

JFK@100

In the year leading up to the centenary of John F. Kennedy's birth on May 29, 2017, two contributors explore JFK's life and legacy. Jeffrey Laikind '53 asks important questions, "What was Jack Kennedy like as a roommate, someone who lived on your corridor or in your house, shared a class with you, or played on a team that you were on?" Henry McNulty '65 explores the role the young Congressman played in shaping our modern-day curriculum by suggesting the introduction of a course on public affairs and government.

LIFE at CHOATE

BY JEFFREY LAIKIND '53

May 29, 2017 will be John F. Kennedy's 100th birthday, an appropriate occasion to revisit his Choate years. Many books have been written about JFK, and most mention his having gone to Choate, some in passing, others in greater detail.

I attended Choate from 1948 until my graduation in 1953, and while 13 years separated JFK and me, he and I had many of the same masters, lived by the same school rules and regulations, and resided in two of the same houses – East Cottage and West Wing. We had one other thing in common: We were outsiders who had to establish ourselves: he was a Catholic boy, and I a Jewish boy at a school where White Anglo-Saxon Protestants prevailed.

What was Jack Kennedy like as a roommate, someone who lived on your corridor or in your house, shared a class with you, or played on a team that you were on? How did he do academically? What were the things that shaped *him* during those four critical years in his life?

Using source material from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, including written reports from his housemasters, teachers, coaches, and classmates, as well as letters from then-Headmaster George St. John and administrators George Steele and Wardell St. John, I have discovered some answers.



In his third form year, John F. Kennedy '35 lived in Choate House (pictured above), which was taken down in 1966 so that Steele Hall could be built. In the fourth form, he was in East Cottage and Fifth and sixth forms, he was on the second floor of West Wing, both of which have since been renovated.

EARLY INFLUENCES

What influences did JFK's years at Choate have on him? How might they have helped mold his character, shape his views of the world, and, finally, influenced decisions he made as our 35th president?

Jack was a second son, preceded at Choate by older brother and favorite son Joe Kennedy Jr. '33, who was a superstar and recipient of the Harvard Crimson Football Award given to the outstanding sixth-form athlete. In following Joe Jr. at Choate, Jack had to meet the challenge of defining himself in ways his older brother did not.

JFK's fifth and sixth form roommate, best friend, and acolyte LeMoyné Billings was also a second son, preceded by older brother Tremaine '29, who was also a superstar and went on to become captain of the Princeton football team. And finally, George St. John's second son, Seymour '31, was preceded at Choate by an older brother, Jim '28.

Jack relied on his quick wit, followed by pranks, to create a circle of friends, of which he became the center. Jack was also a sickly boy. Both boys respected their father, but as Rip Horton's oral history indicates, Joe and Jack were highly competitive, often getting into brotherly spats. In a letter from George St. John to Joseph Kennedy Sr., George wrote, "I am ready to bet right now that Jack will follow in Joe's footsteps, though he may have to go through a lessening, immature phase in the meantime. My oldest son, Jim, was always mature. Our second son, [Seymour], I worried a good deal about. Then in his last year at school ... he has been one of the finest ... fellows that a father could ever wish for." (November 1, 1933)

