

A FOUNDING FAMILY CONFRONTS MULTIPLE DISABILITIES

Large scale editions of the writings of Founding Fathers and other “Great White Men” in Early American History are often associated with contributions only to traditional fields of history, and not with the newer forms of social history. But in fact because the publications and the larger collections on which they draw are so comprehensive, and include private as well as public papers, they can and often have made contributions to many other aspects of history. Standard academic procedures often don’t call attention to such hidden topics. Reviews generally don’t refer to them. Indexes may not highlight them. The finding aids to the archival collections may not note them. As editions increasingly are placed online and become searchable some of these problems may be overcome. Health conditions are one of the most common items mentioned in Early American correspondence and diaries, and references useful to the history of disabilities can sometimes be found. Such is the case with *The Papers of John Jay*, based on original manuscripts in the Rare Book and Manuscript Room of the Columbia University Libraries and photocopies assembled from repositories around the world.

New York Founding Father John Jay (1745-1829), was the sixth of seven surviving children of Peter Jay (1704-82) and Mary Van Cortlandt Jay (1705-77). Four of his older siblings were afflicted in varying degrees by disabilities. As editors of the *Jay Papers* we have primarily been interested in how this family circumstance affected Jay’s life, personality, and character, and how it affected family dynamics generally. However, historians of disabilities can no doubt tease out other implications from what can be learned in Jay’s papers.

This paper seeks to report what is known of how disabilities affected the Jay family, and to call attention to other editions and collections that may make similar contributions to those studying disabilities. It also explores ways in which the American Revolution complicated the lives of Jay’s “unfortunate” family and affected the documentation of the lives of the disabled siblings.

Two of John Jay's brothers, Sir James Jay (1732-1815), a brilliant if erratic medical doctor and inventor, and Frederick (1747-99), a merchant and sometime legislator of unspectacular talents, whatever their problems, could not be classified as disabled. Of the other four children, two, Peter (1734-1813) and Anna Maricka (Nancy) (1737-91), were blinded by small pox in 1739. In 1745 Peter Sr. decided to abandon his active mercantile career and move the family from New York City to a farm in Rye, New York, along the Long Island Sound in Westchester County. There, he thought, his "little blind ones" would be safe from "the dangers and confusions of the city life." At Rye the children, surrounded by a familiar environment, and cared for both by the family and presumably by the family's slaves, appear to have thrived. Peter and Nancy were kept together, and referred to almost as a unit, in the way that twins often are. They seemed to share the closest of bonds. Upon meeting them for the first time in 1774 Sarah Livingston Jay, John Jay's bride, commented on their cheerfulness and good humor; instead of depressing, they raised her spirits.¹

The remaining two siblings Augustus, known as Guss or Gussey (1730-1801), and Eve (1728-1810), did less well. Augustus apparently suffered from a severe learning disability, some of the details of which can be found in correspondence between Peter Jay and Samuel Johnson, later president of Kings College, who undertook the task of teaching 8-11-year-old Augustus to read and do math—with little success. His descriptions of Augustus's problems sound like a mixture of dyslexia and attention deficit disorder. Gussey though a "lovely" and "dear" child was inattentive and unfocused, with a "bird-witted Humour," and made little progress in reading despite being sent to a teacher noted for effective reading instruction. After three years (1738-41), Gussy was not sent back for further schooling; there is no record of further formal education or training; he apparently could read and write well enough to conduct correspondence with his brothers as an adult, although none of his letters have been found. Gussy had no recorded career or trade, and is described as having become "an idle fellow" who "gave his family much trouble and anxiety." For most of his adult life was boarded outside the family residence and financed by inheritances and family support. A Dutch traveler, Carel de Vos van Steenwijk, visiting America in 1783-84, encountered in a home he visited a "disreputable" brother of John Jay. This is probably a reference to Augustus. For the most part family histories are silent about Augustus—little more than his existence is mentioned.²

