

Defining Their Absence: The Valentine Family of Rye

In 1999, when I first arrived as a volunteer at the Jay Heritage Center in Rye, New York, I noticed a tall, two-sided kiosk near the entrance. Each side showed a man's face. These two men were born into very different circumstances but were nonetheless inextricably linked.

The front of the kiosk featured a portrait of John Jay, the nation's first chief justice and the primary negotiator of the peace that ended America's servitude to Britain, along with a provocative question: "What is democracy to you?"[1] On the back of the kiosk, and much less visible, was an image representing Caesar Valentine, a man enslaved by the Jay family for decades. Caesar's face, imagined by an artist, was tilted up towards the sky, perhaps to Jay himself, mutely appealing for his release from bondage. Certainly, democracy did not always serve Caesar.

Since that day twenty-six years ago, I have learned that John Jay's complex and often hypocritical attitude about the oppression of humans by other humans evolved over his lifetime of 84 years.

John Jay was born in 1745.[2] Through his maternal grandparents, he was a member of two of the largest slave-trafficking families in colonial New York, the Van Cortlandts and the Philipses.[3] John's father, Peter Jay—owner of the 400-acre country seat in Rye where John was raised—enslaved at least ten to twelve individuals there.[4] John himself married into the Livingstons, yet another slaveholding family.[5]

But, unlike his parents, his grandparents, and his in-laws, John Jay grew to view the institution of slavery as morally reprehensible and in conflict with the aspirations of a new republic. Jay and others, including his friend Gouverneur Morris, first saw an opportunity to abolish slavery in New York in 1777 through a clause in the state's new constitution, but they were unsuccessful.[6]

While his focus turned to nation-building, Jay continued to be troubled by the disparity between the independence he had sought for his countrymen and the lack of freedom for those who were truly shackled.



Suzanne Clary *is the President of the Board of Trustees of the nonprofit Jay Heritage Center in Rye, New York. She has twenty-five years of experience in the field of historic preservation and site interpretation, especially as related to African American history and women's history in Westchester County and New York State. She and her board were recognized by New York State Parks with an Excellence in Nonprofit Achievement award in 2022.*

AmericanAncestors.org/american-ancestors-magazine • Do not reproduce without permission of American Ancestors.





Opposite page: View of the 1838 Jay Mansion and the Jay Estate, by Carl Svernlov. Once he was freed, Caesar Valentine lived and worked in this house. Jay Heritage Center. *Top: John Jay,* by John Wesley Jarvis, after Gilbert Stuart. 1818. Donated by James Jay Davis to the Jay Heritage Center. Photo by Kim Crichlow. *Bottom:* A visitor looks at the Caesar Valentine kiosk, 2014. Jay Heritage Center.

"It is much to be wished that slavery may be abolished," wrote Jay in 1786. "The honour of the States, as well as justice and humanity, in my opinion, loudly call upon them to emancipate these unhappy people. To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused."[7]

Many of Jay's writings make evident his struggle to reconcile legal rights and inalienable human rights, but to completely end slavery in New York he ultimately chose a staggered approach. In 1799, when he was governor, Jay passed the Gradual Emancipation Act.[8] This method was not a bold, heroic strategy, but the result of Jay's negotiation and compromise. At best, the new act reflected the pragmatism of a moderate who wanted to effect some measurable change, but the legislation ensured that emancipation would move at an excruciatingly glacial pace.

Although Jay's endeavors stood in contrast to the inaction of his Southern peers like Washington and Jefferson, men and women continued to be enslaved in New York for almost three more decades. And his efforts could not undo the past. Abbe, the enslaved servant of Jay's wife, Sarah Livingston, died in 1783 without ever having known freedom.[9] Still the Emancipation Act did pave the way for the permanent and legal abolition of slavery in New York State on July 4, 1827. Jay's measures, slow as they were, finally created space for free Black men and women to own land, operate businesses, build churches, and create vibrant neighborhoods—all developments Jay witnessed before his death.

