



Slaves, Anti-Slavery, and Five Generations of Jays

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The story of the Jay family, their slaves, and the way the generations of the Jays acted in response to slavery is complex, a subject this exhibit can only open small windows upon. Yet the glimpses of the past these stories give are enlightening, and in many cases, even surprising. Most of all, they can be a springboard toward developing a deeper understanding of all of the people who are part of this story: the Jays, the slaves, and the many people who strived to end slavery in America.

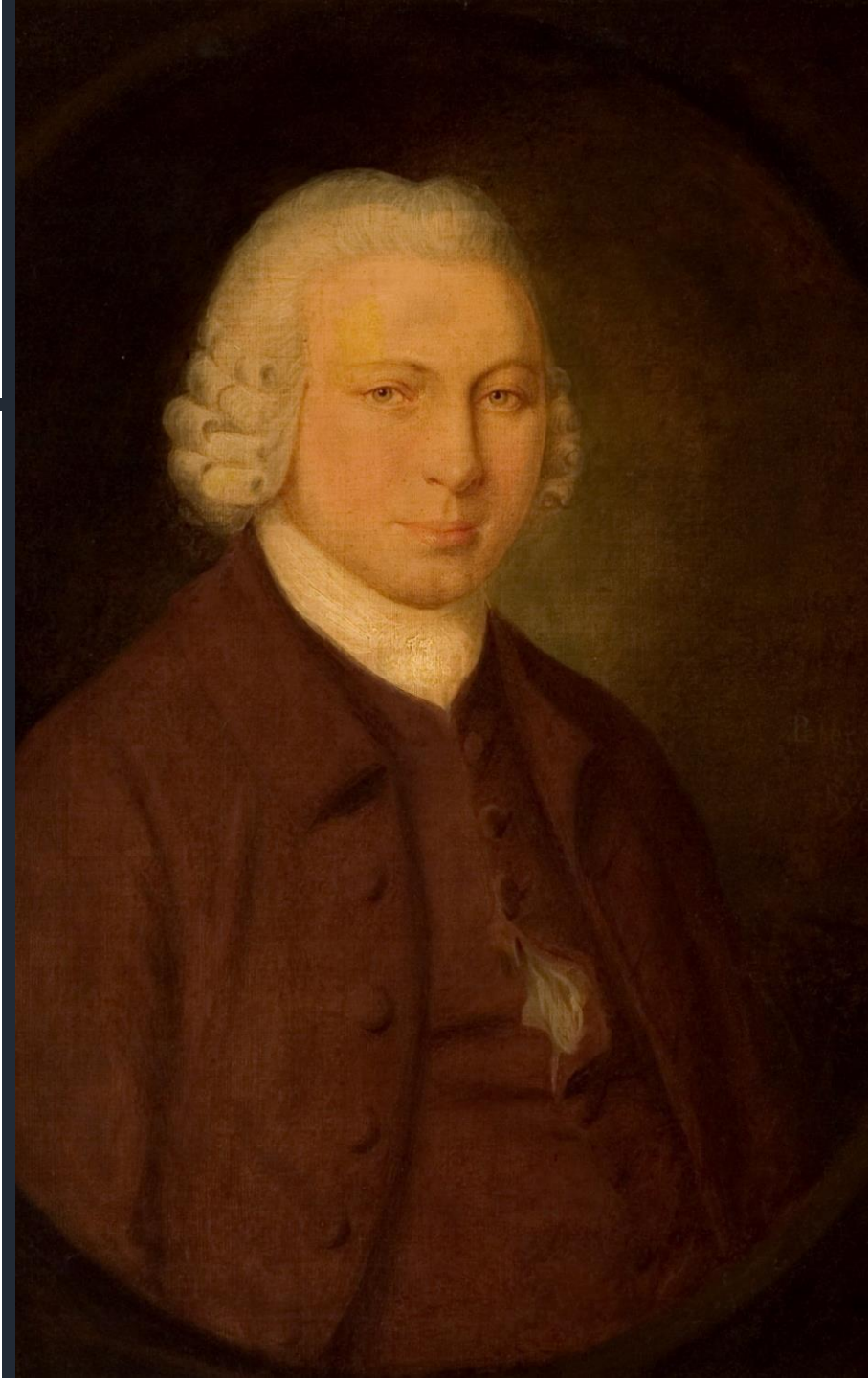


Augustus Jay (1665-1751)

Augustus Jay was born in France into a family of sea traders. After coming to America, he was employed by Frederick Philipse, who traded in commodities ranging from rum and spices to cloth and slaves.

