

FROM OPPRESSION TO FREEDOM

John Jay and his Huguenot Heritage

Conflict Over the Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation changed European history, when it challenged the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. John Calvin was a French theologian who led his own branch of the movement. French Protestants were called Huguenots as a derisive term by Catholics.

Disagreements escalated into a series of religious wars in seventeenth-century France. Tens of thousands of Huguenots were killed. Finally, the Edict of Nantes was issued in 1598 to end the bloodshed; it established Catholicism as the official religion of France, but granted Protestants the right to worship in their own way.

Eighty-seven years later, in 1685, King Louis XIV issued the Edict of Fontainebleau, which reversed the Edict of Nantes, and declared the public practice of Protestantism illegal. Louis regarded religious pluralism as an obstacle to his achieving complete power over the French people. By his order, Huguenot churches were demolished, Huguenot schools were closed, all newborns were required to be baptized as Roman Catholics, and it became illegal for the Protestant laity to emigrate or remove their valuables from France.

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes

A View of La Rochelle



In La Rochelle, a busy seaport on France's Atlantic coast, the large population of Huguenot merchants, traders, and artisans there suffered the persecution that followed the edict. Among them was Pierre Jay, an affluent trader, and his family. Pierre's church was torn down. In order to intimidate him into converting to Catholicism, the government quartered unruly soldiers called dragonnades in his house, to live with him and his family.

The Jays Leave France

In violation of the law against Protestant emigration, Pierre Jay secretly sent his wife and two of his children from La Rochelle to England, where they could practice their religion freely. Once this was discovered by the authorities, he was imprisoned. Catholic friends got him released, and he fled France, joining his family. Soon afterward, the French government confiscated his house and remaining properties in France.

Another of Pierre's sons, Auguste, had been abroad at this time, working as a trader in Africa. Auguste returned home to La Rochelle to find his family gone. After learning what had happened to them and seeing the oppression of the Huguenots, he decided to start a new life in the British colonies in America. After trying life in South Carolina and Philadelphia, he settled in New York in 1686. This painting is an old copy of a portrait of Auguste Jay (1665-1751). The original is believed to have been painted by Gerrit Duyckinck around 1700.



Marianne Peloquin

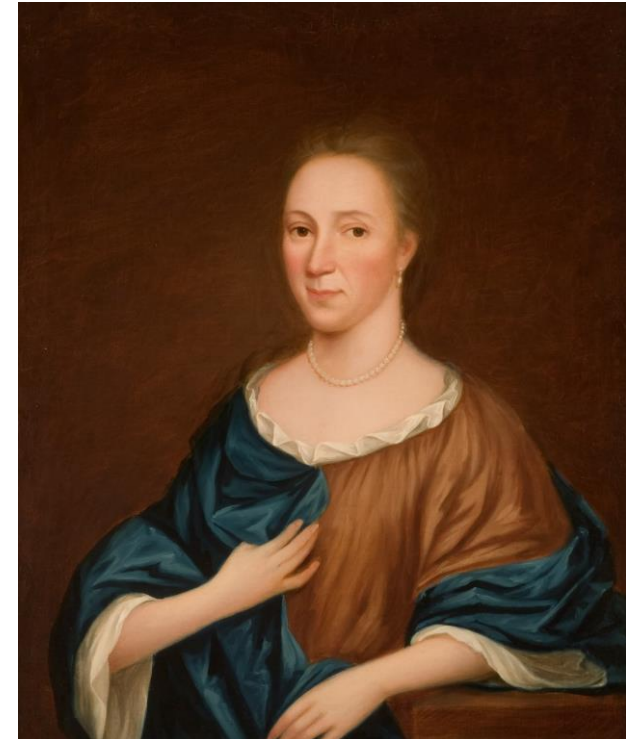


Marianne Peloquin (1706-1778) was the last surviving Jay family member to live in England in the eighteenth century, after four members of the family moved there from France in 1685. Her mother, Françoise Jay Peloquin (died 1742), was the sister of Augustus Jay. In 1783, John Jay traveled to Bristol, England in order to collect an inheritance from Marianne's estate.

The Jays Settle in America

Auguste Jay became a prosperous businessman in New York. He married Anna Maricka Bayard. Auguste anglicized his first name to Augustus, and became a member of the Church of England (the Anglican or Episcopal Church), as did many Huguenots. Augustus had four daughters and a son he named Peter, in honor of his father.

Peter Jay grew up to be a merchant. After marrying Mary Van Cortlandt, Peter had ten children, the eighth of whom he named John. Augustus died in 1751, when his little grandson, John Jay, was five years old.



