

# John Jay and the American Revolution





John Jay was one of America's principal Founding Fathers. Jay held more roles in the government than any other founder and served in both the New York State and Federal governments. In 1774 Jay was working as a lawyer in New York City when he first became active in early revolutionary actions.

Jay's first role during the revolution was as a member of the New York Committee of Correspondence, serving as its secretary in 1774.

Committees of Correspondence were the American colonies' first institution for maintaining communication with one another. They were organized in the decade before the Revolution, when the deteriorating relationship with Great Britain made it increasingly important for the colonies to share ideas and information.



Battle of Bunker Hill

Jay represented the conservative faction of the committee that was interested in protecting property rights and in preserving the rule of law. He acknowledged British violations of American rights, but hoped for a peaceful resolution. However, events including the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Boston Massacre and the burning of Norfolk pushed Jay toward supporting independence.

Jay evolved into first a moderate, and then an ardent Patriot, after all attempts to reconcile with Britain were unsuccessful. He then became wholly dedicated to the revolutionary cause.



John Jay is often credited with being the father of American counterintelligence. As the head of the Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies, it was Jay's responsibility to prevent intelligence gathering by enemy forces, recruit and direct spies, and conduct trials of captured British agents.

One of Jay's early jobs during the revolution was to attend social functions and look for suspicious activity. One such activity was the drinking of tea; and on more than one occasion Jay reported ladies who were seen drinking it.

It was thought that if one was openly drinking tea they were clearly loyal to the king and to England since colonists who were in favor of independence were boycotting the beverage.





Jay also believed that the government had great discretion when it came to matters of intelligence and national security. In response to George Washington's suggestion that information about intelligence victories be revealed to the public as a way to raise moral, Jay responded,

*“The intelligence alluded to, is unfortunately of such a nature as to render Secrecy necessary.”*

March 3, 1779



John Jay was a devoutly religious man. Raised in the Anglican church, Jay focused on religion and religious freedoms for most of his life.

John's paternal grandfather Augustus had been a Huguenot who fled France in the late 17th century. French protestants suffered heavy persecution at the hands of the church and the government.

After arriving in America, Augustus joined the Anglican church.



