

John Jay



John Jay 1745-1829

Among the many thousands of the Huguenots of France who fled to England and America toward the close of the seventeenth century, to escape fiery persecutions, was Augustus Jay, a young merchant. He landed at Charleston, in South Carolina, but soon proceeded northward, and settled in the city of New York. There he married the daughter of Balthazar Bayard, one of the refugees who came with the New Rochelle colony.¹ These were the grand-parents of John Jay, the venerated American patriot and statesman. He was born in the city of New York, on the 12th of December, 1745. At eight years of age he was placed in a boarding school at New Rochelle, and at fourteen he entered King's (now Columbia) College, as a student. He was an apt scholar, and gave early promises of his subsequent brilliant career. He was graduated in 1764, bearing the highest honors of the college, and commenced the study of law under Benjamin Kissam. He was admitted to the bar in 1768, and ascended rapidly to eminence in his profession. In 1774, he was married to the daughter of that sturdy patriot, William Livingston (afterward governor of New Jersey), and entered the political field, with great ardor, as the champion of popular rights. He was one of the most prominent members of the New York committee of correspondence, in the Spring of 1774, and in September following, he took a seat in the first Continental Congress. He was the youngest member of that body, being less than twenty-nine years of age, and he was the latest survivor. His genius as a statesman was exhibited in the Address to the People of Great Britain, put forth by Congress. Jefferson, ignorant of its authorship, said, "It is the production of the finest pen in America." From that time Mr. Jay was identified with most of the important civil measures in his native State; and he also performed much duty in the Continental Congress, until the Summer of 1776, when all his energies were devoted to public business in New York. With tongue, pen, and hand, he was indefatigable; and as a member of the convention at Kingston, in the Spring of 1777, he was chosen to draft a State Constitution. Under that instrument he was appointed chief justice of New York, and held his first term at Kingston, in September, 1777. He was an efficient member of the Council of Safety, appointed to act in place of the legislature, when not in session. In the Autumn of 1778, he was again elected to Congress, and three days after taking his seat there, he was chosen its president. He filled the chair with dignity and vigor, until September, 1779, when he was appointed minister to Spain to obtain the acknowledgment of the independence of the United States, to form a treaty of alliance, and to borrow money. We cannot even refer to his numerous and efficient diplomatic services from that time until 1782, when he was appointed one of the commissioners for negotiating a peace with Great Britain. In all of them he exhibited consummate skill and statesmanship; and to his vigilance we are indebted for advantages obtained by the treaty, of which the artful French minister attempted to deprive us. He signed the preliminary treaty, in November, 1782, with Adams, Franklin, and Laurens, and the following year he affixed his signature to the definitive treaty.

Mr. Jay returned to the United States, in July, 1784, and immediately entered upon the duties of chief of the foreign department of the government, to which he was chosen before his arrival. He occupied that station until the new organization of government under the Federal Constitution, when he was appointed the first chief justice of the United States. He was a zealous advocate of the Constitution, with his pen,² and in the verbal debates in the State convention called to consider it. In 1794, Mr. Jay was appointed an envoy extraordinary to negotiate a commercial treaty, and settle some disputes between the United States and Great Britain. The treaty was not satisfactory to a great portion of his countrymen, and as it also offended France and the "French party" here, intense excitement prevailed throughout the country. Yet he was sustained, and on his return home, in 1795, he found the office of governor of his native State awaiting him. He was chief magistrate of New York until 1801, when he withdrew from public life to enjoy repose in his beautiful seat at Bedford, in Westchester county, although he was then only fifty-six years of age. He succeeded Elias Boudinot as president of the American Bible Society, and he was a generous patron of every moral and religious enterprise. Greatly beloved by all his friends, and respected for his many virtues by his political enemies, that patriarch of the Republic went peacefully to his rest, on the 17th of May, 1829, in the eighty-fourth year of his age.

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