

Cody Nager
Columbia and Slavery
Professor Eric Foner
13 March 2015

“New Birth of Freedom”: Columbia Alumni, The New York Manumission Society and the end
of Slavery in New York

Eighteen prominent New Yorkers met on January 25, 1785 at John Simmons’ coffeehouse on Wall Street in lower Manhattan. The stated purpose of the gathering was to discuss the increased kidnapping of people of African descent throughout New York City and its vicinity. The meeting was called to order by Robert Troup, a notable New York lawyer and graduate of Columbia College (called King’s College when he graduated but renamed in 1784). Despite the original narrow purpose of the meeting, the discussion soon devolved into a broader discussion of the state of enslaved Africans in New York. By the time the meeting concluded, these eighteen men were the founding members of “The New-York Society for promoting the manumission of slaves and protecting such of them as have been or may be liberated,” commonly known as the New York Manumission Society (NYMS).¹ The organization, which would last until 1849 and over the years was led and influenced by many Columbia graduates, sought to gradually end slavery by convincing owners to free their slaves of their own accord. It undertook many projects which were vital for the end of slavery in New York such as the fight for the passage of the gradual emancipation act and the foundation of the African Free School. These projects, while they served to improve the lives of enslaved and free Africans, were representative of a paternalistic approach towards the end of slavery in New York.

¹ Moseley, Thomas Robert. A History of the New York Manumission Society, 1785-1849. Diss. New York U, Graduate School of Arts and Science, 1963. p.22.

John Jay is the graduate of Columbia who receives the most credit for the end of slavery in New York. He was the first president of the New York Manumission Society and later New York's second governor, who signed New York's Gradual Emancipation Act of 1799, which provided for the eventual freeing of all persons henceforth born as slaves in New York. Newspaper editor Horace Greeley claimed that "To Chief Justice Jay may be attributed, more than to any other man, the abolition of Negro bondage in this [New York] state."²

While Jay undoubtedly played a major role in the demise of slavery in New York, other Columbia alumni such as Alexander Hamilton, Peter A. Jay, Robert R. Livingston and Robert Troup provided influential and active support to anti-slavery ideals. This support drove more passively conservative men, such as Jay, towards the more active positions on slavery that Jay reached by the end of the 1790's. However, Greeley's description of Jay as the leading activist against slavery is a significant case of misreading of the facts.

The Founding of the NYMS

The first federal census in 1790, which provides the first clear information on the state of slavery in New York, clarify why members of New York's elite concerned themselves with the establishment of the Manumission Society in 1785. According to this census, New York held the largest number of slaves (21,193) of any state north of Maryland. These enslaved New Yorkers were clustered mostly around the major metropolitan areas, such as New York City and in the rural areas among Dutch farmers. The census counted 7,796 slaveholding families in the state, which represented 14.2% of the total number of families. That means that on average, a slaveholding New York family held about 2.7 people in bondage. Indeed, only 182 families had holdings of over 10 slaves. The average monetary value of a holding was \$405 (adjusting for

² Sudderth, Jake. "Jay and Slavery." *John Jay Papers*. Columbia University Web. 23 Mar. 2015.

inflation that equates to about \$5,500 in present value).³

At the January 25 Manumission Society meeting, the members established a committee of five men: Columbian Robert Troup, Samuel Franklin, Lawrence Embree, Melancton Smith, and John Murray in order to draft rules for the newly founded society. The rules were to be debated and voted on at the next meeting on February 4. After the confirmation of these men, the meeting was adjourned.⁴ The first step in the Manumission Society's activities against slavery in New York had been taken.

On February 4, 1785, the second meeting of the Manumission Society took place at the Coffee House on the corner of Water and Wall. The most immediate difference from the first gathering was its scale. Whereas only eighteen men had been present at the first meeting ten days prior, over thirty responded to the formation of this new society. The membership was heavily composed of New York City Quakers, who had undergone their own internal movement towards abolition during the 18th century.⁵ Most of the founding members returned, including Robert Troup. However, Troup was joined at this meeting by two other notable Columbia College graduates, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay.⁶

Columbians in the NYMS

Most of the Columbians in the New York Manumission Society were reflective of the conservative, paternalistic nature of the society, due to their elite background. For example, the only Columbian present at the foundational meeting, Robert Troup, evinced a typical sort of genteel disdain for the institution of slavery. Troup, a graduate from Columbia College in 1774 was originally from Elizabethtown, New Jersey. During his time at Columbia College he shared

³ United States Census Bureau. "A Century of Population Growth, From the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790 to 1900." *Chapter 14 Statistics of Slaves*. 1976. Web. 23 Mar 2014.

⁴ Minutes of the New York Manumission Society, 25 Jan 1785

⁵ "Early Protests." *Quakers & Slavery*. Bryn Mawr, Web. 23 Mar. 2015.