Peter Jay (1704-1782)

Peter Jay was a successful merchant in New York who retired to a farm he owned at Ry in 1745. He had about twelve slaves, including Zilpha, Mary, Clarinda, Hannah, Moll, Phoebe, Frank, Claas, Anthony, London, and Plato.





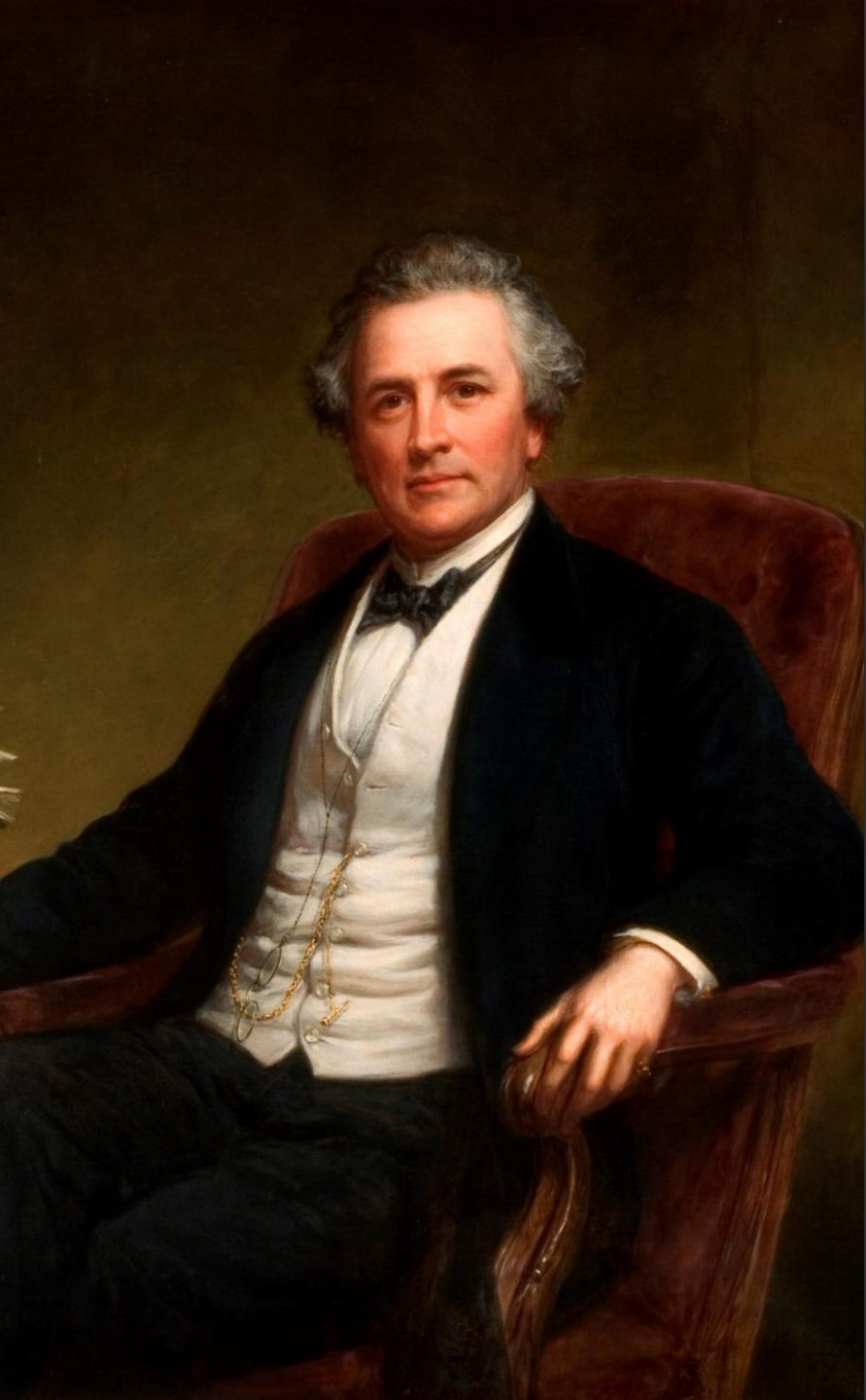
John Jay (1745-1829)

