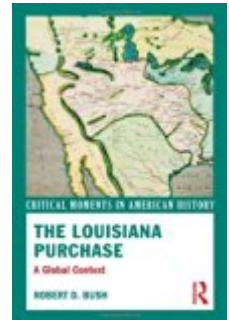


**Robert D. Bush.** *The Louisiana Purchase: A Global Context*. Critical Moments in American History Series. New York: Routledge, 2013. Illustrations, maps. 224 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-81457-7.



**Reviewed by** Paul E. Hoffman

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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

The Louisiana Purchase arguably was the most important event in the history of the United States after the founding of the Republic and the adoption of the Constitution. Roughly doubling the size of the country and expanding its revenues from trade and land sales, it immediately gave America enhanced freedom to try to avoid entanglement in Europe's wars. In the longer term, it raised questions relating to the expansion of slavery into the new territory (and control of commerce along the Mississippi River) that nearly tore the nation apart. Later still, the Mississippi Valley became the breadbasket for much of the world. The purchase was, by these and other measures, a "critical moment" in American history.

Robert D. Bush's *The Louisiana Purchase: A Global Context* is one of nine volumes (as of this writing) in the Routledge series Critical Moments in American History, edited by William Thomas Allison. The books are intended as supplements to traditional textbooks, presumably at the college level. Each provides a scholarly overview of the topic and various documents related to it both in

the text and via the book's website. In this case, the result is a five-chapter examination of various contexts of the event along with thirteen documents, a short list of suggestions for further reading, and a bibliography of works cited in the notes to the five chapters and many additional works that provide greater depth on aspects of the history that Bush touches. The book's website ([www.routledge.cm/cw/criticalmoments](http://www.routledge.cm/cw/criticalmoments)) provides additional resources: a time line (1762-1804) that also appears in the book; five images (two maps--one from 1804 appearing as both the cover and as figure 1--and portraits of Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon Bonaparte, and James Monroe); six additional documents; and links to various online resources, such as the Jefferson and James Madison papers at the Library of Congress. In addition, boxed comments and quotes and brief biographies of key figures appear in the chapters.

Bush's focus is on the years 1800-1803, the period when rumors of Spain's conditional cession of Louisiana to France (Treaty of San Ildefonso, October 1, 1800, document 2 in this volume) first

appeared and led President Jefferson to send Robert Livingston and then Monroe to Paris to attempt to buy the left or east bank of the Mississippi River from 31° north latitude to the Gulf of Mexico (that is, West Florida and the fabled “Isle of Orleans” that included the city of New Orleans). They wanted to protect American rights to use the Mississippi, by then a vital artery for the commerce of residents of the Ohio River drainage, the states of Kentucky and Tennessee, and the Mississippi Territory. Securing this right appeared critical if the trans-Appalachian states and territories were to be kept in the Union and his party in power. The unexpected result was the Louisiana Purchase.

Bush’s four context-setting chapters cover general background events during the years 1763-1800; Louisiana in Spain’s global policy, 1762-1802 (mostly a brief history of the “Mississippi Question”); Napoleon’s decision to sell as it was intertwined with his European and Haitian policies; and the domestic and international situations that Jefferson had to consider as the event unfolded. A final chapter considers both immediate and longer term consequences for the United States. The story thus retold is familiar. Its basic outlines and most details have been rehearsed dozens of times, from Samuel F. Bemis’s classic studies of U.S. diplomacy that appeared in the 1920s and Arthur P. Whitaker’s *The Spanish-American Frontier, 1783-1795* (1927) and *The Mississippi Question, 1795-1803* (1934), through the 2003 Purchase Bicentennial work of Thomas J. Fleming (*The Louisiana Purchase*), Roger G. Kennedy (*Mr. Jefferson’s Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery and the Louisiana Purchase*), Jon Kukla (*A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America*), James E. Lewis, Jr. (*Louisiana Purchase: A Noble Bargain*), and Peter J. Kastor (*The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* [2004]). Necessarily scaling his work to a different

format and purpose, Bush adds little to these accounts.

Several of Bush’s interpretations in his Spanish chapter (along with a number of minor questions of fact) strike me as particularly troublesome. He writes as if Spain accepted the British-U.S. peace treaty of 1783, which placed the borders of the United States on the Mississippi River and 31° north and granted Americans Great Britain’s rights under the Anglo-Spanish peace treaty of 1763 to use the Mississippi to the Gulf. Spain was not a party to the British-U.S. treaty and made it clear from 1784 to 1794 that it did not recognize these provisions. The separate Spanish-British treaty of 1783 recognized Spanish control of the provinces of East and West Florida, but without specifying boundaries, and contains no language suggesting that Great Britain’s rights under the earlier treaty would be continued with the United States. This Anglo-Spanish treaty language freed Spain to pursue policies aimed at impeding the expansion of the United States into the expansive territory it claimed under the British treaty and to use the Native Americans of the lower South as part of the defenses of Louisiana. Not explaining this difference in perspective will leave teachers and students unfamiliar with the specialized literature at a loss to fully understand the Mississippi Question and thus the need for the purchase. Similarly questionable is Bush’s insistence that Jay’s Treaty of November 1794 was critical to the Spanish decision in 1795 to agree to the U.S. understandings of the treaties of 1783. As Kukla and others show, Spain’s decision to grant the United States what it wanted was taken on July 7, 1794, well before Jay’s negotiations had produced the treaty bearing his name.[1] In another place, Bush presents Bernardo de Gálvez’s campaigns on the Gulf Coast (1779-81) as being in support of the U.S. Revolution when in fact he was pursuing Spanish objectives which just happened to help the United States (p. 18) (see Thomas E. Chavés, *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift* [2002]). Omitted—also in

the scholarly literature let it be said--is a full discussion of Spain's "global" situation and policy in the 1790s. Instead Bush uses the standard observations that the monarchy was morally, fiscally, and militarily bankrupt and at the mercy of the French and British. What the book needs is some account of why and how the fiscal and military realities of the empire as a whole influenced Spanish policy.

Customarily, a reviewer does not comment on minor typographical problems that should have been caught in the proofreading. However in this instance the number of such errors found throughout the work and especially in the documents section is so large that the matter cannot be passed over in silence. Also unsatisfactory are the book's website's links to digital resources. They are general, not to specific bodies of material on the Louisiana Purchase. Thus the link to the French archives takes the user to an online exhibit about French Louisiana. The link to Spain's Archive of the Indies is even less helpful; it takes the user to the archive's general page (in Spanish) after which users are left to fend for themselves.

These technical matters, and the various interpretative matters noted here, suggest the challenges of using this book in the classroom. Still, it is a handy, short account of a "critical moment" in the history of the United States and a useful collection of primary sources that can exercise students' critical skills by provoking discussion not only of diplomatic language but also of the viewpoints of the principal actors involved in the purchase and of James Pitot (*Observations on the Colony of Louisiana from 1796 to 1802* [1978]), an American citizen whose book was written to flatter what he thought would be a French regime in Louisiana and which consequently denigrates the Spanish one. Excerpts from Pitot's work conclude the documents.

Note

[1]. Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 180-184.

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