

## Nancy Jay - The Lady of the House

“On the 14<sup>TH</sup> Inst (sic) I wrote to your papa that Sally had the Day before been delivered of a Daughter....It was baptized this morning by the Name of Anne, after her excellent Aunt....Miss Sophia Penn, the Daughter of Lady Julianna Penn is one of the Sponsors, and Mrs. F. Jay & a good friend Egbert Benson are the others.” Thus John Jay announced the birth of his daughter Anne on August 1, 1783 to Catharine “Kitty” Livingston, one of Sarah Jay’s four sisters and Sarah's "papa" was William Livingston, governor of New Jersey and one of the earliest advocates for American independence. Jay and his wife were living in Passy, France where Jay was one of the American Peace Commissioners negotiating a peace treaty with Great Britain, along with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. The Jays returned to New York in 1784, after the successful negotiations of the Treaty of Paris. Their residences through 1801 alternated between New York city and Albany according to the many official positions held by John Jay. Ann, or Nancy as she was known to all, had an elder brother and sister, Peter Augustus and Maria, and a younger brother and sister, William and Sarah Louisa. Another sister, Susan, was born in Spain in 1780 but died at the age of one month.

As a child, Nancy would have been taught the basics of education at home, carefully supervised by her mother which included piano lessons for Nancy and Maria, since accomplished young ladies were expected to play an instrument and entertain family and guests on occasion . To complete her education, Nancy would normally have been sent to a local school for upper class young ladies, such as Isabella Graham’s in New York city which her sister attended. Due to Maria’s persistence, Nancy and Maria were schooled at the Moravian School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania . The school was founded by Countess Benigna von Zinzendorf and other

Moravian settlers in 1742 who viewed education as a sacred responsibility. the Academy was the first school for girls in the colonies and is the ninth oldest independent school in the United States. The curriculum included religion, English and German, history, geography, arithmetic, sewing, knitting and other feminine pursuits. Their education was well suited to the proper education of young ladies of Nancy's social class who were expected to marry well, have children and manage a large household. John Jay expressed his views on a woman's education to his youngest daughter, Sarah Louisa when he wrote to her "I am not anxious that you should be what is called a 'learned Lady' but it would mortify me to have any of my children classed with the ignorant and illiterate". Receipts from the school indicate expenditures for books on accounting, grammar, geography and Christian doctrine, pin cushions and silk thread for "Philigree" work as well as paints , canvases, and material for clothes, to name a few items. Girls at the school often painted or embroidered from copies of works of art, a skill that later sometimes translated into decorations for their future homes. Religion was stressed at the school as well and was a major influence on Nancy throughout her life. She kept a prayer journal at school from which she drew strength and inspiration and viewed suffering as a means to building character.

Her formal education completed by the late 1790's, Nancy returned home and spent time visiting family and friends in New York and Albany. By 1800 construction on the Jay farm in Bedford was well under way as John Jay and Sarah looked forward to retirement. By 1801 the house was ready for occupancy and Nancy assisted her father in the move from Albany to Bedford. Sarah Jay was ill when she arrived at Bedford in the fall and seemed to rally early in the new year, but on May 28, 1802, she died. Nancy had assured her mother that "In endeavoring to

contribute to the comfort & happiness of my beloved & worthy parents, I cannot fail finding lasting enjoyment myself". Children were reared to have a lifelong obligation to their parents, so it was not surprising that at age nineteen, Nancy Jay assumed the role of mistress of the house. The task before her was daunting. The house was in the final stages of construction and needed decorating. She had assumed the responsibility of her younger siblings, William age 13 and Sarah Louisa age 10. There was a large household to run with servants who needed to be trained and supervised and Nancy took time to see to their personal needs such as driving a servant to New Jersey to see a relative. Nancy saw to the provisioning of the house and had her father order supplies from Peter Augustus in New York city who acted as John Jay's agent in procurement. Nancy would have seen to the ordering of the meals and kept her own account book for her household expenses. Relatives, friends, and many notables of the time visited the farm and usually stayed there for several days to an entire season and it was Nancy who had to see to their comforts and act as hostess on these occasions. It was common for a woman in Nancy's position to put up scented water for herself or to do some cooking. On one occasion, John Jay passed along Nancy's recipe for honey cake to a family member and her relatives responded in kind over the years with the bounty from their kitchens and gardens.

Nancy was actively involved in the interior decoration of the house and John Jay wrote to his wife how much enjoyment he and Nancy received from their "...little embellishments of the place". Nancy was very particular about her house as her sister, Sarah Louisa, noted -"The paper which sister Ann purchased here last Fall she told me she wished to have exchanged, as it had an unpleasant smell....I know Nan is anxious to have her dining room painted & smarted up." Wallpaper came in sheets which the lady of the house often hung herself along with

friends and relatives in attendance and did some of the painting as well - "I wish I were with you to paint the cornices" wrote Nancy's sister in law, Mary.