⁶ Minutes of the New York Manumission Society, 4 Feb 1785

a room with Alexander Hamilton, who became one of Troup's closest friends. While Hamilton remained in college until 1775, Troup began to read law, first under a Mr. Thomas Smith of Haverstraw (where he was joined by a young Aaron Burr) and later under the notable Manhattan lawyer John Jay. With the onset of the American Revolution, Troup joined the New York State Militia, only to be captured at the Battle of Long Island. He was subsequently released in a prisoner exchange and then served as aide-de-camp for Horatio Gates at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777. Later, he served as Secretary to the Board of War and Secretary of the Board of Treasury, before resigning his commission in 1780. Returning to his legal studies, Troup spent 1782 at the Schuyler Mansion assisting Hamilton with his bar studies, before passing himself in the middle of 1783. A few weeks after Evacuation Day, when the British finally left New York City, Troup returned.⁷

Troup's roommate, Alexander Hamilton represented a different attitude towards the actions of the Manumission Society, one that seemed to combine more action toward the end of slavery in the state with the same emphasis on the genteel. Hamilton was enrolled in Columbia College at the same time as Robert Troup, although the outbreak of the American Revolution prevented Hamilton from completing his degree. Originally from the Caribbean island of Nevis, through the goodwill of benefactors and his own hard work, Hamilton eventually ended up in the Livingston household in Elizabethtown, New Jersey. It was at Elizabethtown that he first met John Jay, who was courting William Livingston's daughter, Sarah.

In 1775, Hamilton published a response in defense of the Continental Congress entitled, *The Farmer Refuted*, clearly outlining his personal political views. The essay represented his first published statement on his anti-slavery position, "I consider civil liberty, in a genuine,

⁷ Tripp, Wendell Edward. *Robert Troup: A Quest for Security in a Turbulent New Nation, 1775-1832*. Diss. Columbia U, 1973. p. 71

unadulterated sense, as the greatest of terrestrial blessings. I am convinced that the whole human race is entitled to it”⁸ (Troup later claimed that he had read over drafts of *The Farmer Refuted* prior to its publication).⁹ With the outbreak of the revolution, Hamilton made use of his connections to raise an artillery company. Eventually, he was invited to be an aide-de-camp for George Washington, in which position he served as until 1781. Then, desiring a field command, he wheedled his way into being allowed to command the forces that took Redoubt No. 10 at the Battle of Yorktown. The end of war led Hamilton to return to legal studies, working with Robert Troup and getting admitted to the bar in 1783. He served in New York as a lawyer notable for defending British citizens and loyalists from claims against destruction of property.

John Jay graduated from Columbia College in 1764. Originally from Rye, New York, Jay was the son of a notable New York merchant. However, unlike his father, Jay became a lawyer by reading law under Benjamin Kissam. Jay was admitted to the bar in 1768 and began to practice in New York City. He quickly attained city-wide renown and began to circulate among the social and cultural elite. The early 1770’s saw him making frequent trips to Elizabethtown, New Jersey in an attempt to court Sarah Livingston. It is here that he would first meet Alexander Hamilton.¹⁰ Jay married Sarah in 1774. The outbreak of the revolution saw Jay selected to attend the first Continental Congress as a delegate. Subsequently, he served as President of the Second Continental Congress before being selected to head the American diplomatic mission to Spain in an attempt to get that country to provide aid. He failed in that endeavor and was sent to France, where he helped to negotiate the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which ended the American Revolution. On his return to the United States, Jay was selected to be the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, a precursor to the job of Secretary of State, under the Articles of Confederation. In February 1785,

⁸ Hamilton, Alexander. "The Farmer Refuted." *Hathi Trust Digital Library*. Hathi Trust, Web.

⁹ Tripp, Quest, p. 19.

¹⁰ Stahr, Walter. *John Jay: Founding Father*. New York: Hambleton and London, 2005. p. 32.

Jay engaged in greeting foreign dignitaries while at the same time working to accomplish his own personal goals.

The final notable Columbian to join the Manumission Society was Robert R. Livingston. While Livingston was not present at either of the first two Manumission Society meetings in 1785, he later joined the society, quickly becoming one of the more radical members. He pushed for not only the freedom of slaves but also their right to vote. Robert R. Livingston graduated from Columbia College in 1765, the year after Jay. A member of the notable Livingston family, Robert was a representative of the wing from Clermont Manor, in the Upper Hudson Valley. Livingston was educated as a lawyer, and maintained a close friendship with Jay due to their similar careers as New York lawyers, concurrent educational backgrounds and Jay's marriage to his cousin, Sarah.¹¹ In 1773, Livingston was appointed the Recorder of New York City. He only kept this job a short while before being sent as a representative to the Second Continental Congress where he served on the Committee of Five who helped to draft the Declaration of Independence, although he did not sign because of his return to New York. In 1777, Livingston became the first Chancellor, or head of the legal system, of New York, a position he would hold until 1801. This extended term of service earned him the nickname "The Chancellor." On the national political scene, Livingston served as Secretary for Foreign Affairs from 1781 until 1783, until John Jay succeeded him.

The Second Meeting

The February 4th second meeting of the Manumission Society took a starkly different tack from the meeting just ten days prior. The larger size made organization of the rules and standards of the society more essential, especially when it came to societal governance. Hence,

¹¹ Peyster, Frederic De. *A Biographical Sketch of Robert R. Livingston: Read before the N.Y. Historical Society, October 3, 1876*. New York: New York Historical Society, 1876. p. 19.

the first action undertaken was the selection of the President of the Society. John Jay, one of the new attendees, was selected.¹² The choice of Jay was probably due to his prominence among the members of the New York elite, rather than his having any strong views against slavery. For example, in a September 1780 letter to close friend and fellow Columbia alumnus Egbert Benson, Jay wrote, “I purchase slaves and manumit them at proper ages and when their faithful services shall have afforded a reasonable retribution.”¹³ This attitude marks Jay as anti-slavery only in the most conservative manner. Five years later, Jay still had no qualms about owning slaves and even making them work for their “reasonable retribution” before considering manumission. However, Jay’s conservative attitude probably made his selection as president a more palatable choice for the majority of the members than the views of someone who was much more radical.

