

# JOHN JAY'S ACCOUNT OF HIS ANCESTORS' EXPERIENCE AS HUGUENOTS

The essay below, written by John Jay for the information of his adult children, tells the story of the Jay family's oppression as Protestants in France, following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by King Louis XIV in 1685. Jay wrote the essay in an undetermined year, while living at Bedford. Unfortunately, he never completed it: he finished the story of his great-grandfather, Pierre Jay, and of his grandfather, Augustus Jay, but left off at the birth of his father, Peter Jay. Nevertheless, the major aspects of the tale, as related to the family's persecution and flight from France, are recorded. What is missing is the story of the family's early life in New York.

The Jays' persecution for their religious convictions had a powerful formative effect on John Jay throughout his life. His grandfather, whose story forms the main part of this narrative, died when John was five, and he probably retained memories of the family patriarch. The knowledge of how his ancestors had suffered informed Jay's sense of public responsibility, and was near the center of his efforts to make the United States a place of freedom.

Jay's son, William, was his first biographer, and William, recognizing the importance of this story, made the following extracts from his father's essay the opening pages of *The Life of John Jay*. As William wrote, "This narrative was evidently intended only for the information and instruction of his children, and contains much that would not be generally interesting. A few extracts, however, from this paper, while they serve as an introduction to an account of the writer himself, will assist in illustrating his character."

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"You have often expressed a wish that I would reduce to writing what information I have respecting our ancestors. I was pleased to find that you desired it; and have often regretted that a succession of affairs, more immediately important, constrained me from time to time to postpone it. My life has been so much a life of business, that idle time has not been among my burdens. In this place of peace and retirement, which a kind Providence has provided for me in my declining years, I for the first time enjoy the sweets of rest and tranquility. Leisure hours begin to increase and I purpose to employ some of them in giving you the information you request.

“When and where we were born, and who were our progenitors, are questions to which certain philosophers ascribe too little importance. It becomes us to be mindful that the great Creator has been pleased to make men social beings; that he established between them various relations, and among others, those which arise from consanguinity; and that to all these relations he has attached particular and corresponding duties. These relations and duties promote the happiness of individuals and families; they pervade and harmonize society, and are subservient to both public and personal welfare.

“How fleeting, how forgetful, how frail is tradition! There are families in this State who are ignorant even of the names of the first of their ancestors who came to this country—they know not whence, or why, or how they came. Between those days and the period of our revolution, the field for biography has become barren—little has been written, and of that little much has been lost by the destruction of papers during the war. The time, however, is approaching when the barren field will be cultivated by genius and by pride; and under the auspices of obscurity (ever friendly to fiction), become fertile in fables.

“My faith in the generality of historical relations of every kind has been gradually declining for these thirty years. On various occasions I have seen accounts of events and affairs which I knew to be incorrect. Not a few of the common and current opinions respecting public men and public transactions are common and current mistakes, designedly countenanced by demagogues to promote party or personal purposes. The time, however, will most certainly come when the world and all that therein is will be purified in a refiner’s fire. It will then be of little importance to us whether our ancestors were splendid or obscure, and whether events and characters have been truly or partially represented, or not represented at all.

“But to return.—I have been informed that our family is of Poictou, in France, and that the branch of it to which we belong removed from thence to Rochelle. Of our ancestors anterior to Pierre Jay, who left France on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, I know nothing that is certain. Pierre Jay was an active and opulent merchant, extensively and profitably engaged in commerce. He married Judith, a daughter of Mons. François, a merchant in Rochelle. One of her sisters married M. Mouchard, whose son was a director of the French East India Company. Pierre Jay had three sons and one daughter. The sons were Francis, who was eldest; Augustus, who was born 23d March, 1665; and Isaac. The daughter’s name was Frances. Mr. Jay seemed to have been solicitous to have one of his sons educated in England. He first sent his eldest son, but he unfortunately died on the passage. Notwithstanding this distressing event, he immediately sent over his son Augustus, who was then only twelve years old. In the year 1683, Mr. Jay recalled Augustus, and sent him to Africa, but to what part or for what purpose is now unknown.