Eve, though she is reported as a child as suffering long-term illnesses, including pleurisy and fevers, seems to have been quite intelligent. However, she appears as an adult in the extant record as suffering from hysterics and fits and extreme emotional volatility. The fullest descriptions of her behavior come from two unreliable narrators, her estranged husband, Loyalist minister Harry Munro, and her unhappy stepdaughter Elizabeth ("Betsey") Munro Fisher, who later published a memoir that detailed her

childhood sufferings at Eve's hands. The family's dysfunction shattered the silence that might otherwise have surrounded Eve. There is no independent way to document the truth of the Munros' assertions or to determine conclusively whether Eve was truly mentally ill or was a difficult, nonconforming woman trapped in an unhappy marriage. She was unable to cope with childrearing in the face of an often absent husband. Her stepdaughter depicted Eve as charging her with the care of the infant Peter Jay Munro, as pinching and hitting her when she was unable to quiet the baby, and as locking her unfed in the basement as punishment. The neighbors reported the abuse to her husband. Elizabeth charged that even little Peter was hit with a stick and knocked down after inadvertently interfering with Eve's gardening at age six, and that he attempted to imitate an overheard story of suicide by hanging. Elizabeth eventually got her father to place her elsewhere, and entered an early marriage to escape both from Eve and from an even more undesirable marriage promoted by her father. Fleeing internment as a Loyalist, Harry Munro abandoned the family by 1777. The Jay family assumed responsibility for Eve's support and took over Peter's education by age 10. John Jay took him with him on his diplomatic mission to Europe from 1779-84 so that Peter had little further contact with his mother until grown up. As Peter Jay Sr. aged, John and Frederick increasingly took over the care and management of Eve and Gussy and generally kept them at some distance from the family and from each other.³

How did the Revolution alter the situation? Since the Jay home was in the British-occupied area of New York and the Jays were staunch patriots, the family had to relocate further north, removing all from their familiar environment. By that time both Jay parents were aged and ailing; Mary Jay died in 1777. Peter Sr., then in his seventies, sought to manage a rented farm and care for Peter and Nancy, with the help of slaves, some of whom were also aging or infirm. He was assisted from the time John Jay departed for Europe by Frederick, whom John had enlisted to care for the family in his absence. Frederick declared the burden "almost too heavy to bear."⁴ The family fortunes were also diminished and disrupted by the war, so the privileged conditions that softened the difficulties of caring for the disabled were considerably reduced. The family even suffered from a home invasion by a marauding Loyalist band, which robbed the family of their cash and many household goods, but reportedly treated blind Peter and Nancy well. Peter Sr.'s health broke down and he died in April 1782, greatly to the distress of Peter and Nancy.⁵

The war also affected our access to information about the family. While abroad John Jay desperately sought family news, which only occasionally arrived. More often, the mail was intercepted or lost, leaving scholars, like Jay himself, missing many details of family circumstances and care. Jay sought to convey money and goods to the family but often they failed to arrive.

Jay's wartime correspondence reveals that although Peter and Nancy remained within the household throughout the war, Gussy was housed elsewhere in the Hudson Valley. He was reported as "behaving well." Eve, stayed for a time with the family, but mostly remained at a distance, a circumstance Jay strongly approved, in hopes of sparing his father further woes.⁶ In addition to revealing the guilt and distress Jay felt at separation from his family under wartime conditions, Jay's letters display his great attachment to his blind siblings and his desire to return to them, at a time when his relations to his healthy brothers Sir James and Frederick were strained, and when he avoided Gussey and Eve. Ill and emotionally stressed by the negotiation of the peace treaty, Jay declined further appointments and planned his return to America, hoping to return to private life and spend many happy hours in conversation with Peter and Nancy.⁷ It was a fantasy not soon fulfilled since Jay was chosen Secretary for Foreign Affairs, then Supreme Court Chief Justice, then negotiator of the Jay treaty, and, finally governor of New York. Not until 1801 did he in fact retire. Such a pattern of deep family love and attention to the physically disabled, and criticism, embarrassment, and distance from the mentally or emotionally-challenged family members, is of course not uncommon—a similar dynamic appeared for example in the recent Off-Broadway play "Tribes." But the Jay family makes a dramatic case study in Early American history.

