State gears up for 200th anniversary

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SHREVEPORT — The United States paid $15 million for the Louisiana Territory in 1803.

Now, Louisiana tourism officials hope the 200th anniversary celebration of the Louisiana Purchase, beginning later this year, will bring in 600 times that amount — $9 billion — for the state’s economy. The goal is to reach 25 million visitors by the end of 2003.

“We think it is one of the most important tourism events ever in Louisiana,” said Phillip J. Jones, secretary of the state Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. “It will position Louisiana front and center as one of the premier places to visit in 2003.”

Officials aim to capitalize on the significance of the purchase, which has been called one of the greatest real estate deals in history, adding more than 800,000 square miles to the United States. Thirteen whole states and parts of two others were carved from the purchase tract, which sold for about 4 cents an acre.

The deal was struck with France on April 30, 1803, though the transfer to the American government did not take place until Dec. 20 that year.

The bicentennial celebration officially kicks off Dec. 20 at Alexandria’s Kent House, built just three years before the Louisiana Purchase. Hundreds of international tourists are expected.

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national, state and local dignitaries have been invited for the ceremony, which will feature period re-enactors of Spanish, French and Native American descent, and choreographed fireworks.

Natchitoches, the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase, plans special events the following day for the dignitaries.

On Dec. 20, 2003, New Orleans' Cabildo, site of the Dec. 20, 1803, transfer ceremony, will commemorate the transfer. President Bush, the president of France and the king of Spain have been invited.

Between the kickoff and finale will be enough events, exhibits and activities throughout the state to sate even the most ardent history buff’s appetite, not to mention offerings that are designed for just plain fun.

Parishes and local organizations are in the last-minute stages of seeking grants — applications are due Tuesday. About $1 million in federal dollars is available, said Mary Pernault, executive director of the Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial 2003 Celebration.

"It has really caused an excitement in each parish," she said. "It's getting different communities together and pooling resources. We wish we had more money. We're trying to do things people in Louisiana can be proud of but also to attract visitors."

Jones said focus groups were commissioned to gauge consumer perception.

"Most people were very interested in it. They recognized the importance. They are interested in historical re-enactments, in bringing their friends and family. We kind of used that as a guiding force."

The state is aggressively marketing the event, he said. Louisiana Purchase license plates are being issued, and local tribes, maybe bringing powwows here next year."

The goal is to keep Louisiana in the minds of visitors, said Stacy Brown, president of the tourist bureau. "The Louisiana Purchase bicentennial is another reason to come back. People who visit Louisiana are very pleased."

By telling them something is coming up, something lasting more than a year, we can give them reasons to come back again and again."

Besides tourism, education is a component of the celebration. And teachers plan to take advantage of events to expand the stories in textbooks."

"I think it will be a good opportunity for students to have interaction with history," said Melissa Johnson, who teaches American history at Green Oaks High School in Shreveport. "What I am hoping is that events will be things I can take my students to, that they can draw from activities and events some useful knowledge that makes it come alive."

Also at LSU-Shreveport, Pioneer Heritage Center will take advantage of the bicentennial to expand interpretive tour hours, said Marty Young, assistant director. "I'm hoping we do get a lot of interest out of it."