John Jay grew up in a slave-owning household. His father gave him Claas, and left him Plato and Pete in his will. His wife was given Abby by her father. Jay purchased other slaves, including Benoit, Yaff, Dinah, and Phillis.

William Jay (1789-1858)

William Jay spent his childhood in the company of his parent's slaves. As an adult, he was one of America's leading abolitionists. He worked with other abolitionists, including Gerrit Smith and David Ruggles.





John Jay II (1817-1894)

John Jay II continued his father's work as an abolitionist. He defended runaway slaves as a lawyer, and spent nine years helping St. Philip's Church, a black congregation, in its struggle to gain admission to the Protestant Episcopal Convention.

Slavery and the First Generations of the Jays in America

Augustus Jay, John Jay's grandfather, emigrated to the British colony of New York in 1686. His family had been sea traders in France, shipping between Europe, Africa, and India. After coming to America, Augustus went to work for Frederick Philipse, a major trader, as supercargo, stocking Philipse's ships, supervising the sale of their cargo, and handling the sailors' payrolls. Philipse traded in many kinds of goods, including spices and textiles, but as he once wrote, "It is by negroes that I finde my cheivest Proffitt. All other trade I only look upon as by the by."

In 1745, Augustus's son, Peter Jay, moved to a large farm at Rye, where he lived with his wife, ten children (including his son, John), and about a dozen slaves. That was an unusually large number in the North: most slave owners in the colony of New York only possessed two or three.

At his death, Peter Jay left his slaves to his children. His will stipulated, "I leave to my son John, my negro slave 'Peter'," and also, "My two negro women, Zilpha and Mary, in consideration of long service, are to have their choice of masters among my sons." After Peter's death, Zilpha was given her freedom, and remained in Rye, working for Peter's son, Peter Jr., as a paid employee.

In my opinion, every man of color and description has a natural right to freedom, and I shall ever acknowledge myself to be an advocate for the manumission of slaves in such way as may be consistent with the justice due to them, with the justice due to their master, and with the regard due to the actual state of society. These considerations unite in convincing me that the abolition of slavery must be gradual”

- John Jay, 1792



Slave Owner and An Advocate for Emancipation: John Jay's Conflicted Record on Slavery

From as early as 1777 until at least 1817, John Jay favored working toward an end to slavery while continuing to own, purchase, rent, and sell slaves. Around the time the first New York State Constitution was adopted, he expressed his wish for a provision to end domestic slavery in New York, a motion he had made during the constitutional deliberations, but which did not survive to the final document.

In 1779, Jay traveled to Spain as a diplomat, accompanied by his wife and her slave, Abby. At a stopover in Martinique, he purchased a fifteen-year old boy named Benoit. Five years later, in France, Jay drew up a conditional manumission document for Benoit, granting him his freedom if he would continue to work an additional three years. In it, Jay wrote, "The Children of Men are by Nature equally free, and cannot without Injustice be either reduced to, or held in Slavery..." It appears that Benoit was freed in France, however; he did not accompany the Jays back to America in 1784.

In 1785, Jay co-founded and became first president of the New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, an organization that worked to convince the New Yorker legislature to end slavery in the state. Years later, as governor of New York, Jay signed the Gradual Emancipation Law of 1799, which slowly began the process of ending slavery in New York by providing for the eventual freedom of children born into slavery after July 4 of that year.