Jay's two sons, Peter Augustus and William Jay, continued their father's legacy by championing voting rights, educational opportunities, and respect for families of African descent. The brothers advocated accelerating the manumission timeline and supported helping fugitives flee slavery. In 1821, Peter Augustus defended the voting rights of freedmen at New York State's constitutional convention.[10] When another delegate declared that "the intellect of a black man is naturally inferior to that of a white man," Peter Augustus emphatically rejected the statement as "completely refuted and is now so universally exploded."[11]

Today, the lives of the women, men, and children that the Jays enslaved and, in some cases, freed are at the forefront of restoration efforts at the Jay Estate. We have reexamined letters, censuses, and land records

AmericanAncestors.org/american-ancestors-magazine • Do not reproduce without permission of American Ancestors.

that were previously dismissed as less relevant, and we have searched for people who were omitted from earlier narratives. We looked in new places, too, not just established institutions or marbled halls. Letters in an attic, faded writing in a Bible, and oral histories passed down for generations can also provide clues to resurrecting the forgotten.

Searching for Caesar

In 2008, I started my search in earnest to learn more about Caesar Valentine's life. His story gnawed at me every time I looked at that kiosk and welcomed visitors to the Jay home. It was also Caesar's home, wasn't it?

Based on the evidence in his manumission document, I knew that Caesar Valentine was one of the last people who lived in bondage at the Jay estate.[12] He was not freed until 1824, when his enslaver, the widow Mary Duyckinck Jay, John Jay's sister-in-law, died.[13] She had refused to give Caesar his freedom during her lifetime. After his emancipation, Caesar opted to stay in Rye, and he worked for Peter Augustus Jay and his family for twenty-three years. When Peter died in 1843, he left a lifetime stipend to Caesar Valentine and instructions for his children to care for Caesar until Caesar's death.[14]

The 1830 census shows five free Black persons still living and working at the Jay Estate.[15] I wondered who they were and whether they included Caesar's wife and children. Without clear records to document Caesar's life, I turned to a cache of handwritten ledgers in the vault at Christ's Church in Rye, founded by the Jay family. The records included baptisms, marriages, and deaths of enslaved people. I learned that a man named Caesar in the Jay household died in 1847 at age 60, establishing his birth year as 1787.

Caesar Valentine's burial service was conducted by a minister at Christ's Church, who noted that Caesar was buried, not in the church cemetery reserved for white congregants, but "somewhere" on the more than 400-acre "farm of John C. Jay."[16] I wanted to determine the location. Based on letters and books in the Jay Heritage Center and in the archives of Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, I suspected that at least one, and possibly two, dedicated spots existed for the enslaved dead on the original property.[17]

In 2010, in my role as Executive Director, I authorized Dr. Eugene Boesch, an archaeologist, to conduct a small ground penetrating radar exercise in a few locations in our park to try to reveal more information about the daily lives and routines of the enslaved people on the Jay Farm and possibly locate colonial-era structures.

At the same time, I expanded my search for information about Caesar's potential relatives or friends who might have been interred a little further outside the grounds. In hindsight, I see that this change in direction was a pivotal moment in my journey. I began to explore Rye's African American Cemetery. Historically referred to as the "Colored Cemetery" and the "Colored Burying Ground," this municipally owned 1.4-acre parcel was set aside in 1860 by a Methodist couple for the use of freed Blacks in Rye.[18] Located just over a mile from the Jay Estate, the plot would have been within walking or riding distance of Caesar Valentine's home. Shortly after my first visit, I contacted the friends' group there founded by Dave Thomas and offered to help with research.

Each time I returned to the cemetery, I hoped some new clue would emerge to lead me closer to Caesar's family and proof he left descendants. I even daydreamed about finding a missing Valentine family tombstone hidden under a pile of leaves. I read all the gravestone inscriptions twice and then three times. Soon, I was as familiar with other Black residents of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Rye as I was with Caesar. I imagined them all engaging in conversation as they conducted business and ran errands in town.

