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John Jacob Astor



*America's First
Multimillionaire*

AXEL MADSEN



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Los Angeles, May 2000



John Jacob Astor

Introduction



Before Bill Gates and Donald Trump, before the Rockefellers, before Andrew Carnegie, E. H. Harriman, and Henry Ford, there was John Jacob Astor. He might have been born in a village in southern Germany, but his story is American in his desire to reinvent himself and, to an astonishing extent, invent the newly formed United States. The wish to make something of oneself is a perennial in most cultures. Doing so is the American obsession. Doing so supremely is the stuff of legends. Astor was America's first multimillionaire. As his friend Philip Hone, the last of the aristocratic mayors of New York, said of him: "All he touched turned to gold, and it seemed as if fortune delighted in erecting him a monument of her unerring potency." When he died a few months short of his eighty-fifth birthday, he left behind a fortune that represented one-fifteenth of all the personal wealth in America.

The new American democracy's laissez-faire economy gave astute and audacious entrepreneurs unlimited opportunities. Astor was one of the first merchants to imagine the world as a global economy. He traded on three continents and had little patience for prickly nationalism. He didn't think England's quarrel with its former North American colonies was any of his business. Throughout his long life he ignored jingoistic passions while remaining attentive to the money to be made on wars. A beaver skin, he believed, belonged to the trapper who caught the animal and to the person who bought the pelt regardless of maps that statesmen in London, Paris, Madrid, St. Petersburg, and the new

capital of the new United States drew up of territories no white man had ever seen. When he entered the fur trade, two of every three Americans lived within fifty miles of the Atlantic Ocean, and only four roads crossed the Allegheny Mountains. California belonged to Spain; Russian traders had footholds on the coast of Alaska. In between, Canadians dominated whatever business was carried out with Indians.

The French Revolution upset Europe's dynastic checkerboard and Napoleon's rise spilled over into sea warfare with Great Britain that tested its relationship with the United States. The new American states suspected England of waiting for an opportunity to reclaim the colonies. Successive governments in London were too focused on conflicts with Napoleon to try to placate the apprehensions of the testy citizens of its former colonies. Thomas Jefferson clung to the illusion that depriving Britain and France of American commerce would make the two enemy nations come to their senses. When he imposed an embargo on all foreign trade, Astor tricked the president into making an exception for him. Wars make for inflation—countries don't tax their citizens in advance; they issue debt to pay for wars—and Astor profited handsomely when James Madison blundered into the War of 1812. With Philadelphia banker Stephen Girard, he lent the Treasury money to finance the conflict, and thumbed his nose at both sides by floating part of the war loan in London. His wartime activities might have verged on the treasonable, but his loan to the Treasury saved him from popular wrath and judicial pursuit. Besides, with the election of James Monroe in 1817, a man in Astor's debt occupied the White House.



His time was the eight decades that stretched from the end of the American Revolution to the mid-nineteenth century. When he arrived in Baltimore, the jealous states didn't trust the federal government with printing money. A silver dollar was worth \$200 of today's money. A clerk earned \$150 a year (again $\times 200$, the \$30,000 paid an office worker in today's dollars). A person could live comfortably and even with a degree of style on \$750 a year. A night at Astor House, the

city's first luxury hotel, cost \$2, but room and board in New York could be had for \$2.50 a week. Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor and reform politician, taunted Astor in 1844 by writing that the average earnings of two-thirds of New York City's population scarcely, if at all, exceeded a dollar a week. The same year Astor gave his granddaughter Laura a wedding gift of \$250,000, conservatively worth \$50 million today.

It was a time before a centralized, national economy. People worked for a "livelihood" rather than for money. They grew their own food, wove their own cloth, turned their own furniture. Handicrafts were widespread, shops and factories were interspersed among farms, and traffic in goods and money was limited to narrow regions. Fortunes, especially in New York and Virginia, were based on ownership of land. Along the Atlantic coast, wealth was created in the shipping trade, although the pace was slow and temperate. It was a time before railways and telegraphs, when commerce was carried on rivers and the construction of the Erie Canal was a wonder of progress. To reach the Pacific took the better part of a year. The easiest way was to start in the fur capital of Montreal, float down the St. Lawrence through the Great Lakes, cut down to the bottom of Green Bay, haul canoes overland to Lake Winnebago, continue to the upper Mississippi, and run down to the confluence of the Missouri above the frontier town of St. Louis. From here it was three thousand miles up the Missouri, past the friendly Mandan villages and, hopefully, past the fierce Blackfeet, trek overland across the Rockies to the Snake or one of its tributaries, travel by river until reaching the Columbia, and then head down to the coast. The sea route was barely any faster. A Chinaman or East Indiaman sailed south from New York, caught the tradewinds, navigated the treacherous Roaring Forties off Argentina, stopped at the Falklands for freshwater, rounded Cape Horn, ran up the west coast of South America or, more often, cut across to Hawaii for freshwater again before heading for Canton on the Pearl River.