Jay’s first action as president of the New York Manumission Society was to listen to the rules that had been proposed by the Committee of Five formed at the January 25 meeting. These rules were read out and approved as the constitution of the society. Thus, Troup as a member of the rules committee was the first Columbia College graduate to make a substantial contribution to the New York Manumission Society. After all present had signed off on the rules, Alexander Hamilton, Robert Troup and White Matlack were assigned to a committee to investigate how the members of the society should proceed with regard to the slaves they personally owned.¹⁴ This investigation, which was not completed until nine months later, was revealing of the innately conservative nature of the society’s members.

The 1785 Proposal

¹² Minutes of the New York Manumission Society, Feb 4 1785.

¹³ Jay, John. Letter to Egbert Benson. 1780 September 18.

¹⁴ Minutes of the New York Manumission Society, February 4 1785

The same day as the second meeting of the Manumission Society, in the New York State Legislature, Assemblyman John Lawrence, who had been present at the first Manumission Society meeting, presented a first attempt at a Gradual Emancipation Act. While ultimately unsuccessful the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1785 served as the introduction of the Manumission Society to the broader populace of New York. The legislative meeting at the Old New York City Hall probably took place prior to the meeting of the Manumission Society which were usually held at 5pm. As the bill was further debated over the coming weeks, Aaron Burr, then a state representative, argued for immediate emancipation, but was voted down thirty three to thirteen, provoking the ire of some anti-slavery advocates who saw his actions as besmirching their reputation as moderates.¹⁵ John Lawrence's proposal was largely modeled on the Gradual Emancipation Act that Pennsylvania had passed in 1780, including a mandatory period of uncompensated labor for children born to slave mothers, until the age of 25 for males and 22 for females.¹⁶

However, the representatives of the slaveholding upper counties insisted on adding three amendments to the bill. The first prevented a "negro, mulatto or mustee [what at a later time was termed an octroon]" from holding public office or testifying in court against a white citizen. This amendment was rejected by the assembly by the margin of a single vote. The second amendment meant to prevent the enfranchisement of the freed slaves by stating that "no negro, mulatto or mustee, shall have a legal vote in any case whatsoever." This amendment was approved by a three to two ratio. The final amendment imposed a hundred pound fine on both members of a couple who engaged in miscegenation, or sexual relations between the races. This measure also

¹⁵ Gellman, David Nathaniel. *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006. p. 50.

¹⁶ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 48.

passed, albeit with a narrower margin than the disenfranchisement amendment.

This bill was then sent to the Council of Revision, composed of Governor George Clinton, State Chief Justice John Sloss Hobart, and Columbia College alumnus Chancellor Robert R. Livingston. The Council of Revision vetoed the measure ruling that the bill created a racialized form of citizenship that could potentially result in the creation of a “class of disenfranchised and discontented citizens, who at some future period, may be both numerous and wealthy.”¹⁷ This veto meant that the State Senate and State Assembly now both required a two-thirds majority to override the veto. The senate passed the measure, but the assembly fell short.

The opponents of the Gradual Emancipation Act had succeeded in causing the anti-slavery elements in New York to vote against their own bill, thus ending the debates in the legislature over black citizenship for at least a decade. As Jay wrote in a letter to Richard Price on September 27, 1785, “the cause of liberty like most other good causes will have its difficulties [...] It has advanced more in this than other countries but all the objects were not attained.”¹⁸ However, this failure did not keep the New York Manumission Society from taking other actions in support of the end of slavery in New York.

The New York Manumission Society found other ways of promoting their political objectives in the aftermath of 1785. These included petitions, social pressure and record keeping. However, prior to undertaking these ventures, the society returned in the fall to consider the proposals put forth by Hamilton, Troup and Matlack on the subject of the slaves of members. At the November meeting, these three presented five suggestions. One, all slaves under the age of 26 should be manumitted when they attain the age of 35. Two, slaves between 29 and 38 should be manumitted within seven years. Three, slaves not included under points one and two should

¹⁷ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 50.

¹⁸ Jay, John. Letter to Richard Price. 27 September 1785.

be freed at age 45. Four, slaves currently owned by members should not be sold unless the buying party agrees to the above manumission scheme. And lastly, the president of the society should collect information about the slaves of members who had been manumitted.¹⁹

Of the suggestions put forth by Troup, Hamilton and Matlack, the final two were accepted without delay. The first three, which defined the age scheme for manumission, were referred to a special committee and then proceeded to be lost in bureaucratic squabbling over the exact ages that would mark the end of the term of service. This special committee dissolved two years later due to lack of progress, having accomplished nothing. This episode is revealing as it highlights the deep internal contradictions that these members of the Manumission Society represent. While ostensibly working for the rights of the enslaved Africans, they continued to hold people in bondage. Despite rather poor justifications for this, such as Jay's September 1780 letter to Egbert Benson, this fundamental conservatism makes the goals of the society seem radical in comparison to their actions.

Methods of the NYMS

The main method that the society used to accomplish its goals was the petition. A petition was an easy way for the genteel members of the society to participate politically without much investment of time. It also took advantage of the reputation and status of many of the notable members. This simplicity provided the petition with its enduring popularity among the membership. Two cases demonstrate that when the society used petitions to apply pressure on the legislature it had great influence; this would later become important in the push for the Gradual Emancipation Act.

The first petition that the society organized came in March 1785, in support of the passage of the failed Gradual Emancipation Act. While this petition was ineffective, as the

¹⁹ Moseley, History, p. 23-4.

