

# Homestead celebrates 50th anniversary of dedication

By MARY LEGRAND

Almost 50 years ago — on Sept. 24, 1965, to be exact — the John Jay Homestead Association invited its guests to the dedication ceremonies of the John Jay Homestead on Jay Street in Katonah. As noted on the event invitation, speakers were “the Honorable Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the United States, and the Honorable Nelson A. Rockefeller, Governor of the State of New York, and Others.”

Since then, the home of John Jay, the nation’s first Chief Justice, has attracted visitors from far and wide, and its importance as an historic property continues to this day. The 62-acre property is run by the State of New York and benefits greatly from the strong backing of the Friends of John Jay Homestead organization.

Both are looking forward into a bright future for the Homestead, with an ongoing reinvigoration of Bedford House, the Homestead’s main museum space and John Jay’s retirement home, is called. The first step has been to install a \$1.2 million HVAC system into the historic building, its completion being welcome news because it means the house, after being closed for more than a year, will reopen this May to school groups, visitors and tours.

The reopening happens, by serendipity, to coincide with the Homestead’s 50th



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN JAY HOMESTEAD

**John Jay’s office as it appeared when the Homestead first opened as a public museum 50 years ago. Friends of John Jay Homestead are embarking on a massive house restoration project this spring, with the restoration of this room.**

anniversary year, and plans are afoot to celebrate with a gala party on Saturday, May 2. “In the House,” as the event is called, will be an evening gathering to highlight the house and the plans for continued preservation and restoration. Cocktails will be available throughout the period rooms and their collections, followed by a presentation by the event’s honorary chairman, Leslie Keno of “Antiques Road Show” fame.

According to Heather Langham, who is president of the Friends of John Jay Homestead board of directors, local residents are the reason the Homestead even

exists in its present state. “The community was compelled to rescue the house from demolition 50 years ago,” she said. “We have in the museum’s archives a scrapbook of news clippings, the engraved invitation and other memorabilia from the dedication,” which was attended by many dignitaries, including Chief Justice Warren, Governor Rockefeller and Otto Koenig, the principal figure who saved the house through his formation of the John Jay Homestead Association.

Also in attendance at the 1965 dedication was a “large group of local politicians,

historians, socialites, etc.,” Ms. Langham said. “It was a fairly big deal, with speeches that were given from the front porch to an audience seated on chairs on the lawn.”

This spring’s event, Ms. Langham said, will be equally exciting, and members of the Friends organization hope that everyone puts the May 2 date on their calendars. What they will see then, and afterward when Bedford House reopens to the public on May 6, will be a rejuvenated home, with artifacts repositioned within the house. John Jay’s office will be restored and refurnished, and there will be a new focus on the house tour.

John Jay held more important roles than any other Founding Father, with Thomas Jefferson coming in second. John Jay served as a member of the New York Provincial Congress and as New York State’s first Chief Justice. He served in the federal government as a member of the First and Second Continental Congresses, president of the second Continental Congress, and United States Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of Spain. He was considered the most influential of the American Peace Commissioners for the treaty that ended the Revolutionary War, and achieved British recognition of U.S. independence in what was perhaps his most important accomplishment.

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# Homestead celebrates 50th with upgrades

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Following that, he was the second United States Secretary for Foreign Affairs; a co-author of the Federalist Papers, which argued for adoption of the United States Constitution; the first Chief Justice of the United States; the negotiator of the Jay Treaty, which averted what would have been war with England in the 1790s; and finally, second governor of New York State. He retired to Bedford to live out his life as a gentleman farmer.

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“John Jay Homestead is one of the only two surviving homes of the Founding Fathers in New York state,” Ms. Langham said. “Jay’s family lived in Bedford House from 1801 to 1953; no other family of a Founding Father lived in the family patriarch’s home for as long as that.”

The new house tour will emphasize John Jay’s accomplishments and will begin in his office. The board of directors of the Friends organization has committed \$150,000 to the restoration of that space, Ms. Langham said. “Additional house restoration will proceed room by room as funding becomes available. For each room we hope to put together a committee of individuals who want to become engaged in the particular story told in that particular room. The homes of the Founding Fathers should be in pristine condition — they’re our American heritage, our American story — including our own John Jay Homestead.”

