

John Jay

New York City and County

Born: December 23, 1745, New York City

You are John Jay, son of Peter Jay and Mary Van Cortlandt Jay, born December 23, 1745, in New York City. Your paternal grandfather, Auguste Jay, brought the family to America from France, following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which had provided protection for French Huguenots (Calvinists) since 1598. Despite this inauspicious beginning as a religious refugee, your grandfather, and later your father, became successful merchants, and the Jay family today is one of the city's most prominent.

You were not though raised in the city. Only months after your birth, your parents moved the family to Rye, New York, to escape a smallpox epidemic that had blinded two of their children. There you were homeschooled for most of your youth until going off to King's College (later renamed Columbia) in 1760, earning both bachelor's and master's degrees. Afterward, you read law under Benjamin Kissam and were admitted to the bar in 1768. A law practice of your own followed in 1771.

With the approach of the war, you signed on with the patriot cause, serving as secretary of the New York committee of correspondence, your first public office. Your revolutionary enthusiasm was tempered, however, by a respect for property rights and a fear of mob rule. When sent to represent New York at the First Continental Congress in 1774, you stood with the conservatives who put reconciliation before independence. The outbreak of fighting the next year began your change of mind; British atrocities completed the transition, and by the time of the signing of the Declaration, you were as committed a patriot as any in the colonies. But you were not present for the signing of that historic document, even though again a member of Congress, because other duties kept you back home. These included service in the New York Provincial Congress and the drafting of the New York State Constitution (along with Robert Livingston and Gouverneur Morris) in 1777. When you returned to the Continental Congress in 1778, you were immediately elected president of that body.

Your term in Congress and as president lasted for just one year, because in 1779 you were appointed minister to Spain. While there, you succeeded in securing a much needed loan, though not formal recognition of the American state as hoped for, and you departed Spain in 1782. But only to go to Paris, where negotiations to end the war were under way. Representing America were Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and yourself. Together you produced the Treaty of Paris (1783), which concluded hostilities, granted recognition, and provided your country with generous borders north, west, and south. A diplomatic triumph was this, not likely ever to be repeated!

Shortly after ratification of the Articles of Confederation in 1781, the office of secretary of foreign affairs was created, and beginning in 1783 you served as its second minister (replacing Robert Livingston). Your responsibilities were many, but none so vexing as the critical need for open markets in Europe and open navigation of the Mississippi River. Spain held the key to each and was in no hurry to make a deal. Meanwhile, northerners, who demanded the former, and westerners who demanded the latter, came to distrust and despise you, fearing betrayal of their interest. You are still minister, and still nothing has been resolved.

Diplomacy is so difficult because the world holds America in such low regard, noting its weakness, its indebtedness, and the chaos of its domestic politics. The lesson imparted is that America needs a stronger national government than that provided under the Articles of Confederation. To that end you joined Alexander Hamilton and James Madison in authoring *The Federalist*, a series of newspaper essays (now a book) that attempts to explain and defend the Constitution and to persuade New York to vote its ratification. And just ahead of the election of delegates, you published *An Address to the People of the State of New York* under the pseudonym "A Citizen of New York." Written in a clear style, the essay may have been more effective than the grander *Federalist* in making the case for ratification.

As a *Federalist* delegate to the state ratifying convention representing New York City and County, you are a staunch ally of Chancellor Robert Livingston (party leader) and Alexander Hamilton (party lieutenant), fully their equal in status.

