

The History of the Carriage Barn at John Jay Homestead



A carriage on the Jay property in 1897. The Carriage Barn can be seen behind the horses.

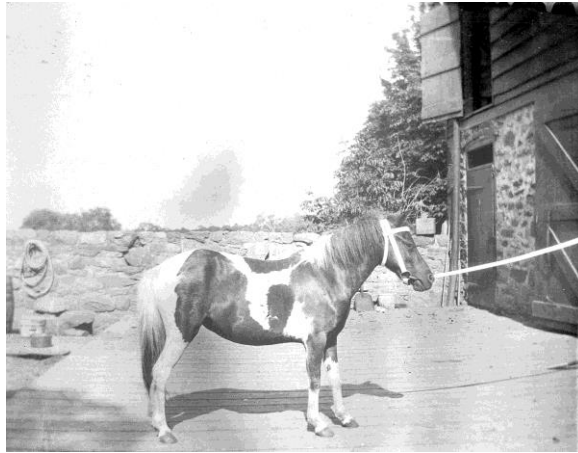
The carriage barn at John Jay Homestead was part of the earliest construction done to prepare John Jay's farm to become his home in retirement. Jay had come into possession of the property in 1785, as part of the settlement of his father's estate. For the first sixteen years he owned the property, he operated it purely as a farming business. The farm was then only an investment, and not the Jay family's home.

But as Jay looked ahead to his retirement from politics in the late 1790s, he planned to spend this last period of his life as a gentleman farmer, as George Washington did at Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. All took as their inspiration the Roman general, Cincinnatus, who after his years of public service, retired to live the honorable life of a farmer. This was seen by several Founding Fathers as an appropriate way for a government leader to retire from public life as a citizen in the new American republic. Jay decided to make his Bedford farm his final home.

Its main house, beautifully sited in front of a hill to the north, was enlarged from the original house built for Jay's farm manager. But the house would need dependencies for the Jays, including a carriage barn and a coachman's house to handle the family's transportation needs. From the start, a complex of these two buildings, separated by a cobblestone courtyard, was conceived as primarily associated with the main house, in spite of its greater proximity to the barnyard with its numerous farm buildings.

In 1800, Jay entered into a contract with a builder named Hezekiah Tracy for the enlargement and alteration of the main house, as well as construction of several outbuildings, including the carriage barn, to be built "in a strong neat and workmanlike manner." Construction of the Carriage Barn began in June 1801. At that point, it consisted only of the part with the stone and mortar ground

story. Double doors were put on the south wall to admit carriages that had dropped the Jays and their guests off at the front porch of the main house; another set of doors on the north wall opened onto the courtyard, so the horses could be taken to stables in the lower story of the coachman's house across the way. The large, central, roughly square area of the carriage barn was meant for storing vehicles. On the east and west sides of this area were much narrower spaces whose original purpose is not documented, but which likely contained more stables for horses, and storage areas for tack and other supplies. These side sections had exterior doors of their own. The second story, faced with clapboard, was a commodious area for keeping hay, feed, and whatever else they wanted to store there. The roof was of cedar shingles. Construction of the carriage barn was completed in 1802, the year after the Jays moved here.



A pony on a deck on the north side of the Carriage Barn in 1897, before the wooden shed addition was built.

The building underwent repairs and alterations as the years went on; the Jay family resided at Katonah all the way into the 1950s, and modifications were made to the building in response to changing times and needs. In the mid-nineteenth century, besides repairs to the building, alterations, possibly including the construction of box stalls for horses in the east section, were made. Sometime by 1908, the most extensive change was made when the large wooden shed was built onto the north side. With its wide sliding doors and a concrete floor, it was constructed to provide a space for garaging the automobiles of Arthur and Eleanor Jay Iselin.

In 1958-59, Westchester County purchased the carriage barn and the coachman's house as part of its purchase of the John Jay house and its estate grounds. Ownership of the property was quickly transferred to the State of New York, and while the main house was readied to be opened to the public as a history museum, the carriage barn was put to utilitarian use. After the historic site opened to visitors in 1965, the carriage barn served as the downstate workshop of the Taconic State Park Commission's building restoration staff. From the 1980s to 2001, it was the maintenance building for John Jay Homestead State Historic Site.

In 2005, plans for the restoration of the building and its conversion to a visitor center began. Construction was completed in 2012, and it opened to the public in 2013. The interior of the building can now be seen and enjoyed by visitors, while they learn about John Jay, his accomplishments, and the history of his farm at Katonah.