



**William Jay: Abolitionist and peacekeeper.**

By Marcus R. Cimino

William Jay was the younger of New York Governor John Jay's two sons, the older son being Peter Augustus Jay. William was born in 1789, at an important time in America's history, where George Washington had become the nation's first president, and the Constitution had been ratified by eleven states. Jay spent his childhood distant from his busy father, who was the United States' first Chief Justice, and had also later undergone the task of putting the Jay Treaty into effect in England. His mother adequately raised William without his father until he was thirteen years old, the same time John Jay became the Governor of New York.

Once William was old enough to move out of his parent's home, he attended a small parish boarding school in Albany run by Reverend Thomas Ellison. It was here that William became friends James Fenimore Cooper, the famous author of *The Last*

*of the Mohicans* and *The Spy*. Although it was a tradition of the Jays to attend Columbia College, the family's friend Timothy Dwight was running Yale at the time, and William found it more fitting for him to attend the prestigious institution in Cambridge. William was burdened with poor eyesight at a time when accommodations for such handicaps were not so easily accessible. Being the caring individual he was, William wrote to his nephew, warning him of how to avoid such possible difficulties:

"I was struggling hard for honors at Yale and used to arise about four o'clock; light my fire and sit down and study the shape of the conic sections. I brought on a condition of my eyes which lasted for years. Be sure you never rise before the sun and study your Latin and Greek by the candle and gas light."

Despite his difficulties with reading, William graduated from Yale in 1808. The young man made an attempt to follow his brother and his father's career path, enrolling in law school in Albany. Unfortunately his eyesight would remain problematic resulting in a decision to leave, writing to his father:

"I will hasten home, and bidding adieu to pursuits from which my childhood I had anticipated pleasure and honor, devote myself to others... The affairs of this life are ordered by Providence... In the course of which I am about to travel, I may find as much solid pleasure as in the one which I myself had chosen."

This change of heart may not have come entirely as a result of William's poor eyesight. At what seems to be a confusing time for William, he confided in his father and looked forward to being home in Bedford. In a letter to his father, William wrote,

"I have for a long time since, looked upon the pursuits of agriculture as those in which I am destined to be engaged... Feeling conscious of my own ignorance, with regard to all subjects relating to husbandry, I have endeavored to acquire this kind of knowledge and for this purpose, when last at Bedford, I kept (unknown to you) a minute of all the work done on the farm and the time and season in which it was done."

This newly expressed passion by William turned out to be much more than rhetoric. Under the tutelage of William, the Bedford farm became a much more successful farm, and was even able to meet the demands of New York City's consumers, shipping wagon carts down to sell the family's dairy products; namely cheese, eggs, and milk. In 1812 Jay married Augusta McVickar who presided over the Bedford household until her death in 1875. She home taught their children, (two sons and five daughters) along with her servants children, and based her teachings on the principles of Christian values William admired.

Regardless of his new hobby for farming, William continued his pursuit of becoming a lawyer. One particular correspondence to a friend, Jay declares his renewed interest in law, but also demonstrates his motivation.

"I have devoted myself to the law, to protect the weak from the power of the strong. To shield the poor from the oppression of the rich, is the part for which I am preparing myself. God grant that I may not labor in vain."

William Jay's strong moral character immediately began to show in his civic duties. In 1818 William was appointed Westchester County Judge by the Governor of New York, Dewitt Clinton.

William Jay's relentless fight to abolish slavery begins around the same time he is elevated to a position of importance. Jay stood against the institution of slavery when it was not yet a popular cause, even in New York. Early in his career, Jay expressed his feelings in a letter to a friend, stating

“we may live to see great revolutions; our beloved country may perhaps one day call for our services. But before we can be good patriots, we must be good men.”

William’s love for freedom and equality was a value he bestowed equally with his love for God. Philosophically he tied the interest of the church to that of slavery as an inseparable link. In a letter to Elias Boudinot of the American Bible Society he wrote,

“I have no doubt that the laws of God, and as a necessary and inevitable consequence, the true interests of our country, forbid the extension of slavery.”

He continued to push his opinions on abortion to clergymen in an attempt to make abolition a common platform in church sermons. To one Episcopal clergyman

William declared

“the sin of slavery consists not in the cruelty of the master, but in the annihilation of the rights of human nature... If slavery be inherently and necessarily sinful, it ought instantly to cease. It is, I believe, sound theology, that every man is bound to put away his sins immediately.”

Not only was Jay using his civic title to push an issue which was most essential to him, the young abolitionist had become an excellent writer, utilizing his skills to fight for the abolitionist cause. In 1820 congress signed the Missouri Compromise, appeasing pro-slavery factions of the house by allowing a great deal of land (such as the Louisiana Purchase) to be occupied by slave owners. Concerned about the expansion of slavery into the newly inhabited west, thirty year old Jay wrote “if slavery once takes root on the other side of the Mississippi, it can never afterwards be exterminated, but will extend with the future of the western empire.”

His writing continued, and in 1819, Jay contributed to the first edition of the *Emancipator*, a newspaper in the south that dedicated itself to ridding the U.S. of slavery. In 1835 President Andrew Jackson banned abolitionist mail from flooding the senate and house. Even though Jackson did this to prevent an apparent “slave revolt”, Jay expressed his anger at the legislation to the president, urging him to reverse his policy.

Jay’s writing evolved from letters and articles to books, and later in 1835 he wrote Inquiry into the Character and Tendency of the American Colonization and American Anti-Slavery Societies which became so popular that it was reprinted in London. His publishing did not stop there, and in 1839 he expanded his body of literature with many several more books and pamphlets, including A View of the Action of the Federal Government in Behalf of Slavery, and The Coalition of the free People of Color in the United States.

Although he was relieved of his position as Judge of Westchester County in 1843 for his moral idealism, William Jay was praised by many as a hero, right until his funeral in 1858. Among the most notable of these men was Horace Greeley, who said

“as to Chief Justice Jay; the father may be attributed, more than to any other man, the abolition of negro bondage in this state [New York], so to Judge William Jay, the son, the future will give the credit of having been one of the earliest of the modern anti-slavery movements... and of having guided by his writings, in a large measure, the direction which a cause so important and so conservative of the best and most precious rights of the people should take.”

William Jay died in 1858 at the age of sixty-nine. On his death bed he advised his children to treat people fairly regardless of the skewed and prejudiced views the

world possessed. Fredrick Douglas eulogized him by stating he “made the wisest and best use of life, and will be recognized as a shining example to the human race. The cause of emancipation in the U.S. has lost one of its ablest and most effective advocates.” William Jay is undoubtedly one resident not only the Hudson Valley will honor and remember, but the entire United States.