“The troubles and violences that proceeded to revocation of the Edict of Nantes are related in five quarto volumes, entitled ‘Histoire de L’Edit de Nantes,’ which you will find among my books. As those detestable proceedings are amply detailed in that history, I decline taking particular notice of them here. To me it appears extraordinary, that such proceedings did not sooner lead the more discreet and considerate Protestants to foresee

the necessity they would be under of leaving the kingdom, and the prudence of making timely provision for their retreat. Such, however, is human nature. We all know with absolute certainty that we are to pass from this to another world, and yet how few of us prepare for our removal!

“Pursuant to an order passed in January, 1685, the Protestant church at Rochelle was demolished. The ensuing summer a number of troops were marched into the city, and quartered on the Protestant inhabitants, and these troops were soon followed by four companies of dragoons. The attempts made to convert or intimidate Mr. Jay proving fruitless, some of these dragoons were sent to his house to live and act at their discretion. I have not understood that they offered any personal insults to Mr. Jay or his family, but in other respects they behaved as it was intended they should. Such a situation was intolerable, and Mr. Jay lost no time in relieving his family from it. He found means to withdraw them, together with some articles of value, secretly from the house, and succeeded in putting them onboard a vessel which he had engaged for the purpose. They fortunately set sail without being discovered, and were safely landed at Plymouth, in England. He thought it advisable to remain behind, doubtless with the design to save what he could from the wrecks of his fortune.

“It was not long before the absence of his family excited attention, and produced investigations. After some time he was arrested and committed to prison. Being closely connected with some influential Catholics, he was by their interposition and good offices soon set at liberty. At that time some vessels in which he was concerned were expected, and particularly one from Spain, of which he was the sole owner. He determined to effect his escape, if possible, in the first of these vessels that should arrive; and for that purpose instructed a pilot, on whose good-will and attachment he relied, to watch these vessels, and to put the first of them that came in immediately at anchor, at a place agreed upon between them.

“Of the vessels that were expected, the one from Spain was the first that arrived. The pilot instantly went on board, and carried her to the place agreed on, and gave Mr. Jay notice of it. With the aid of this faithful and friendly pilot, proper precautions were taken to prevent discovery, and the moment Mr. Jay got on board she sailed, and carried him to England.

“This ship and her cargo (the principal part of which was iron) belonged wholly to himself, and together with the property sent over with his family, and that now brought over by himself, comprised all that he had saved. What this all amounted to, I have never been informed: it was such, however, as placed him and his family above dependency, and was so managed as that, during the residue of his life, his situation was comfortable.

“As soon as Mr. Jay’s departure was known, his estate in France was seized; and no part of it afterward came to the use of either himself or his children.

“Having escaped from the fury of persecution to a friendly country, nothing remained to excite his anxiety but the fate of his son Augustus, whom he had sent to Africa, and who

would probably arrive without having been apprized of the troubles and flight of his family. This accordingly happened. On his arrival at Rochelle, he found himself in a situation not easy to be described. The persecution was proceeding with increasing severity, and every circumstance and prudential consideration pressed him to decide without delay on the measures proper for him to take and pursue. He determined to remain true to his religion, and to meet the risks and dangers to which it exposed him. The kindness of his friends facilitated every necessary arrangement for his departure from the country, and in a very short time he embarked in a vessel bound to Charleston, in South Carolina. Thus by Divine Providence every member of the family was rescued from the rage and reach of persecution, and enabled to preserve a portion of the property more than adequate to their actual necessities.

“Augustus very properly reflected that his parents had two younger children to provide for, and that it became him to depend on his own exertions. It was his first intention to settle in South Carolina. His education in England, and the knowledge he had acquired of the English language, trade, and manners, had prepared him for living in an English country. The climate of South Carolina, however, made so serious an impression on his health he went to Philadelphia, which he found in such an infant state, that he thought it advisable to go to New-York. With New-York he was much pleased, and found there several refugee families from Rochelle. His first employment was that of supercargo, and he continued in it for several years. His parents found themselves relieved from anxiety about his welfare, and with great satisfaction observed his industry and promising prospects. The time, however, was approaching when the course of life proper for their younger son was to be determined and provided for. He, it seems, preferred a military life; and his passion for it was exceedingly excited by the forming a regiment of French refugees in England to serve a Protestant king against a popish competitor. Isaac solicited the consent of his parents with so much earnestness, that it was at length obtained. He joined his regiment as a volunteer, and was with it at the battle of the Boyne, in 1690. He received several wounds; and returning to his father, lingered for some months, and died.