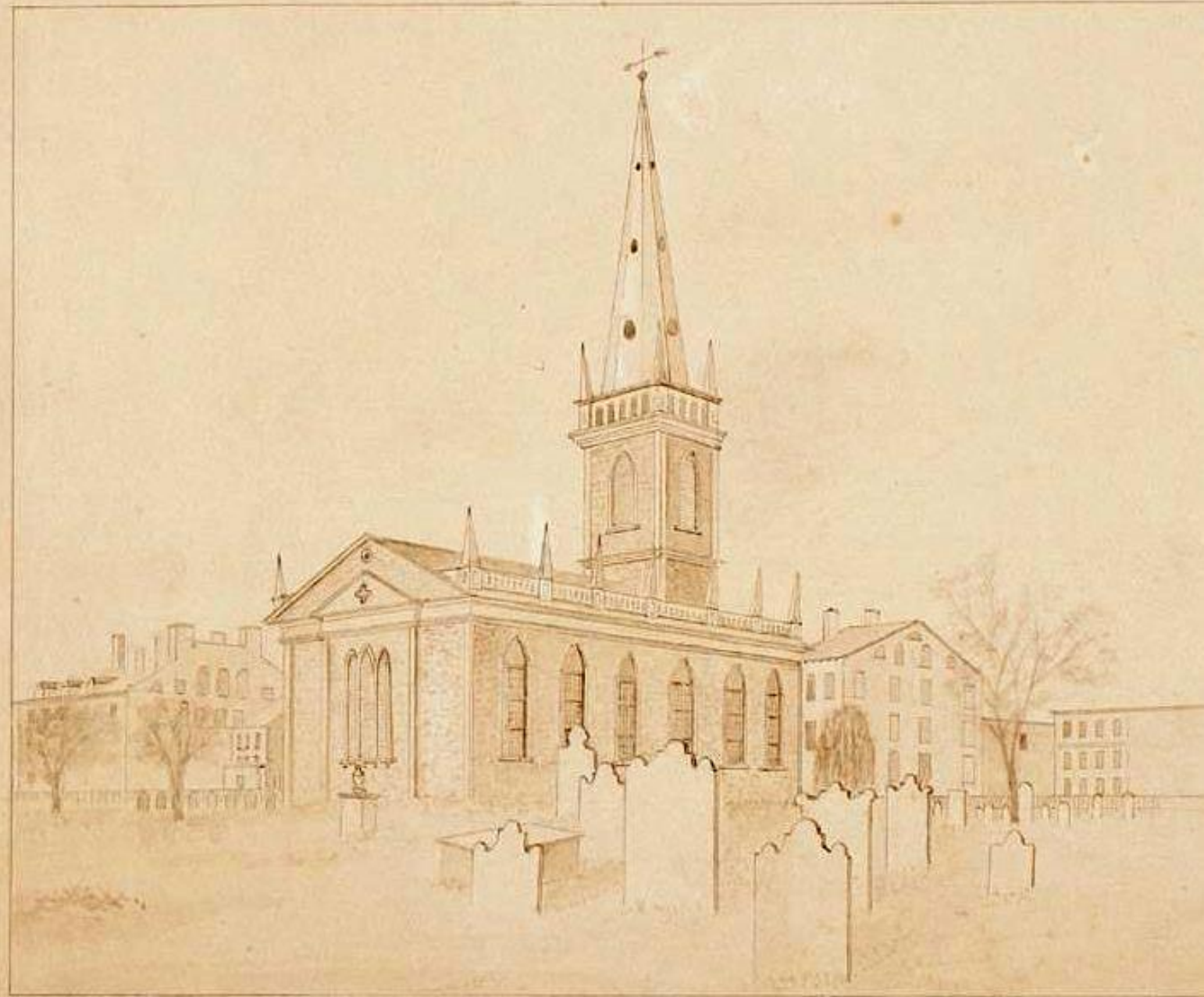
Augustus Jay



During the revolution, Jay was instrumental in New York State politics and was the principal author of its constitution in 1777. When the draft left committee and was submitted to the floor of the state legislature it called for “*the free toleration of religious professionals and worship be forever allowed with in this state to all mankind.*”

Jay felt that was too broad and that religious freedom should not be extended to sects whose doctrines were, “*inconsistent with the safety of civil society.*”

When that motion did not pass, Jay went even further calling for it to be the state’s right to deprive citizens of land ownership or participation in government unless they took an oath of allegiance to the state stating that no pope or priest or other body had more authority then New York. This motion was swiftly rejected.



OLD TRINITY 1790-1859.





*His Excellency JOHN JAY President of Congress  
& Minister Plenipotentiary from Congress at Madrid.*

*Pub.<sup>d</sup> May 15<sup>th</sup> 1783, by R. Wilkinson N<sup>o</sup> 58, Cornhill, London.*

John Jay held a variety of positions during the American Revolution. However, his most significant contributions came while he was serving as a diplomat.

From 1779-1783 Jay traveled in Europe on behalf of the United States government trying to solicit funds and support for the revolution. Jay spent two years in Spain trying to get funding. He was never able to secure an audience with the king and was not recognized as a representative from a foreign nation. Overall the trip was a failure.



After the unsuccessful trip to Spain, Jay and his wife were sent to Paris. Jay had been appointed by the congress to serve as a negotiator of a peace treaty with Britain. The Jays adapted well to life in France. Sarah Jay, John's wife, enjoyed the culture, the society and being around her fellow Americans. She wrote:

*“Among all the pleasures which Paris affords ( & they are not few) none of them gratify me like the frequent opportunity of seeing my Countrymen.”*

Sarah Jay to Kitty Livingston,  
December 14, 1782







There was a great dichotomy with the call to arms of the revolution; particularly pertaining to slavery. Many colonists viewed themselves as slaves; deprived of liberty by their mother country. Many made these claims while they continued to own slaves themselves.

Once the war began, slaves in New York had some leverage. They could demand freedom for loyal service or if denied, flee to the British army for asylum. Both sides used black soldiers in war. By the time the Patriot forces were victorious at the Battle of Yorktown, more than 4,000 black soldiers served in the Continental Army.