To find passage in Hawaii for what was called the Northwest Coast was difficult. Below the Russian trading post at Sitka, Alaska, Neweetee, on the southern tip of Vancouver

Island, was the sole Indian settlement of consequence. Only fur traders navigated the foggy waters lapping the jagged shores of the Strait of Georgia and Puget Sound and the inlets inhabited by fierce Indians, always alert for pillage and massacre. It was a time before political correctness decreed that the continent's aborigines had lived in peace and harmony until violated by white intruders. Cruelty can be practiced by anyone. President Zachary Taylor, whose soldiering during the Black Hawk War brought him into contact with the American Fur Company's representatives, considered Astor's agents "the greatest scoundrels the world ever knew."

It was the best of times and the worst of times, said Charles Dickens, who visited the new Astor House hotel in New York shortly after it was built. Astor was by then the courtly widower fastidiously fond of music, never happier than when he was surrounded by his grandchildren. Yet the silver-haired patriarch was also a slumlord, a war profiteer, and a ruthless jobber who shipped opium to China, and sold liquor to Indians knowing the devastating consequences. He prospered not only by maximizing profits, but also by riding out storms that sank less well-capitalized rivals. He was perhaps the first entrepreneur to diversify, and, as he said, to see "how one form of commerce could be linked with another to the advantage of both." Best of all, he knew when to get out of a business. He liquidated his China clippers and New York warehouses as tea from Japan and India cut into the China tea trade. He dropped the fur trade as fashions changed and North American beaver pelts and other animal coats became scarce after a century of devastating trapping. Converting the profits from China and the fur trade into Manhattan real estate made him and his descendants for generations the wealthiest Americans.

Astor was in Paris in 1826 when Joseph-Nicéphore Niepce took the world's first photograph. He was still alive when a collection of daguerreotypes went on display in New York in 1839 (his friend Philip Hone thought Louis Daguerre's Parisian landscapes constituted "one of the wonders of modern times"). No photo exists of John Jacob or his

immediate family. The lack of photographs is perhaps the reason the American Revolution and the Napoleonic era feels remote compared, say, to the Civil War with its images of soldiers and commanders in the field. Astor had himself painted by the leading portraitists of his day: Gilbert Stuart, who painted George Washington twice, and John W. Jarvis, famous for his portrait of the War of 1812 hero Oliver H. Perry and the Illinois Indian leader Black Hawk. Astor was not handsome and the portraits we have of him are, in the manner of his time, celebratory, posed images.

He was not eloquent and had little talent for flattery, but from an early age his character commanded trust and confidence. He was not a man who lost his temper easily, nor was he given to bragging. He was formal and guarded, but knew how to lead people almost without their knowing they were being led. He and his wife, Sarah, didn't let money go to their heads. When he took over the indebted Aaron Burr's Manhattan manor, the Astors didn't move into Richmond Hill. Instead, they leased it to Governor George Clinton, who, like Burr, found politics expensive and soon had to sell land to Astor.

With the exception of New York's first luxury hotel, he never built anything. He preferred to lease his land and let others do the developing. That put taxes and assessments on the lessee, who usually built a two-story dwelling, often financed by an Astor mortgage. When the typical twenty-one-year lease was up, the builder had ten days to remove the structure, have a neutral committee appraise the property, or see the building revert cost-free to Astor. The extraordinary growth of New York City during his lifetime assured an ever-growing number of tenants and a healthy—reformers would say “obscene”—return on the family investment. His grandson liked to quip that “a man who has a million dollars is as well off as if he were rich.”

“Decadence,” wrote Thomas Mann in *Buddenbrooks*, the story of the decline of a North German merchant family, “is detectable in the third generation and fatal in the fourth.” John Jacob's son William had none of his father's

entrepreneurial energy. By the time grandson John J. Astor III inherited the empire, the financial flair was lost, and the rest of the descendants never *made* any money. Many of them, however, had the good sense or luck to marry women smarter than them.

