

Maryland Society Sons of the American Revolution

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John Jay and the Creation of America

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John Jay was born in New York City on December 12, 1745. He went on to graduate at King's College and was eventually admitted to the bar in 1768. Jay became interested in politics when he married Sarah Livingston, the daughter of New Jersey governor William Livingston. His successes early in his life would continue on as he helped gain American independence, establish the Constitution, and prevent war with Great Britain.

In 1763 the Peace of Paris was signed ending the French and Indian war. Great Britain, with staggering debts, decided to start taxing the American colonies. The American colonists started resenting the acts and revolutionary sentiment started spreading throughout the colonies. In 1773 the "Boston Tea Party" broke out when members of the Sons of Liberty threw British tea into the harbor in response to the Tea Act. King George III responded with the "Intolerable Acts" which led to the creation of the Continental Congress. Jay was elected to be one of the four representatives of New York at the Congress. Representatives at the congress included John Adams, Patrick Henry, George Washington, and many other founding fathers. The congress debated trade boycott, military measures, and the drafting of petitions and statements. Jay helped author the Address to the British People which reminded British readers of the American support in the French and Indian War, the right to a jury trial, and a voice in legislation. Throughout the address, the Revenue Act is scorned because it subjected Americans "to the sad necessity of being judged by a single man, a creation of the Crown" (Ford 84-85). The work showed a remarkable degree of unity among the colonies and was the beginning of the creation of a unified nation.

In May of 1775 the second Continental Congress was summoned in response to the battle of Lexington and Concord. The new congress contained more delegates including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. This new Congress faced many difficult questions on whether to petition Britain again, to take control and responsibility of an army, and to defend New York and the Hudson River against British attack. Jay was kept busy while he helped draft a letter to "the Canadian people" to assure them that the Americans did not intend to use the forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point to threaten

Canada. In the draft Jay states that “You may rely on our assurances, that these colonies will pursue no measures whatever, but such as friendship and a regard for our mutual safety and interest may suggest” (Stahr 49). This has been shown in the modern world because Canada and America share an unguarded border and have shown “friendship” throughout their histories. By June the Congress had appointed a committee including Dickinson, Franklin, and Jay to prepare another petition to the King. In Jay’s draft he was very cautious stating that the colonists were “bound to Your Majesty by the strongest ties of allegiance and affection” (Stahr 47) in a last attempt to prevent a revolutionary war. Jay’s draft was a main part of the Olive Branch Petition which was adopted by Congress and sent to the King. Although Jay initially attempted reconciliation with the British, by July 1776 he declared that the Declaration of Independence was “unavoidable” and that New York “approve the same, and will, at the risk of our lives and fortunes, join with the other colonies in supporting it”(Stahr 62).

In the earlier stages of the war, Jay spent his time serving the New York constitutional convention. During those two years he drafted the state constitution, became the Chief Justice of the state, and served in the state Council of Safety. Although he had accomplished much he was also disgusted with the way in which the New York legislature sometimes disregarded the state constitution or the national situation. The seeds of Jay’s nationalism had begun and would continue to grow as he observed from the Presidents’ chair the weakness and indecision of the national Congress.

After two years of serving his state, Jay decided to return to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Upon his arrival he was elected president of the congress. Despite the absence of any power, one delegate while discussing Jay said “Mr. Jay is more judicious than his predecessor in the chair and less prolix.” (Stahr 93). In 1779 Spain had declared war against Great Britain and the Congress decided that they needed to send a peace commissioner to get funds and arms. After several votes Jay along with future president, John Adams, were appointed Ministers to Spain in order to seek recognition of Colonial Independence, financial aid, and commercial treaties. Although Jay found little success in Spain, he gained colonial recognition and was named a minister to Paris. Jay, along with Adams, Franklin, and Laurens signed the Treaty of Paris ending the war. Due to his diplomatic accomplishments during the war, Jay returned to Congress as the Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

Immediately following American independence, the Articles of Confederation were faced with many problems, eventually leading to Shay’s Rebellion. Jay had first hand experience with the problems of the Articles and was a supporter of a new more powerful national government. In 1787 Jay authored several articles in *The Federalist*, in which he, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton argued in support of the ratification of the new Federal Constitution. Under the name of “Publius” Jay wrote articles two, three, four, five, and sixty-four about the powers of the senate and the dangers of foreign influence. Due to *The Federalist* the Constitution was ratified despite vigorous opposition by men such as Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson.

Although the Constitution had been ratified, Jay still worked hard to promote a strong national government. In 1789 George Washington named Jay the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. During his reign as Chief Justice he remained committed to nationalistic ideas and was outspoken in national politics such as the Genet affair. By 1794 Great Britain and the United States of America were on the verge of war. Great Britain had not abandoned forts in the Northwestern part of America and were impressing American sailors. The Americans however were passing navigation laws that could possibly damage Great Britain. With tensions very high, Washington sent Jay to prevent the outbreak of war. Although “Jay’s Treaty” was very unpopular in America, it prevented another war and opened up the northwest to American expansion.

Jay had helped win the revolutionary war, construct a new national government, and protect the early republic from foreign affairs. Through his efforts Americans today live in a country with a powerful national government. Jay should be remembered like the other founding fathers but his modesty and conservative views cause most Americans today to forget about him. Perhaps the best summary of Jay’s life was the words placed on his tombstone by his son: “In memory of John Jay, eminent among those who asserted the liberty and established the independence of his country, which he long served in the most important offices, legislative, executive, judicial, and diplomatic, and distinguished in them all by his ability, firmness, patriotism, and integrity.” (Stahr 388)

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Biography

Nick Thomas is a junior at Tuscarora High School in Frederick, Maryland. He is an honor roll student who currently has a 4.4 weighted GPA. His extracurricular activities include playing on the varsity golf team, model United Nations, mock trial, National Honor Society, and chess club. He also is very involved with volunteer work at his church. Nick plans to attend college and study either engineering or history.