It is estimated that the British evacuated 14,000 former slaves from the United States between 1775-1783. The British government offered slaves their freedom at the end of the war if they ran away from their American masters and joined the British army. At least two Jay family slaves joined the British army.



NEW-YORK, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1783.

THIS is to certify to whomsoever it may concern, that the Bearer hereof

*Cato Hammsay*

a Negro, resorted to the British Lines, in consequence of the Proclamations of Sir William Howe, and Sir Henry Clinton, late Commanders in Chief in America ; and that the said Negro has hereby his Excellency Sir Guy Carleton's Permission to go to Nova-Scotia, or wherever else *He* may think proper.

*By Order of Brigadier General Birch,*

*The Book of Negroes* is a document created by Brigadier General Samuel Birch that recorded names and descriptions of 3,000 enslaved Africans who escaped to the British lines during the American Revolution. After the war they were evacuated to points in Nova Scotia as free people of color.

*The Book of Negroes* lists Peter Robinson, who was a slave that belonged to John Jay's brother Fredrick. Pete was evacuated from New York City to Nova Scotia on October 31, 1783.

It also lists a slave named Massey who ran away and joined the Wagon Master General's Department. Massey was a slave that belonged to John Jay. Massey boarded a ship to Nova Scotia on November 19, 1783.

John Jay grew up in a slave owning environment that continued to flourish during the American Revolution.

Despite frequent calls to use governmental authority to end slavery, Jay owned slaves before, during, and after the American Revolution.

When the Jays left for Europe in 1779 they took with them a slave named Abbe, who served as Sarah Jay's personal maid. Abbe belonged to the Livingston family and had been with Sarah for many years.

Sarah Jay wrote:

*“The attention and proofs of fidelity which we have received from Abbe, demands, and ever shall have my acknowledgement.”*

August 28, 1780



When the Jays arrived in France in 1782 Abbe helped run the household and care for the children.

Slavery was a controversial topic in France. Many parts of France, Paris in particular, upheld the Freedom Principle.

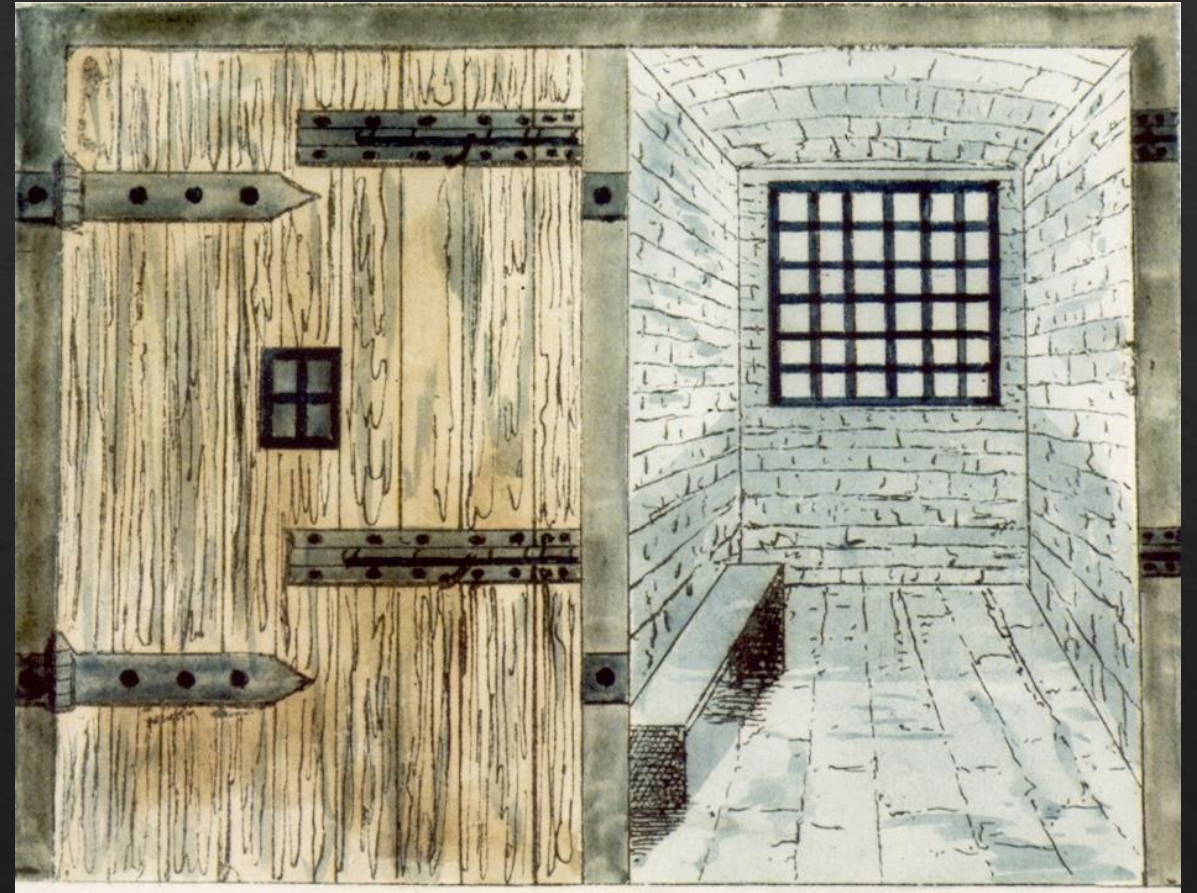
The Freedom Principle had been around in France for hundreds of years. In Paris, slaves could request their freedom from their masters. If denied, they could go to the Admiralty Court and file a petition for their freedom. This policy was well known to slave owners and slaves.