Inherited wealth was new to the United States—and to the Astors. The country believed, and openly declared itself, to be a classless society. One great-grandson bought a British peerage because elitism and wealth inequality were tolerated in England. Some of the Astors were not very talented; some were arrogant dilettantes. Not all were slumlords. They were not famous for their humor, even though journalistic legend has it that great-grandson John Jacob IV came on deck after the *Titanic* hit the iceberg saying, “I asked for ice, but this is ridiculous.” They were mostly a dour lot, eccentric and shy in public. One granddaughter-in-law gave balls at her Fifth Avenue mansion that cost \$200,000, and refused to invite the Vanderbilts because she thought it ungentlemanly to manipulate railway stocks. Another granddaughter-in-law financed a regiment of black Union soldiers. Some of them tried politics, others gave away a lot of money. All married extravagantly. Great-great-grandson Vincent, who married three times, said that if the Astors were successful it was because the men in the family married clever women, which allowed one great-great-granddaughter-in-law to quip, “I married beneath me—all women do,” and to become the first woman elected to the British Parliament. There were no children from any of Vincent’s three marriages, and his death in 1959 marked the end of the house of Astor on American soil.

Whatever they all did, old John Jacob’s wealth kept them from ruining themselves.

“His story makes for marvelous reading—particularly as he never learned to write English properly,” Brooke Astor, the last wife of great-great-grandson Vincent, said over two hundred years after his birth.



The Hard Years

At a time when most people lived and died within a hundred miles of where they were born, John Jacob Astor's birth in the German territory of the margrave of Baden-Baden was almost accidental. The Astors—the name was variously spelled Astore and Aoster—were Italian Protestants from the Alpine village of Chiavenna high above the northern end of Lake Como. A medieval ancestor was supposed to have been Pedro de Astorga, a knight from León, in northwestern Spain, whose coat of arms featured a goshawk—*azor* in Spanish—and who was killed in Jerusalem on the Fourth Crusade in 1203. Tracing the lineage back to the Castilian grandee was the genealogical handiwork of John Jacob's great-grandson, William Waldorf Astor, when the latter pressed his case for British peerage. The first documented ancestor is Jean-Jacques d'Astorg, who embraced the Reformation. He and his family are assumed to have been followers of the persecuted Waldensian Puritan faith originating in southern France and existing chiefly in Savoy, a small duchy in northwestern Italy. The religious wars, which broke out in 1618, resulted in brutal persecutions.

Like most subjects of the duke of Savoy, d'Astorg spoke French and Italian, and answered both to Jean-Jacques and Giovan Pietro Astore. The duke of Savoy was a boy of ten and a vassal of Louis XIV in 1685 when the Sun King revoked the Edict of Nantes, which for nearly a century had protected French Calvinists and Lutherans. The massacre of Protestants in Valtellina high up in the Adda Valley sent d'Astorg-Astore, his wife, and their two children fleeing north across Switzerland to Heidelberg, the old university town and Calvinist stronghold where freedom of worship was respected. The family was uprooted again in 1693 when the troops of Louis XIV razed the town. They settled in Zurich, the birthplace a century earlier of Ulrich Zwingli's Reformation. Astore found work as a silk maker and changed his name to Hans Peter Astor. He died in 1711 at the age of forty-seven. His grandson Johann Jakob moved north to Nussloch in Baden, one of the three hundred German principalities, duchies, free cities, and estates forever changing shapes and allegiances as a result of wars and dynastic marriages.

Records show that Johann Jakob and his wife, Anna Margaretha Eberhard, had only one child, Felix Astor. He, too, moved. After Felix married Eva Freund and came into property settled on his wife, the couple established themselves in Walldorf—from the German words *Wald* and *Dorf*, meaning literally “wood village”—a community of a thousand souls on the edge of the Black Forest twenty miles south of Heidelberg.

Baden was a long strip of territory stretching from Mannheim to the Swiss border on the south and on the west facing French Alsace across the Rhine. Baden was divided into two states, Catholic Baden-Baden and Protestant Baden-Durlach, a rift that provided little incentive for commerce and industry. Because the Catholic and Protestant halves had pursued diverging policies, Baden had been left helpless during French expansion across the Rhine. Towns and citadels had been destroyed. Felix Astor bought a vineyard in Walldorf in 1713, but he and Eva were never part of the landowning class, although he achieved the honorable

position of churchwarden. They were enterprising in commerce. Johann Jacob chose to stay while his half brother Georg Peter—one of the six sons born to Felix Astor's second wife, Susannah—sought his fortune in England. Johann Jacob became the town butcher and, in 1750, married Maria Magdalena Volfelder, when she was seventeen. Five sons and one daughter were born of the union. The first boy died in infancy. Georg Peter, Johann Heinrich, Catherine, and Melchior followed.