Nancy also found time to indulge in her love of gardening as noted by a cousin - "Cousin Ann says she is much better lately which she attributes to the garden; you know her fondness for it; how carefully she watches and nurses every expanding bed, and how much she appears herself to benefit as they increase in fragrance and beauty." Nancy was said to have had 21 varieties of roses in her garden.

Despite the demands of the farm at Bedford, Nancy found time to visit her family and friends with trips to Albany ,New York, to the numerous spas in upstate New York and to Rye, where she loved to collect sea shells. Her health was delicate and she suffered from weak eyes, a disordered stomach which responded to doses of bismuth and annual bouts of a winter cold which usually deteriorated to a more serious condition and required a visit from a local doctor. She also found relief in electric shock treatments and while visiting her sister Maria in Albany John Jay noted - "Nancy thinks that while at Albany she recd Benefit from the application from Electricity - and frequently has expressed a Wish that our Machine was here."

Over the years, the family expanded with Peter Augustus and his family visiting from New York. Maria married Goldsborough Banyer, an Albany attorney, but by 1810, Maria had lost her husband, son and daughter to illness. After caring for her ailing father-in-law, she rented a house in New York city in 1816 but remained a frequent visitor to the farm. In 1818 the Jay family mourned the sudden death of Sarah Louisa at age 26 from a mysterious illness. William

married Augusta McVickar in 1812 and they had five children while setting up permanent residence at the farm. While Nancy and Maria harbored doubts about Augusta and words about disharmony appear in correspondence, Nancy continued to manage the house and to maintain a balance of personal relations throughout. When John Jay had a schoolhouse built for William and Augusta's five children in 1826 and hired a tutor for them, Nancy was magnanimous when she wrote to a friend "Augusta now has a tutor for her children, which relieves her of too much fatigue & will give them an opportunity of learning to more advantage & they all seem disposed to profit by it."

A strong bond developed between Nancy and Maria during these years and when John Jay died in 1829, Nancy uneventfully

relinquished her position at the farm to Augusta and took up residence with Maria at Maria's house 396 Broadway and later at

20 Bond Street in New York city. Bond Street was the most desirable address for New York's elite and was home to judges,

financiers, Senators and Congressman, religious leaders, ambassadors, a U.S. General and Dr. John C. Jay, M.D., son of

Peter Augustus Jay and Nancy and Maria's nephew who lived across the street from Nancy and Maria at #21. The sixty

houses that comprised Bond Street were three story brick buildings with dormer windows in the attic. Each house had two

trees in front for which the street was famous. For the rest of their lives, the two sisters were devoted to each other and to

charitable endeavors for the poor and destitute. It was said that their home was always open to the needy. One of Nancy's

most enduring achievements occurred in the Fall of 1839 when ten ladies assembled in the living room of Maria's house and

formed the Colored Home for the *relief of the sick and respectable Colored aged*. The scope of the organization was later

expanded by the New York State legislature to include *disabled colored sailors and other infirm*

*and destitute colored*

*people*. Officers and Advisors of the organization included John Jay II and Elizabeth Clarkson Jay as well as members of the

Livingston, Hamilton and Roosevelt families.

During these years, the two sisters took time to travel and in 1829 they journeyed to Niagara Falls and visited the Moravian School of which Nancy wrote "...we were greatly surprised by meeting Sister Kuntz, she looked so very much as she did more than thirty years ago....and when informed of our names said she recollected such girls & kissed us very cordially." After a trip to St. Croix in 1836, Nancy expounded on the institution of slavery - "But it is not easy to believe that in this age, pure Christianity could prevail generally, & a system of slavery be continued -- But there are such difficulties in the way of giving freedom to slaves in the South that some masters whose consciences would induce them to manumit their slaves, knew not how to act & they deserve our charity & sympathy as well as the poor creatures held in bondage." She also had views about women speaking in public when she commented on a newspaper article about a woman speaking in Congress Hall " among whom were the President & many of the great officers of government & men of talent & note from all parts of the nation....There was an exertion of zeal, sufficient one would think to endure martyrdom." Her legal and financial affairs were handled by her nephew, Peter Jay, and her letters to him often resembled those of her father concerned with investments and monies due on bonds. She was in many ways her father's daughter.

On November 13, 1856 Nancy died at age 73. Her Will exemplified her life with a preamble expressing her deep religious beliefs and bequests to family and many charitable organizations. She left a considerable estate consisting of numerous bonds and personal notes, real property

interests, and shares of stock in banks, insurance companies, railroads and cash. In all, through inheritance and skillful management, Nancy Jay left an estate of more than \$70,000 which was a considerable sum for any person at that time, let alone a single lady. Eight days after Nancy's death, Maria died. Both are buried in the Jay family cemetery in Rye.

Nancy Jay was a remarkable woman, steadfast, devout, loyal to her family and friends while retaining a personality that was distinctly hers. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment was her selfless devotion to her father as lady of the house.