Over the course of the 18th century, the Parisian court granted every freedom petition that came before them.



In late 1783, Abbe ran away from the Jay household. She was having trouble with a nanny the Jays had hired. Abbe felt that her position in the house was being overlooked and that the white French woman the Jays hired was given more respect. Abbe decided to leave the Jays; she was promised paid work from an English washer woman.

John Jay was in England at the time and Sarah sought out Benjamin Franklin's advice on how to handle the situation. Franklin used his prominence to get Abbe thrown in jail in the hopes of "teaching her a lesson."





Despite frequent requests to return to the Jay home, Abbe chose to remain in jail. She stated she would only return once the French woman was removed from the household. In her letters, Sarah Jay could not comprehend why Abbe would choose to stay in prison and not come home.

After becoming ill in prison and not recovering, Abbe agreed to return to the Jay house. Abbe's health never improved, and she died a short time later.

While Jay served in many capacities during the war, he is most widely recognized as one of the chief negotiators of the Treaty of Paris. After the Battle of Yorktown, England began peace negotiations with the colonies. Jay had been appointed a peace commissioner by the Continental Congress before leaving for Europe in 1779.

The other commissioners were John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens and Thomas Jefferson. All the men were involved in the negotiations except Jefferson. He never left Virginia.



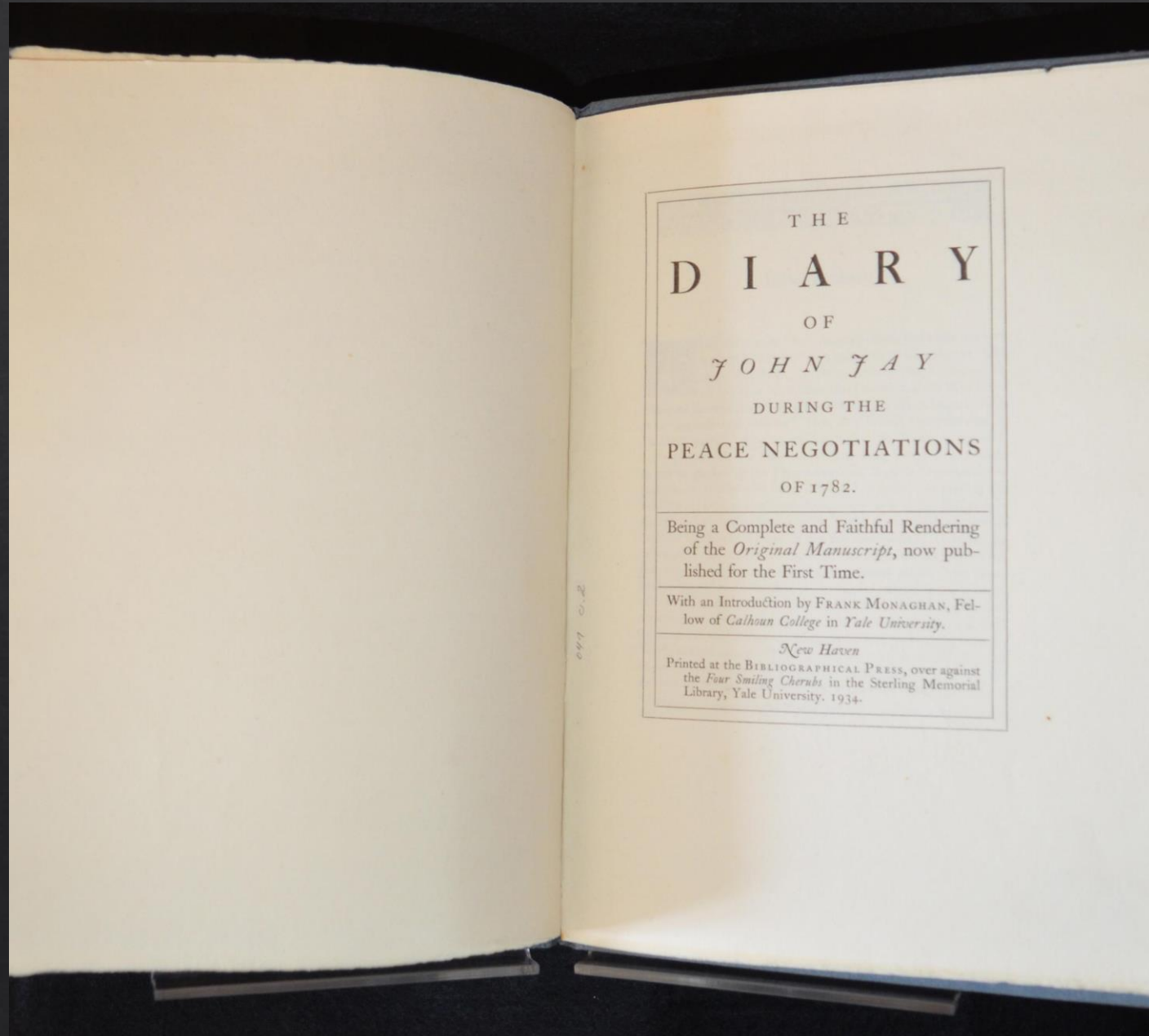




Negotiations began in April 1782 and involved Great Britain, The United States and France. In September 1782, French Foreign Minister Vergennes proposed that The United States would gain its independence but be confined to the area east of the Appalachian Mountains and Britain would take the area north of the Ohio River. In the area south of that would be an independent Indian state under Spanish control.

The Americans strongly opposed this suggestion from their ally and realized that they could get a better deal directly from England. Removing the French from negotiations went directly against the orders from congress, but the commissioners felt it was the only move.

John Jay promptly told the British that he was willing to negotiate directly with them, cutting off France and Spain. The British Prime Minister, Lord Shelburne agreed seizing the opportunity to make the new country a valuable economic partner.





