Museum - Pens to Parchment - Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial

This is the story of how with the stroke of a pen, a fledgling America doubled its size and became a world power almost overnight. Our story recounts how this, more than any single event, would forever alter the course of our nation’s history. It was a time of global conflict. The Americans had just won independence from England. France was recovering from its own revolution. The powers in Europe were facing war on the continent while seeking to expand their empires beyond the boundaries of their own shores. Spain, England, and France had laid claim to territory in this so called “new world” across the sea. The American colonists, newly independent, were trying to make their own way. Thomas Jefferson knew that in order to our westward expansion and to secure the lifeline of trade we had to control the Mississippi River, and that meant the port of New Orleans. Then, as if to fulfill what some would call our manifest destiny, a sequence of events coincided to present us an opportunity of a lifetime. In a bold move out country entered into what’s been called the greatest real estate transaction of all time, known simply as the Louisiana Purchase. We acquired more than 800,000 square miles for $15 million dollars. That’s about 4 cents an acre for a territory that who’s natural resources held riches beyond anyone’s ability to calculate. As General Horatio Gates said to President Jefferson July 18th, 1803, “Let the land rejoice, for you have bought Louisiana for a song.” When we think of Louisiana as we know it today, it’s hard to imagine that it was once a vast territory stretching west across the plains to the Rocky Mountains, and north from the Gulf of Mexico all the way to the Canadian border. With the addition of an area greater than all of Western Europe, the United States suddenly became one of the largest nations in the world. Ultimately all or part of 15 states would be carved out of the lands of the Louisiana Territory; Louisiana, April 30th, 1812; Missouri, August 10th, 1821; Arkansas, June 15th, 1836; Texas, December 29th, 1845; Iowa, December 28th, 1846; Minnesota, May 11th, 1858; Kansas, January 29th, 1861; Nebraska March 1st, 1867; Colorado, August 1st, 1876; North Dakota, November 2nd, 1889; South Dakota, November 2nd, 1889; Montana, November 8th, 1889; Wyoming, July 10th, 1890; Oklahoma, November 16th, 1907; New Mexico, January 6th, 1912. I think the Louisiana Purchase represents the great moment where the United States starts defining itself in new terms. It’s no longer looking east, the country starts looking west. The Louisiana Purchase has so defined the way we understand American history since that time that it’s very difficult, frankly, for us to think about what America might have been like if it hadn’t have happened. Through the heart of this story, like the center of the country, runs the Mississippi River. If you were a farmer in what was known as the Old Northwest Territory there was no way to get your crops to the east coast. What you often did for trade purposes was go down the Ohio River then down to the port of New Orleans. Things came down flatboats, bateaus, barges, etc. the goods that were being exported out of the interior continent had to be transferred to ocean going vessels in order to be shipped abroad. You wanted to be able to bring your goods ashore at the port of New Orleans. It was called the right of deposit. So you can see how important New Orleans was for that whole group of people that was then the Western United States. New Orleans was king in 1803. On the 16th of October the Intendant, who was the Spanish official in New Orleans, issued an edict closing the river to American trade. It absolutely outraged all Americans. Call it coincidence or providence, a culmination of events converged and we were fortunate enough to seize the moment. The Louisiana Purchase is a combination few things. It just happened in fluke circumstances that the French had a great setback. They started realizing it would be much harder to have an empire in the new world than they thought it would be. Napoleon was outfitting an expedition to take control of Louisiana. What happened is that all of those troops and all of that preparation get swallowed up in the debacle of war and 54,000 of 60,000 troops die. Once Napoleon’s expedition collapses, within a matter of weeks he is set on selling the colony. For a year before the final transfer of the territory Jefferson started writing notes to French intellectuals. In those notes he would say “We have to control that New Orleans. I’m afraid if we don’t it might mean was with France. I, Jefferson, love France. The moment that France takes possession of New Orleans, we will have to marry ourselves to the British fleet and all of this is certain of dire consequences.” Jefferson entrusts to Dupont a letter that he sends to Livingston with the hope that not only he deliver the letter to Livingston but also, through his own channels, brings pressure to bear on Napoleon. He was doing psychological warfare. Not directly to Napoleon, but knowing that these notes would seep into the palace and Napoleon would read them. Word of these things really came to bear on Napoleon and he essentially decided to give up Louisiana and go back to war with England and for that he needs money. So we have Livingston and Monroe thousands of miles from their President faced with a momentous proposition far beyond anything for which they had been prepared or authorized to undertake. I think the wisdom of Jefferson’s handling of his diplomats comes from the fact that he had been in Paris in the 1780’s as our representative. So he knew what it was like to be in a foreign place when events were happening quickly and he was essentially twelve weeks out of touch with his government. Jefferson brought Livingston to Washington and they spent the better part of a week talking over all kinds of scenarios. By the time Livingston left, he knew Jefferson’s thinking inside and out. Jefferson does the same thing with Monroe. As a result, while they are in France, they know the President’s mind and have a certain confidence to make the best of opportunity rather than feeling bound by written instruction. Due to those circumstances there’s the famous scene where Napoleon asks “What would you give us for all of Louisiana?” Monroe’s physical presence there in Paris is an indication that Jefferson cared enough to send one of his own. The face that Monroe was there to back Livingston up meant a great deal. Monroe also quickly realized that this was an opportunity that they had to seize. They had to take Napoleon’s offer up at once before he renigged on the offer. So they moved with great speed. They didn’t even know whether they even had a Constitutional mandate to do such a thing. But they did know one thing. Livingston in particular knew they mind of Jefferson and he knew that mind would want one thing. It would want all of the Louisiana Territory. I think without that wisdom for that approach to diplomacy the opportunity of the purchase of the Louisiana Territory could have just come and gone. Today we take for granted the obvious benefits of the purchase. But at the time not everyone could see it. Spending a fortune we didn’t have for all that undeveloped wilderness. And the idea the idea of incorporating all those new people caused quite a few to question the wisdom and the legality of the decision. Federalists in New England, including Congressmen, said they would resign from U.S. Congress if Jefferson went through with this kind of purchase because they were so worried it was going to destroy the country. The question of constitutionality that really worried Jefferson and his contemporaries has to do with whether its right for the government, which has been set up as a compact between 13 states, to admit these other people into their Union. A blending of cultures in Louisiana was the beginning of the great melting pot America was to become. The Louisiana Purchase means so much more than the greatest real estate deal in history. It assured out place among the powers of the world and provided us the inspiration to explore, to expand westward and beyond. In no small measure, the Louisiana Purchased served to shape the future of our nation.