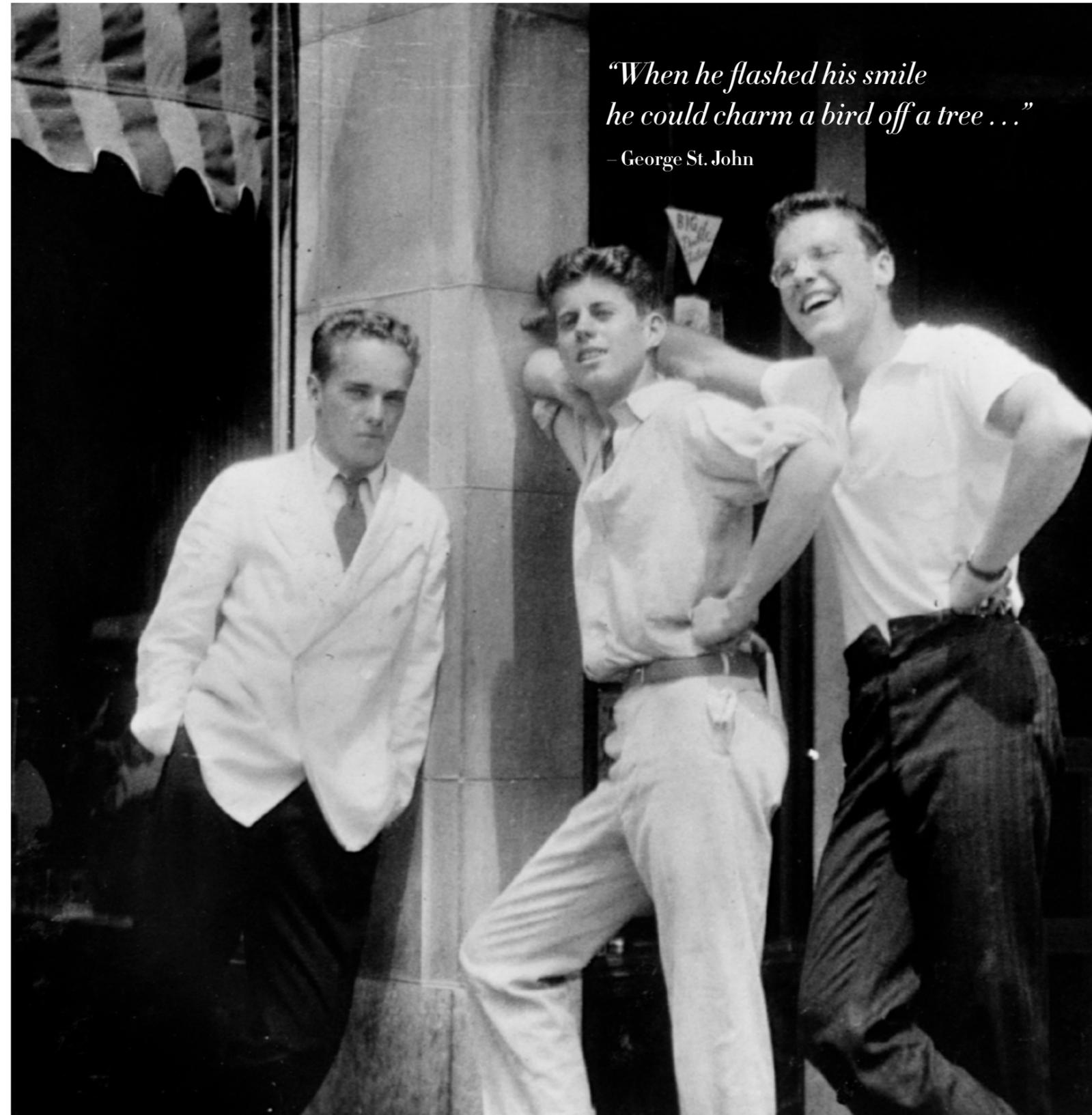
It's fair to conclude that Jack was influenced by trying to live up to an older brother with whom he could not possibly compete as an athlete. He may have tried to establish his own identity in other ways – by being a prankster, by not following rules, and by creating his own inner circle.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Jack Kennedy was an indifferent student at Choate. He did well in subjects he liked, but put little effort into subjects, such as Latin and French, he didn't care for. He showed an aptitude for English and history – he liked Russ Ayres' history class, and received good reports from him – yet despite his ability as president to speak publicly, at Choate he never received higher than a C+ in public speaking.

In his third form year, Jack got a 40 on his final algebra exam. George St. John wrote to Joseph Kennedy Sr., "Jack, at present, lacks the stability and the power of concentration to do a really effective job." And so it went throughout his four years. He graduated with a 72 average and never got above third quintile.

FROM LEFT: Ralph "Rip" Horton, John F. Kennedy, and Lem Billings outside Moran's Pharmacy at the corner of North Main and Center Streets, Wallingford, circa 1930s. (Photo by © CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)



*"When he flashed his smile
he could charm a bird off a tree ..."*

– George St. John

HOUSEMASTERS AND SCHOOL DAYS

Jack's housemasters were a major factor in his Choate experience. Earl "Cappy" Leinbach, his third form housemaster, saw something in the young boy. "He is in all respects a fine citizen," he wrote. Cappy's friendship lasted into JFK's presidency, with correspondence continuing as late as 1961.

His experiences with J.J. Maher, his housemaster during his fifth and sixth form years, however, were contentious to say the least. "Jack takes a great deal of understanding... Jack is young in his ways, and sometimes childish in his antics," Maher wrote.

Jack probably set a school record for most days spent in the Archbold infirmary. He suffered from many ailments: rashes, asthma, pneumonia. He spent the summer of his fifth form year at the Mayo Clinic, where he was treated for colitis. In the sixth form, he was excused from sports "due to illness."

Amazingly, during his four years at Choate, with all his illnesses, Rose Kennedy, Jack's mother, never once visited her son in Wallingford. She did, however, accompany her husband to Europe many times during those same four years. How must a young Jack have felt, spending so much time in the Infirmary, yet not being visited by his mother?

"In the morning hours in the classroom.... he was all school. In the afternoon, he was all boy, and from then until just before dinner it was athletics and rough housing and horsing around and just having a whale of a time."