Gradual Emancipation Act eventually failed, it marked the first major organizational foray into the political sphere. As a slight consolation for members of the society, the New York State Legislature did pass a measure regulating the export of slaves from New York starting from 1785.²⁰

This success drove the society away from advocacy for a Gradual Emancipation Act and towards a greater regulation of the slave trade throughout the late 1780's. The lawyers for the society, advised by Hamilton, drew up a bill to completely ban the exportation of slaves and presented it to the legislature in 1786. When it failed in the assembly, they returned the next year. When it was not acted upon for the second year in a row, the society took a different tack for the third attempt.²¹ This next major petition, in place of the draft bills of previous years, was presented in 1788, when a special meeting of the society organized a drive to ban the export of slaves completely. In response to the petition, the legislature took action, passing an exportation ban on February 22, 1788.

The other major function of the society during this period was record keeping. Manumissions in New York were taking place under a complicated statute that was passed a few months into 1785. The influence that the Manumission Society had on this statute's enactment is questionable, although they did send a small petition on manumission to the legislature. This statute required that owners who wished to manumit their slaves had to get a signed certificate from the overseers of the poor. This requirement made sure that the freedman would not go on the public dole and that the justices of the peace would vouch for the slave staying out of trouble. The slave also had to be under fifty years of age and self-sufficient.²²

The law was a step forward from colonial era laws which required posting a bond to keep

²⁰ Mosely, History, p. 114.

²¹ Mosely, History, p. 116.

²² Mosely, History, p. 129.

freed slaves from requiring public assistance, but the process was rather complicated, and involved receiving the signatures of important and often rather inaccessible people. For example, in New York City, the signatures required were either the mayor or the recorder and two aldermen. Due to the prominence of their members, the Manumission Society took the role of a middleman between those who wished to manumit their slaves and those who had to sign off on their forms. In addition to offering this streamlined manumission service, the Society also kept the records of manumissions, providing the freed people with a body of proof to use if necessary.

On occasion legislative action also forced the society to undertake other sorts of ventures. For example, in 1786, the state legislature passed a law freeing the slaves of people whose property had been possessed by the state. This meant that the slaves of the loyalists, who had been scattered around the state, were now free. In order to inform these people of their new situation, the Society formed an enforcement committee composed of three of the best lawyers in the state, Columbians John Jay, Egbert Benson, and Alexander Hamilton. This project, which involved work in both finding and freeing the slaves, was mostly completed within a year, although a few cases dragged on for much longer.²³

While the push for the end of slavery in New York was being undertaken by the Manumission Society and quite a few Columbians, some took part in events at the national level as well. The apparent instability of the Articles of Confederation in the aftermath of 1786's Shays Rebellion was one of the developments that caused the convening of the Constitutional Convention, with the goal of creating a new governmental system that would provide greater stability. A few Columbia alumni attended including New York delegate Alexander Hamilton and Pennsylvania delegate Gouverneur Morris. Morris, who graduated in 1768, was a native New Yorker who had moved to Philadelphia in 1779 to pursue business opportunities. He would

²³ Mosely, History, p. 132.

later become an associate of the Manumission Society. At the Constitutional Convention, Morris was one of the most vocal delegates, speaking out on many issues. Indeed, he was later credited as the drafter of much of the Constitution. On August 8, Morris delivered his most famous speech at the Convention, a brutal condemnation of slavery. As James Madison recorded it in his journal:

It was a nefarious institution. It was the curse of heaven on the states where it prevailed. Compare the free regions of the Middle States, where a rich & noble cultivation marks the prosperity & happiness of the people, with the misery & poverty which overspread the barren wastes of Va. Maryd. & the other States having slaves. ... Proceed southwardly, and every step you take, through the great regions of slaves, presents a desert increasing with the increasing proportion of these wretched beings.²⁴

This strongly worded condemnation marks Morris as one of the more radical anti-slavery Columbians, in a tier with Livingston rather than the more conservative Jay or Hamilton. Clearly, Jay was not the only person responsible for emancipation in New York.

The Tension of the 1790's

The work of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 marked the introduction a new system of government. The conduct of the Washington administration in the early 1790s produced political tensions that were unforeseen among the political elite of American society. One of the most notable falling outs came between John Jay and Robert R. Livingston, who aligned themselves on opposite sides of the newly formed partisan divide, Jay becoming a Federalist and Livingston a Democratic-Republican. This marked the end of the cordiality that had existed since their graduation from Columbia. Livingston had hoped to receive a cabinet position from Washington, preferably Secretary of the

²⁴ Farrand, Max. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. Vol. 2. New Haven: Yale U, 1966. p. 221

Treasury or Chief Justice. However, he was denied both, and thus took his rage out on Jay, who had received the Chief Justice position in his stead.²⁵

However, despite their political falling out, Livingston and Jay remained closely aligned on their support of manumission. This marks an example of one of the more interesting aspects about the fight to end slavery in New York -- political party affiliation had seemingly little predictive power over attitudes on this issue. Indeed, the most accurate indicator, according to the work of Edward Countryman who investigated the roll call votes of the New York State Legislature from the 1780's onwards was that, "the abolition of slavery was the only issue on which, over a series of votes, the elected representatives assumed a stance that was not congruent with their overall political positions." Rather than splitting on party lines, the votes divided on an urban/rural basis, with the rural Dutch descendants as the opposition to the measure.²⁶ Thus,, one can infer that many more Columbia graduates, who mostly came from the urban areas, would be in favor of the actions of the Manumission Society than opposed to it.