Certain other family records for this period also are revealing—namely the wills of various family members, and the ways they provided for the various siblings. When Peter Jay Sr. died in 1782, his will made detailed provisions for his children. His lands and property were divided among four sons, though James had debts to the family deducted from his share. John, Peter and Frederick divided family real estate among them, and were given a choice of properties as part of their shares.⁸ With John's encouragement Peter took over the family farm in Rye, and was assisted in rehabilitating it from wartime damages. There, restored to his familiar environment, Peter lived with Nancy, married, and capably ran the estate. He is described as having such sensitive hands that he became an expert evaluator of horses by touch, a skilled carpenter and a knowledgeable farmer.⁹ Gussey on the other hand was left a fixed sum of 500 pounds, placed at interest under the supervision of trustees to provide for his support; he did not have independent status to manage his affairs on his own. Other inheritances left him on the same footing. Both Nancy and Eve were also granted fixed sums of 1800 pounds for their support; but Eve's money was under trust for herself and her son Peter, probably both because of her instability as well as the need to prevent her husband from taking control of the funds. Thus, the blind children retained greater self-determination than did Gussey and Eve. They were also spoken of with respect for their competence, common sense, and prudence, in ways that even their healthy siblings, apart from John Jay, often were not.¹⁰

The siblings benefitted after the war from the settlement of another inheritance, that from an English cousin of Peter Sr., Mary Ann Peloquin of Bristol. This will provided cash payments for all the children, 500 pounds each except for Augustus, who received only 100 pounds. Harry Munro, then in England, seized control of Eve's share of the inheritance and long refused allotting any of it to her support or to his son Peter. However, after long, very public embarrassment from vociferous and frequent appeals from Eve and her relatives, Harry finally turned over some of the Peloquin inheritance to Eve and Peter, with the stipulation that Eve be kept away from him.¹¹ "I am naturally fond of the Company of a virtuous & good woman," Harry asserted, "But a contentious & brawling woman, Good God, who can bear? For the Space of ten long years and upwards, I strove to bring her to a Sense of her conjugal Duty; but all in Vain."¹² Peter Jay Munro, with some assistance from his charming cousin Peter Augustus Jay, later persuaded Harry to sign over his American landholdings to Peter. The ensuing conflict with his stepsister over the property led to her arrest and imprisonment for forgery, and to the publication in 1810 of her memoir detailing Eve's abuses. In the meantime Eve, who generally rented a room in Manhattan after the war, had apparently learned to be sufficiently tactful to extract payment of funds controlled by John Jay, even though he considered her often extravagant, until her funds were turned over to the management of Peter Jay Munro in 1794.¹³

Finally the extant wills of the siblings themselves provide some insights into their relationships. Nancy, with rather substantial funds remaining at the time of her death in 1791, made several specific bequests, but left the bulk of her estate to her brother Peter. Augustus, who also resided in New York City after the war, awarded his remaining funds to Sir James in 1801.¹⁴

What other ways did the family history of disability manifest itself? The Jays were extremely health conscious. John Jay's letters reveal constant attention to physical and mental health, his own and that of his family. Fresh air and exercise, especially long walks and horseback riding, are frequently recommended, particularly as a way of warding off stress and depression.¹⁵ Interestingly, Jay and his "unfortunate" siblings, had long lives. He was quick to ensure that all his children were inoculated against small pox.¹⁶ His letters to a longtime friend, Peter Van Schaack, who was going blind during the Revolution and went to England for treatment, reveal both that James Jay became expert in the treatment of eye disorders, and that John Jay was well aware of his techniques.¹⁷ John, who assumed or was assigned the position of "good son" in a troubled family, displayed an unusual sense of duty and family responsibility from an early age, as well as a certain concern for the unfortunate that may have contributed to his support for the abolition of slavery. Jay suffered from a sense of conflict between public and private duty and, though public duty usually won, this did affect his choice of public offices.¹⁸ Disabilities had also moved the family from city to countryside, and Jay's upbringing

there no doubt contributed to the romantic passion for nature that appears in many of his letters, and led ultimately to his long retirement on his Bedford estate.¹⁹

