



The Colonel

By Marcus R. Cimino

For generations, Chief Justice John Jay and his descendants fought tooth and nail to abolish slavery in the United States. Jay's son Peter Augustus Jay, and his youngest son William Jay, both were publicly and ideologically opposed to slavery. When America the Civil War began, Colonel William Jay (also known as "the Colonel") represented the Jay's honorably; not only in his civic duties, but also to finish what his ancestors started, and rid the nation of slavery once and for all. The Jay's estate in the Hudson Valley, which had been passed down for five generations, tells a tale of some of the less recognized of John Jay's descendants, among them is the Chief Justice's grandson Colonel William Jay. "The Colonel" is an illusive character, and documentation on his

life is hard to come by, but the historians in charge of the Jay's estate at Bedford compiled as much as they could on the Colonel through letters and archives, telling the tale of a life that seemed affluent, as well as fortified by the generational success of his ancestors. Although Jay was blessed with his family's legacy, and justly earned his rank in the military, his immediate family was devastated by illness and death at a time when medicine and physicians lacked behind the advancement of the rest of post-Civil War America.

Colonel William Jay embraced the Jay tradition of public servitude, family values, and the overall end of slavery. Unlike his ancestors, William witnessed the abolition of slavery via the thirteenth amendment. The American Bar association had the Colonel come and speak about his great grandfather, the Chief Justice after he served the Union forces. After the war, William stated: "I was brought up in the atmosphere of the Chief Justice. My grandfather, and my father, and indeed the whole family, were saturated with it very naturally". (32) William was born to John and Eleanor Jay, and after the tragic death of his only brother as an infant, William was the only male heir to the family's cherished Bedford estate; growing up in the scenic Westchester farmhouse during the summers, and spending the cold winters at the family's Manhattan residence. William had a pleasant upbringing in the Jay's comfortable home, where ponies circulated the acreage, and gardens sprung up in all panoramic directions. Early life was a blessing for young William, and his pleasant experiences helped form the man he would soon become.

The young William followed in the footsteps of his father, and grandfather, and great grandfather before him, namely by following the family trade of law. Having

several of his male relatives as alumni to the institution, William honored tradition, enrolling in law school at Columbia University in 1855. He finished his four-year by 1859, and quickly enrolled into the law school. Jay's legal studies were interrupted by the American Civil War, a conflict in which the Jay family's deontological values, and anti-slavery views became a call to arms.

In the spring of 1861 William volunteered as an aide to General John E. Wool. General Monroe swiftly and decisively occupied Fort Monroe in Virginia, overlooking the Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads; an area that would serve as an essential counter-territory for the Gosport Naval Yard the Confederates occupied near-by. (32) The "Jay" name was synonymous with success in regards to state servitude. This was made evident to young William when President Abraham Lincoln promoted him to captain later in his freshman year in the service. Captain William wrote almost every day to his family, but being the only son increased the demand the competitiveness of his sisters and mother nurtured. He explained in one letter to a sister who felt as if she were being written less that

"at any rate you must not think that I intend to write to one of you more than to another except for mother to whom the understanding is that I write as often as I do to all the rest put together." (32)

It is also quite evident in these memorandums that William desired action. In one letter he describes the mundane atmosphere of Fort Monroe, stating:

"it is the most monotonous place I have ever been and I miss home very much. It is really quite doleful to sit all day reading the army regulations or some such other equally lively work waiting for the general to tell me to do something... this place is the dullest hole I was ever in... we constantly hope for an attack or something to cheer us."

These trends continue in his correspondence, where descriptions of meals with the general, and horse riding around the camp were prevalent features in William's updates to his loved ones. Other letters were requests for desired goods he longed for—such as his horse, his servant, his cigar collection (a prestigious possession amongst officers), bottles of wine, and articles of clothing which comfortably suited the environment of Fort Monroe. (33)

William showed the typical signs of a frustrated youth in his years at Fort Monroe, often openly expressing his idealism and callous attitude towards those of different opinions than himself. In one letter, William wrote “I declare that the men who resisted the draft during the riots in New York be shot”. He also fortifies his aggressiveness on this matter by sharing his opinion on the execution of five conscripts who recently had deserted. “The affair was very creditable gone through with... arrangements were admirable. Its effect upon the men in most cases was very salutary.” The matter almost seemed as a means to an end to William, rather than an action that resulted in the death of five young men. The rest of Jay's letter shows how little remorse he possessed for the executions, given that he only inquired about his sister's upcoming wedding. (34)

There was no doubt William had a great deal of loyalty towards his fellow soldiers, and when the war began to pick up his parents tried to get him to resign, a move the honorable young William would have no part in. His role in the war was reiterated to his parents in a letter, responding to their demand. William stated:

“Indeed it strikes me that the reasons for my remaining in the service are far stronger than they were for my entering it in the beginning.”

His loyalty was also to his General, General George Sykes. When William learned that General Sykes was being transferred to Kansas he wrote to his father, telling him:

“Please go and see General Sykes if you have time and give him my best love. They have insulted him by ordering him to Kansas... I feel very blue at all these changes and especially so since I find that I cannot remain with the dear old Corps and the men with whom I have lived during the past year. The friendships one forms by the constant companionship in Camp and in the field are deeper than one would imagine.”(34)

Williams letters continued to push his parents to help him get more action, while his father continuously influenced his son's assignments, making them less dangerous. William requested a position in the artillery but was instead assigned to help General John E. Wool, where the parents of William knew their son's safety was secure. William Jay would continue his position serving alongside the great Generals of the Union forces, assisting General George G. Meade during the battle of Chancellorsville, and also shadowing General Sykes at Gettysburg where he would cross the Rapidan and accept the surrender of General Robert E. Lee. (34)

In his writings, William showed concern with the publications he was reading in the papers. He wrote:

“The newspapers are making fools of themselves, everybody else, and exaggerating most absurdly the extent of Lee's repulse. We worsted him certainly in the fighting taking it all together, but he is not by any means in full retreat as yet... The papers seem to give all the credit of the campaign to Grant which is an immense mistake. He looks on and puts in his oar occasionally I suppose, but General Meade commands the army... It is not enough that you should give all the credit to Grant, but history will give General Meade an equal if not larger share of the honor of this campaign. If it does not, it ought to.”