The future empire builder and founder of the Anglo-American dynasty was the fifth and youngest son, born on July 17, 1763. Johann Jakob, as he was christened, was three when his mother died. The widowed butcher remarried, but his new wife, Christina Barbara, proved to be of little benefit to her stepchildren as she bore her husband six children of her own. The first set of children resented their stepmother and the second brood. The loathing was mutual. Perhaps because he was only three when his birth mother died, young Johann Jakob seemed not to have suffered the problems so often associated with boys and stepmothers. No letters indicating his affection for Christina exist, but as a mature man he hired an artist to paint portraits of his father and stepmother. Like modern-day police sketches, the portraits were painstakingly drawn from the adult John Jakob's memory. The portraits showed the elder Johann Jakob, toothless and scrawny, selling fish and game. Christina is thin and wrinkled. She holds up one egg from a basket of eggs in the Walldorf market square.

Maria Magdalena's offspring left the overcrowded home as soon as they were old enough to fend for themselves—Catherine to marry, the boys to seek their fortunes elsewhere. There was little motivation for their father to keep them at home or for them to stay. Johann Jakob Sr. was a stubborn, careless, and optimistic man. After a few steins of beer, he could turn nasty and cruel. None of his children apparently liked him. But he ran Walldorf's leading butcher shop for forty years and after that enjoyed good health for another three decades. He was ninety-two when he died in 1816.



The margrave Karl Friedrich was a benevolent ruler of Baden-Durlach and, after the other line of margraves became extinct in 1771, of Baden-Baden. In his youth, he had visited France, the Netherlands, England, and Italy and for a time studied at the University of Lausanne. With his wife, Caroline Louise of Hesse-Darmstadt, he was devoted to art and science beyond mere patronage, and became a friend of Mirabeau and the benefactor of Goethe, Voltaire, and Linnaeus. His concern for improving farming made him an acquaintance of Pierre S. du Pont de Nemours, who would flee the French Revolution for the United States and make a fortune in gunpowder.

Karl Friedrich introduced reforms that were much admired in other German states. Among them was early schooling, from which the Astor children benefited. Johann Jakob came under the influences of schoolmaster Valentin Jeune, a French Protestant who had settled in Walldorf, and the village pastor, John Philip Steiner. Both men seemed to have recognized an able mind in young Johann Jakob because both made special efforts to broaden the boy's horizons beyond reading, writing, and ciphering. The boy was no dreamer. His talents were practical and analytical, and he was an avid reader of the few books and newspapers available in Walldorf. Since his brothers Georg and Heinrich had emigrated, he was especially interested in foreign countries.

Georg, the eldest son of Johann and Maria Magdalena, had been the first to leave. In London, Uncle Georg Peter secured him a job in a company making musical instruments. Young Georg was a gifted musician and craftsman who did well in his uncle's workshop. In 1777, he borrowed enough money to set out to make his own way in the London music scene. He wooed a young girl named Elizabeth Wright. Because she was under the age of consent, her father had to agree to their union. The fact that he did so suggests Georg was not regarded as a penniless foreigner.

The second son, Heinrich, seized his opportunity when German princes began raising regiments to help the Hanoverian King George III of England fight dissidence in

his American colonies. Wars were remarkably passionless in eighteenth-century Europe, restricted by conventions and fought for dynastic reasons, with limited objectives. Nationality made little difference to allegiance. Armies were immobile and expensive, and mostly recruited from nobles, vagabonds, and sons pushed out of large, hardscrabble families. The officer corps was permeated by corruption and ineptness, and was separated from the enlisted men by arrogance and incompetence. Heinrich enlisted in Frankfurt, one of the 29,166 men rented out to George III by German rulers for the gross sum of £850,000 a year. Germany was the British army's traditional recruiting ground. German mercenaries were cheaper to recruit than working-class Englishmen who, although poor, enjoyed a high standard of living and were rarely driven by hunger to enlist. Besides, procuring mercenaries for Britain was all in the family. The ruler of Frankfurt was Prince William of Hesse-Kassel, King George's nephew.

Heinrich sailed in a Royal Navy man-of-war in 1775 and arrived in British-held New York, not as a soldier but as a butcher. His job was to procure and prepare meat to feed the Regiment of Hesse. He Anglicized his name to Henry, but the way he pronounced his last name made people spell it Ashdour. He discovered that a third of the colonists were for accommodation with the Crown, a third were for independence, and a third had no opinion.

When his regiment moved out, he deserted and soon opened a butcher's stall in Fly Market. To overcome the shortage of meat, he slipped out of New York City on horseback and somewhere in Westchester County bought stolen livestock from a raiding party. Under cover of night he drove the animals into town, slaughtered them, and sold the meat. Since his prices were generally lower than those of other butchers, competitors protested.



On Palm Sunday of 1777, fourteen-year-old Johann Jakob was confirmed in the Lutheran Church. For peasant and village boys the ceremony marked the end of schooling. Thanks

to Karl Friedrich's education reforms and to schoolmaster Jeune's teaching and interest in him, Johann Jakob was better educated than the majority of poor youths of his time. However much his head was filled with ideas of striking out on his own like George and Henry, he followed his father's edict and learned the butcher's trade.