Peter Jay's Seal



This silver and ebony seal, very faintly inscribed "Peter Jay 1722" on the ferrule, shows the Jay family coat-of-arms when they were still members of the French Protestant Church. Surmounting the armorial is a pair of overlapped hearts, a Huguenot symbol of loyalty.

As a boy, John Jay attended the grammar school at New Rochelle operated by the pastor of the Anglican church there, which had many Huguenot descendants in its congregation. Throughout his life, Jay remained strongly anti-Catholic, once declaring that the Roman Catholic Church had “dispersed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder, and rebellion through every part of the world.”

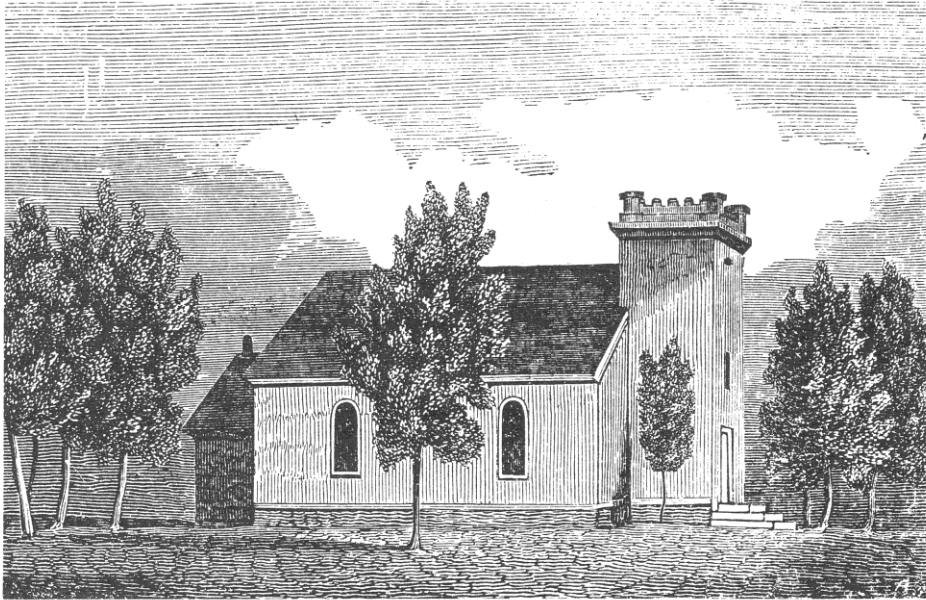
Jay argued that the Church should never be granted civil authority above that of the government. He convinced the framers of the first New York State Constitution in 1777 to adopt language that new citizens of the state should be required to “abjure and renounce all allegiance and subjection to all and every foreign king, prince, potentate, and state in all matters, ecclesiastical as well as civil.”

John Jay's Thoughts on Religion and Government

In his personal life, Jay was a devout Christian, perhaps the most religious of the Founding Fathers. He believed that morality was essential for the health of a democratic republic, and that morality grew out of obedience to God. But his core belief, regarding the relationship between religion and government, was that while individuals should be ruled by religious principles, civil government should not be ruled by religious institutions. To Jay, political power properly came from the nation's citizenry as a whole.



