

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE TERRITORY

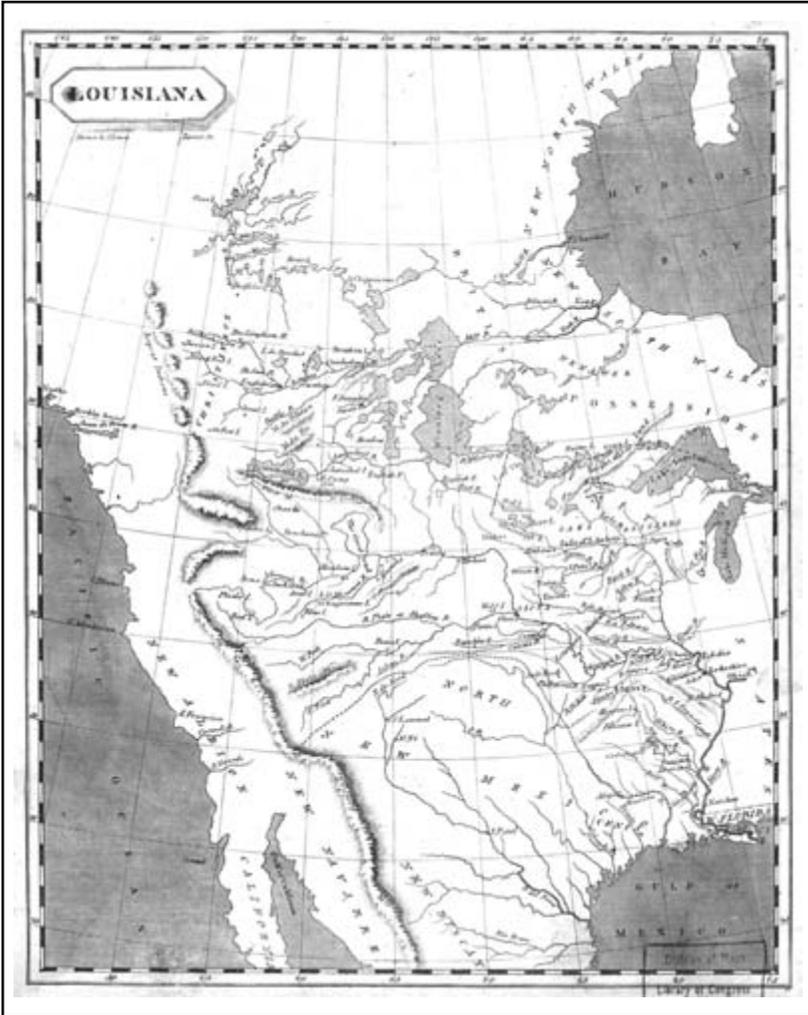
The Louisiana Purchase Territory: Historical Geographers' Perspectives

Craig E. Colten and Dydia DeLyser
Co-Editors

With the Louisiana Purchase bicentennial approaching, and being in the midst of organizations preparing to celebrate this event, *Historical Geography's* editors sought a way to participate in the anniversary. The Louisiana Purchase was such a gargantuan land acquisition that was so thoroughly dismantled as a political or functional entity, no single scholar has brought an expertise to bear on the territory. In lieu of treatise on the complete territory, we sought out authors who were familiar with more discrete places within the Mississippi River's western drainage basin. Drawing on a long list of potential authors, we sent invitations to numerous scholars asking them to prepare short essays about the places they knew well—by way of archival materials, frequent field investigations, or longtime residency—and requesting that they fashion essays that could capture an essence of each place through the perspective of historical geography. Like a museum exhibit, we hoped to assemble a prose display that would illustrate some of the range of historical and geographical ingredients found in the Louisiana Purchase Territory.

The land that became the Louisiana Purchase was, in short, a geopolitical plum. As a French colonial territory (1699-1763) it encircled the English colonies and yielded vast fur-trapping grounds. For Spain (1763-1803) it represented a barrier against British expansion westward and linked holdings in Florida with Mexico, although it never produced the fortunes anticipated. When the United States purchased these 830,000 square miles of land, it too entered the role of colonial power—albeit as a state with what amounted to a contiguous colony. Populated by French Creoles, Africans, diverse native peoples, Germans, and Spaniards, the territory's residents became uncomfortable Americans—as Donald Meinig puts it, Louisiana was an “imperial colony of alien people.”¹

Craig E. Colten is Professor and Chair of the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge; Dydia DeLyser is Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. They share the editorship of this journal. *Historical Geography* Volume 31(2003): 5-8. ©2003 Geoscience Publications.



The Louisiana Purchase territory. Louisiana from Arrowsmith & Lewis' *New and Elegant General Atlas*, 1804. Original housed in the collections of the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress.