The next two years were the unhappiest in his life. He hated the slaughterhouse and the butcher shop where he worked skinning animals, jointing carcasses, serving customers, and delivering orders. At fifteen he was an expert meat cutter and, with his knack for calculations, a competent would-be tradesman. He was serious, and eager to improve himself. From his mother he was said to have inherited an alert mind. Physically, he was a lanky blond youth, strong and sturdy.

The letters from his brothers made him realize that Walldorf was, economically, the sticks. Henry wrote from New York that even a butcher boy could earn three times as much as he could in Walldorf. Letters from George in London also stirred John Jacob's imagination, and he showed the letters to Reverend Steiner and Schoolmaster Jeune. The trio gravely discussed the contents. It was hard to believe that the rebels in America could possibly win against the powers of the English king. But George reported that London merchants were uneasy over the way the fighting was going in the colonies.

George suggested Melchior join him in his expanding flute-making business. But Melchior could not or would not leave home. He either had no interest or his father could not do without him. Late in life John Jacob would remember how he tramped miles to collect the letters his brothers sent, how his imagination was stirred by descriptions of life in London and the New World. Melchior eventually left their father's shop and joined a community of the evangelistic Moravian church near Koblenz. There he managed a community school and became a tenant farmer on the estate of the prince of Neuwied.

Johann Jakob wrote back to his brothers, asking if he could take Melchior's place. The answer came from London

after many weeks, from New York after many months. Yes, they said, he should leave. We do not know why he chose flute making in London over slaughtering in New York: perhaps one step at the time was sensible, or perhaps money for passage to America was out of the question; after all, the king of England had paid for Henry's Atlantic crossing. Johann Jakob discussed the opportunities with Steiner and Jeune. The choice no doubt came down to what was common sense. Other Germans worked in George's instrument factory. Pastor and schoolmaster put in a word with Butcher Astor. It apparently took months before Johann Jakob Sr. agreed to give the youngest son of his first wife the chance he had afforded his other sons.

Two months short of his seventeenth birthday, Johann Jakob stood at the edge of Walldorf and gravely said goodbye to Steiner, Jeune, and one of his half sisters. Only the teacher was cheerful, saying Johann Jakob had a good head and that the world would hear of him. Out of their sight, Johann Jakob knelt under a tree and, according to a story he probably originated himself, promised *der lieber Gott* he would be honest, industrious, and never gamble. With that he walked to the Rhine and, in the town of Speyer, became a deckhand on a raft transporting Black Forest lumber downriver. Two weeks later he was in Holland with enough money for passage to England. In London he found his way to the Astor & Broadwood musical instrument factory.

Johann Jakob stayed four years in London and Anglicized his name to John Jacob. In 1778, the musical instrument firm of George and John Astor opened its doors at 26 Wych Street, off Drury Lane, in the heart of fashionable London. The brothers made wooden flutes, clarinets, and other wind instruments, slowly broadening their range. As John matured, he learned the business from his brother, and became fluent in English, though he never lost his heavy, guttural accent and never learned the spelling. George was an astute merchant who expanded and diversified into keyboard instruments. John proved to be a born salesman.

News from the American colonies told a confusing story. Letters from Henry spoke of opportunities for ambitious

young men and suggested John Jacob come and try his luck. France entered the war on the side of the American rebels the year George and John Jacob opened their shop, and bolstered George Washington's resistance to Britain's veteran troops. The surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 did not settle the conflict, but peace negotiations were started. Thomas Jefferson, President Washington's ambassador to France, was particularly anti-British. "Mr. Jefferson likes us because he detests England," wrote the French minister Pierre Adet, "but he might change his opinion of us tomorrow, if tomorrow Great Britain should cease to inspire his fears." Even after the peace treaty was signed in Paris in 1783, Jefferson brought Anglo-American relations close to war again after a 1790 flare-up between Britain and Spain over English navigator George Vancouver's claims for Britain of a stretch of the Pacific coast of North America.

Twenty-year-old John Jacob possessed both imagination and caution. Peace meant the ex-colonists would turn to cultivating the arts, meaning they would want musical instruments. On the other hand, if the music business failed, there was always the butcher's trade. Flutes were a luxury, but people always needed meat, leather, and furs. The brothers dissolved their London partnership and, with his own modest resources, John Jacob embarked aboard a vessel named the *North Carolina* or the *Carolina* in November 1783. His luggage included a consignment of flutes.

