

the Louisiana Purchase

The French and Spanish

Second
of a
FOUR
Part Series

In the Louisiana Purchase of April 1803, the United States bought a huge piece of land west of the Mississippi River, doubling the young country's size. More than just a political deal, the Louisiana Purchase suddenly changed the lives of all sorts of people.

Do you know the **boundaries** of your state, or who runs your state government? If you had a problem that the government needed to solve, would you know who to go to? At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, no one knew the exact boundaries of the territory. And even though many different people lived, explored and settled in the Louisiana Territory, people weren't always sure who was in charge. Native Americans had been living in the region for thousands of years. French and Spanish settlers also called the Louisiana Territory home. Before the Purchase, people living in the Louisiana Territory were not part of the United States. They were governed by people sent by the King of France, who claimed the land. Sometimes, though, these leaders were not very interested in helping solve problems.



Even if they wanted to help, the area was just too big for them to be able to get around to everyone. What would life be like if it took days for you to find someone who was supposed to be in charge, only to find that person could not do anything to help you?

The first European settlers were French trappers and traders. At first, only men came to the territory. They

traveled the Missouri and Mississippi rivers in search of **beaver pelts**. Beaver pelts were worth a lot of money in Europe. Hats made from beaver fur were fashionable at that time — and they were very expensive. Trapping beaver in the Louisiana Territory was dangerous work. Men were willing to risk their lives to get the furs! Other early European settlers built and worked in **lead** mines. Lead was useful to the French because it could be made into bullets for guns.

As trade increased, families began to move to the Territory. The first French city was Sainte Genevieve, in present day Missouri. Most of the people who lived there were French farmers and African slaves. They moved across the Mississippi River from Illinois territory to settle rich farmland on the western side of the river. By 1750, there were a few thousand French living in the Louisiana Territory. However, the French never lived on most of the land that they claimed to own. Native American tribes lived and hunted on this land.

In 1763, the King of France gave the Louisiana Territory to his cousin, the King of Spain. The Spanish had been living in southern parts of North America for many years. They had built trade **relationships** with Indian tribes and made a great profit for their homeland. When they took over the Louisiana Territory, they did not see much use for it. However, the King of Spain still took the land because he did not want the Americans or the British to claim control of it.

Most people living in the Louisiana Territory did not know Spain owned the land. For two years, Spain did not even send anyone to control the land or the trading system. The French continued to rule over the land until it was **formally** given back to them shortly before the Louisiana Purchase.

Everyday people living in the Territory weren't usually affected by changes in government. They did not have a formal government and sometimes didn't even know change had occurred until years after. The Louisiana Purchase marked the beginning of a formal government for the Territory's settlers.

The Beaver Fur Hat

Today, many young people wear fashionable baseball caps, visors or hooded sweatshirts. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, beaver hats were very fashionable in Europe. In fact, beaver felt hats were so popular that the beaver was hunted to extinction in Western Europe. Because everyone still wanted to wear this type of hat, beaver pelts were major trade goods from North America.

Creating beaver hats was a very long and dangerous process for the hat maker, or "hatter." The hatting process involved pulling rough hairs from the pelt and brushing the remaining soft hairs with mercury. After brushing with mercury, the fur became very fuzzy. The fur was then matted into felt and shaped into a hat. Hatters had different ways of shaping the felt into a hat. These different ways of making hats were the hatter's trade secrets, or secret recipes. Finishing steps included lining the hat with silk or cotton and ironing it to make it smooth.

Sadly, the mercury used in making hats often caused brain damage to those who used it for a long time. Hatters sometimes had problems talking, thinking and controlling muscles. In fact, the phrase "mad as a hatter" became a way to describe someone who seemed to have mental problems. This is how Lewis Carroll got the idea for the Mad Hatter character in Alice in Wonderland.

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