– Harold Tinker, English master, Choate 1923-1962

Not having her present during Choate's annual Mother's Day tea (In those years, Choate had a Mother's Day in the spring and a Father's Day in the fall). Her absence must have hurt, but perhaps developed in him an independence and self-reliance that he would draw upon in the future.

THE BOY DOWN THE CORRIDOR

If you were at Choate when Jack Kennedy was there, how would you as a fellow student or master feel about him if he was on your corridor, in a class, or sat next to you in the dining room? Here are some quotes from reports by masters and other boys at Choate.

"When he flashed his smile he could charm a bird off a tree..." –George St. John

"He was a very mediocre student. He did have one flair ... and that was a flair for writing. He had too good a sense of humor. I've never seen him disturbed or hurt, or his feelings wounded by any event or occurrence." –Ralph "Rip" Horton, Choate '35

"In the morning hours in the classroom ... he was all school. In the afternoon, he was all boy, and from then until just before dinner it was athletics and rough housing and horsing around and just having a whale of a time." –Harold Tinker, English master, Choate 1923-1962

THE MUCKERS: REPERCUSSIONS AND IMPACT

Much has been written about JFK and the Muckers. In his sixth form year, he and a group of friends planned a practical joke that caused George St. John to call an all-school meeting at which time he called the pranksters "muckers," a term used derogatorily in Boston to describe Irish immigrants, who could find work only sweeping the Boston streets free of horse manure, or muck. Jack immediately named his group, which grew to 13 sixth formers, "Muckers."

He had a Wallingford jeweler make up a pin with a shovel, and each Mucker had one. They mischievously planned to dump a pile of manure in the dining room during Winter Festivities, but someone alerted Headmaster St. John of the scheme, and he called all the Muckers into his study in the morning and threatened to expel them.

But between morning and the time that they needed to catch a train out of Wallingford, he changed his mind. He sent a telegram to Joe Sr., asking him to come to Wallingford for an in-person meeting with Jack present. Joe Sr. arrived, and the three met. Jack was then asked to excuse himself and George St. John and Joe. Sr. met privately, allegedly for six hours. No one knows what was discussed, but at the end of the meeting, Jack was reinstated. When Joe Sr. met his son, his comment was "If it had been me, I would have started the name of the club with an 'F'."

CONCLUSIONS

Jack Kennedy was fun and imaginative. He was a good guy to live near, one who made dorm life interesting and enjoyable, and was always ready to buck authority or the established norm. I think I would have liked him.

He was voted most likely to succeed in his class. While he had serious health problems, he suffered through them with good humor. Nevertheless, he needed to establish his own identity, and did so by being funny, charming, and mischievous.

Because he felt the need to live up to his older brother, this pushed him in certain directions. In his own right, he was a leader, not a follower. Jack was himself at Choate. He benefited from his lifelong friendships with Cappy Leinbach and Seymour St. John, and fought against J.J. Maher's inability to see his pranks as simply a rebellion against authority.

I think any of us would have been glad to be his friend. JFK remained connected to Choate throughout his life. And as we celebrate what would have been his 100th birthday, we should mark Choate's lasting influence. Choate guides its students, allows them to grow, and ultimately builds them for the future.

Jeffrey Laikind '53 is former president of the Choate Rosemary Hall Alumni Association. In honor of President Kennedy's centennial, in May 2017 the JFK Library will unveil a special exhibition titled "JFK at 100: Milestones and Mementos."

A LEGACY OF SERVICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

BY HENRY MCNULTY '65

Reminders that John F. Kennedy '35 was a Choate graduate can be found all over the School today – from his portrait and bust in Archbold to the John F. Kennedy Special Collection in the Andrew Mellon Library, his name on the Alumni Seal Prize plaque in the dining hall, and more.

But perhaps Kennedy's greatest continued presence at Choate Rosemary Hall is something that doesn't bear his name but was created at his behest: a political science course now called "American Government and Politics."

It has changed its name and its curriculum several times in the past almost 70 years, but the public affairs course remains true to the vision Kennedy expressed in September 1946 at a dinner celebrating the 50th anniversary of The Choate School.

As the penultimate after-dinner speaker, Kennedy said: "It seems to me that Choate and schools like it, and colleges too, have been taught by men who have taken small interest in the contemporary life around them... In the future ... the men who teach at Choate must instill in its students an active interest in our politics and the national life around us."

Choate, he said, can continue to do "great work ... by interesting their students in politics."

Several faculty members supported the idea. "We are grateful to Jack for placing emphasis on this problem," wrote veteran English master Harold L. Tinker the following January. "It has done us good ... to be reminded of our responsibility and our opportunity."

In May 1947, a faculty committee was assembled to study creating a new course in politics; Choate masters Russell Ayres, Hugh Packard, and Gordon Stillman were suggested by then-Headmaster George St. John as members.