The average transatlantic crossing took sixty-six days. Because of an unusually severe winter, the ship taking John Jacob to America was four months at sea. Captain Jacob Stout veered south toward Baltimore to avoid pack ice, which clogged the more northerly ports. The ship was nevertheless immobilized in the frozen waters of Chesapeake Bay. The ice encasing the vessel was thick enough to walk on, and by February and March 1784 a number of John Jacob's fellow passengers clambered overboard and made their way on foot to the Maryland headland. There are two versions of how John Jacob reached America's shore. In 1929, Arthur Howden Smith would write in *John Jacob Astor: Landlord of New York* that John Jacob waited until the ice broke and the captain was able to move the ship to her berth. In

his 1993 biography, *The Astors 1763–1992: Landscape with Millionaires*, Derek Wilson would claim John Jacob stayed on the ship because the shipping company was obliged to provide bed and board until the end of the voyage. However, by March 24 or 25, he, too, had enough and, with no sign of an imminent thaw, made his way across the frozen Chesapeake Bay to Baltimore.

Half a century later, when he commissioned the best-selling author, historian, diplomat, and gossip Washington Irving to write his life story, he dictated this sketch of his first day in the New World:

I took a walk to see the town, getting up Market Street. While standing and looking about, a little man came out of his shop. This was Nicholas Tuschdy. He addressed me saying— young man I believe you are a stranger, to which I replied yes. Where did you come from—from London—but you are not an Englishman, no a German. Then he says we are near countrymen. I am a Swiss—we are glad to see people coming to this country from Europe. On this he asked me into his house and offered me a glass of wine and introduced me to his wife as a countryman. He offered his services and advice while in Baltimore and requested me to call again to see him.

John Jacob stayed three weeks in Baltimore. Tuschdy displayed some of John Jacob's instruments in his shop window. Several sold. When it was time for J. J. to move on, he had money enough to take a coach for New York.



Flutes and Miss Todd

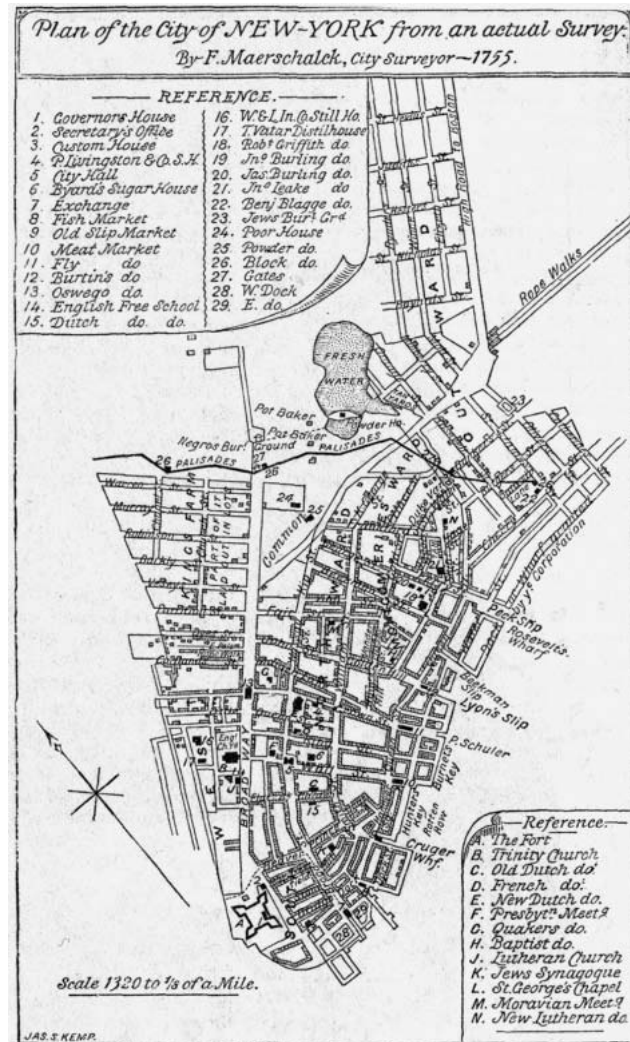
On his twenty-first birthday, or shortly before or after July 17, 1784, John Jacob stepped ashore in Manhattan from the New Jersey ferry. No imposing figure, he was strikingly blond, but short, with a slim face, brown eyes, a prominent nose, pale complexion, and long, straight hair. He had rough manners, and spoke uncouth English.