Jay's Churches



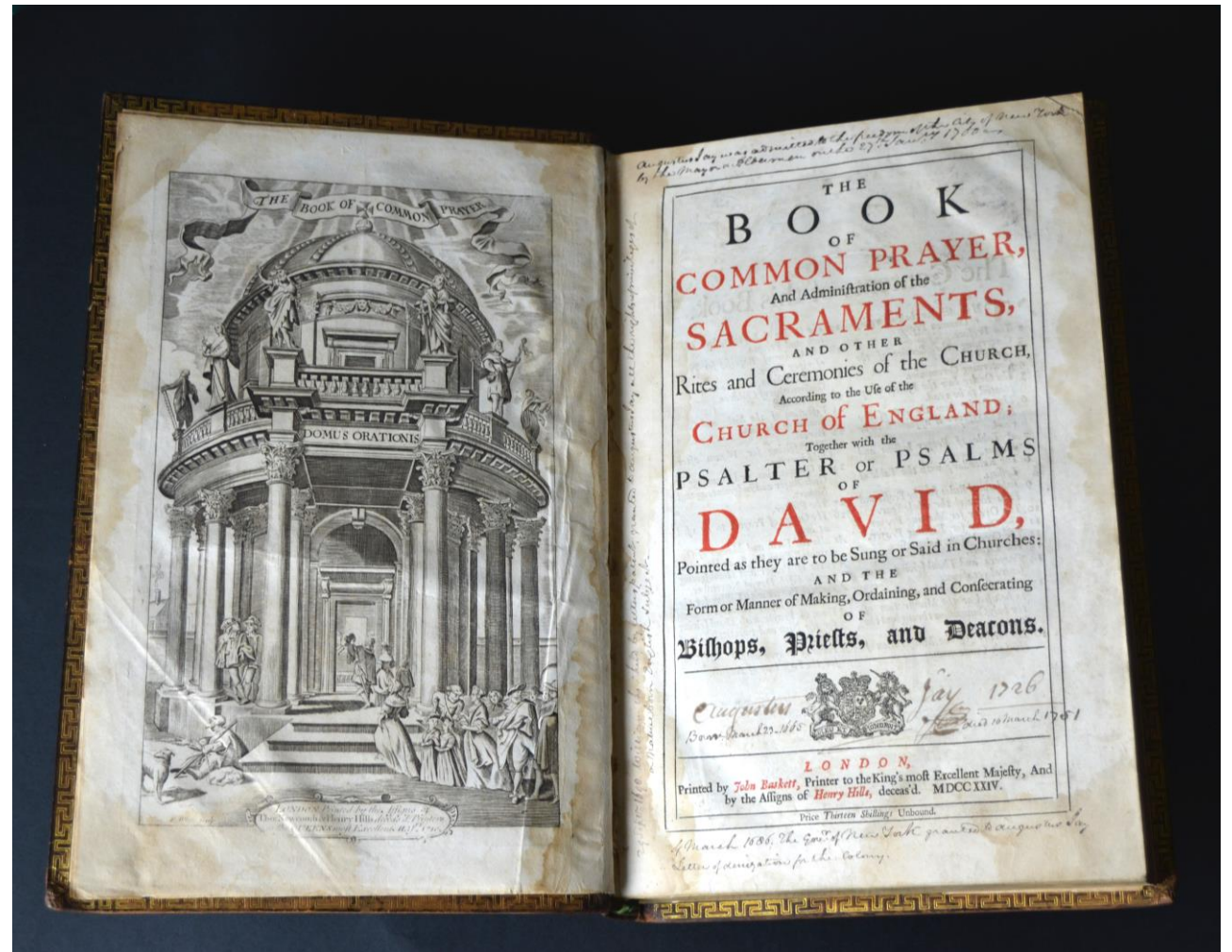
In 1843 the little Chapel was added

John Jay belonged to two Anglican churches during his adult life. Trinity Church in New York City was constructed in 1788 to replace an earlier building, which burned in 1776. Jay was a church warden there for three years after its construction, which he and his brothers had supported with donations. His name was inscribed on the foundation stone.

The little country church pictured here is St. Matthew's Church in Bedford, which Jay attended and supported as a local resident. Jay loaned the congregation \$800 in 1803 to assist in purchasing the land where it was built. The completed building was even smaller than the picture indicates: the small, shadowed wing on the left was not built until 1843. Soon after St. Matthew's was consecrated in 1810, Jay's daughters donated a silver communion service to it. Jay purchased the second square pew on the east side of the church in 1812. St. Matthew's still stands and is still active, having been enlarged and remodeled a number of times in its history.

Book of Common Prayer

This large, expensively produced book assembles the prayers used by the Church of England in its religious observances. Auguste Jay joined the Church of England (also known as the Anglican Church, and later, in America, the Episcopal Church). He Anglicized his name to Augustus. On the title page are his signature and notations recording major milestones in his life in America. On the bottom of the page is a notation about receiving his letter of denization, which is on display in the case to the left of the fireplace





Silver Tray

This tray was a wedding gift to John Jay's granddaughter, Maria Banyer Jay, from her brother, John Jay II, and his wife, Eleanor Kingsland Field Jay. At its center is the revised Jay coat-of-arms, with an Anglican rood replacing the pair of Huguenot hearts, a reflection of the family's conversion to the Anglican, or Episcopal, Church. The coat of arms bears the legend, "Deo Duce Perseverandum" ("With God Our Leader We Must Persevere"). Engraved among the scrollwork are three religious edifices: a church, a mosque, and a Chinese temple.

The Legacy of the Founding Fathers of Huguenot Ancestry

John Jay was one of several descendants of Huguenots who played important roles in the formation of the United States. Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, Henry Laurens, and Paul Revere all had Huguenot ancestors. The value of the separation of Church and State had been made very clear to the Americans by the religious conflicts that had plagued Europe in the previous centuries. To ensure that the United States would not establish a state religion, or outlaw the observance of religions on the basis of theological differences between them, the first amendment to the Constitution was adopted as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

***CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW RESPECTING AN
ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIGION, OR PROHIBITING THE
FREE EXERCISE THEREOF...***