To what extent could similar case studies be found in other documentary editions, or the larger collections on which they draw? An online query to other editors and archivists, provided more tips on mental illness than on physical disabilities, and more for the 19th century and later than for the 17th or 18th centuries. *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker* contains well indexed material on disabilities as well as illnesses. Emotional troubles in the Adams family have received attention, but there can also be found material on blind John Greenleaf, who married an Adams relative. The George Washington Papers reported material on his epileptic step-daughter. The Jefferson Davis Papers reported documents on his mentally ill niece who died in an asylum. Scholars searching women's documents for the American Revolutionary era also reported cases buried in family records, including one in the Harriet Liston Diary, regarding the position of an "idiot" among Native Americans. The Sedgwick papers at Massachusetts Historical Society were reported to contain material on Bi-polar Priscilla Sedgwick, and several later generations of mentally ill family members. The James Monroe Papers contained "discreet" material on a deaf and dumb grandson. Material from the microfilmed and digitized Pension Records of the American Revolution appeared in another paper at this conference. Naval pension records and the papers of the Marine Department Hospital similarly provide material on disabilities acquired in the line of duty. The War Department records now being assembled will no doubt do likewise. My work on the Papers of Robert Morris led to encounters with petitions to Congress and claims in treasury and naval records for compensation for wartime injuries. A Texas archivist reported ways in which inventive online searching techniques combining words associated with disabilities such as lost and arm helped the state to identify archival collections pertaining to the history of disabilities. A Syracuse University archivist similarly reported digital searches on finding aids identifying potential sources. Historians of disabilities can benefit from these scattered tidbits and case studies, when they know how to find them. And editors and archivists can develop more ways to make such materials visible and accessible to the historians who can use them.²⁰

Elizabeth M. Nuxoll
Editor, The Papers of John Jay
Columbia University

Notes

This paper is based on the documents and research assembled by the Papers of John Jay Project at Columbia University, now being published under the auspices of the Columbia University Libraries as *The Selected Papers of John Jay (JJSP)*, and previously published in part by Richard B. Morris, as the *Unpublished Papers of John Jay (JJUP)*; with funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Most of the documents are available as well in a free online image database (EJ) produced by Columbia University Libraries and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

1. On the Jay family background, see *JJSP*, 1: lxxvii, 1-4; Laura Jay Wells, *The Jay Family of La Rochelle and New York* (New York, 1938), 13-16; Landa M. Freeman, Louise V. North, and Janet M. Wedge, eds., *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay* (Jefferson, N.C., 2005), 10-13; Walter Stahr, *John Jay: Founding Father* (New York and London, 2005), 3-7; Frank Monaghan, *John Jay: Defender of Liberty* (New York, 1935), 22. On the cheerfulness of Peter and Nancy, see Sarah Livingston Jay to Susannah French Jay, 6 May 1774, NNC (EJ: 6394); *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 30.

2. On the education of Augustus Jay, see Samuel Johnson to Peter Jay, 31 Jan., 19 June, 27 July, 14 and 29 Dec. 1739, 21 Aug. 1740, 13 Apr. 1741, 17 Sept. 1741, all NNC (EJ: 6667-6676); Monaghan, *Jay*, 22. In Frederick Jay to JJ, 16 March 1776, *JJSP*, 1: 210. as the Jays began the process of moving, Frederick reported that he was taking care of and providing linens for Gussy, and that he fears he will be “troublesome.” He added that “Mrs. M (Eve) had wrote to him to come to live with her, the Letter I have stopped—& wrote to G. not to think of it.” On the care and location of Augustus, see also Frederick Jay to JJ, 7 Feb. 1779, NNC (EJ: 6316); *JJSP*, 3: xxx, 172n5, 278, 491; *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 103, 121. In 1782 Frederick reported that Gussy was living in Kingston and behaving well. Frederick Jay to JJ, 15 Aug. 1782, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 121.