Yet Jay still continued to own slaves. In 1798, he wrote, "I have three male and three female slaves...I purchase slaves, and manumit them at proper ages, and when their faithful services shall have afforded a reasonable retribution" – in other words, after he considered them to have paid for themselves through their labor. John Jay's mixed record was a result of the conflict between his desire for financial expediency and his principles.

A Path to Freedom: Manumission

Manumission was a process that provided freedom for a slave through an act by the slave owner. A slave who was being manumitted might get his or her freedom immediately, or might be required to work for their owner for a period of years, the premise being that the value of the slave's labor would function as repayment for his or her worth as property.

Laws like New York's Gradual Emancipation Law of 1799 set the maximum number of years affected slaves had to work before their freedom would come. Under that law, boys born after July 4, 1799 had to be freed upon reaching their 28th birthday, while for girls it would be their 25th birthday. The male slaves were required to work longer than female slaves, because they were worth more money on the basis of their ability to perform more strenuous work. The Gradual Emancipation Law of 1799 did not promise freedom to any slave in New York born before July 4th of that year.

Slaves, Slavery, and the Jay Family

Relatively little is known of the lives of the Jays' slaves. There are no portraits to show us what any of them looked like. None of them left any writings of their own. A number of slaves are mentioned in Jay family letters, in statements that usually give little sense of these people as individuals. But in a few cases, there are records of them that reveal something of their personalities and what they cared about.

Abby

Abby had been a slave in the family of John Jay's wife. She accompanied John and Sarah Jay to Europe when Jay went there in 1779 as a diplomat during the Revolutionary War. While in Spain, Sarah wrote her mother, "you can hardly imagine how useful she is to us, for indeed, her place could not be supplied, at least not here." In November 1782, while they were living in Paris, Abby felt antagonized by a paid servant the Jays had hired in France. After she was offered a paying job as a washerwoman, she ran away from the Jay household, and was arrested and jailed, although slavery had been outlawed in France. The Jays offered Abby the chance to be released from jail, if she would come back to them and "behave well." She refused at first, saying "she was very happy where she was for that she had nothing to do." Jay, who regarded her running away as "a measure for which I cannot conceive of a Motive," left her in prison to reconsider her decision, following advice given him by Benjamin Franklin. Later, after becoming ill on account of harsh conditions in the jail, Abby changed her mind and returned to the Jays. Not long after coming back to their household, she died, apparently from pneumonia. Jay wrote, "I lament Abbys Death. It would have given me great Pleasure to have restored her in Health to our own Country."

Chester Tillotson's Son

Chester Tillotson was a free man who was a paid employee of John Jay during the 1810s. His nine-year-old son, Chester Jr., however, was a slave in the possession of a man named Launcelot G. McDonald. Tillotson and Jay made an arrangement: Jay advanced Tillotson his son's purchase price—\$100—in order to allow him to buy Chester Jr. from McDonald. Tillotson then repaid Jay's loan through a portion of his wages.

Caesar

Caesar was a slave who belonged to John Jay's son, Peter Augustus. The family considered him difficult, and hired him out as a sailor; slaves were often rented out for the owner's profit in this period. In 1800, Peter Augustus wrote his father, "Caesar who left me the year before last has sent me a Message by another black man who delivered it to Mrs. Masseys just before my Return that he had gone a sailor to Cape Française where he was impressed & is now a Drummer in Toussaint's Army, that he is very ill used, & extremely desirous to return to me –" François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture was a former slave and military leader who brought an end to slavery in Haiti in 1793, and later expelled the British from the island. Somehow, Caesar was forced into his army as a conscript.

A man named Caesar later worked for the family at their farm in Rye, where he inadvertently killed a man who had been allowed to enter the family house, and then put up an argument after he was refused permission to stay overnight. It is uncertain if this was the same Caesar who had been in Haiti. This Caesar obtained his freedom in 1824. In Peter Augustus Jay's will, he bequeathed Caesar Valentine, "a black man, long a servant in my family," a small annuity, and requested that his children "not to let him suffer, if, through age or infirmity, he should be unable to support himself with comfort."

Benoit

Familiarly called “Ben,” Benoit was “a very fine negroe Boy of 15 years old” when he was purchased by John Jay in Martinique in 1779, while the Jays were on their way to Europe for Jay’s diplomatic mission. In 1784, while in France, Jay wrote Benoit a conditional manumission, granting him his freedom if he would continue to serve Jay well for three more years. Jay considered the value of eight years of Benoit’s labor as reimbursement for his purchase price.

Clarinda, Zilpha, and Their Family

Clarinda, Mary, and Zilpha were part of a family of slaves owned by the Jays at Rye, and later, at Bedford.

Clarinda and Mary were sisters who lived with the Peter Jay family in Rye. Clarinda was sold out of the household by John Jay's brother Frederick in the early 1780s; at the same time Zilpha, who was apparently considerably older, was given her freedom. Zilpha remained with the Jays at Rye as a paid employee. Clarinda appears to have been related to her, and may have been her daughter.

Clarinda was rented for John Jay's household in New York City in the 1790s. She took a husband named Pompey, a slave who apparently belonged to a different household. This happened frequently at that time; slave husbands and wives who lived apart saw each other only when they could. Clarinda had a daughter, whom she named Zilpha after the older woman. She had two other children whose names are unknown, including a baby who died of whooping cough.

Jay sold Clarinda's daughter Zilpha to his sister-in-law in 1809, then rented Zilpha back in 1811, after she had lost a child of her own, and Clarinda asked that her daughter be reunited with her. Clarinda remained with the Jays until her death in 1837.

Initially, Zilpha refused to come back to the Jay household, but eventually did return, where, after obtaining her freedom in 1817, she chose to remain as a paid employee for the rest of her life. She took the surname Montgomery, and after her death in 1872, was buried with the Jays in their family burial plot at St. Matthew's Church in Bedford.

Massey

Massey was a slave of John Jay's who ran away and joined the British forces in 1778. Slaves were promised their freedom by the British if they left their American masters and served in the British Army during the war. Massey served in the Wagon Master General's department till the end of the war. He is recorded in the Book of Negroes as heading to Port Mouton, Nova Scotia in November 1783. He was 22 years old

Phillis

In a 1799 letter to his son Peter Augustus, John Jay asks: “Have you done any thing with Phillis?” Phillis was a Jay slave who was behaving in a manner that Jay did not like. He had instructed his son to sell her. He wrote: “ I think with your mama that to liberate her immediately would be of evil Example to the others, considering what her Behaviour has been –I think it wd. Be prudent to sell her for not more than two years, taking a covenant from the purchaser to manumit her at the Expiration of that Term – I should be satisfied with fifteen or twenty pounds – I fear lest we should be changeable with her maintenance during life – and there is little prospect of her being good for much, considering her Habits.”

While this passage illustrated Jay’s manumissionist views, it also shows his beliefs as a slave owner. He did not want to have to care for a slave who wasn’t going to work hard. There is no mention of Phillis or her fate in any subsequent letters.

A Path to Freedom: Abolition

The concept of abolition was to provide freedom to all slaves through an act of law. Abolitionists generally favored an immediate end to slavery. Some abolitionists advocated emancipation being declared at the federal level, while others, concerned about Constitutional legal questions, advocated outlawing slavery at the state level in each and every state.

Not all abolitionists agreed on what should follow emancipation. Some abolitionists, believing that people of African descent could never successfully assimilate into American society, advocated colonization, the deportation of former slaves and freeborn black people alike to Africa. This outraged many people on account of its unabashed racism. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in 1865, but it did not guarantee the rights of citizenship to former slaves. It took the Civil Rights Act of 1866, buttressed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1868, to achieve this.

The Death of Slavery in New York

With the passage of the Gradual Emancipation Law of 1799, the eventual end of slavery in New York became widely apparent. In 1811, John Jay's son Peter Augustus wrote to his sister about their elderly Uncle Peter's now strained relationship with his slaves at Rye, "Uncle cannot perceive that it is necessary to treat Slaves at the present day in a Manner different from that they were accustomed to fifty years ago."

Slavery apparently ended on John Jay's farm at Bedford when he manumitted Zilpha in 1817. As a free employee, she was paid wages of three dollars a month, in addition to her food and expenses.

In the south, slavery did not wither away, as many Northerners had expected it would. The nation's westward expansion strengthened the practice, especially after growth in the demand for cotton led to the development of large, profitable plantations from Alabama to Texas. These plantations were reliant on slave labor. The importation of slaves had legally ended in America in 1807, but the slave population of the U.S. quadrupled to four million by 1860: any children born to slave mothers were themselves born into slavery, and still more slaves continued to be brought into the country illegally.

Slavery ended more slowly in New York State than might be supposed. The next Gradual Emancipation Law, which passed in 1817, declared that all slaves born before July 4, 1799 would become free on July 4, 1827; it also established that the years of gradual emancipation set by the 1799 law would be shortened to twenty-one for males and females. The children of slave mothers born July 3, 1827 or earlier were still bound by the twenty-one year rule, and remained indentured servants in New York as late as 1848. Slavery ended in the U.S. as a whole with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.



Advocacy for Justice

Peter Augustus Jay (1776-1843)



Peter Augustus Jay, John Jay's elder son, served as one of the presidents of the Manumission Society. In 1819, he addressed two thousand people in New York City, at a rally held to oppose the extension of slavery into new states and territories. In 1821, while a delegate to the New York State Constitutional Convention, he moved to strike the word "white" from a proposed resolution on who should be qualified to vote. "Why are they, who were born free as ourselves, natives of the same country, and deriving from nature and our political institutions the same rights and privileges which we have, now to be deprived of all those rights, and doomed to remain forever as aliens among us?" he argued. His motion passed, but was rendered ineffective by later amendments that made it difficult for free black men to become eligible for suffrage.

**Ann “Nancy” Jay
(1783-1856)**

**Maria Jay Banyer
(1782-1856)**

John Jay’s daughters, Maria and Ann (called “Nancy”), were also concerned about the needs of African-Americans. The initial planning meeting for founding the Colored Home, a residence for the sick and aged, was held at Maria’s house; Nancy contributed \$1,000 as its first funding. At their deaths in 1856, Maria and Nancy both left bequests to black charities. Maria left \$500 to the Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans. Nancy Jay left the orphans’ association \$1,000, and a final \$1,000 to the Colored Home. To better understand the value of their gifts, \$1,000 in 1856 was roughly equivalent to \$23,600 today.





William Jay (1789-1858)

William Jay, John Jay's younger son, became one of the most respected abolitionists of his time. Abolitionism and religion were the two great passions of his life, and his religious convictions were the foundation of his abolitionism. In 1827, he wrote, "The abolition of slavery in this country if ever effected must be the result of Christian principle, and no one who endeavors to weaken the influence of this principle can be a true friend of emancipation." He joined a number of anti-slavery associations over the course of his life, remaining a member while he agreed with their goals, and leaving the organizations if their principles or methods came into conflict with his. He was a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1834 to 1840, a co-editor of the *Cabinet of Freedom* in 1836, and a member of the Executive Committee of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society from 1840 to 1854. After his death, he was honored with a long, impassioned eulogy by Frederick Douglass at the Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York.

John Jay II (1817-1894)

John Jay II had been an active abolitionist since he was 17, when he became manager of the New York Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society. Over his lifetime, he belonged to several abolitionist associations and helped to organize the Republican Party in New York State as an anti-slavery political organization. As a lawyer, John Jay II's defense of runaway slaves in court caused him to be shunned and even physically attacked. In 1852, it was written "Jay's last nigger case decided against him, after a very stormy session, in which Jay's head was punched by Busted, of counsel for the claimant." After slavery was abolished and the rights of citizenship were declared for all African-Americans, he wrote, "After a national existence of ninety years passed in the violation of rights which we ourselves had proclaimed sacred, chastised and humbled, we return to the truth to which we pledged ourselves when we took our place in the family of nations...we stand upon the simple doctrine of our fathers, that all men are born with an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