Approximately 60 volunteers have formed an event committee for the “In the House” event, and having Mr. Keno as honorary chairman is an added plus, said Ms. Langham. “He is a real

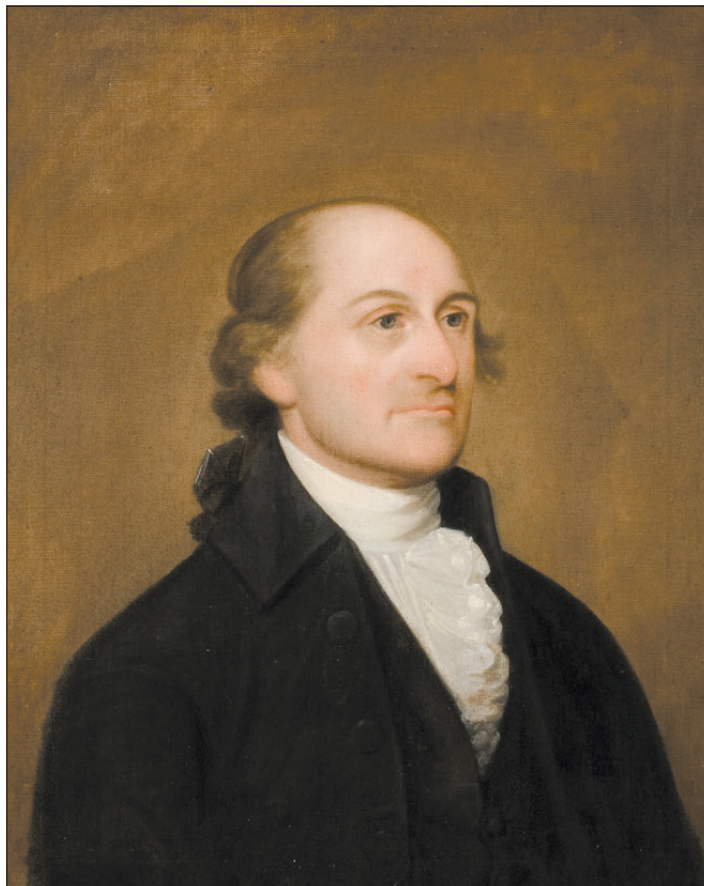


PHOTO COURTESY JOHN JAY HOMESTEAD

**John Jay as painted by John Trumbull, circa 1794. The portrait of John Jay remains at the John Jay historic site.**

intellect and understands the complexity and intricacies of our fascinating American history and the important role that John Jay played. All proceeds from the evening will go to the house restoration project.”

Working alongside the event committee and Friends board will be Ruth Sonshine, executive director of the Friends of John Jay Homestead.

Heather Iannucci is the museum director of John Jay Homestead, which was acquired by New York state in 1959. She oversees the property and all of its buildings, modern and historic, including Bedford House, the main museum building. The house’s heating and cooling system replaces one more than 30 years old.

“The new system will enable

us to create more stable heating, cooling and humidity control,” Ms. Iannucci said. “It’s important for museums to maintain perfect conditions for their collections, which are negatively impacted by fluctuations in temperature and humidity. To the visitor, it means you’re going to be more comfortable, and, it also means you won’t see air conditioners hanging out of windows and distracting from the historic view.”

The HVAC job was part of Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s New York Works project, which, Ms. Iannucci said, “put an unprecedented amount of financial support into parks’ infrastructure. It’s exciting for us.”

While the HVAC work has been in progress, the collections previously kept in Bedford House

have been stored off-site. These pieces will be back in place when the home reopens in May.

“One of the things we’re trying to accomplish with this interpretation is to strengthen the story of John Jay, and part of our change is to make him better known,” Ms. Iannucci said. “Our current interpretation tells a lovely story of the Jay family’s life in the 1820s. We focus on the decorative arts, the differences between the Jays and the servant class, and some of Jay’s political career. His office is the part of the house that relates the most to the man and his personality.”

Future restoration work will involve more than cosmetic changes, Ms. Iannucci said. “At the same time we’re working on the interior of the house, we’ll also be doing work on the exterior. We want to make sure that as we’re progressing through the restoration that we’re stopping all of the problems that created some of the deterioration in the first place. This includes repointing chimneys, putting on chimney caps, fixing flashing and siding issues.”

The Friends of John Jay organization “has done a wonderful job of supporting restoration of the property’s outbuildings, including turning the Carriage Barn into a visitor center in 2013, and prior to that restoring the Red Barn, Draft Horse Barn, School House, potting sheds and a stabilization of our Brick Cottage, one of the earlier buildings,” Ms. Iannucci said. “We’ve decided to return our efforts to the historic Bedford House, which really is our primary artifact here, especially with the 50th anniversary this year and knowing that we now have an appropriate environment for our collection. Now is the time to move forward.”

The Friends of the John Jay Homestead has an executive director, Ruth Sonshine, who can be reached at 232-8119. To contact the John Jay Homestead State Historic Site, call 232-5651.