The role of the rural opposition came to the fore in the New York State gubernatorial election of 1792, which pitted Federalist John Jay against Democratic-Republican George Clinton. Jay, then serving as Chief Justice, desired the position for both its greater prestige and its ability to make more of an impact on the development of the nation. Clinton supporters viewed Jay as an elitist whose involvement with organizations such as the New York Manumission Society marked him as out of touch with the desires of the common man. Thus, while slavery was not the central issue, it nevertheless served as an important part of the discussion of the new political ideologies as a whole. An article in the New York Journal in 1792

²⁵ Brandt, Clare. "Robert R Livingston: The Reluctant Revolutionary." *Hudson Valley Regional Review* 4.1 (1987): p. 15

²⁶ White, Shane. *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. Athens: U of Georgia, 1991. Print. p. 20

marked the Republican position on slavery, based on belief in fundamental racial difference. According to the article, “the first and greatest point is to prove that they are an inferior tribe,” which was accomplished through an analysis of blacks’ physiognomy. In response, an article claimed that the lower status of blacks was due to “cultural deprivation” and “contingences” which prevented their full development.²⁷ These articles marked the complex cultural tension into which the discussions over manumission in the 1792 gubernatorial election were thrown.

Clinton and his supporters recognized that Jay represented a formidable candidate because he was well liked, well respected and a figure of national prominence. In order to defeat Jay, they radicalized his anti-slavery views. They painted him as an advocate of “immediate and absolute” abolition rather than his real gradualist views. Additionally, some Clinton supporters even accused Jay of supporting “black liberty,” which would have made him one of the most radical men in the nation.²⁸ His role as president of the New York Manumission Society was also vastly overstated and painted as an elitist endeavor for the education of blacks. All of these smear tactics presented him with difficulties in the rural counties, which by and large supported slavery. This led to concern among many of his fellow Columbians and Manumission Society members, including Troup and Hamilton. Troup spent much of his time writing rebuttals against the Clinton supporters’ representations of Jay and the New York Manumission Society, and Hamilton, who despite his role as Secretary for the Treasury, took an active concern in the maintenance of Federalist political control in his home state. Hamilton wrote that the election was, “[...] very tight. Mr. Jays being one of the Emancipation Committee operates much against him.”²⁹

The election of 1792 ended up being decided on a technicality. The votes from Otsego

²⁷ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 133.

²⁸ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 134

²⁹ *Ibid.*

County, which Jay had won, were delivered by a sheriff with an expired license (making him technically unable to legally turn over the votes to the review board). Thus, the votes from Otsego County were thrown out, meaning that Clinton was elected governor by narrowest of margins, 108 votes. Had the votes from Otsego County been considered, Jay would have become governor.³⁰

Despite Jay's loss, the voting records reveal interesting facts about the attitude toward slavery in New York. Of the six counties with the highest proportion of black population, five went for Clinton, marking the effectiveness of the radicalization campaign. The only county with an appreciable black population that fell into Jay's column was New York County, which was actually decided via a much closer margin than many expected.³¹ Jay's victory in New York County was most probably due to his close connections with the New York elite through a distinguished legal career and common educational background. However, the election of 1792 marked the nadir of the anti-slavery movement in New York and it led to important changes later in the decade.

The African Free School

One of the major issues that Clinton supporters confronted Jay on was the African Free School, a project of the New York Manumission Society which horrified many pro-slavery advocates. The African Free School was the main approach through which the third major goal of the society was accomplished, that of supporting the manumitted slaves whom the society had successfully freed. Established in 1787, the Free School was an institution meant to teach the children of manumitted slaves basic skills such as reading, writing and math. Education was

³⁰ Jenkins, John S. *History of Political Parties in the State of New York from the Acknowledgment of the Independence of the United States to the Close of the Presidential Election in Eighteen Hundred Forty-four*. Auburn, NY: Alden & Markham, 1846. p. 43.

³¹ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 135.

conducted on Lancasterian system, with the abler pupils being used as helpers to the teacher, passing on the information they had learned to other students. The system, created in England for the education of the lower classes, had an elitist appeal which may have justified some of the Clintonites complaints. However, because the Lancaster system endowed certain students with the responsibility of helping their classmates, it produced independence that often impressed visitors. A minor tuition fee was charged with the idea that it would permit the school to cover its own operating costs. However, this was never achieved and the African Free School continued to lose money until it was separated from the Manumission Society in 1833.

In order to prevent this hemorrhaging of money, the African Free School relied largely on donations from members of the Society and concerned citizens in order to support its educational endeavors. A Fredrick Jay (no relation to John Jay) had donated a plot of land for the construction of a schoolhouse, but its inconvenient location meant that a founding a successful school would have been difficult. The search for a permanent location lasted until 1796, when a lot was purchased on the corner of Cliff Street, and one of the outbuildings renovated into a schoolhouse. The African Free School would occupy the Cliff Street Schoolhouse until 1813, when it was lost to a fire. Other donations from members worked to cover teachers' salaries, which were always too low in comparison to the work that had been to undertaken. The first schoolmaster, Cornelius Davis received "£60 during a six month period, in return for which he would furnish a school room, heat it and teach such children as the society would send to him."³² These requirements, while on such a minimal salary, meant that Davis was making almost no money for his efforts. While this small financial obligation was not a problem for the Manumission Society, the increasing size of the student body created the need for more faculty many of whom were not willing to make the same contract that Davis had. Thus the salaries had

³² Moseley, History, p. 181.

to be more generous over the following years, causing financial hardship. John Jay's daughter Maria was an avid supporter of the project of the African Free School and donated much money to the effort while taking care of her elderly father in Bedford and in New York until his 1829 death.

