

Q90 – What territory did the United States buy from France in 1803?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:

In 1803 the United States bought the Territory of Louisiana. Overnight, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the young nation. The territory covered some 828,000 square miles: from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, and from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. This area would form part or all of some fifteen new states.

The territory had already changed hands twice. After losing the French and Indian War, France ceded the land to Spain. In 1801, Spain ceded it back to France. And in 1803, France sold it to the United States.

America's western border was the Mississippi River – a lifeline for Western settlers who sold their crops downstream in the bustling port of New Orleans. Whoever owned New Orleans ruled the river.

President Thomas Jefferson authorized our ambassador to France to negotiate the purchase of New Orleans.

In April 1803, France made a stunning counter-offer: Would we like to buy the whole Louisiana Territory?

France was drifting toward war with Britain, and the Emperor Napoleon desperately needed money. By the end of April the deal was signed. In October, the Senate ratified the purchase.

The American ambassador to France proclaimed, "From this day, the United States take their place among the powers of the first rank."

In today's currency, the Louisiana Territory cost less than one dollar per acre -- maybe the best real estate deal in history.