Henry was doing well, but like so many newcomers writing home had embellished his success to his kid brother. He was no longer hawking meat from a wheelbarrow. He was delivering his victuals by horse cart and vying for a stall of his own in Maiden Lane. A month before John Jacob's arrival, he had acquired a wife, a girl still in her teens. Dorothea Pessenger was the stepdaughter of John Pessenger, a meat seller who occupied Stall #1, the most advantageous location, in the Fly Market. Henry and Dorothea had set up housekeeping in a small house at First and Fisher Streets. John Jacob was given a warm welcome, but was not invited to stay with his brother and sister-in-law. Whether Henry thought it imprudent to leave his young wife with John Jacob or didn't have space for his young brother, he arranged

for John Jacob to become the lodger of a baker named George Dietrich at nearby 150 Queen Street. Dietrich had known the Astors in Germany. Henry suggested that John Jacob work for him, but J. J. turned down the job offer. No more butchering.

Dietrich needed a peddler boy to hawk his cakes, cookies, doughnuts, and rolls, and John Jacob's first job was to sell the Dietrich confections in the streets. With a basket of wares, he walked up and down cobble-laid Broad Street, with its rattling handcarts, spangled phaetons, and lines of shops. John Jacob no more wanted to become a baker's hawker than be a butcher's assistant, but peddling for Dietrich taught him the layout of the city. His next job was with an elderly Quaker. Robert Browne was a fur dealer, and during the summer of 1784, J. J.'s main chore was beating the furs to keep the moths away. The pay was \$2 a week and board. Astor carried out Browne's orders with competence and within a few weeks, Browne increased his new employee's wages. J. J. was quick to learn. The best beaver skins were from Canada. The most highly prized skins for hatters were *castors gras d'hiver* ("beavers taken in winter"). Indians scraped the raw side, a process that weakened the roots of the long hairs and made them fall out. Next, the Indians sewed a number of pelts into a dress, which they wore next to their bodies for several months. This made the pelts soft and greasy, the fur downy—the most desirable for the finest hats. Pelts worn only a short time were called *demi gras*. Beavers killed in the summer were *castors gras d'été*. *Castors secs* were skins that had not been worn at all, and their value depended on the season in which they had been killed.

Working for Quaker Browne, as he was called, didn't prevent John Jacob from disposing of the rest of the instruments he had brought with him from London. As was the custom for people who had articles to sell but did not own a shop, he made arrangements with Samuel Loudon, a job printer and publisher of the *New York Packet*. The September 20, 1784, ad read:



New York City map

GERMAN FLUTES of a Superior Quality to be Sold at this Printing-Office.

We do not know whether advertising the flutes as German was homage to his and his brother's homeland or whether, ten months after the end of the war with England, it was a diplomatic way of distancing the merchandise from

the former colonial power. In any case, George sent John Jacob a new shipment of flutes. Quaker Browne, meanwhile, was happy with his energetic assistant, and showed his appreciation by giving him a pocket watch. The silver time-piece of the so-called English bulldog type was engraved: "Presented to John Jacob Astor by R. Browne, 1785."

John Jacob invested his money in flutes and skins. On Sundays and evenings he could be found on Beekman Slip, Hunter's Key, Schermerhorn's Wharf, and other docks and quaysides on the East River, going aboard sloops and barges to ask river men if they might have a pelt or two for sale. Back in his room at Quaker Browne's, he beat the skins, then cleaned and packed them. He didn't sell them but put them in storage. In the fall of 1785, he had enough pelts to make it worth his while to sail across the Atlantic to dispose of his consignment in London at a good profit. Once there, he picked up flutes from George and convinced two reputable British piano makers to name him their American agent.

Profit margins were sizable, as fashionable New Yorkers demanded the luxurious trappings of sophisticated European society. Within a few years, John Astor built a business not quite rivaling that of New York's two established music dealers, Messrs. Dodd and Wilks of 66 and 235 Queen Street, respectively. Still, he also located his musical emporium in Queen Street, albeit in a walk-up room at number 81.

He informed the readers of the May 22, 1786, edition of the *New York Packet* that he had imported a new supply of instruments:

JACOB ASTOR, 81 Queen Street, Two doors from the Friends Meeting House, has just imported from London an elegant assortment of Musical Instruments, such as pianofortes, spinets, pianoforte guitars, the best of violins, German flutes, clarinets, hautboys, fifes, the best Roman violin strings, and all other kinds of strings, music books and paper, and every other article in the musical line, which he will dispose of on very low terms for cash.

His landlady was Sarah Cox Todd. Mrs. Todd was related to the Brevoorts, a notable old New York Dutch family. Her

two sons and a son-in-law were sea captains, but she lived in reduced circumstances herself. Her husband's death had left her almost penniless and obliged her to take in lodgers. She liked her young German tenant and so did her daughter, also named Sarah. On Sundays after church, the two young people went walking under the tulip trees and chestnuts that made the Bowery deserving of its name. On September 19, 1785, John married Sarah.

