

## WILLIAM JAY AND SLAVERY.

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WILLIAM JAY AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL MOVEMENT FOR THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY. By Bayard Tuckerman. With a Preface by John Jay. New-York: Dodd, Mead & Co.

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Some of the contemporaries of William Jay rated his services to the Abolitionist cause as equal in value to those rendered by any other person; they believed that scarcely any other man's influence was so effective in arousing popular sentiment. He was one of the few men of wealth, high social standing, and commanding position who attached themselves to the anti-slavery movement and strove openly and persistently for its advancement. Men of his class, as a rule, held aloof from the movement, for to avow sympathy with it was to call down upon themselves many things that were unpleasant to bear.

Mr. Jay did not suffer much from his opposition to slavery, though he was removed from the Westchester County Judgeship on account of it, but his exemption from penalties that some others suffered was in large measure due to the superlative quality of his fighting. He championed the rights of the colored men for over thirty years, but in

all that time he never once laid himself open to the charge either of inconsistency in position or of discourtesy toward those with whom he contended or disregard of the constitutional rights of others. Probably he did more than anybody else to discount the common accusation that the Abolitionists were a lot of hot-headed, revolutionary, law-despising men. Blow after blow he delivered at the institution which he hated, but he fought as a citizen of the United States, whose loyalty to the Constitution of the land was the equal of any man's, and his blows were always fairly given

In the excellent story of Mr. Jay's life which Mr. Tuckerman has given us one will search in vain for a passage from Mr. Jay's writings or a quotation from his addresses and conversations which would indicate that he ever wrote or spoke except as a dignified and courteous gentleman. Of course, he had the advantage over most men to which we have already referred, the advantage of his position. He was the son of John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States. He was himself the honored incumbent of a judicial bench. He was probably the leading layman of the Episcopal Church in this country. But he might easily have lost his vantage ground in controversies with pro-slavery men by a single imprudence, and of that imprudence he was not guilty.

It is not to be wondered at that such a man was constantly called upon by his associates to do work which only a person like him could do well. It was Jay who, in 1826, drafted the memorial to Congress ordered by the citizens of Westchester County asking for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. It was Jay who, in 1833, in a letter to "The Emancipator," foretold the proposition upon which the anti-slavery men must stand until they should win victory by the use of moral forces. It was Jay who compelled the incorporation into the constitutions of anti-slavery societies of declarations like this:

"We concede that Congress, under the present national compact, has no right to interfere with any of the slave States in relation to this momentous subject, but we maintain that Congress has a right and is solemnly bound to suppress the domestic slave trade between the several States and to abolish slavery in those portions of our territory which the Constitution has placed under its exclusive jurisdiction."

This declaration, as it was the best answer to the charge that Abolitionists sought to accomplish their ends by unconstitutional means, was also a most influential factor in compelling respect for their movement. Again, it was Jay who was called upon when, in 1835, there seemed to be need to set forth a declaration of principles for the information of the public. Elizur Wright, Jr., referring to this declaration, said: "The Southern papers are copying it extensively, and most of them charge us with having disclaimed in it our real motive—a proof that our real sentiments were before misunderstood." "It has had a most beneficial effect," wrote Lewis Tappan. "What a contrast to the ebullition of public meetings." It was Jay, too, who was chosen to answer Andrew Jackson, then President, when he had recommended closing the mail to anti-slavery literature. Mr. Jay's letter was unexceptionable in the respect showed to the Chief Magistrate of the Nation, but Jackson was more than a man if he did not smart under its condemnation of his course.

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But while Mr. Jay was writing and talking for the public, he was also working privately as a sympathizer with the oppressed colored men. To help fugitive slaves he regarded as a duty. "The slaveholders," he wrote to a friend, "with their accustomed impudence and mendacity, apply the term theft to the humane and Christian efforts to assist a slave in escaping from his house of bondage. In their sense of the expression, I glory in being a slave stealer, and I inculcate upon my children the duty—the Christian duty—of this kind of theft." At least one of the children listened to the words of his father, for John Jay, the son, gave his services as a lawyer constantly and successfully to prevent the return of fugitive slaves.

Mr. Jay did not live to see the cause triumph to which he was so devoutly attached, and for which he labored in so distinguished a manner. He died Oct. 14, 1858, in the first half of his seventieth year.

## Bibliography

"WILLIAM JAY AND SLAVERY." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Dec 17, 1893.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/95123231?accountid=28549>.

Abolitionist William Jay  
Grade Level: 11<sup>th</sup>  
Time Allotted: two class periods

New York State Core Standard: Soc. 9-12. 2. II. B. 3 - The great constitutional debates: states' rights versus federal supremacy; efforts to address slavery issue.

Learning Objectives: Students will be able to explain how William Jay contributed to the start of the anti-slavery movement. They will also be able to create a convincing argument against the institution of slavery using the methods that William employed in his fight against slavery.

Essential Questions:

- 1) How was William Jay's argument on slavery unique to the time period?
- 2) How did William Jay argue against slavery?

Learning Styles:

- 1) Auditory- students will listen to...
  - a. a short PowerPoint read by their teacher.
  - b. a newspaper article read by their peers.
  - c. classwork instructions read by their teacher.
  - d. classwork letters read by their peers.
- 2) Visual- students will view...
  - a. a PowerPoint presentation.
  - b. a newspaper article.
  - c. classwork instructions handout.
- 3) Kinesthetic- students will engage in a writing assignment.

Materials:

- 1) William Jay PowerPoint
- 2) "WILLIAM JAY AND SLAVERY." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Dec 17, 1893.  
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/95123231?accountid=28549>.
- 3) Classwork instructions handout
- 4) Letter handout

Motivation:

- At the start of class, students will engage in a brainstorming activity centered on the term: abolitionist.
- The class will briefly discuss their knowledge about the term.

Procedure:

- The teacher will present a short PowerPoint presentation on the life of abolitionist, William Jay.

- The teacher will hand a small, foam ball to one of the students. The student will be instructed to read the first paragraph of newspaper article: “William Jay and Slavery.”
- The foam ball will be gently thrown around the classroom from student to student. When a student is in possession of the ball, he or she has to read the next paragraph from the article.
- The teacher will ask the students the following questions pertaining to the article in order to prompt a discussion:
  - What type of language did William Jay use in his abolitionist work? Did he write low-grade or professional work?
  - What were the standards and expectations of the time pertaining to slavery?
  - What type of rhetoric did William use to argue against slavery? What were his main reasons against the institution?
- The teacher will distribute and read a hand out explain the classwork assignment.
- Students will write a letter to President Andrew Jackson, pretending to be William Jay. In this letter they will write a response to the President’s decision to ban abolitionist mail from flooding the Senate and the House.

Summary:

- Five students will volunteer to share their letters in front of the class.

Evaluation:

- Students will engage in a class discussion about how William Jay’s argument on slavery was unique to the time period and how he argued against the institution.