

Sarah Jay, the true first lady of fashion

By JOYCE CORRIGAN

It was in 1787 that Sarah Jay had her first Jackie O moment. Her husband, John, was Secretary for Foreign Affairs and, as New York City's supreme hostess — and eventual Bedford resident — she had just thrown her umpteenth dinner to lobby the day's most important politicians. The next day Abigail Adams Smith, in a letter to her mother, sniffed, “Mrs. Jay dresses showily ... and the dinner was a la Française with more European taste than I expected to find.”

Two hundred years later, puritanical views of First Lady style proceed apace. Jacqueline Kennedy's obsession with pricy Parisian couturiers was famously criticized during the 1960 presidential campaign, as was her alleged annual \$30,000 clothing budget (Ms. Kennedy denied the claims, noting, “I couldn't spend that much if I wore sable underwear.”) Michelle Obama was known for J Crew cardigans, but caught flak the day she wore \$600 Lanvin sneakers to a food bank; and for a recent Beijing visit, Melania Trump wowed in a body-hugging, mink-trimmed Chinese-style Gucci dress, although her decision to strap on Louboutin stilettos to view Hurricane Harvey floods was a misstep that went viral.

Like these modern independent-minded trendsetters, Sarah Jay also stood her style ground. She understood what none of the other Founding Mothers did: the wife of an important political leader will always be seen as a reflection of the political office itself and, when on the world stage, a symbol of American power and prestige. John Jay was the nation's first Chief Justice and New York's second governor, making Sarah New York's second First Lady. Given the historical context of the 18th century, when women weren't even voting, much less holding office, diplomatic hostess and high-profile political companion was as big a role as women could play.

Sarah Jay played it bigger than most. A cache of Jay family heirlooms that attest to her inimitable style and charisma are on view as part of the John Jay Homestead's March 1 tour, “Women of the Jay Family,” which kicks off Women's History Month.

Sarah Jay's fashion choices were always political, whether the opulent ancien régime corsets, colorful satins and powdered wigs she wore when presented at Versailles, or the simple white cotton chemise she later adopted in New York that reflected the country's embrace of neoclassical Republican values. The late century Greek-inspired Empire style she adopted was deliberately pared down and pastoral, but she always managed to put her sophisticated spin on it with strategically placed ruffles and beribboned hats.

“A few of her Revolutionary era peers could be quite snarky about Sarah's glamour,” according to Melissa Vail, chair of the John Jay Homestead Scholars. “We think of Abigail Adams scrubbing the floors of her farmhouse, determined to give the impression of being anti-fashion and homespun.” Sarah Jay, who grew up the daughter of the first governor of New Jersey, studying French and the Classics and acting as her father's personal secretary, knew style and elegance was a useful tool. “This was never truer than when she was working to support her country diplomatically abroad,” added Vail, noting that it was crucial to gain French and Spanish support after the Revolutionary War.” Sarah Jay, of course, acquired her “a la Française” effects in France when she — the only Founding Mother to do so — accompanied her husband, the chief peace negotiator, across the Atlantic, when ocean voyages were treacherous, to say the least. The journey was all the more extraordinary as Ms. Jay was leaving at home a 6-year-old son and was also pregnant. She came into her own in Paris, hanging out with her besties Benjamin Franklin and the Marquise de la Fayette; Ms. Jay would soon earn the nickname “la belle Americaine”.

If we could beam Instagram back to Sarah Jay's day she would have had a million followers. There would have been several posts that captured that first 1779 ocean voyage, when rough seas and high winds caused the loss of several masts and the bowsprit. Ms. Jay chose to recount the trauma cheerfully focusing on how Mr. Jay rose to the occasion: (“It is the property of a Diamond...to appear most brilliant in the dark...in the gloomy hour of adversity.”) Another day the ship was chased by an enemy British frigate as she watched from the deck. How could she not post from the Paris Opera the night she was mistaken for Marie Antoinette? Or from Versailles when she and Ben Franklin and everyone in Paris who mattered witnessed the maiden voyage of the Montgolfier brothers' hot air balloon — the first recorded instance of human flight? Years later, the Jays settled on their property in Bedford, she surely would post the progress of the new house about which she wrote: “I can truly say I have never enjoyed so



PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN JAY HOMESTEAD

Two 18th century Balloon chairs made in the style of Louis XVI furniture master Jean-Baptiste Bernard Dema can be found in the bedroom of Sarah Jay's daughter, Nancy.

