

The Making of a Nation – Program No.33:

Thomas Jefferson, Part 4: Jefferson Arranges the Louisiana Purchase

From VOA Learning English, welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

We've been discussing the presidency of Thomas Jefferson. He was America's third president, elected in 1800.

In our last program, we talked about a dispute between Jefferson and the chief justice of the United States. Jefferson believed the Constitution gave Congress the right to decide the country's laws. But Chief Justice John Marshall believed the Supreme Court had the final say.

The two men's beliefs were tested in a case called Marbury versus Madison. John Marshall's arguments won. He wrote a decision saying the Supreme Court had the power to rule on the laws that Congress passed.

The Supreme Court did not act on that power during Jefferson's administration. But John Marshall's decision did help establish the role of the Supreme Court in the American government.

The Marbury versus Madison case is one of the important legacies of Jefferson's presidency. But historian Joseph Ellis says it was not the only one.

“The major achievement of Jefferson’s presidency is the Louisiana Purchase, which is a lot of luck as well as his willingness to take advantage of the luck.”

The story of the Louisiana Purchase begins with France and Spain. The two European countries wanted to limit the power of the United States. So, in 1800, Spain and France entered into a secret treaty. In the treaty, Spain gave France control of a large area in North America called the Louisiana Territory.

The Louisiana Territory stretched north-to-south from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. And, it stretched east-to-west from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. The area was important not only for its large size. It also included some valuable navigation features, including where the Mississippi River opened into the Gulf of Mexico.

Napoleon Bonaparte ruled France at that time. Jefferson did not want Napoleon in North America. He felt the French presence was a threat to the peace of the United States. He decided to try to buy parts of the Louisiana Territory, especially around the mouth of the Mississippi River near the city of New Orleans.

Jefferson sent James Monroe to Paris as a special negotiator.

But Monroe never had a chance to offer the American position. Napoleon had decided to sell everything to the Americans. He told his finance minister to give up Louisiana -- all of it. Napoleon needed money for a war with Britain.

James Monroe was happy to negotiate the purchase of Louisiana. They agreed on a price of eighty million francs for all the land drained by the great Mississippi River and all its many streams.

The Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the size of the United States at that time. It included the present-day states of Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska. It stretched into parts of Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana.

The Louisiana Purchase also opened the Mississippi River to American commerce and travel. Historian Andrew O'Shaughnessy says that as a result of this access, the Louisiana Purchase fueled the country's economic expansion in the nineteenth century. And, Mr. O'Shaughnessy says the Louisiana Purchase created more opportunities for Americans to own land.

"It was very important to Jefferson because he really wanted every free member of society to be able to own land. He regarded land ownership as in many ways essential to someone's independence and their ability therefore to participate in a republican government."

But both Mr. O'Shaughnessy and historian Joseph Ellis say the Louisiana Purchase went against Jefferson's beliefs about central government. Joseph Ellis says that in many ways, Jefferson's presidency aimed to make the federal government almost invisible and to limit the president's power.

“And the Louisiana Purchase is the most authoritative executive action in American presidential history. One president decides to buy the Midwest. And he does it unilaterally.”

Historians say the Louisiana Purchase is one example of Jefferson’s contradictory character, in which he says one thing but does another. Andrew O’Shaughnessy adds that Jefferson made trade-offs. When he bought Louisiana, Jefferson used presidential power in a way that was not specifically permitted by the Constitution. But, Mr. O’Shaughnessy says Jefferson was also looking to the higher good—in the case of the Louisiana Purchase, the good of improving the county’s political health.

Federalists in the early 1800s also questioned Jefferson’s decision to buy Louisiana. They feared it would weaken the power of the states of the Northeast. Federalist leaders made a plan to form a new government of those states. But to succeed, they needed the state of New York. Their plan for a new government led to another memorable episode in American history.

Aaron Burr was vice president during Thomas Jefferson’s first term. Burr became a candidate for New York governor. The Federalists believed Burr would win the election, become governor, and support their plan. But Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton did not trust Burr. The two had been enemies for a long time.

Hamilton made some strong statements against Burr during the election campaign in New York. The comments later appeared in several

newspapers. Burr lost the New York election. The Federalist plan for a new government of Northeastern states died.

New York historian Valerie Paley says Burr heard about Hamilton's strong comments. He was offended.

"He called him something like despicable. It hinged on a word, one word, and a word as simple as 'despicable.'"

Burr asked Hamilton to admit or deny the comments. Hamilton refused. The two men exchanged more notes. Burr was not satisfied with Hamilton's answers. He believed Hamilton had attacked his honor. Burr demanded a duel.

A duel is a fight, usually with guns. Valerie Paley says in those days, gentlemen often used duels to settle rivalries and defend their honor.

"So, it wasn't so much these men dueled to kill. They would purposely miss their shots, and then the air would be cleared."

Hamilton opposed duels. Yet he agreed to fight Burr on July 11, 1804.

The two men met at Weehawken, New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from New York City. The duel would take place by the water's edge, at the bottom of a high rock wall.

The guns were loaded. Burr and Hamilton took their places. One of Hamilton's friends explained the rules. "Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked. Both answered "yes." There was a moment of silence. He gave the signal. Burr and Hamilton raised their guns. Two shots split the air.

Hamilton raised up on his toes, then fell to the ground. Burr remained standing. He looked at Hamilton with regret, then left. Hamilton died the next day. He was not yet 50. Valerie Paley says Hamilton's story is almost like a television or newspaper drama.

"He was extremely attractive, and he had such a romantic story. Here he is, the immigrant boy from the West Indies, made good, comes to New York, goes to King's College, becomes a sort of self-taught lawyer, becomes aide-de camp to Washington, all sorts of extraordinary things, marries so well, and also has this vision of what modern America might become. And in many ways was able to implement at least an early bit of that vision before his death."

Hamilton had made a big impact on the United States. He had created a national bank and influenced many government policies. Newspapers throughout the nation reported his death. Most people accepted the news calmly. To them, it was simply the sad end to an old, private dispute.

In the months after Hamilton's death, the nation prepared for the next presidential election. Once again, the Republican Party chose Thomas Jefferson as its candidate for president. But the Republicans refused to

support Aaron Burr for vice president again. Instead, they chose George Clinton. Clinton had served as governor of New York seven times.

The Federalist Party chose Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina as its candidate for president. It chose Rufus King of New York to be its vice presidential candidate.

The campaign was quiet. In those days, candidates did not make many speeches.

Republican pamphlets told of the progress made during the past four years. The former Federalist administration raised taxes, they said. Jefferson ended many of the taxes. The Federalists borrowed millions of dollars. Jefferson borrowed none. And Jefferson got the Louisiana Territory without going to war.

The Federalists could not dispute these facts. They expected that Jefferson would be re-elected. But they were sure their candidate would get as many as 40 electoral votes. The results shocked the Federalists. Jefferson received 162 electoral votes. Pinckney received just 14.

One man tried to explain the meaning of Jefferson's great victory. He was John Quincy Adams, son of former president John Adams. President Adams had been a firm Federalist. This is what his son said:

The power of Jefferson's administration rests on a strong majority of the American people. The president has great popular support. His re-election

shows that the experiment of the Federalists has failed. It never can and never will be brought to life again. To try to bring it back would be foolish. It would be like trying to put life into a body that has been buried for years.

After the election of 1804, only seven Federalists remained in the United States Senate. Only 25 remained in the House of Representatives.

Thomas Jefferson would be president for another four years.

Jefferson's second term will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us each week for THE MAKING OF A NATION – our program of American history from VOA Learning English.

—

This is program #33 of [THE MAKING OF A NATION](#)