

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Sundance Hollingsworth

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The purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 ushered in a new era for the burgeoning new United States. Effectively doubling the size of the country, it positioned the US as a major player in the world. Exploration of this newly purchased land, and more broadly the continent, would be necessary to foster emigration to these new lands. With federal funding, a string of expeditions began setting off for this territory with some of the most notable being the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Pike expedition, and the Long expedition. Each expedition brought new discoveries and within the diaries of the explorers one can find grand descriptions of the landscape, attempting to accurately capture the West. Additionally, various artists accompanied some of the expeditions, lending an air of realism to the fantastical descriptions. Federally funded expeditions into the West planted the first seeds of Manifest Destiny and fostered an image of diverse lands rich in untapped flora and fauna; a dangerous place where if one were willing to emigrate, they could create a new life for themselves and their families.

Even before the purchase of the Louisiana territory, Thomas Jefferson had plans for exploring the continent. Indeed, the purchase of the Louisiana Territory came on the eve of an expedition he'd already planned helmed by his secretary, Merriweather Lewis and his traveling companion Captain William Clark. It is within the journals of Lewis that we glimpse the amazement and wonder of the first Americans to see this new land, here speaking of the Great Falls of the Missouri river: "on my right formes the grandest sight I ever beheld... the water...

brakes into a perfect white foam which assumes a thousand forms in a moment...”¹ Throughout their journey to the Pacific—for which their expedition is most well-known—Lewis and Clark catalogued as much of the wilderness as they could manage, wildlife and otherwise. Even before their return to St. Louis, details of their findings had made their way back and fur traders had already begun trekking to the wilderness to exploit the rich wildlife.² This expedition holds special importance as the first cataloguing of the Great West and a measure of the continent’s width. The expedition placed the frontier dead center in the public consciousness with the completion of this expedition, and it signaled the U.S. intent to expand its borders.

With the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the federal government was chomping at the bit to fund more exploration, a sentiment that was subsequently reinforced with each completed expedition. Reaching a high in 1856, when compared with the total federal income, the budget for later expeditions may well have been as high as one-third of the total.³ Two other notable explorers were Zebulon Pike and Major Stephen H. Long. Pike’s 1806 expedition was wrought with complications ranging from corruption to espionage, that would lead to his being pursued by the Spanish cavalry. Much of his expedition reads like something straight out of an adventure tale, with exploration, pursuit, and a villainous patron. Zebulon Pike explored much of the plains and Rocky Mountains all the while evading capture. When he was finally captured, he

¹ Clyde A Milner, Anne M Butler, and David R Lewis, eds., “Federal Support of Explorers and Emigrants” in *Major Problems in the History of the American West: Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 2010), 118.

² Milner, Butler, and Lewis, “Federal,” 133.

³ Milner, Butler, and Lewis, “Federal,” 141

was ushered out of Spanish territory. All in all, he returned somewhat unimpressed, calling the land a “Great American Desert” and concluding that it was uninhabitable.

Some years later, in 1819 Major Stephen H. Long led an expedition through the Great Plains area to find the source of several prominent rivers, notably the Red River—an assumed boundary of the Louisiana Territory. He brought with him several artists who would sketch and paint the landscape. He too came away with an impression of the area as barren, going as far as to label the Great Plains in his maps the “Great American Desert,” borrowing the term from Pike. While his expedition was unsuccessful in mapping the Red River boundaries, the information, maps, and paintings that he brought back proved invaluable in understanding and cataloguing what would await emigrants to the American West.

Expansion truly exploded decades later at the onset of the 1849 gold rush emigrant numbers rising from 13 in 1840 to 25,450 in just under a decade.⁴ With travel to California and Oregon suddenly seeing unprecedented numbers, the need for federal support for emigrants had to be addressed. Emigrants argued for military protection against native raids and in 1846 a plan to build a chain of forts along the Oregon trail was approved. Even with these new forts, the trail was dangerous, and many companies traveled with Mounted Riflemen to defend them. In his journal, one such rifleman states that “we now pass the graves of emigrants daily along the road... on inquiring [we find that] almost every company has lost one or two members.”⁵ He goes on later to explain that, while their journey has been absent of any raids from Natives, they

⁴ Milner, Butler, Lewis, “Federal,” 128.

⁵ Milner, Butler, Lewis, “Federal,” 124.

still have to take every precaution as they are “now on the war grounds.”⁶ As for the forts, they served dual purposes. Not only did they provide safe places to rest and recuperate, but they were also key places of trade. This protection initiative more than anything cultivated the idea of Manifest Destiny as part of the American Dream. The U.S. would expand to take the whole of the continent, and those brave enough to travel west could start a new life and build wealth for themselves and their family.

In funding the exploration and expansion of the American West, the federal government of the day set off a chain of events that would lead to the expansion of the United States across the continent to the Pacific coast and beyond. As public knowledge and a fuller picture of the potential of the West grew, public interest in emigration grew as well, hitting a fever pitch in 1849 with the discovery of gold in California. To say that the idea of Manifest Destiny, and by extension the American Dream, is linked closely with early exploration of the West is accurate but doesn't quite capture the importance of the turning of the American zeitgeist toward the setting sun. The sense of mobility, both class-wise and geographically, is a quintessential part of the American identity and while it was fostered during the early colonial period it wasn't fully realized until the early to mid-nineteenth century when the federal government turned their gaze west to the Pacific.

Works Cited

⁶ Milner, Butler, Lewis, “Federal,” 124.

Milner, Clyde A, Anne M Butler, and David R Lewis, eds. "Federal Support of Explorers and Emigrants" in *Major Problems in the History of the American West: Second Edition*. 2nd ed. Boston Houghton Mifflin, 2010.