knew about France’s money troubles. Jefferson sent Robert Livingston and James Monroe to France where they asked Napoleon to sell New Orleans to the United States. To their surprise, Napoleon offered to sell the whole Louisiana Territory for \$15 million. The land totaled about 800,000 square miles, so the total cost was about three cents per acre. **Does this sound like enough money for this huge territory? Was this money worth a lot more back then?**

At first, Jefferson was afraid the president couldn’t buy the land because the Constitution does not say anything about the president being able to buy land. But Congress approved the sale. **Can you tell from this map which states or parts of states were created from the Louisiana Purchase?** (*Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, North Dakota, Texas, South Dakota, New Mexico, Nebraska, Kansas, Wyoming, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Montana.*) Buying the Louisiana Territory for this bargain price was one of Thomas Jefferson’s greatest achievements as president. The Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the size of the young United States. Americans immediately began to move westward into the new lands. **Other than size, how would our country be different today if the Louisiana Purchase hadn’t happened?** END