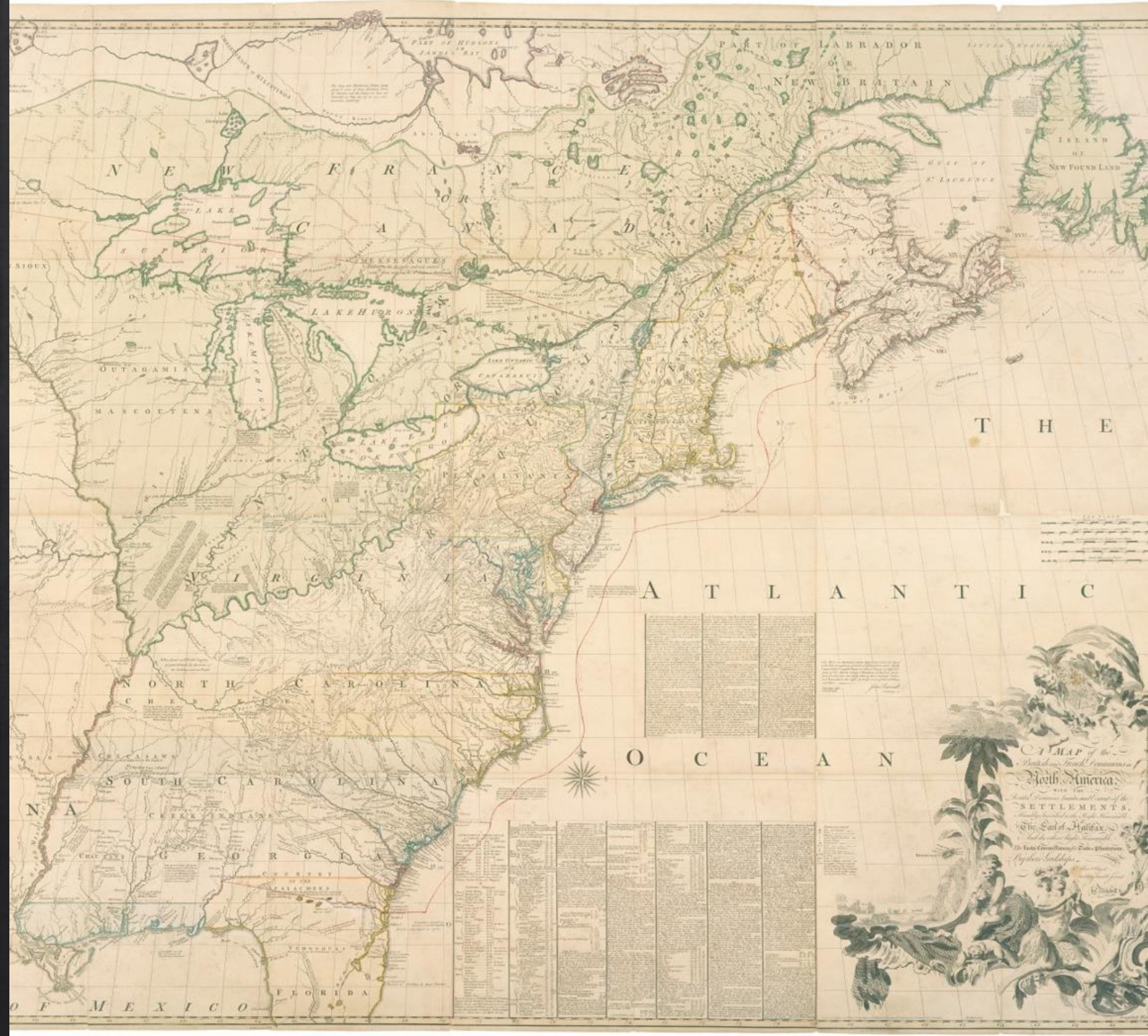
*“As an American I feel an interest in the dignity of my country, which renders it difficult for me to reconcile myself to the idea of the sovereign independent states of America, submitting in the persons of their ministers to be absolutely governed by the advice and opinions of the servants of another sovereign, especially in a case of such national importance.”*

John Jay to President of the Congress (Thomas McKean)  
September 20, 1781



The Treaty of Paris is the document that established the United States as its own country. The negotiations were lengthy; with the majority of the terms pertaining to land rights and debt repayment. This included navigation rights to the Mississippi for both parties, fishing rights for the United States off of the Great Banks in Nova Scotia and that that the property of Loyalists would no longer be confiscated, and all debts owed to either side would be repaid.

It also required Britain to acknowledge the United States to be free, sovereign, and independent states, and that the British Crown and all heirs and successors relinquish claims to the Government, property, and territorial rights of the same, and every part thereof. This is the only article of the treaty (Article 1), that remains in effect today.







The treaty was signed on September 3, 1783 by John Jay, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin for the Americans, and David Hartley for the British.  
The United States Congress of the Confederation ratified the Treaty of Paris on January 14, 1784.