I pored over digitized obituaries and articles referencing the cemetery to learn more about the lives of the community's Black individuals and families. I was transfixed by these forgotten men and women. I discovered where people had been raised or enslaved, plus their



Dave Thomas, founder of the Friends of the African American Cemetery in Rye, 2019. Photo by Kim Crichlow.

AmericanAncestors.org/american-ancestors-magazine • Do not reproduce without permission of American Ancestors.

nicknames, parentage, children, employers, and jobs. I learned about a coachman named Charles who saved a white child from drowning in the storm-swollen Blind Brook, a tributary that still floods today.[19] I marveled at an innkeeper named Rufus whose turtle soup sounded so good it might have rivaled a dish at Delmonico's.[20]

Their stories mesmerized me because, like Caesar, these Black residents of Rye had so clearly been left out of the larger historical narrative that I learned as a child and as an adult. I made requests to the New York City, Westchester County, and New York State archives for hundreds of vital records. Copies of handwritten baptismal, marriage, and death certificates were delivered to my inbox. I transcribed them to create increasingly detailed narratives of people outside the Valentine family—a who's who of people of African descent in Rye, Port Chester, and Mamaroneck who belonged to some of Westchester County's earliest African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion churches.

When I was in college, I took a studio art course. One assignment was to draw a chair by filling in all of the details in the room except for the chair itself. The chair's profile would ultimately appear, defined by its absence. In my search, I hoped that if I kept filling in the people and context immediately around Caesar—the women and men inhabiting the same neighborhood, their comings and goings, their work and worship, and their jobs, their joys and sorrows—I could make more of Caesar's life reemerge from the negative space.

Carol Smith Ubosi was on a quest similar to mine. Carol, who taught English as a Second Language, lives in Maryland and is a member of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society. She grew up in Westchester County and generations of her family lived, worked, and worshiped not far from the Jay Estate. As a child, she tended the gravesites of her grandparents at the Rye African American Cemetery—the place that brought us together—and as an adult developed a love of gardening and genealogy.

In September 2011, Carol called my office to discuss building greater advocacy for the cemetery and to ask for help tracing a man named Lewis, who was listed on a manumission paper in her possession. Carol later drove to Rye with her daughter Naji to donate this rare document to the Jay Heritage Center so that it could be a catalyst for educational initiatives about Black history in Westchester County.

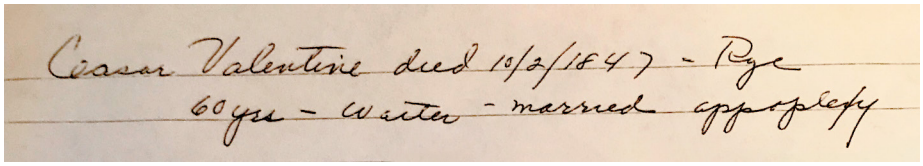
To announce Carol's generous gift, we held a talk by Lincoln historian Harold Holzer, followed by dinner in the 1838 Jay Mansion. We toasted Carol in the same rooms where Caesar once interacted with the Jay family. After dinner, Carol showed me an old Bible she'd brought that had passed down through her family. She had found the folded manumission paper within its pages. Looking at the frontispiece of the book, I gasped as I noticed a faded inscription in pencil: "May 18, 1867—Caesar Valentine died Age 60." But this was not the Caesar I had been seeking. He was too young, born in 1807.

Then Carol showed me a second piece of paper:

> Caesar Valentine died 10/2/1847 — Rye
> 60 yrs — waiter — married apoplexy

These two scraps of information about a father and his namesake son had been preserved together for almost 150 years. Combined with the church records and





Top: Carol Smith Ubosi and her family collection displayed as part of the "Preserving African American Heritage in Westchester" exhibit at the Jay Heritage Center, 2019. Photo by Kim Crichlow. *Bottom:* The slip of paper found in Carol Ubosi's Bible that confirmed Caesar Valentine's marriage, occupation, and cause of death.

AmericanAncestors.org/american-ancestors-magazine • Do not reproduce without permission of American Ancestors.