No details of the nuptials have come down to us. Brother Henry and sister-in-law Dorothea might have been generous, and the Brevoorts may have sent a gift on the occasion of their poor relations' wedding. Perhaps Widow Todd gave a dinner and the other lodgers chipped in with drinks. We don't know. We don't even know what the bride looked like. Several biographers have said she was no beauty, that she was not even conventionally pretty. The only portrait extant of Sarah Todd Astor is an engraving executed when she was a middle-aged woman. It shows her as a woman of regular features with a frank gaze and full, sensuous lips.

Calculation no doubt played a bigger role than passion. A year older than her husband, young Sarah brought with her a dowry of \$300. No doubt she, in turn, appreciated John Jacob's initiative, knowledge of music, dexterity with a carving knife, and serious attitude toward life. Many of the young men boarding with her mother were veterans of the War of Independence, given to booze and restlessness. Both mother and daughter appreciated that John Jacob was a hard worker. They also liked his taste for fine music and the fact that he regularly, if not assiduously, attended church. Perhaps more important for John Jacob, his new in-laws had strong maritime and commercial connections. He much admired the Brevoort farm out in the country at Broadway and Fourth Street, where Broadway detoured because the elder Brevoort refused to let the city run a road across his property.

Mrs. Todd gave the newlyweds two rooms. The front first-floor space was the showroom for the music business. The rear room on the same floor served as the newlyweds' living quarters, bedroom, and kitchen. Sarah threw herself into



Sarah Todd Astor

her husband's affairs and encouraged his entrepreneurial bent. Besides her \$300, John Jacob had hoarded a couple of hundred from the music business and the transaction in pelts he had learned from Quaker Browne and his trip to London. Within a few weeks of their marriage, Sarah waved good-bye to her husband as he took a boat up the Hudson River to Albany to try his hand at fur trading.



Into the Woods

The Old World conquered the Americas largely for commercial gain. The desire for the wealth to be made from the acquisition of animal skins led to the opening up of North America. The French were the pioneers. Operating out of Montreal and traveling by the continent's waterways, hunters, trappers, *coureurs de bois* ("woodsmen," or ambulant traders), and *voyageurs*, or boatmen, built up a highly profitable trade with Indians who arrived at the trading posts every spring, their canoes laden with pelts. At the end of the Seven Years' War, in 1763, when the French lost Canada, this fabulous trade fell into British hands.

As John Jacob tramped through the wilderness of upstate New York, buying beaver skins from trappers—mostly European adventurers, Indians, and mixed-race men cheating, fighting, and outwitting one another—the Union Jack still flew over Niagara and Detroit. To regulate the trade north and east of the Great Lakes, leading merchants in Montreal formed the Northwest Company. To monopolize the vast, unexplored hinterland of the new, confederated States, assorted Scots and French Canadians set up the

Mackinac (or Mackinaw) Company on the strait between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan.

During the next years, John Jacob was a harbinger of spring in Albany, arriving with the first sloop to get through from New York City after the ice melted. He struck out on foot along the Indian trail snaking westward through the Onondaga settlement to the Finger Lakes country, the Allegheny Valley, and the mountains of Pennsylvania. He ranged west to Buffalo and north into the Adirondacks. He drove himself unsparingly. One contemporary wrote that before the Canandaigua settlement was founded in 1789, John Jacob Astor, with a backpack of Indian goods, one night strayed from the Indian trail, got lost in the low grounds at the foot of Seneca Lake, and wandered amid the rustling of wild animals until almost morning, when he was attracted by the light of an Indian cabin. James Wadsworth, whose father remembered meeting J. J. in the woods of western New York, told one of the few anecdotes extant of Astor's humbler years. "His wagon had broken down in the midst of a swamp," the elder Wadsworth reported. "In the melee all his gold had rolled off the tail-piece and vanished into the ooze, and was irrevocably lost; and Astor was seen emerging from the swamp covered with mud and carrying on his shoulder an ax—the sole relic of his property." To which Astor's business biographer Kenneth W. Porter would sensibly add: "It was doubtful he would carry any considerable quality of gold while engaged in Indian trade."

John Jacob discovered that Mohawks and Senecas liked music, and when the occasion was right he took out a flute and tootled a few Baden-Baden folk tunes. He was seen in the taprooms of the frontier taverns and was remembered for his insatiable thirst for knowledge of geography, tribes, and, of course, furs. Muskrat, raccoon, deer, wolf, and bear had always been used for clothing, but smart men and women in London and New York wanted to adorn themselves in finer furs—beaver, marten, ermine, mink, and otter.

Peter Smith was a salesman of books, beeswax, lace, walking sticks, and snuffboxes who became a friend. In