This quote by William does not only give insight to the great deal of pride the young

Captain had in his superior, but also his honest opinion on the real driving force of the Union forces during the Civil War that contradicts more recent interpretations. (34)

William was decorated after the war and quickly rose in rank. In 1864 the young captain was brevetted Major by President Lincoln for his conduct in the field, and in 1865 he was again brevetted; this time to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel by President Andrew Johnson. Major General Meade, after approving the Colonel's resignation in 1865, said,

“I deem it due to this officer's distinguished services to express officially my approbation of his gallantry and zeal, and the intelligence he has ever displayed since being under my command.”

General Meade showed how William's efforts during the war were admirable, even to someone at such a high-ranking position as himself. (34)

After the war Colonel William Jay finished law school and was admitted to the bar in 1869. The first firm he became associated with was originally titled “Van Winkle, Candler & Jay,” but after the young Colonel became a prominent member the firm changed their name to Jay & Candler presumably as a means to advertise the potential political connections of the Jay name. The partnership Candler and Jay created would become a long term friendship as well, keeping the two close together throughout the rest of their lives. Jay & Candler were well known for spearheading title searches, making the real estate collections they acquired significantly more valuable for the new title search firms who would utilize the documents later. William personally oversaw the finalizing of wills, trusts and estates for the company, and even helped his firm acquire the role of consul to the United States Trust Company. Colonel William did as all his Jay

predecessors had done before him and taken on the practice of law successfully, so much so that he could afford to focus on some leisurely interests. (35)

Colonel William Jay's main hobby was always horses. This was symbolic of his earlier years on the Bedford farm in Westchester County where he rode the shetland ponies his father imported. This later translated into an adulthood obsession, where a New York newspaper article recalls that Jay and his friend Colonel Kane,

“were strolling down Fourth Avenue one day in the early seventies when they saw an old-fashioned English road coach in front of a carriage maker's establishment. They bought it. Colonel Jay borrowed a carriage horse from his mother's stable, Colonel Kane [borrowed] one from his family stud. A third was produced by Thomas Newbold, and an old cab horse was requisitioned for the fourth.”

This marked the dawn of Colonel Jay's proudest achievements: the New York Coaching Club. The Colonel was so proud of the organization that he maintained his status as the president of the organization for twenty years. These “parades” which William helped begin would start at the Metropolitan Club, and work their way up Fifth Avenue until they reached their final destination at Central Park. (35)

In addition to the law firm and this newly founded recreational coaching club, Colonel William Jay was instrumental in running many businesses. Among these businesses were: the New York Herald Company where Jay was vice president, the Valley Farm Company where he was the director, and the Manhattan Storage and Warehouse, as well as the New York Cab Company. Being that the Jay's were always religious, maintaining a close relationship with the church, Jay was a senior warden and clerk of the Trinity Church. The Colonel also spent a great deal of time feeding the poor from the Church's free dispensary on Fulton Street. Being the religious man he was, Jay also served as a trustee for an orphanage in addition to dedicating himself to the church.

In his lifetime Jay would also be a member of the City Century, the Knickerbocker Clubs, The New York Historical Society, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Sons of the Revolution, and the president of the Huguenot Society in New Rochelle. (36)

Colonel Jay had always dreamt of taking over the family farm as he grew older, and in 1896 William, his wife Lucy, and his daughter Eleanor moved into the Bedford homestead. Unfortunately, the move for the next generation of Jay's into the house wasn't a pleasant process.

By this time the family of William Jay had been struck with a stretch of tragedy. Jay's youngest daughter Julia died of diphtheria at the age of one in a half. Jay's wife was soon stricken with the disease as well, but fortunately recovered. A few months before taking over the Bedford property, the Colonel's oldest daughter Julia had also caught the deadly disease after a trip abroad with her parents. The seventeen year old died, devastating the family, and only leaving Eleanor as heir to the family's belongings. William made the best of his new life and spent much of his time tending to the farm. Unlike his father, the Colonel did not rent out the property to farmers, instead he hired a superintendent to cater to the various needs of the property while tending to the farming himself. The Colonel also painted the house white again, after he swore to himself he would change back the color from the yellow with brown trim his father painted it while he was away at war. Although the family had been through an unimaginable series of losses (including the death of the Colonel's father and his mother having a stroke) they made the best of their lives, and lived out their years in the Hudson Valley living a humble life on their farm. (36)

In 1915, Jay and his wife Lucy travelled to Virginia to stay at the Greenbrier in White Sulfur Springs. Jay died pleasantly in his sleep on March 28th, leaving his estate, and family's timeless name to his only surviving daughter Eleanor. In all generations of Jay family tradition, it seems to have been clear that the family was duty driven in their servitude to the lower Hudson River Valley region. On the surface, Jay fits the mold of a perfect specimen, whose life was a byproduct of his family's success and connection. It is only when one realizes the heartbreak and loss the Colonel had seen in his lifetime, whether it be on a battlefield or in his own home, that one gains a true appreciation for the magnanimous achievements he was able to complete in his lifetime.