3. On Eve, see Wells, *Jay Family*, 11-13; Peter Jay’s correspondence with Eve Jay, 1770-74, NNC (EJ: 13465); Eve Jay Accounts, NNC(EJ: 1017); Louise V. North, Janet M. Wedge, and Landa M. Freeman, *In the Words of Women: The Revolutionary War and the Birth of the Nation, 1765-1799* (Lanham, Md., 2011), 196-98; *Memoirs of Mrs. Elizabeth Fisher, of the City of New York, Daughter of the Rev. Harry Munro, who was a Chaplain in the British Army, during the American Revolution—Giving a particular account of a Variety of Domestic Misfortunes, and also of her trial, and cruel condemnation to the State's Prison for six years, at the instance of her brother, Peter Jay Munro. Written by*

herself (New York, c. 1810). On Eve's early ill health, see Peter Jay to David Pelouquin, 15 May 1764, NNC (EJ: 11191).

4. On the increasing illness of Peter Jay Sr., see Frederick Jay to JJ, 6 Mar. 1776, NNC (EJ: 6309); Peter Jay to JJ, 12 Mar. 1776, NNC (EJ: 7867). For Peter Jay's reports on the distressing situation and danger at Fishkill, see his letters to John Jay and James Jay of 1 Sept. and 22 Sept. 1779, NNC (EJ: 7873, 7875). JJ responded to his father's distress calls by resigning as chief justice of New York, seeking to withdraw from re-election to Congress, and postponing a decision on his appointment as minister to Spain in 1779 until Frederick pledged to assume responsibility for the family. See JJ to George Clinton and to Frederick Jay, 16 Sept. 1779, NNC (EJ: 7615, 6323); *JJSP*, 1: 678-80.

For Frederick Jay's laments on the care of "a large and helpless family," see his letter to John Jay of 10 Apr. 1781, NNC (EJ: 6327). On the death of Peter Jay and Peter and Nancy's reactions, see Frederick Jay to JJ, 20 Apr. 1782, *JJSP*, 2: 721-23.

5. By May 1781 Susan Livingston informed JJ of the plundering of the Jay family by robbers, who nevertheless "had the generosity to spare Mr. Peter Jay, his clothes (10 May 1781, NNC, EJ: 8295). In a letter to his father, 1 Aug. 1781, JJ reported he had heard of the raid, and commented on the respect reportedly shown Peter and Nancy. NNC (EJ: 7847); *JJSP*, 2: 526. See also the Deposition of John Bennett, 11 Nov. 1785, NNC (EJ: 13092).

7. For JJ's attachment to and respect for Peter and Nancy, see JJ to Frederick Jay, 13 Feb. 1782, *JJSP*, 2: 689-90; and *JJSP*, 3: 92, 172, 277, 431. On JJ's avoidance of Eve Munro and efforts to reign in what he perceived as her extravagance, see JJ to Frederick Jay, 15 Mar. 1781, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 103; 13 Feb. 1782, *JJSP*, 2: 689-90. That she sometimes defied her brothers' advice (for example by returning to her home near Albany in 1782), see Frederick Jay to JJ, 15 Aug. 1782, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 121.

8. For copies of the will of Peter Jay, see NNC (EJ: 13464); NNMus (EJ: 374); *JJSP*, 2: 720-21.

9. An indication of "Blind Peter's" knowledge of and interest in machinery is that Sarah Jay sent information to him about sugar mills in Martinique in SLJ to Peter Jay Sr., 9 Jan. 1780, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 73. On the decision to allot the Jay homestead at Rye to Peter at the end of the war, see JJ to Egbert Benson, 6 Apr. 1783, *JJSP*, 3: 349-50, Frederick Jay to JJ, 2 Oct. 1783, NNC (EJ: 6344). On "Blind Peter," his marriage in 1789 when in his 50s, and his capacities for using his sensitive fingers to judge horses, and was on his reputation as a good carpenter and farmer, see Wells, *Jay Family*, 16. On Peter's death in 1813 the Rye estate went to Peter Augustus

Jay, but it remained the residence of Peter's widow Mary until her death in 1824. See Wells, *Jay Family*, 42.

