

The ‘Amiable’ Children of John and Sarah Livingston Jay

Sarah Jay wrote her husband [Oct. 1801]: “I have been rendered very happy by the company of our dear children . . . I often, I shd. say daily, bless God for giving us such amiable Children. May they long be preserved a blessing to us & to the community.” Who were these ‘amiable’ children, and what were they like?

The happy marriage of John and Sarah Jay produced six children: Peter Augustus, born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1776; Susan, born and died in Madrid after only a few weeks of life, in 1780; Maria, born in Madrid in 1782; Ann, born in Paris in 1783, William and Sarah Louisa, born in NYC in 1789 and 1792 respectively.

As you can see by the birthplaces of these children, their parents played active parts on the stage of independence, doing what needed to be done, wherever it needed to be done, at the end of a colonial era and the birth of a new nation. John Jay held a greater variety of posts than any other Founding Father, posts he insisted he did not seek but felt it his duty to his country to assume. Sarah Livingston Jay, brought up in a political household, was a strong support to her husband, astutely networking with the movers and shakers of the time (as a look at her *Invitation Lists of 1787–1788* shows).

It is no wonder then that their children were raised with the welfare of their country, of those less fortunate than they, and a hope of God’s approbation in their hearts and minds. None of the Jay children played important national roles, but they exerted significant influence as public servants in furthering the legacy of the Founding Fathers. This commitment to the public good was instilled in them by their parents.

The first-born, Peter Augustus, spent most of his early years with his Livingston grandparents, who, with their daughter Susan, carefully educated him.

Upon graduation from Columbia College in 1794, Peter Augustus traveled to England with his father. His note book and diary are filled not only with to-do memos (“Genl. W[ashington]s Hair is to be made into a Breast-pin Uncle Peter wishes for a short Spy-Glass if it can be had good & cheap For Mr. Munro 12 pair of shoes . . .”), the sights he saw, and the people he met, but also reflect his interest in law and the English court system. Upon attending the trial of John Tooke for high treason at the Old Bailey: “With respect to the Counsel on this Tryal they appear to me to be all men of abilities & eloquence, but none of them are so great orators as I expected to find them.” Peter’s American pride came through as he added, “Mr. Harrison & Mr. Burr are (I think) equal to any of them if not superior.”

Returning to New York, Peter Augustus began his law studies, was admitted to the bar in 1797, and formed a partnership with his cousin Peter Jay Munro. It seems that there were pressures for him to join the political scene. His father wrote to him [Dec. 1800]: “Your Time for offices is not yet come. The wisdom of accepting them at any Time is frequently dubious. Stand independently on your own legs, and next to Providence, Trust to your Talents, your Industry and Prudence.” It was advice all of Jay’s children absorbed. Peter’s health—a pulmonary complaint—necessitated travel to Italy and France. From Paris [May 1803], he wrote to his father: “Our Affairs respecting Louisiana are settled. We have purchased it of the French for a Sum of money & for certain commercial privileges . . . which are yet secret.” Robert R. Livingston asked him to carry the Treaty and Napoleon’s orders to evacuate the territory back to the United States. Eventually Peter was able to resume his law practice, and in 1808 he married Mary Rutherford Clarkson, the daughter of General Matthew Clarkson; they had eight children, all of whom reached adulthood. Peter not only had a busy law practice, he also managed the financial investments of his clients and extended family. He took on the defense of students who rioted during Columbia College commencement exercises in 1811 but lost. He was elected to Congress on the Peace & Commerce Party platform in 1812, but the election was declared void. That year he wrote to his father: “The Effect the War will have on our politicks is more uncertain that I supposed. It is very certain that the great Majority of this Place are in their hearts utterly opposed to it. But there is an unaccountable Timidity among the Federalists which stops their Mouths & makes them assent to the Doctrine that every Patriot must now support the Government.”

In 1816, Peter declined to run for governor but was elected, as a Federal Republican, to the New York State Assembly, where he supported legislation for the creation of the Erie Canal and for the abolition of slavery in the state. In 1821, as a member of the New York Constitutional Convention, he appealed for suffrage of free African-Americans: “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?”

Unfortunately, Peter’s eloquence was in vain. He commented to his wife: “It is long since had I much relish for politics, & what I have seen here has not made me more fond of them.” Indeed, he was one of eight to vote against the final draft of the New York Constitution because of discontent with property qualifications for electors and the political power of the judiciary.

Peter was honored with a Doctor of Laws from Harvard University in 1832 for his “talents and virtues.” The many posts he held show his commitment to his community and his country. The death of his wife in 1838 was a great blow, particularly as he had begun to build a new house for her on the Jay property in Rye. Peter died five years later.