The territory itself underwent several quick reconfigurations. As long as waterways defined the interior transportation network, New Orleans held onto its position as the entrepôt for the entire Mississippi drainage basin. Yet, the rest of the Purchase endured political fragmentation. In 1804, Congress carved the Territory of Orleans—largely what constitutes the state of Louisiana today—out of the larger tract as the first administrative subunit. A rebellion from Spain brought Louisiana's Florida Parishes into the U.S. in 1810, and an 1819 treaty with Spain clarified the western boundary of what is now the State of Louisiana. In quick succession, Arkansas and Missouri acquired territorial governments as migrants

settled there and appealed for recognition, thus further subdividing the Purchase. During the 1820s, the forced relocation of eastern indigenous tribal groups prompted the creation of reservations to absorb the Trail of Tears in what is now Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Kansas. In its first quarter century, the Louisiana Purchase became a politically fragmented land with an immigrant population from the east—both Anglo and Native Americans—overlying the earlier colonial settlers. During this period, it continued to function as the western half of a massive and somewhat unified economic system linked by the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

The peopling and political restructuring of the upper reaches of the territory was a slower process, but gradually new immigrants transformed the prairies and high plains and in doing so carved out new states. Iowa, Minnesota, and Kansas all came into existence by the outbreak of the Civil War. First Nation Americans, who were native to the plains, remained, albeit greatly reduced in number. As the U.S. Army forced the indigenous population into reservations, further subdivisions added to the geopolitical complexity of the Louisiana Purchase. European immigrants broke the sod of the northern prairies and provided sufficient population to carve out Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Wyoming, all of which became states by 1890. Within a century, Meinig's "imperial colony of alien people" was a place vastly different than it had been in 1803 and was incorporated into the emerging national realm. Today, it is much different again. Since 1903, political realignments and foreign immigration have largely ceased, but the pasts of many places continue to influence the geography of the many-faceted territory. The river system once used to delimit the Purchase neither defines nor unites the territory. East-west rail lines and interstate highways provide economic linkages to Chicago and the eastern seaboard. Consequently, New Orleans' role as *entrepôt* has diminished.

The contributors to this volume will offer historical geographers' insights to a selection of places transformed during the past 200 years. John Allen's offering on the image of the Louisiana Territory opens the set of essays. Allen offers a view to the geographical understanding President Thomas Jefferson brought to both the purchase and to the subsequent voyage of exploration by Lewis and Clark. Although not all true, Jefferson's image was a powerful force behind efforts to bring the territory within the effective reach of U.S. authority.

Craig Colten's essay on the strategic importance of Bayou St. John—a small waterway linking New Orleans to Lake Pontchartrain—underscores the importance of traditional routeways in the development of the territory's principal port, and ultimately the impact of new transportation technologies to commerce and this backdoor route. Gay Gomez offers a highly personal view of the significance of human-environment relationships in the Barataria wetlands downstream from New Orleans. Settled by Canary Islanders—or *Isleños*—who adapted their livelihoods to this

marshland, Barataria today is beset by serious land-loss problems that penetrate to the core of this ethnic community's very existence.

Beyond the lower valley, Walter Schroeder provides a view into the survival of an isolated French community in Missouri. Bypassed for decades by social, economic, and political inclusion, the residents now showcase their traditional communities to a burgeoning heritage tourism traffic. John Fraser Hart reviews the persistence of small towns in the upper Midwest despite forecasts of their demise in the early 1960s. After observing these communities for half a century, Hart too now sees their demise as a possibility, unless they recruit a new generation of immigrants. John Hudson focuses on the "Big Empty," the Missouri Plateau, as a scene of conflict in shaping our interpretations of the American West. He provides a critical review of land-management concepts as they apply to this vast grassland that is losing its population, but not its position as a center for controversy in Western history.

Karen Morin considers the village of Rosalie, Nebraska. Through her critical reading of the landscape and the Omaha Indian Reservation where it is found, she offers a view to the situation of the Omaha today. The reservation and its people have endured economic hardship stemming from land-alienation policies imposed on its residents, but some relief has come from the opening of a gambling casino. Despite this hope, Morin expresses caution about the prospects of those living on the reservation. Deborah Popper discusses Theodore Roosevelt National Park in southwestern North Dakota as part of the larger process of resource development on the plains. She examines how a bit of badlands served as the setting for failed private-ranching efforts, followed by its redevelopment as a national park.

Jack Wright offers a final essay taking the reader to the outer edges of the territory. He returns to the theme of geographical ideas and how they shaped the exploration of the purchase territory, reflecting on what would have happened if the Lewis and Clark party had taken a different route to the Pacific. While we will never know the answer to such historical speculations, his essay gets at the heart of one geographical quest—to chart the uncharted. The Louisiana Purchase offered tremendous opportunity for explorers and cartographers as they filled in the gaps in our geographical understanding of this vast territory. We continue to plot the course of the Purchase's use and development as it continues to change over time. Although the territory has never functioned as a cultural, political, or economic whole, we hope that the places presented here might allow us to showcase the historical geographic perspective as a way to fathom both the parts and the whole.

Notes

1. Donald W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, V. 2, Continental America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 15.