However, measuring the success of the African Free School in terms of improving the actual lives of the manumitted slaves in New York City proves rather difficult. While teaching literacy and mathematics, it seems to represent more the ideal of the New York elite than any practical system of community improvement. For example, James McCune Smith, a graduate of the African Free School, attempted in 1832 to enroll at Columbia College. In spite of his prodigious scholastic talents he was rejected solely because of his race. He proceeded to attend the University of Glasgow receiving three degrees, including his doctorate in medicine in 1837. He became the first African American in the United States to hold a medical degree and a noted abolitionist.³³ The fact that in 1832 Peter Jay was Chairman of the Columbia Board of Trustees and the lack of support from members of the Manumission Society, which did not petition Columbia to accept Smith or even mention this injustice in the minutes of their 1832 meetings, reveals the lack of limits of the Society's efforts to ensure the success of the students they educated.³⁴

Altering Attitudes

Jay's defeat in the 1792 gubernatorial campaign marked the end of potential political activity for the Manumission Society until the opening of the next election cycle. However, between the election of 1792 and the election of 1795 events conspired to change the public

³³ Morgan, Thomas M., MD. "The Education and Medical Practice of Dr. James McCune Smith (1813-1865), First Black American to Hold a Medical Degree." *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95.7 (2003): 603-14. *PubMed Central*. Web.

³⁴ Matthews, Brander. *A History of Columbia University, 1754-1904: Published in Commemoration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of King's College*. New York: Columbia UP, 1904. p. 241.

attitude towards slavery. The first was the negotiation of the Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation with Great Britain, or Jay's Treaty, in 1794. In his negotiations, John Jay failed to pressure the British into providing compensation to slave-owners who had lost their property during the American Revolution. This result provoked the wrath of many slaveholders, including the large Dutch families of New York. Hamilton, under the pseudonym of Camillus, attempted to make a reasoned argument in the *Argus*, a New York City newspaper, about the extent the British could be pressured into concessions and argued that the treaty was in fact a positive result for the new republic in contrast to another war with Britain. The Defence No.III, published on July 29, 1795 in the *Argus* is especially interesting as a major section of the address treats the matter of compensation for enslaved people taken by the British upon their evacuation. Hamilton writes, "Let me now ask this question of any candid man. Is our construction of the article respecting the negroes, so much better supported than that of Great Britain, as to justify our pronouncing with positiveness that the carrying them away was a breach of the treaty? To me it appears clear, that this must be considered, speaking favorably for us, as a very doubtful point, and that we cannot with confidence predicate a breach of the treaty by Great Britain upon this event."³⁵ However, this plea fell on deaf ears as the Republicans responded painting Hamilton as one who believed "the interests of these Africans lay nearer the heart of their gracious monarch than those of white Americans?"³⁶ While the Jay Treaty, despite its controversial nature, did eventually win Senate ratification, it marked one of the final moments of real animosity toward the anti-slavery movement in New York State.

The second major action that altered the attitude of the public was the rebellion of the enslaved population in St. Dominique (Haiti). While the original uprising was met with outrage

³⁵ Hamilton, Alexander. "The Defence No. III." *Argus* [New York] 29 July 1795

³⁶ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 138.

and condescension among the New York City press, this moderated throughout the course of the decade, becoming a growing acceptance. Shane White argues that this moderation was caused by the introduction of slave-owning refugees into New York City, since common New Yorkers were able to witness the difference between the style of slavery that they had and that of the southern plantation islands.³⁷ While this reasoning is debatable, it remains true that support for slavery in New York entered a downward spiral between 1792 and the reintroduction of the Gradual Emancipation Law in 1795.

Throughout this period, the New York Manumission Society began to experience rapid growth. While the increased appeal in the anti-slavery movement did help drive an increase in membership, the other development was that the society became a popular expression of New York's intellectual elite. Men such as Elihu Hubbard Smith and William Dunlap, notable Early Republic intellectuals, moved from the Friendly Club, the leading New York City literary society, into administration positions at the African Free School or other posts in the Manumission Society. This marked a widening appreciation of the society's gradualism for the freeing of slaves in New York. However, the interests of these new members was mostly paternalist in nature, in that they believed in the educability of free slaves, along with a heavy strain of cultural and nationalist optimism. This did not totally undermine the true beliefs in the cause, but suggested that the condition of the African Americans in bondage was not the sole reason for joining. However, despite the enlargement of the society's membership, its actions towards emancipation remained slow and true to its traditional measures of petitions, social encouragement and streamlining. Not until the gubernatorial election of 1795 did the development of the Gradual Emancipation Act again proceed in earnest.

The Gradual Emancipation Act

³⁷ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 144.

In April 1795, John Jay was elected governor of New York, defeating Robert Yates. The induction of Jay, the previous president of the Manumission Society, reinvigorated the push for a Gradual Emancipation Act. Interestingly, Jay's running mate was Stephen Van Rensselaer, a Dutch descendent who owned a large amount of land upstate, which he rented to tenant farmers. Van Rensselaer was one of the largest slaveholders in New York, owning fifteen, which leads to the question of why Jay would have included him on the ballot. One possible consideration is that Van Rensselaer was included to gain the rural Dutch votes that had cost Jay the election of 1792. The three thousand tenants under the sway of Van Rensselaer represented roughly one tenth of the total possible voters in the state. The stigma of Jay being a past president of the Manumission Society that worked so well for Clinton's campaign in 1792 was not effective three years later. Jay was elected by a fifty three to forty six per cent margin.

