



John Jay: Founding Father

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John Jay was one of America's greatest Founding Fathers. Drawing on substantial new material, Walter Stahr has written a full and highly readable portrait of both the public and the private man.

John Jay: Founding Father Details

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From Reader Review John Jay: Founding Father for online ebook

Daniel DeLappe says

A precise history of an interesting person. A short book, but I feel I got the complete story on John Jay.

Steven Peterson says

This is a fine biography of one of this country's Founders--John Jay. I have read biographies of many of the Founders--from Sam Adams to John Adams to James Madison to George Washington to Thomas Jefferson and so on. But I had never run across a portrayal of John Jay. When you think about it, this is rather strange. Look at his record: member of the Continental Congress and later its President, a key figure in peace negotiations on the continent, Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the Congress under the Articles of Confederation, he worked with others to have the Constitution ratified in New York (even though the odds seemed long)--including being on of the triumvirate who wrote the Federalist Papers (although his contributions were fewer in number than those of Madison and Alexander Hamilton), he served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, as Governor of New York, and as a diplomat to develop a treaty of peace with the British Empire, and so on. . . . Whew!

One of the strengths of this volume is a pretty straightforward depiction of Jay. He is not treated as superhuman but as a talented political figure who strove to realize his vision of the United States. He was able to accomplish much, being able to work with others well (there were quite a few cantankerous founders).

This is a work well worth reading to gain insight into one of the major Founders of the United States.

Joshua says

Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Schuyler, Greene, Hamilton, and Hancock are just a few names that will surface in nearly any book about the American Revolution. And why shouldn't they? These men each played a distinct role to help lay the foundation for the blessings of liberty that we currently enjoy. However, there is one name that will often appear on a list of influential fathers but will rarely be elaborated on: John Jay. Most know the role that he played as the first Chief Justice of the United States but we often forget the important role that he played nearly every step of the great American Revolution. His wisdom, gravity, piety, and kind disposition won him respect among his peers and ultimately among the nation that he served. For 75 years there has hardly been a solid work on John Jay until now. In Walter Stahr's "John Jay" he carefully and respectfully tries to impart to the reader a fresh vision of one of the great minds that helped put this country on a solid track toward independence and prosperity. Stahr's work is relatively new but it was long overdue, and I think it will serve as a force of scholarship in the field of early American history. Here are some of the reasons why I think this work would be an excellent addition to anyone who is serious about investigating the founding fathers and their influence.

It is easy to gloss over Jay and not because he is not important or essential but because his life is not marked by anything unusual. Jefferson for example is a colorful man with many shades of contradiction while Washington seems to be a riddle to the reader. John Adams was pugnacious as well as controversial while

Franklin is known for political acumen and flirtatious trysts with women half his age. Jay is something of a straight arrow that lives a very ordinary life; yet, Jay left a huge footprint on the political landscape of the American Revolution. Born to a tradesman in New York City Jay showed a quick, nimble mind from an early age. He entered King's College at the age of 14 and finished his studies at the age of 18. By the time he was 22 years old he had finished his masters and was on his way to becoming one of New York's up and coming lawyers. He may have lived a distinguished life were it not for his path colliding with the American Revolution and this was what transformed Jay among others from an ordinary citizen of the British Empire into a pioneering founder of the nation. Jay did all that was in his power to avoid any break between the colonies and their "mother country" but when it came time to call independence Jay was there and stood behind the decision whole-heartedly. Jay was among many things a patriot of his native homeland and while he was soft towards the British he knew when to stand up against them.

Over his long career Jay served the nation in a variety of capacities including: as delegate to the Second Continental Congress, Drafter of his State Constitution, Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court, Peace Commissioner to France and Spain, Peace Commissioner to Great Britain, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Contributor to the famous "Federalist Papers," Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and Governor of New York. Because he wore so many hats Jay had his hand in influencing the many government leaders he came in contact with. He was a temperate man who tended to be cautious about everything and everyone, and his policies were typically "middle of the road." His pragmatic and realistic nature endeared him to most people in Congress, and he was the kind of man who was able to get things done because of it. He was a real family man who practiced his faith very devoutly. In our time, there is always question about the founding fathers in regards to their faith and the general consensus is that most were not solid believers in organized religion or the authority of the Bible. It so happens that Jay was one of our founders that happened to be very strong in the way he practiced his faith and was an adamant believer in the power of the Bible. He not only practiced his faith in theory but practiced it in real-life through active civic engagement, devotion to family as well as friends, and piety in his ecclesiastical relationships.

Stahr is a great writer and he writes in an easy and accessible manner that will appeal to a broad audience. He has a solid bibliography and it is clear that he has done his homework. In terms of the subject matter itself it would appear that he tends to be even-handed for the most part. Stahr exhibits a clear admiration for his subject matter; this is not necessarily a negative attribute. Caring for one's subject matter allows an individual to write in a very passionate and meaningful way. However, the downside is that he is sometimes too soft on Jay. Like anyone Jay had his share of conflicts and I am sure that he was often at least a small part of the problem. When Stahr speaks about these conflicts it seems that he rarely implicates Jay as part of the problem and tends to place more of the responsibility on the other parties. I certainly expect that he would paint his subject in the best possible light, yet at times I felt that I did not really gain a solid sense on the Jay's shortcomings. I do not expect Jay to be painted as devilish or evil, but I do think that a great feature of biography is learning our subject's failures. Jay was not a man of great ardor which allowed him to reach across aisles that others were not always able to do so. However, I am not saying that Stahr that was not objective but rather that I felt this was an area that was not developed properly. I still think that that book was excellent and well worth the long investment involved in reading it.

Of course, it goes without saying that Jay's most important role was serving as the First Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and his appointment to said position reflects well on the ability of George Washington to spot the right man for the right job. Jay was so cautious and moderate in many positions that he was right man to set necessary precedent for that role; albeit, it would be John Marshall who would accomplish the most in setting precedent for the job of Chief Justice. However, where he is often neglected is in regards to his work in negotiating a peace settlement with the British. He tended to be pragmatic but when it came time to sit down and hash out a peace agreement Jay did not mind doing everything he could to make sure that America got the most out of the deal. He drove a hard bargain but he was the right man for the job. He was the missing piece of the puzzle when one considers that he was the middle point between Adams and Franklin. His even nature made his more palatable to the English than Adams, yet his rigid and formal nature

was easier on British tastes than Dr. Franklin. He was very active in writing, editing, and submitting both the first and second drafts of the treaty that secured independence. After the war it was essential to promote a more filial relationship with the British Empire and Dr. Stahr argues that it was Jay's treaty that paved the way for future relations with the British. He was an excellent ambassador who not only exhibited poise, candor, and good humor but who made sure that he did all within his power to get as much as possible for his native country.

What am I walking away with as I completed my journey with Jay? I think that Dr. Bernstein was correct when he said that the founding fathers did not have a cohesive vision for what they hoped America would look like. As I read this book, I realized that Jay's vision of America with a robust and powerful central authority is in many ways still at play. I don't imagine that the nationalists of the time ever thought we would be wiretapped in our own homes yet the kind of government they envisioned was broad, brooding, and strong. The reality is that as I get to know these men I come to find that they each had competing views of America's future and the America we have inherited is in part the one they gave us. That is not a popular view but it seems to be so. Take for example: Dr. Ferling discusses how Madison and Hamilton were concerned about the growing sense of egalitarianism and the democratization of the American public before the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Nevertheless, this was exactly the sort of society that Jefferson and Patrick Henry were hoping to see. My point is that Jay was a strong nationalist and while I respect his amazing talents and contributions I recognize that his support for a strident, far-reaching government would be something that I could never support today. That being said, I have a great deal of respect for Justice Jay and without him we might not have some of the blessings of liberty we enjoy today.

I give this book: 1 star = Research. 1 star = writing. 1 star = bibliography. 1 star = readability. The final star I reserve due to the previously mentioned critique and because there were spots where the book hit some boring lulls.

Jeffrey Blake says

an excellent biography of this often overlooked and less revered founding father, and the first in nearly 7 decades. Well researched and dispassionate.

Jeffrey Brooks says

A good, solid biography. It lacks the elegance of, say, McCullough's biography of John Adams or Brands's biography of Benjamin Franklin, but it is enjoyable and well worth reading. Given the lack of any other modern biography of Jay (who was not as appealing a human being as many of the other Founding Fathers), students of the period should give thanks to Walter Stahr for writing this book.

Diana Long says

George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay known as the "Founding Fathers". In this work the author brings to life the history of John Jay, who is much overshadowed by the other leaders but he is relevant and played an important role in the making of this nation. Jay started his career as a lawyer and when war for independence became a reality he championed the cause. He went where he was needed, being abroad with his wife for several years in

Spain and France seeking aid and was not in the states when Cornwallis surrendered but was instrumental working out a peace agreement with Britain. He along with Madison and Hamilton wrote the Federalist papers and framed a Constitution that would be acceptable to the majority of the states. I was fascinated reading about the debates and learning more about this great man. The author did an amazing amount of research and much is included in the work. It's well written, fully notated and a fascinating biography of a remarkable patriot. John Jay may not have been a President, an inventor, or involved in a scandal but he was a statesman, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Governor of New York and much more. I highly recommend this biography to anyone studying or interested in United States History.

Jonathan Stocum says

Great information

Was a bit of a tough read but I did enjoy enjoy page. I knew nothing of John Jay except that he was the first Chief Justice. Now I know there was a lot more to the man.

Jean says

John Jay: Founding Father by Walter Stahr is the first biography about John Jay in over sixty years. In the past sixty plus years a mountain of new knowledge about the early nation has piled up and Stahr uses it all with confidence and critical detachment. Jay had a remarkable career. He was president of the Continental Congress, commissioner to Spain and France, secretary of foreign affairs (later called Secretary of State) a negotiator of the treaty that won the United States its independence in 1783, one of the authors of The Federalist Papers, first chief justice of New York, first Chief justice of the Supreme Court and 2 time governor of New York. He was a very private man of unfailingly sober disposition who left his mark more in significant deeds than in memorable works and commanding decisions.

Stahr cover Jay's entire life unlike the other biographers. Jay graduated from King's College (later called Columbia University) and then read law with a prominent New York lawyer. Like John Marshall John Jay joined a debating club and was active in debate. As an attorney Jay was active in negating disputes about boarder lines between the colonies. This helped him to become an excellent negotiator. Jay married Sarah Van Brugh Livingston (1756 1802) in 1774. Sarah was a well educated woman for her day and was fluent in English and French. Unlike women of her day Sarah chose to travel to Spain and France with Jay when he was appointed the peace commissioner (The U.S. was not recognized as a country in those days so he could not be called an Ambassador). Crossing the Atlantic was dangerous in those days. Sarah gave birth to three children during their years aboard in Spain and France. Sarah was more political astute than her husband; he often sought her advise on politics. As the wife of the Nations Chief diplomat she put on elegant dinners for government and foreign dignitaries. When she was the first lady of New York she drew upon her European experience along with her instinctive charm, she quickly came to be regarded as New York's most glamorous hostess. John and Sarah wrote long letters to each other. He often discussed government matters with her and sought her advice much as John and Abigail Adams. When he was gone on business, she managed the family domestic affairs, overseeing the purchase and sale of land, stock and directing the improvements at their property in Bedford New York. She also kept informed about the political scene in New York.

Jay drafted the New York constitution and was Chief Justice of New York Supreme Court. Unlike many of the founding fathers Jay was a religious man. Jay neglected the job of Chief Justice because of his work in

negotiating a peace settlement with Britain. His rigid and formal nature was palatable to the English more than was Adams and Franklin. Dr. Stahr argues that it was Jay's Treaty that paved the way for future relations with the British. Jay vision of America was with a robust and powerful central authority was in line with Washington, Madison and Marshall but opposed by Jefferson. Jay envisioned a larger America and wasted no effort in taking the Mississippi away from Spain, France and England. Jay was an advocate of the rule of law and property rights. When Chief Justice there were only a few cases and that came toward the end of his term. Jay did set up the guidelines for the operation of the court. In those day there were only 5 Justices on the court.

The author obviously cares about his subject matter and writes in a passionate and meaningful way. Stahr is an excellent writer and writes in an easy and accessible manner. The writing and research are excellent. I now not only have a feeling for who jay was as a person but also what his place in history is.

Walter B. Stahr is an international attorney also interested in the American Revolution. He graduated from Stanford, Harvard and the Kennedy School of Public Policy. I had read his biography of William Henry Seward published in 2012 which I thoroughly enjoyed. I understand he is currently working on a biography of Edwin McMasters Stanton. I have been so impressed with his writing and research ability I will have to read his next book. Now whenever I get to the east coast I would like to visit the John Jay Homestead in Bedford Hills, New York. I read this as an e-book on my Kindle app for my iPad.

Jesse Bradstreet says

7.5/10

Not too many biographies about John Jay out there, despite him definitely being in the top 8, as far as Founding Fathers go. Author Walter Stahr does a good job of making a comprehensive swath through Jay's life. If the book is a bit dry, it's because Jay is as well, but it's definitely an interesting and essential read to any US history buff, big or small.

Andy Miller says

I learned from this thoroughly researched and comprehensive biography of John Jay. The author, Walter Stahr, persuasively argues that Jay's contributions to the founding of our country are not sufficiently recognized by history. Stahr details Jay's contributions in the first continental congresses though he did not attend the 1776 convention as he thought it was more important to stay in New York to create New York's state government and organize New York's defenses against the British. He later was President of the Continental Congress, an experience that caused him to later to become an advocate for a strong federal government. John Jay served well as one of our first diplomats, especially as a member of the Peace commission after the Revolutionary War. Jay's contributions as one of the three authors of the Federalist papers are fairly well known, but perhaps more important was his leadership in convincing New York state to ratify the constitution even though a clear majority of delegates to the convention had been elected as anti-Federalists. An example of Jay's persuasion was this simple sentence that he wrote to Washington that so well explains the separation of powers

"Let Congress legislate. Let others execute. Let others judge."

John Jay was our first Chief Justice. He did not serve long enough to make the mark that John Marshall did, but I was intrigued to read of his decisions that invalidated laws because they conflicted with the

constitution, anticipating Marshall's later famous opinion in Marbury vs Madison. Stahr does not shy away from the issue of slavery and the conflict between Jay's political opposition to slavery and his owning of slaves, including poor treatment of slaves who upset him. Stahr also gives much credit to Jay's wife, Sarah, who was a political partner who accompanied him on many of his trips to Europe. This thorough biography of a somewhat forgotten founder of our country is well worth the read

Porter Broyles says

I've read Seward and Stanton by Stahr, this is the weakest of the three. It is a so-so book, but nothing really to get excited about, which was very disappointing. Seward and Stanton were great books that really helped you understand the period and the characters. I struggled through the last hundred pages or so of this book because it was so rough.

Pete daPixie says

J.J.'s biography by Mr Stahr was a very enjoyable read, even if it was written by a lawyer about a lawyer. The book took me through American Independence and the Continental Congress and Jay's key role in the development and ratification of the U.S. Constitution. He served as Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Chief Justice and Governor of New York.

As his son Peter Augustus had written on his tombstone: 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.

Brian Willis says

Jay is often considered a footnote in history for the passing amateur scholar, the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. His life is not often chronicled; this biography doesn't unearth any juicy anecdotes or stories. But as a negotiator, diplomat, and judge, we would hope for those temperaments in a person who accomplished what John Jay did.

Just as Washington's and Adams's fingerprints are all over the executive and legislative branches, Jay's are all over the judicial system in the United States. His Chief Justiceship set a number of precedents that still dominate the court. His influence led to the groundbreaking inclusion of the Supremacy Clause in the U.S. Constitution. He was a powerful governor of New York. His negotiation of the Treaty of Paris set geographical precedents still in place today.

Stahr focuses on the legal aspects of John Jay's life. But both author and subject were lawyers, and it is for his groundbreaking legal work that we continue to remember Jay.

Rachel says

It's must be clear to any readers this biography that John Jay has been greatly underrated as a founding

father. I believe the mystery of the snub by posterity is solved with this biography. The fact is, Jay was just not an incredibly interesting guy. That's not meant as a knock on him, it actually speaks to his respectability. The reason he's often overlooked is due to the fact that he just didn't draw attention to himself and he didn't have serious personal scandals (the worst was a lawsuit he filed against a young family member for debt collection). The man was the very embodiment of prudence and virtue. He was well-known and liked in his time and deserves a lot of credit for his amazing accomplishments. His character makes for an admirable but fairly dry biography.

Dan Cotter says

Very well done biography of John Jay, an important person in our nation's history. Jay was the first SCOTUS Chief Justice but so much more. Well worth the read.