Suzanne Clary and Carol Smith Ubosi with fellow members of the African American Heritage in Westchester Committee at the Rye African Cemetery, 2019. Photo by Kim Crichlow.

censuses that I had found earlier, they confirmed what I had long suspected—that Caesar had a family. After this, I found a probate document for Caesar bearing the signatures of both Caesar's son and John Jay's grandson who, together, were executors of the older Caesar's estate. And I discovered information at the Westchester County Archives confirming that the individuals listed in the 1830 census were Caesar's son and two daughters. Nothing is yet known about any further generations.

Countless Black families struggle with a lack of historical documentation while researching their ancestry. The resources available to them can seem dauntingly limited but technology and organizations like American Ancestors, the Jay Heritage Center, and Rye's Friends of the African American Cemetery are changing that. Since my journey started more than a decade ago, I have reconstructed large portions of Caesar's life, before and after his emancipation by the Jay family. I've also discovered how freedom impacted other Black families who used their independence to create schools, communities, and social support networks in Westchester County. We continue to search the Jay farm for the burial ground that holds Caesar's remains and those of his ancestors.

Carol, Dave, and I are now combining our findings into a book that will help other families trace their lineages. The old kiosk is gone and will be replaced with two new ones. One will still tell the story of the Jay family and their legacy in the shaping of our flawed yet precious democracy. The other kiosk will discuss the resilience and historic presence of the Valentine family of Rye—now much more real and tangible than when I first arrived at the Jay Heritage Center. ◆

Notes

1 Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (1983), 438; and "John Adams' Journal of Peace Negotiations," November 30, 1782, avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/6wh90-3.asp.

2 Frank Monahan, *Defender of Liberty* (1935), 3.

3 Walter Stahr, *John Jay, Founding Father* (2005), 2.

4 Landa M. Freeman, Louise V. North, and Janet M. Wedge, *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay* (2005), 296.

5 Ibid.

6 John Jay to Robert R. Livingston and Gouverneur Morris, April 29, 1777, *The Selected Papers of John Jay* at Columbia University, library.columbia.edu/libraries/rbml/units/jayprint.html. This digital collection consists of over 13,000 papers compiled from the holdings of over 75 institutions, including the Jay Heritage Center.

7 William Jay, *The Life of John Jay with Selections from His Correspondence* (1833), 181–82.

8 Walter Stahr, *John Jay, Founding Father* (2005), 347.

9 Freeman, North, and Wedge, *Selected Letters* [note 4], 162, 298.

10 John Jay, *Memorials of Peter A. Jay Compiled for his Descendants* (1929), 108.

11 Nathaniel H. Carter and William L. Stone, *Reports of the Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of 1821, Assembled for the Purpose of Amending the Constitution of the State of New-York* (1821), 184.

12 Manumission document of "Caesar," May 28, 1824, Jay Family Papers (MS 917), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, archives.yale.edu/repositories/12/resources/3958.

13 Guide to the Jay Family Papers (MS 917), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, archives.yale.edu/repositories/12/resources/3958.

14 John Jay, *Memorials of Peter A. Jay* [note 10], 217.

15 Peter A. Jay household, 1830 US Census, Rye, Westchester County, New York, Ancestry.com. (Although indexing shows him in New Castle, the census record places him in Rye.)

16 Funeral records, 1841–1860, Christ's Church Archives, Rye, New York. Also in Thomas T. Sherman, "Vital Records of Christ's Church at Rye, Westchester County, New York," *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, Funerals 1841–1860: Vol. 48, No. 3 (1917):228–35.

17 *The Selected Papers of John Jay* [note 6].

18 *The Journal News* (White Plains, N.Y.), February 5, 1979, 201.

19 "Rye," *Port Chester (N.Y.) Journal*, March 8, 1883, 1.

20 "Sawpits Forty Years Ago," *Port Chester (N.Y.) Journal*, August 31, 1876, 1.

AmericanAncestors.org/american-ancestors-magazine • Do not reproduce without permission of American Ancestors.