In January 1796, James Watson, an assemblyman from New York City reintroduced the Gradual Abolition Act. The legislators attempted to link it to a method of compensating slaveholding New Yorkers for the capital that they would lose when their slaves became free. The legislature decided that emancipation should only affect the children of those in bondage, not those currently enslaved, in order to lessen the financial shock of emancipation on slaveholders. This policy passed the state legislature by one vote. The issue of compensation divided the pro-abolition members of the state legislature. Thirteen pro-abolition members, including Watson, voted for compensation, while fifteen pro-abolition members voted against.³⁸ The bill for gradual abolition was then referred to a special five-member committee for further deliberation. This marked the end of the progress of the bill for the 1796 session.

This referral stunted the legislative progress on the bill for the rest of Jay's first term. However, the popular press highlighted growing public acceptance of the goal of emancipation.

³⁸ Gellman, *Emancipating*, p. 165-6.

A January 28 letter written to Citizen Greenleaf of the *Argus* by “Reflection” argues “that all creatures of the human species are free by nature, and that by their just right they ought to enjoy the great blessing of natural liberty, which nature and nature’s god have bountifully provided them.”³⁹ This argument marks a decidedly antislavery viewpoint which was becoming all the more common in the press. It seems likely that “Reflection” was a Quaker who was involved in the Manumission Society. In 1797 appeared the Rushton pamphlet, which featured poet and staunch abolitionist Edward Rushton of Liverpool accusing Washington of hypocrisy (“You took arms in defence of the rights of man- Your negroes are men-Where are the rights of your negroes? They have been inured to slavery, and are not fit for freedom”).

The gubernatorial election of 1798 was an interesting development as it marked a faceoff between two Columbia graduates and members of the Manumission Society, John Jay and Robert R. Livingston. It marked their first competitive run for public office since they had their falling out in 1789. Both Jay and Livingston were identified with the emancipation movement in New York, making support or lack thereof for slavery largely a moot issue, despite Livingston’s slightly more radical stance. Interestingly, both Jay and Livingston chose Van Rensselaer as their selection for lieutenant governor, highlighting the continued importance of his constituency, despite the candidates’ respective anti-slavery predilections. In spite of a nasty campaign that showcased the vitriol that had developed between the two, Jay was reelected to his second term by a margin of fifty four to forty six.

Finally, in the early months of 1799, the gradual emancipation bill again came up for debate in the New York State Legislature. According to a March 29, 1799 article in the *Albany Gazette*, “Mr. Hatfield from the committee of the whole to whom was referred the bill entitled

³⁹ *Argus*. Jan 28, 1796. Is. 226

‘an act for the gradual abolition of slavery’⁴⁰ brought it forward in the state legislature and offered several amendments. The first sought to solve the problem of freed slave children until they were “bound out” by making the state responsible for their upkeep. This amendment passed with only five nays. Interestingly, the second action of the same session was a motion, introduced by a Mr. Addison, to reject the gradual emancipation bill. This attempt failed by twenty-four to eight. The bill then passed in its entirety, marking the beginning of the gradual end of slavery in New York.

The passage of the bill occurred deep into Jay’s second term as governor. As a former president of the New York Manumission Society, Jay’s failure to tackle this issue during his first term raises some questions about his commitment to the cause. The most obvious reason for the delay would be that Jay was concerned with the political ramifications of the passage of such a law on his reelection campaign in 1798. However, his support of the bill at its introduction in January 1796 is not consistent with this theory. Indeed, more credit should be given to the election of 1798 and the influence of Livingston, who probably forced Jay’s hand with his more radical support for emancipation.

The Role of Columbia and the NYMS

The passage of the Gradual Emancipation Act began the process of ending slavery in New York. However, much remained to be done and thus the mission of the New York Manumission Society was only just beginning. Until the end of slavery in New York in July 1827, the Society worked to register and support those African Americans freed under the provisions of the 1799 law. The African Free School grew to an ever expanding network of six institutions spread across New York City by 1835, when it was subsumed into the New York City’s developing public school system. As for the Society itself, it lasted until 1849, when

⁴⁰ *Albany Gazette*. 29 Mar 1799.

declining membership due to its now outdated ideology forced its closure.

The Manumission Society involvement of the Columbian revolutionary generation largely ended with the passage of the Gradual Emancipation Act. Jay finished out his term as governor and retired to a farm in Bedford, New York. He rarely made public appearances and his only notable action after 1801 was to become president of the American Bible Society. Hamilton, deeply involved in the political conflicts over the election of 1800, met his end in the famous duel with Aaron Burr in the spring of 1804. Livingston served as minister to France, negotiated the Louisiana Purchase and later became one of the first investors in Robert Fulton's steamboat. Troup became a land manager for a British investment corporation known as the Pulteney Association, which had purchased large tracts of land in Upstate New York.