10. That JJ later wrote to Augustus and that he was "delighted" by the attention, and that Augustus occasionally visited during the 1790s is revealed in Sarah Jay to JJ, 11 Oct. 1794, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 233. Relations with Eve were also more normal in 1790s, but did not always go well. For example, while visiting with her and her friend, her grandson Peter Munro wandered off and was killed after he fell in a well. SLJ to Catharine Livingston Ridley, 23 July 1797, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 261. Both Eve and Gussey apparently lived in rented rooms in New York in the 1780s and 90s, paid for with interest payments from their trust funds, including an additional inheritance from their aunt Ann Chambers. Jay in many cases acted as executor; but Peter Jay Munro was put in charge of managing Eve's funds in 1794. See receipts in John Jay Receipt Book, NNC; Eve Jay to John Jay of Oct. 18, 1789, NNC (EJ: 9368). See also Eve Jay Accounts, NNC (EJ: 1017). For JJ's praise for Peter and Nancy, see JJ to Frederick Jay, 13 Feb. 1782, *JJSP*, 2: 689-90.

11. For the will of Mary Ann Peloquin, 27 Apr. 1768, see NNC (EJ: 12421). On the settlement of the estate and Harry Munro's refusal to release Eve's inheritance to her support, see *JJSP*, 3: 491-92, 497.

12. For Harry Munro's complaints about Eve, see his letter to Peter Jay Munro of 9 June 1789, NNMus (EJ: 406).

13. Harry Munro released his claims to his American property to Peter Munro in 1794, after Peter Augustus Jay made an appeal to him on a visit to Scotland. *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 247-49; Peter Jay Munro to JJ, 16 Oct. 1794 (EJ: 9375, 430)

14. On the wills of Nancy Jay and Augustus Jay, see Will of Anna Maricka Jay, 7 Nov. 1791, NNC (EJ: 10043); Peter Augustus Jay to JJ, 31 Dec. 1801, NHi (EJ: 721); Peter Augustus Jay to JJ, 8 Jan. 1802, NNC (EJ: 9195).

15. For JJ's emphasis on health care, see, for example, JJ to R.R. Livingston, 25 Feb. 1776, to Sarah Livingston Jay, 6 June 1777, to Peter Van Schaack, 26 June 1778, *JJSP*, 1: 202, 435, 527-28. For his opposition to slavery, see *JJSP*, 3: xxxii-xxxiii.

16. On inoculation, see JJ to Sarah Livingston Jay, March 1776, NNC (EJ: 8049); *JJSP*, 1: 497, 489n1; Sarah Livingston Jay to JJ, 11 Dec. 1783, *JJSP*, 3: 531, 532n2.

17. For JJ's reports on James's successful conducting of eye surgery, see his letter to Peter van Schaack, 26 June 1778, *JJSP*, 1: 527-28.

18. For JJ's turning down of offices, see note 4, above, and *JJSP*, 3: 415, 556.

19. For JJ's love of nature, see, for example, *JJSP*, 2: 111-12, 729.

20. E Mail correspondence with Louise North, 14 Jan. 2013; Michael Crawford (Naval History Center), 23 and 25 Oct. 2012; Adina Joyce Mulliken, Syracuse University, 28 Sept. 2012; Jessica Tucker, Texas State Library, 27 Sept. 2012; Tom Foster, De Paul University, 27 Sept. 2012; David Mattern, James Madison Papers, 27 Sept. 2012; Martha King, Thomas Jefferson Papers, 26 Sept. 26 Sept. 2012; Beth Luey, Adams Papers, 26 Sept. 2012; William Ferraro, Washington Papers, 26 Sept. 2012; William di Giacomantonio, First Federal Congress Papers, 26 Sept. 2012. Since my presentation of this paper, Jeanne E. Abrams has published *The Founding Fathers and Mothers in Sickness and in Health* (New York, 2013) , based largely on the papers of John and Abigail Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington.