

Liberty's Chain: Slavery, Abolition, and the Jay Family of New York**David N. Gellman****Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022****544 pages****ISBN: 9781501715846****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v10i1.354>**

David Gellman's *Liberty's Chain* is a deeply engrossing study of slavery through a multi-generational lens on the wealthy and prominent Jay family of New York. John Jay is one of the most influential and revered founders, and his legacy is deeply ingrained in our nation's history. Nevertheless, Jay and his descendants are one of the most understudied founding families. *Liberty's Chain* is divided into three sections and traces the Jays' rise to prominence. Gellman's work sprawls across the colonial and post-Reconstruction eras. In doing so, he illustrates how the Jays "transmitted and transformed deeply held political, religious, and moral values" (8). Indeed, Gellman not only provides different insights on the founders and slavery, but he also explores the way a family that deeply identified with a founding father grappled with and made sense of American independence and the legacy of slavery.

Gellman opens *Liberty's Chain* with John Jay, analyzing how he straddled the roles of both "slaveholder" and "antislavery reformer," and the ways those contradictions marked Jay's "private and public careers" (399). Jay rose to prominence during the American Revolution and early republic serving as president of the Continental Congress during the war, contributor to the Federalist papers, inaugural Chief Justice of the United States, negotiator of the "Jay Treaty," and the second governor of New York. His marriage to Sarah Livingston brought social privilege and political influence through familial ties with the prominent Livingston family. Jay utilized Revolutionary rhetoric to contemplate and articulate an "alternative to the slaveholding world" he lived in (29). In the 1780s, Jay joined the New-York Manumission Society (NYMS), one of the first antislavery organizations, and became its inaugural president. Jay held antislavery sentiments

although he never resigned his role as an enslaver. Like other prestigious members of the NYMS, Jay enslaved men, women, and children.

According to Gellman, Jay began connecting the dots between “metaphoric and actual slavery,” evident in his brief comments regarding the New York State Constitution having nothing to do with advancing slavery’s end (46). But he did not extend his antislavery sentiments to his own household. Jay reported in May 1780 that he had purchased a 15-year-old enslaved boy in Spain while serving as a diplomat. Furthermore, he and Sarah also brought enslaved people from home as they traveled internationally to Spain and France. Abbe was an enslaved woman who served Sarah. While in France, Abbe witnessed the stark differences between her own situation and those of paid servants. Seeking her own freedom, Abbe fled the Jay household. She was arrested and jailed for a period of time before falling ill, which prompted Sarah to have Abbe brought back home where she passed away. Gellman argues that because Abbe was in France where she may have been entitled to her freedom, her confinement was considered of “dubious legality” (69). Abbe’s death signaled Jay’s tepid concerns regarding the institution of slavery. Years later, in March 1799 while Jay served as governor, the Gradual Abolition of Slavery passed the New York Assembly. Given the political climate at the time, Jay chose not to align himself with the effort. However, the law mirrored aspects of Jay’s “slaveholding credo” in that the “future freed person’s labor would compensate for the costs of ownership” (117). Jay believed in gradual emancipation and applied that to slaves in his household voluntarily.

Gellman centers the second and third parts of *Liberty’s Chain* on the work of John Jay’s youngest son, William, and his grandson, John Jay II. Educated at Yale in the 1810s, William ascribed to his father’s gradualism. It was not until the 1830s, due to the influence of his son, John Jay II, that William embraced abolitionism. John Jay II studied at Columbia where he witnessed

the race riots in Manhattan and staked out a “defensive position on the frontlines” (166). From thenceforth, abolitionism encompassed both father and son’s identities, and they worked together to forge a path toward ending slavery.

William became a member of the American Antislavery Society and rejected colonization. He wielded a strong pen and frequently composed and published many important works in which he denounced racism. In his 1835 book *Inquiry into the Character and Tendency of the American Colonization, and American Anti-Slavery Societies*, William exposed the “deceptive, racist strategy of the American Colonization Society” and recognized that the society strengthened the institution of slavery as opposed to weakening it (169). William and John Jay II assisted many African Americans including Alexander Crummell, a freed Black New Yorker who wanted to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. William Jay lent his caustic pen and outlined his “antiracist decalogue” in his essay titled *Condition of the Free People of Color*. He charged that northerners enforced prejudice over liberty. He and his son managed to “rid their church of its most racially prejudicial practices” (249). After William’s death in 1858, his efforts were recognized in a eulogy composed and delivered by Frederick Douglass who cast William as a “moral titan in the history of abolitionism” (334).

John Jay II continued the work to end slavery and advocate for enslaved people. He represented many fugitive slaves in court. According to Gellman, one of his most dramatic confrontations with “race-based oppression” in the Fugitive Slave Act era was the Lemmon case, in which the liberty of eight people was on the line. This case was incredibly important in that it demonstrated that networks of African Americans and whites could “liberate the enslaved,” as well as “agitate debate” and “set off alarms in distant corridors of power” (301). As the nation propelled toward Civil War and Reconstruction, John Jay II never ended his commitment to end slavery.

Liberty's Chain is both a timely and a much-needed analysis that adds to the growing body of scholarship related to slavery and the American founding. Gellman has a masterful command of the subject matter and compiled an impressive bibliography comprised of primary sources and secondary literature. His previous scholarship includes *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom 1777–1827* and *Jim Crow New York: A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship, 1777–1877*. In tracing the journey of slave ownership to abolitionism within the generations of a prominent New York family, Gellman demonstrates that slavery was not exclusively a Southern problem. He also sheds light on the impact of inherited legacies. John Jay's descendants grappled with the legacy of the American Revolution and their family's relationship with slavery across a vast landscape. Gellman also appropriately incorporates the enslaved and domestic workers who served the Jay family in his narrative. Scholars interested in the Jay family and slavery in New York will find *Liberty's Chain* well worth reading.

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