



## John Jay: A brief biography

Arguably, John Jay was the most prominent New York-born Founding Father. Because he spent the final one-third of his life at his retirement home in Bedford, he often is celebrated as a resident of Westchester County. But, as you will learn during the walking tour of John Jay's Not-So-Big City, John Jay was a city boy. He was born and educated in New York City, and throughout his working life he considered the city to be "home."

Soon after Jay's birth on December 12, 1745, his father retired and moved the family to a farm he had purchased in Rye, on the shores of Long Island Sound in Westchester County. That's where John spent his boyhood, receiving his early education first from his mother, then at a church school and later from a private tutor. In August of 1760 – a few months shy of his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday – young Jay was back in Manhattan beginning his studies at King's College. Today, we know that school as Columbia University. Jay went on to become one of the city's most successful lawyers.

In April 1774, Jay married Sarah Van Brugh Livingston, who was known as Sally. She was a daughter of William Livingston, a leader of the revolutionary movement who became the first governor of the independent state of New Jersey. John and Sally would have six children, five of whom who lived to adulthood.

Within weeks of their marriage, John Jay was drawn into the struggle with England which would lead to independence. Initially, Jay was not anxious for separation from Great Britain. As the king and parliament resisted all calls to moderate their treatment of the colonies, Jay's position evolved and hardened. He was guided by the simple idea that Englishmen in America had the same rights as Englishmen in Britain. Once independence was declared, Jay became a committed revolutionary.

Between 1774 and 1801, John Jay held more important jobs than any other Founding Father. He was elected to the First Continental Congresses and served a term as president of the Second Continental Congress. During the Revolutionary War, Jay was assigned a diplomatic mission as minister to Spain. From Spain, he was dispatched to France as one of the four commissioners who negotiated the terms of peace with Great Britain. Upon returning home, Jay learned that he had been appointed Secretary for Foreign Affairs, making him the nation's top diplomat under the Articles of Confederation. Jay was not sent to Philadelphia as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention – he was deemed too radical – but he became an outspoken advocate for ratification in New York State. He joined Alexander Hamilton and James Madison in writing what became known as the Federalist Papers, a series of newspaper essays arguing on behalf of the Constitution.

When the first presidential election was held under the new Constitution, Jay received the third most Electoral College votes, after George Washington and John Adams. Given a choice of roles in Washington's administration, Jay became the first Chief Justice of the United States. But his diplomatic career was not over. In 1794, with the nation on the brink of a second war with England, President Washington sent him to London to negotiate a new treaty. The Jay Treaty proved highly unpopular. But

President Washington was worried about being drawn into a war he was certain the Americans would lose, and convinced the Senate to ratify the treaty. While Jay was in England negotiating the terms of the treaty – before anyone had seen the document -- he had been elected governor of New York. By the time Jay ran for re-election in 1797 anger over the treaty had abated, and he was elected to a second three-year term. He finally retired from public life at the end of June, 1801.

Jay and Sally had long been planning for retirement. Through inheritance and purchase, Jay acquired a 760-acre farmstead in the Westchester County town of Bedford. In 1787, he built a small house for his farm manager. During his second term as governor, Jay built a brick cottage for the farm manager, and set about expanding the original house into a retirement home. The result was the Federal-style house which today is the focal point of the John Jay Homestead State Historic Site.

John and Sally moved into “Bedford House,” as it was called by later generations of the family, in the fall of 1801. Sadly, Sally died the following spring. John Jay never remarried, and for the rest of his life he was attended by his middle daughter, Ann, who was called Nancy. Jay died in the house on May 17, 1829. He was 83 years old.

The house in Bedford remained in the Jay family for four more generations. After the death in 1953 of John Jay’s great-great granddaughter, Eleanor Jay Iselin, the house was acquired by Westchester County and turned over to the state. After restoring the exterior of the house and many of the interior rooms to their appearance in the early 1800s, Jay’s home was opened as a historic site and museum.