Sarah Jay's joy must have been great when Maria was born in 1782 and Ann, known as Nancy, followed a year later. Abigail Adams called the first, "the Grave Maria," and the second, "the sprightly little French girl." There was an almost symbiotic relationship between the two. Only when Maria insisted on attending the Moravian Young Ladies' Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and when she was married, were the sisters separated. Sarah wrote to her daughters [May 1793]: "The punctuality & attention to the manner of writing & spelling which you have discovered, evince your grateful obedience. Continue my dear Children to observe the directions of your Parents & your own satisfaction will equal that of ours."

Sarah's death in 1802 changed the lives of the Jay children. Ann took her mother's place as hostess and manager of daily life at Bedford. And very capable she was, too! Her gardening skills were legendary.

For Maria, it was the first of four tragedies, followed by the death of her young son Goldsborough, her husband, and her daughter Sarah, all within eight years. Her brother Peter wrote: "Poor Maria seems destined to sorrow." Sixteen years after her husband's death, Maria wrote: "[H]e was my idol, I loved him passionately, as no mortal should love a mortal. Little would those who think 'the heart soon heals' believe how deeply to this day I feel his loss."

Her deep faith comforted her, and she took on, among other things, the care of her aged father-in-law. In 1819, she joined her father in his retirement at Bedford, where she lived, guiding the education of the increasing brood of nieces and nephews until 1830.

After John Jay's death in 1829, Maria and Ann moved to New York City: Ann wrote to Maria [Dec. 1830]: "In many ways, my dear sister, our comfort and happiness are linked with each other's, so that while one suffers the other cannot feel at ease." Maria opined [Jan. 1827]: "I am too indolent & permit a dislike to writing & a passion for reading to interfere with my duties. Oh for more energy more promptness. Life is very short . . . My dear sister sets me an admirable example."

Together they traveled for their health; together they were liberal in their donations to charities (including the Episcopal Church, Sunday schools, family members, friends less fortunate than they). They viewed themselves as "stewards of the wealth entrusted" to them, Maria giving \$8,000 a year and Ann, in the last months of her life alone, \$6,000 (well over \$100,000 today). They died within eight days of each other in 1856. Their brother-in-law, Columbia professor John McVickar, compared their characters to that of John Jay: "Roman firmness, amounting, in all questions of duty, to Stoic sternness, was yet, in action, ever tempered by the faith and gentleness of the Christian."

The two youngest children, William and Sarah Louisa, due to the proximity of their ages, were also close companions (Peter Augustus was in college and the older sisters were in school). It was Sarah Jay who took their education in hand.

Later it fell to Maria to continue the oversight: William and Sarah Louisa moved to Albany, where Maria lived after her marriage. Sarah Louisa was the ray of sunshine in her sister's life: sprightly, without guile, she enjoyed parties, and flirted with several beaux. She wrote to her father [April 1809]: "I have received your elegant present my Dear Papa for which I must again thank you, it is one of the handsomer muffs I have ever seen & much too handsome for me." She continued: "I hear of nothing but politics but as I am not politician myself & not my business, I never attend to them."

She delightedly reported to her brother William [March 1812]: "Since Cousin Peter has been here, I have wrought in him a wonderful & happy revolution, I have broke him almost entirely of swearing which when he came up, he indulged in to a horrible & shocking excess without being aware that he do so. I made a bargain with him that for every oath or profane exclamation he uttered in my presence he should pay one shilling, which should be appropriated to the poor. Surely swearing was never turned to a better account."

She was the helpful youngest sister, doing errands, watching the nieces and nephews, working for the church.

This lively spirit died suddenly in her mid-twenties, possibly of a ruptured appendix. William wrote in his diary [April 23, 1818]: "It was my painful task this morning to inform [Papa] of the loss of his beloved daughter. He bore the news with composure, I never witnessed such perfect resignation, scarcely a groan escaped him . . ."

It was William—to my mind the most interesting of the Jay progeny—who followed most closely in his father's footsteps. His cousin, the author Susan Livingston Sedgwick, remembered him as "a vigorous, sturdy boy, with laughing eyes, cheeks glowing and dimpled . . . in temper quick, even to passion, but never vindictive . . . thus fore-shadowing . . . his fearless resistance to wrong and uncompromising advocacy of right . . ."

After graduating from Yale in 1807, William calmly accepted the abandonment of his law studies due to problems with his eyesight, and became a farmer and manager of the family homestead. He put his energies to writing: essays against dueling, on temperance, on agriculture reform, on peace, on church matters, and, most passionately and eloquently, the abolition of slavery. In May 1812, Peter wrote to Maria: "To my very great Surprize I recd. by the last mail a letter from William stating that he intended to make Miss McVicker my Sister in Law . . . His Courtship has certainly been more rapid or more secret than any I have ever known." The marriage of William and Augusta

produced eight children, all but two reaching adulthood. They lived with John Jay, who expanded the house for his growing family.