The Gradual Emancipation Act that these Columbians had worked so hard to achieve, both personally and through the Manumission Society, did not bear immediate fruit. The 1800 census shows that the number of enslaved people in New York had only decreased in ten years to 20,903, a meager 290 person decline. This indicates the failure of the New York Manumission Society to take effective action in the period prior to the passage of the Gradual Emancipation Act in March 1799. However, by 1810, the number of slaves had dropped to 15,017. By 1820 the number had fallen to 10,088. By 1830, three years after the date set by the Emancipation Act as the end of slavery in New York, the number of slaves was only 75. The large decrease of 5,886 slaves between the census of 1800 and the census of 1810 is reflective of the passage of the Gradual Emancipation Act in 1799. These years marked the effect that the Act had in helping to encourage the end of slavery in the state.⁴¹

The last action a member of the revolutionary generation of Columbians took against slavery was Peter Jay's, John Jay's eldest son, argument against the inclusion of a racial

⁴¹ Census Bureau, *Chapter 14 Statistics of Slaves*

restrictions for voting rights in the New York State Constitution. At the constitutional convention in 1821, members abolished the property qualification for voting for white men, but permitted African American men to vote only if they had assets of at least two hundred fifty dollars – an enormous sum at the time. Jay argued that the use of the word white in the document promoted unhealthy racial difference which was not in line with the traditional values of the American republic. As he stated in his convention speech, "Why are they, who were born free as ourselves, natives of the same country, and deriving from nature and our political institutions the same rights and privileges which we have, now to be deprived of all those rights, and doomed to remain forever as aliens among us?"⁴² The document remained rather loathsome to Jay as his attempt to extend suffrage was patently rejected.⁴³

The New York Manumission Society marked an important social institution for the New York elite to congregate and develop their views on the subject of manumission and gradual emancipation. While in many ways, it remained an elitist and paternalist institution, which embodied the polite social activism typical of the upper class of the late Enlightenment period, it did provide some benefits in terms of efficient organization and activism to the African American community that it sought to help. The Columbian presence in the Manumission Society was strong throughout its early years and men such as Troup, Hamilton, Livingston and Jay served to help the Society achieve its goals. The contributions of a group of Columbians, joined by others in the New York Manumission Society, made emancipation possible.

Works Cited

⁴² North, Louise. "The Amiable Children of John and Sarah Jay." Proc. of Columbia's Legacy: Friends and Enemies in the New Nation, Columbia University, New York. Web.

⁴³ Jay, John, II. *Memorials of Peter A. Jay Compiled for His Descendants*. Arnheim, Holland: Printed for Private Circulation, 1905. p. 108.

- Albany Gazette*. 29 Mar. 1799: n. pag. *Newsbank*. Web. 23 Mar. 2015.
- Argus* [New York] 28 Jan. 1796: n. pag. *Newsbank*. Web. 23 Mar. 2015.
- Brandt, Clare. "Robert R Livingston: The Reluctant Revolutionary." *Hudson Valley Regional Review* 4.1 (1987)
- "Early Protests." *Quakers & Slavery*. Bryn Mawr, Web. 23 Mar. 2015.
- Farrand, Max. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. Vol. 2. New Haven: Yale U, 1966. Print.
- Gellman, David Nathaniel. *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006. Print.
- Hamilton, Alexander. "The Defence No. III." *Argus* [New York] 29 July 1795
- Hamilton, Alexander. "The Farmer Refuted." Hathi Trust Digital Library. Hathi Trust, n.d. Web.
- Jay, John. Letter to Egbert Benson. 18 Sept. 1780. *Papers of John Jay*. Columbia University, n.d. Web.
- Jay, John. Letter to Richard Price. 27 Sept. 1785. *Papers of John Jay*. Columbia University, n.d. Web.
- Jay, John, II. *Memorials of Peter A. Jay Compiled for His Descendants*. Arnheim, Holland: Printed for Private Circulation, 1905. Print.
- Jenkins, John S. *History of Political Parties in the State of New York from the Acknowledgment of the Independence of the United States to the Close of the Presidential Election in Eighteen Hundred Forty-four*. Auburn, NY: Alden & Markham, 1846. Print.
- Matthews, Brander. *A History of Columbia University, 1754-1904: Published in Commemoration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of King's College*. New York: Columbia UP, 1904. Print.
- Minutes of the New York Manumission Society, 25 Jan 1785
- Minutes of the New York Manumission Society, 4 Feb 1785
- Morgan, Thomas M., MD. "The Education and Medical Practice of Dr. James McCune Smith (1813-1865), First Black American to Hold a Medical Degree." *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95.7 (2003): 603-14. PubMed Central. Web.
- Moseley, Thomas Robert. *A History of the New York Manumission Society, 1785-1849*. Diss. New York U, Graduate School of Arts and Science, 1963.
- North, Louise. "The Amiable Children of John and Sarah Jay." *Proc. of Columbia's Legacy: Friends and Enemies in the New Nation*, Columbia University, New York. Web.
- Peyster, Frederic De. *A Biographical Sketch of Robert R. Livingston: Read before the N.Y. Historical Society, October 3, 1876*. New York: New York Historical Society, 1876.
- Stahr, Walter. *John Jay: Founding Father*. New York: Hambledon and London, 2005.
- Sudderth, Jake. "Jay and Slavery." *John Jay Papers*. Columbia University Web. 23 Mar. 2015.
- Tripp, Wendell Edward. *Robert Troup: A Quest for Security in a Turbulent New Nation, 1775-1832*. Diss. Columbia U, 1973.
- United States Census Bureau. "A Century of Population Growth, From the First Census of the United

States to the Twelfth, 1790 to 1900.” *Chapter 14 Statistics of Slaves*. 1976. Web. 23 Mar 2014.

White, Shane. *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. Athens: U of Georgia, 1991. Print.