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PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN JAY HOMESTEAD

A portrait of Sarah Jay with two of her six children.

much comfort as I do here.”

One of the Homestead's most remarkable — if nano-sized — treasures is the 1783 miniature portrait attributed as “after Alexander Roslin,” a protégé of Rococo master Francois Boucher. It's painted on ivory and encased in a tortoiseshell locket containing a lock of John Jay's own hair. The wig, the gown, the regal comportment — it's obvious why Sarah Jay was mistaken for Her Highness the fashion addict. Yet she was no Antoinette wannabe, said Sarah Jones, the Homestead's interpretation coordinator,

who will be leading the March tour. “Given that the French loved to expose imposters, she had to be on her toes at all times. That she was regularly received in the highest Parisian circles proves she passed the test,” Jones noted. It didn't hurt that Sarah Jay arrived looking the part, knowing how to curtsy and to converse in adequate French. “Sarah understood she was in the Old World representing the New World,” added Jones. “She was personifying the colonies.” Ms. Jay also understood that what may have been in vogue at Versailles — the over-the-top, perfumed, peri-wigged style — was at odds with the principles of the American Revolution. She confessed in a letter to a friend that she couldn't help but be completely taken in by the sight at the theater of the spectacularly dressed Antoinette. “She is so handsome & her manners are so engaging, that almost forgetful of republican principles, I was ever ready while in her presence to declare her born to be a queen...”

Sarah Van Brugh Livingston Jay was hardly a country bumpkin. Born in New York City in 1756 to a wealthy, politically charged household, she was the daughter of William Livingston, staunch patriot and, as New Jersey governor, signer of the Constitution. She was popular and spirited, and even played Kate in a private production of “Taming of the Shrew.” Her beauty and brains made her the toast of New York before she was introduced to the love of her life, the Columbia (then Kings College) educated lawyer John Jay. So much did her husband come to rely on Ms. Jay's judgment that the Homestead's Collections Manager Arthur Benware believes it's “safe to assume” that the pale green silk court suit John wore in 1782 when Franklin introduced him to Louis XVI's Foreign Minister — another of the Homestead's remarkable treasures — was Sarah's sartorial influence. The suit was a far cry from the images we see of the usually soberly attired Founding Father.

The “It bags” of the 18th century were handheld folded fans, and the Homestead is thrilled to exhibit Ms. Jay's personal, hand-painted favorite. Thrillingly, it shows signs of wear where she held it. “Sarah would have picked this up in Paris and we're lucky it survived the trip back to the States in such good condition,” said Jones. The fan served a practical purpose in pre-air conditioning days, particularly since Sarah was very often fulfilling her diplomatic duties while expecting — she had six children. “A watercolor on paper, with ivory sticks, it's a splendid example of Rococo style,” remarked Jones, “and truly a luxury item for the 20-something Sarah who had to get it right when taking tea with the hypercritical French.”

Ms. Jay's refined taste would have extended to décor and entertaining, too. While she herself didn't sail back from Europe with the Homestead's two 18th century commemorative Balloon chairs made in the style of Louis XVI furniture master Jean-Baptiste Bernard Dema, her family bought them for the Bedford house to pay homage to the historical flight she witnessed. The chairs can be found in her daughter Nancy's bedroom as Nancy was born in Paris during that time.

Surely the Homestead's most fragile heirloom is Ms. Jay's handwritten Dinner List, recording various VIPs who dined at the Jays' New York home on lower Broadway. She hosted dinners almost every Tuesday night for almost two years. Some historians consider the Dinner List the most famous American “society” document of the 18th century. Attention to etiquette was Ms. Jay's forte, and each guest was accorded their proper title whether “chevalier” or chancellor. Chevalier Jones, in fact, was John Paul Jones. Several of these evenings, it is believed, aimed to promote the ratification of the Constitution, the substance of the Federalist Papers of which John Jay was a key author. Look closely and you'll see a few of the major players in the Revolution: Hamilton, Madison, Morris, Pinckney and Bingham. William Bingham, a Philadelphia federalist, helped establish the first Bank of the United States and gave John Jay the walking stick on display at the Homestead, further proof of the power of the Jay style.

Bringing opposing politicians together to collaborate to move the young nation forward was a rare skill, to be sure, but Sarah Jay mastered it. In these turbulent times, couldn't we use more of her gifts, glamour and grit?



Sarah Jay depicted in a miniature on display at the John Jay Homestead.