After his father died, William embarked on a work of filial admiration: *The Life of John Jay*. To Peter [Dec. 1831] he wrote: “Your criticism on the stile . . . is very just. It is too ‘stately’ or rather too dry . . . I wish I had power to enliven the narrative . . .”

Though he failed to “enliven” the tribute to his father, William did do so an issue that exacted his total commitment: the immediate abolition of slavery. John Jay had been the first president of the New York Anti-slavery Society and a founder of the African Free School, and, while he was governor, the New York legislature passed a manumission law, though it would be nearly thirty years before slavery was officially ended in the state. William, however, held that slavery was an “abominable sin” and that “the abolition of slavery in this country if ever effected must be the result of Christian principle.”

William believed in the equality of the races but made a distinction between natural rights and political/social rights. He abhorred the fact that African-Americans could receive communion only after whites, that they were denied seats in stagecoaches, that they were refused admission to schools or theological seminaries. These were conditions he witnessed daily in the North; he never visited the South. When a newspaper referred to him as the “fanatical son of Govr. Jay,” William replied, “I have no desire to disclaim the fanaticism of believing that every human being is entitled to justice, whatever may be the color of his skin . . .” (1837). He was nominated for several political offices, including governor (1840), by the abolitionists but was defeated by party politics and his own unwillingness to compromise on a party platform. It was for political reasons that he was ousted in 1843 from the Westchester judgeship to which Governor DeWitt Clinton had appointed him in 1818.

He continued to fight against slavery and the slave trade. He gave both money and legal advice to the Amistad captives. He wrote to Lewis Tappan: “Whence does [the Federal Government] derive power to surrender native Africans to Spain, for a homicide committed in self defence against Spanish felons! If our Courts assume jurisdiction over the Africans, are they not bound in common decency & justice to try their Kidnappers also?” Common decency and justice—that was the quintessential William!

Like his siblings and his parents, William suffered from various ailments, a pulmonary problem sending him, his wife, and two daughters on a trip to England, Malta, Greece, Egypt, Italy, and France in 1843. Aboard a French steamer from Istanbul to Alexandria, he noticed a Turk with four females clearly intended for the slave market in Egypt. When his complaints to the ship’s officers were ignored, he lodged a protest with the British and Foreign Anti-slavery Society who forwarded it to the French government. In advocating moral persuasion to bring an end to slavery and in urging peaceful dialogue

to resolve armed conflicts, William was so passionate that his schoolmate and friend James Fenimore Cooper called him, “Thou most pugnacious man of peace.” After William’s death in 1858, Frederick Douglass in his eulogy said: “[T]he cause of Emancipation in the United States has lost one of its ablest and most effective advocates . . .”

The story of the Jay children would not be complete without the mention of another child raised by John and Sarah Jay: his nephew Peter Jay Munro, born in 1767. At age thirteen, Peter accompanied the Jays to Europe. He and Sarah quickly developed a close bond (remember, they had left their own son Peter in America). She wrote from Martinique: “As Peter was suppos’d to be my son upon my first arrival, I had the pleasure of being complimented as the mother of a very lovely Boy; & indeed his engaging behaviour added to other circumstances attach me to him, that it would be difficult to convince me that he really was not my own child.” In Paris, Munro became close friends with young John Quincy Adams, though the friendship was not of long duration. When Adams went to London, they exchanged some wonderful letters with discussions of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Adams’s favorite) or Pope’s translation of the *Aeneid* (Munro’s favorite). The fifteen-year old Adams wrote [Nov. 1783]: “I beg you would let me know . . . whether your uncle or aunt know any thing about a certain foolish affair that happened once between you and me, . . . tho’ I hope they don’t for it was a business of which we ought both to be ashamed . . .” What had these teenagers done? Gotten drunk? Gambled? Visited a house of ill repute?

Once back in New York, John Jay placed Munro in the law office of Aaron Burr; he became an extremely capable lawyer. He also posed in John Jay’s chief justice robes so that Gilbert Stuart could finish the portrait. The congenial relationship between Munro and the Jays was maintained throughout their lives, though there were some bumpy stretches. Munro, like Peter Augustus Jay, served as a member of the New York State Constitutional Convention of 1821, as chairman of the judiciary committee. He married his cousin Margaret White in 1790; they had twelve children. He died in 1833.

Now you’ve met the “amiable children”: Peter Augustus, Maria, Ann, William, Sarah Louisa, and Peter Jay Munro. They carefully followed John and Sarah Jay’s dictates of diligence, prudence, virtue, and Christian charity, each contributing to the public good, and each supporting the legacies of freedom gained for them by the tireless efforts of the Founding Fathers and Mothers. John and Sarah would have been pleased.

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