“In the year 1692 certain commercial affairs at Hamburgh induced Augustus to take a passage in a vessel bound from New-York to that place. The vessel was captured by a privateer from St. Maloes, and carried into that port. He with other prisoners was sent to a fortress about fifteen miles from St. Maloes. He was in that fortress when the news of the battle of La Hogue arrived there. Orders were thereupon given that the prisoners should that evening be put and kept in close custody. By negligence or accident the prisoners became informed of this order. Augustus and another prisoner agreed to attempt making their escape. The day had been wet and boisterous, and in the evening the rain and wind increased. Before the time when they expected to be called, they found means to conceal themselves, so that when the other prisoners were carried to the places in which they were to be closely confined, these two remained without. Favoured by the darkness and the storm, they eluded the vigilance of the sentinels, and proceeded to the part of the wall which they had agreed on. There Augustus let himself drop into the ditch, and received no material injury. His companion did not join him: whether he changed his mind or was stunned by the fall is uncertain. Augustus took the road to Rochelle, and so managed as not to arrive there till the next evening, and at a late hour repaired to his aunt Mouchard,

by whom he was kindly received and secreted; and afterward, through her address and management, he was privately conveyed to the Isle of Rhè, where a vessel ready to sail for Denmark received him. He arrived safe in Denmark. On his return he went to Holland, and from thence to England to visit his father and sister. Much to the grief and loss of the family his mother had lately died, and he found his father and sister deeply affected by it. This was the first time they had met since they fled from France. The excitements to sensibility were numerous, and it was natural that on such an occasion the tears of grief should mingle with those of joy. The affairs and engagements of Augustus constrained him to return speedily to America; and it was not long before he was obliged to take leave of his father and sister. With what emotions they bade each other a *last* farewell may easily be conceived. How much has persecution to answer for!

“In 1697 Augustus married, at New-York, Ann Maria, a daughter of Mr. Balthazar Bayard. The ancestor of this gentleman was a Protestant professor of theology at Paris in the reign of Lewis the 13<sup>th</sup>, and who had been compelled by the persecuting spirit of the popery to quit his country, and go with his wife and children to Holland. Three of his grandsons, of whom Mr. Balthazar Bayard was one, afterward removed from Holland to America. By his marriage Augustus became encircled with friends who, from their situations, were able, and from the attachment to consanguinity (for which our Dutch families were always remarkable), were disposed to promote his interest as a merchant, and his social happiness as a man. He no sooner found himself settled and his prospects fair, than he represented the prosperous state of affairs to his father and sister, and earnestly pressed them to come over and participate in it. But his father thought himself far too advanced in age to undertake the voyage, and no considerations could have prevailed on his excellent daughter to leave him.

“From what has been said, you will observe with pleasure and with gratitude how kindly and how amply Providence was pleased to provide for the welfare of our ancestor Augustus. Nor was his case a solitary or singular instance. The beneficent care of Heaven appears to have been evidently and remarkably extended to all those persecuted exiles. Strange as it may seem, I never heard of one of them who asked or received alms; nor have I any reason to suspect, much less to believe, that any of them came to this country in destitute condition. The number of refugees who settled here was considerable. They did not disperse or settle in different parts of the country, but formed three societies and or congregations; one in the city of New-York, another at the Paltz, and the third at a town which they purchased and called *New-Rochelle*. At New-Rochelle they built two churches, and lived in great tranquility: none of them became rich, but they all lived comfortably.

“Augustus Jay, after having had three daughters, was on 3d November, 1704, blessed with a son, whom, in honour of his father, he named Peter...”

Transcription by Cody Nager