

Sarah Livingston Jay

Sarah Van Brugh Livingston was born in 1756 to Susannah French Livingston and William Livingston, patriot and first governor of the State of New Jersey. She was educated at home in penmanship, English grammar, the Bible, and classic literature. Sarah grew into a graceful and capable young woman. At a time when women were usually relegated to the kitchen, she was brought up to be politically aware, even serving at times as her father's secretary.

William Livingston moved his family to a new home, Liberty Hall, in Elizabeth Town, New Jersey, in 1772. Sarah's beauty, gaiety, and intelligence attracted many suitors. She chose John Jay, an upcoming young lawyer, and married him at Liberty Hall on April 28, 1774. Despite the difference in their ages—he was 29, she was 18—this was a love-match; Sarah's brother later wrote, "Mr. & Mrs. Jay can be unhappy no where. They love each other too well ...". The couple's hopes for a peaceful life together were almost immediately shattered by developments that led to the American Revolution.

John Jay was elected to the Continental Congress only months after the wedding. Public responsibilities frequently separated him from his young bride. The newlyweds remained in touch by writing each other constantly, John addressing Sarah as "Sally," and she addressing him as "Mr. Jay." Both agonized over the separations, which continued intermittently for years. During one, he wrote her, "I wished you ... had been with me. This idea, tho' amidst much noise and mirth, made me much alone." Upon learning that John had been elected President of the Continental Congress, ensuring he would be away from her even more, Sarah wrote him in exasperation, "I am very solicitous to know how long I am still to remain in a state of widowhood." By the time John was appointed Minister to Spain in 1779, Sarah, having been assured by her husband that "my happiness depends on your welfare," agreed to accompany him to Europe. This step required enormous courage. The trip took Sarah across the great ocean from her parents, her siblings, her friends, and most painfully, from her little son Peter, who had been born in January, 1776.

After being nearly shipwrecked on their voyage, the Jays arrived in Spain, where they were to remain for more than two years. It was a difficult time: John Jay was not officially received by the Spanish government and Sarah suffered the loss of an infant daughter, Susan. She had a second child, Maria, in Madrid in 1781. In 1782, the British

were ready to discuss the terms of peace with the Americans. Benjamin Franklin summoned John Jay to Paris to help negotiate a treaty with England, and the Jays gladly left Spain.

In France, Sarah came into her own. She had another daughter, Ann, and was happy in a circle of friends that included Franklin and the Marquis de Lafayette and his wife Adrienne. She attended concerts and the theater, witnessed the first balloon ascent over Paris, and met many of the most notable people of the day. A glimpse of the Jays' social life can be seen in a letter Sarah wrote John while he was temporarily away: "The other evening at Passy, he (Benjamin Franklin) produced several pieces of steel, the one he supposed you at Chaillot, which being placed near another piece which was to represent me, it was attracted by that and presently united, but when drawn off from me and nearer another piece which the Doctor called an English Lady, behold! the same effect! The company enjoyed it much and urged me to revenge, but all could not shake my confidence in my beloved friend."

In 1783, the Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the Revolutionary War. The Jays returned to New York in 1784, learning upon their arrival that John had been appointed U.S. Secretary for Foreign Affairs. As the wife of the nation's chief diplomat, Sarah put on elegant dinners for government and foreign dignitaries nearly every week. Drawing upon her European experience as well as her instinctive charm, she quickly came to be regarded as New York's most glamorous hostess.

Her greatest passion, however, remained her family. She was as devoted a daughter and mother as she was a wife. While separated from her parents in Europe, she had written her sister, "I had the pleasure of receiving a letter from Mama the other day that was dated in April—I've often experienced the truth of an observation I've heard from her that Children rarely know the extent of their obligations to their parents until they become parents themselves; & I'm sure I am more sensible than ever of what I owe to mine, since by being by my distance from them depriv'd of their advice, & sometimes when most necessary, of their consolation; I have learnt the real value of those blessings ..." Of her young children she wrote, "As to my little Prattlers, I had rather hear the music of their tender voices than the united melody of all the birds in the country."

In 1794, President Washington sent John, now Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, to London to negotiate a treaty with the British. Sarah remained behind to care for their youngest children, who now included William (born 1789) and Sarah Louisa (born 1792). In John's absence, she also managed the family's domestic affairs, overseeing the purchase and sale of stocks and of land, directing improvements at their property at Bedford, New York, and keeping informed about the political scene.

Upon her husband's return to the U.S., Sarah's hope for retirement was again deferred when John Jay was elected to two terms as New York's governor. She assumed the duties of the state's First Lady with her accustomed grace and charm.

In 1801, John Jay retired from politics. Of all the Founding Fathers, none had served his Country in as many capacities as he did. He had been influential in the drafting of the first New York State Constitution, and was the state's first Chief Justice (1777). He had served as President of the Continental Congress (1778-9), and U.S. Minister to Spain (1779-1782). He was the most influential negotiator, with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, of the Treaty of Paris (1782-3). He was U.S. Secretary for Foreign Affairs (1784-89), and the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court (1789-1795). In 1794, he negotiated the Jay Treaty with the British. And from 1795 to 1801, he had been New York's second governor.

While John was finishing his gubernatorial term, the Jays developed the farm at Bedford as the place they would live out their lives together. Sarah told John, "Our Jaunt to Bedford has furnished your daughter & myself with a great many pleasing hopes ... In the country I feel ever sensible of an ever present deity dispensing light & life & cheerfulness around & my heart is animated with confidence & joy & love." Construction of the main house was completed in December 1801. Sarah then joined John there, after a delay caused by a bout of ill health.

At long last, after twenty-seven years of marriage, Sarah and John Jay could finally devote themselves to each other and their children without John's public responsibilities drawing them apart. Sarah loved the farm and wrote, "I can truly say I have never enjoyed so much comfort as I do here." Her health had been in decline for several years, however. She had long suffered from attacks of rheumatism, intermittent fevers, and influenza. Only months after moving to Bedford, she became ill again. On May 28th, 1802, she died suddenly, at the age of forty-six.

The death of his beloved wife was a blow from which John Jay never recovered. He now focused on his family, his church, and his farm. The household, ably supervised by his daughter Ann, increased after his son William married and had six children. Surrounded by his children and grandchildren, John Jay died May 16, 1829, at the age of eighty-three.

Staff of John Jay Homestead State Historic Site