Almost 30 years after losing the French and Indian War (1754–1763) and its vast holdings in North America, France changed radically. In 1789, revolutionaries overthrew the French monarchy. Chaos and confusion reigned in the new republic until a young officer named Napoleon Bonaparte took control. By 1800, Napoleon assumed leadership of the French government, and he had plans for Louisiana. That far-off land would provide food and timber for France to restore its position in North America. He instructed his ministers to begin secret negotiations with Spain for a retrocession, or return, of Louisiana to France.

The exact shape of French Louisiana had never been specified, so a clear understanding of where one nation’s possessions ended and another nation’s possessions began did not exist.
King Charles IV of Spain was willing to return the territory. France’s presence would provide a buffer zone between the Spanish possessions in the West and the new United States. Charles IV set only two conditions for the retrocession: (1) that France promise not to cede Louisiana to either Great Britain or the United States, and (2) that Napoleon make Charles IV’s brother-in-law, the Duke of Parma (a region in Italy), the king of a combined and enlarged territory of both Parma and Tuscany.

Napoleon agreed. The secret Third Treaty of San Ildefonso was signed on October 1, 1800. It set November 30, 1803, as the day Louisiana would return to French control.

Although France and Spain hoped to keep their treaty a secret, U.S. officials learned of it in 1801. U.S. president Thomas Jefferson was concerned about the return of Louisiana to an imperialistic France. He preferred the weaker Spain as a neighbor. But then diplomatic relations between Spain and the United States became strained over rights to the Mississippi River.

Back in 1795, Spain and the United States had signed the Treaty of San Lorenzo. It guaranteed American ships the right to travel freely on the Mississippi River and to deposit goods at New Orleans. On October 18, 1802, however, the Spanish governor of Louisiana withdrew the right of American shippers to store their goods duty-free at the port of New Orleans. Canceling the right of deposit, as it was called, angered the Americans. If New Orleans was closed to them, their ability to transport

ABOVE: Americans Robert R. Livingston and James Monroe and French secretary of the treasury Francois Barbe-Marbois spent two weeks negotiating the details of the Louisiana Purchase. The “P.F.” on the treaty jacket’s velvet cover [RIGHT] stands for “Peuple Francais.”
goods up and down the Mississippi River and out to the Gulf of Mexico was almost impossible. Talk of war with Spain was in the air.

Jefferson hoped to avoid a war and protect American interests on the Mississippi by obtaining land at the mouth of the river or along the gulf. In May 1802, the U.S. minister to France, Robert R. Livingston, had been instructed to see if France would sell New Orleans and East and West Florida. (Florida had returned to Spanish control in 1783 after Great Britain lost the Revolutionary War.) In the spring of 1803, Jefferson also sent James Monroe to Paris to help negotiate a deal. He authorized Monroe to offer $10 million for New Orleans and the Floridas.

Monroe and Livingston were stunned when the French offered to sell all of Louisiana for $15 million in April. Although they did not have the authority to accept it, the two Americans recognized that it presented a unique opportunity and quickly worked to complete the deal.

Two events had made Napoleon change his mind about Louisiana. First, the French army that he was going to send to take possession of Louisiana in 1802 went instead to Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) to quell a slave rebellion. Between the fighting and yellow fever, a majority of the French troops had been killed. Another expedition that Napoleon had ready to sail for Louisiana in early 1803 found itself icebound in the Dutch port of Helvoet Sluys.

Second, another war between France and Great Britain also loomed. With all his remaining forces needed to face Great Britain, Napoleon wanted to keep on friendly terms with the United States. He did not want the United States to align with Great Britain and capture New Orleans. That action would threaten France’s islands in the Caribbean Sea. So, despite having promised the Spanish that he would not transfer Louisiana to the United States, Napoleon did exactly that. Less than one month after Spain returned Louisiana to France, France ceded the entire territory, approximately 828,000 square miles, to the United States for $11,250,000. The United States also agreed to pay an additional $3,750,000 to the citizens of Louisiana who had claims against the French government.

The United States took possession of Louisiana on December 30, 1803. It was one of those moments that historians look back on in wonder. To Napoleon, Louisiana had become remote and hard to defend. But to the United States, such a large and valuable tract of land doubled the nation’s size and increased its prestige. Today, the territory that comprised the Louisiana Purchase makes up all or part of 15 states. And at about three cents per acre, it was the deal of the century. 🇺🇸