Later that month, faculty member Earl G. "Cap" Leinbach (who had been Jack's housemaster and coach) wrote to the presidents of Harvard, Yale, Brown, and Dartmouth, asking for their help. "[The] Headmaster has appointed a Choate Faculty Committee to plan a course in civics and government," he told them. "We seek the advice and help of the best men who would be willing to work with us in an advisory capacity."



c 1934 – In a relaxed pose, Jack and his three friends, Ralph "Rip" Horton, Lem Billings, and Butch Schriber (left to right), appear at ease with one another, as young friends might be for the camera. Jack and his companions are dressed in the fashion of the time for boys attending an elite boarding school.

By the fall, planning was well underway. “Cap Leinbach has been in touch with you, I know, about our projected course in government,” the new Headmaster, Seymour St. John, wrote to Kennedy. “The idea is your baby, and we have been working on it from several angles for several months.”

The committee was set to meet in early December 1947. “Naturally,” St. John wrote Kennedy, “what we should like best of all would be to have you join us for the conference.” JFK, who was then representing Massachusetts’ 11th District in Congress, had a previous engagement and had to decline, adding, “I would appreciate very much, when it is convenient, hearing from you as to the progress that was made.”

“Largely through the impetus given by Jack Kennedy in a stirring talk at the Fiftieth Anniversary Ceremonies, ...the School this year has initiated a new course entitled Public Affairs.”

– Choate *Bulletin*, Fall 1948

In 1958, Senator John F. Kennedy received the School’s first Alumni Seal Prize. Headmaster Seymour St. John, left, and history master Courtenay Hemenway, right, look on.



By January 1948, Courtenay Hemenway, head of the History Department, had developed a course outline.

“For the first year, one medium-sized section will be organized,” his plan read. “Boys in this section will be of varying abilities, but will be boys with real interest in history and social studies.... Class will meet as a unit three times a week for discussion, questions, and instruction. Each boy will meet with three or four others, and the instructor, twice a week for work on projects, for checking on the reading, and for more personal questions.”

In the fall term of 1948 – by coincidence, an election year – the new course was up and running. “Largely through the impetus given by Jack Kennedy in a stirring talk at the Fiftieth Anniversary Ceremonies, which emphasized the apathy and ignorance of the majority of secondary school students in political affairs, the School this year has initiated a new course entitled Public Affairs,” the *Alumni Bulletin* reported. “Mr. Hemenway will be the mentor and will see to it that such subjects as world politics, economics, and governmental structure are covered. No definite textbook will be followed, but *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Commonweal*, *The Nation*, *The Congressional Digest* and newspapers representing different parties, sections, and blocs will point the way to a comprehensive coverage of national and world events.”

By the early 1950s, the course did include textbooks, including Philip Dorf’s *Visualized American Government* and, later, works by the noted political writers Clinton Rossiter, Walter Wriston, and George F. Kennan.

A few years later, the curriculum of what was then called History VI (Public Affairs) had not only history texts but novels such as George Orwell’s *1984* and Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. By the late 1950s, students also – appropriately – read Kennedy’s own *Profiles in Courage*.

In 1958, when Jack Kennedy came to Wallingford to accept the School’s first Alumni Seal Prize, he again warmed to the topic of keeping students interested in politics.

“I realize that most Americans are not concerned about the education of politicians,” he told students, faculty, and administrators. “No education is considered necessary for political success, except how to find your way around a smoke-filled room. Unfortunately, this disdain for the political profession is not only shared, but intensified, in our academic institutions.” Except, that is, at Choate.

The Kennedy-inspired course, a sixth form elective, was called Public Affairs until 1970, when it became American Political Institutions and was led by history teacher Stephen

Longley. A regular component – which continues today – was an annual trip to Washington, D.C. to give students an opportunity to meet politicians, aides, lobbyists, Supreme Court justices, journalists, and others who are part of the American political scene.

For many years, history teacher Zachary Goodyear taught the course; he kept the name American Political Institutions for the fall term and used *Effecting Political Change* in the spring.

Today, this two-term course, now known as U.S. Government and Politics, is taught by veteran history instructor Ned Gallagher as a two-term sequence. “It begins with what I might call Civics 101,” he says. “The three branches of government, the Constitution, looking at elections – the nuts and bolts.” This is followed by a weeks-long seminar involving whatever political issues are topical, and includes a field trip to the State Capitol in Hartford.

Since 1973, students have also formed a “Model Congress,” with each writing a bill and presenting it. “I call it practice in the art of politics,” Gallagher says. It involves party organizations, elected leaders, Committee assignments, and full floor proceedings with all three sections of the course meeting together.

And in January, there’s the much-anticipated three-day trip to Washington to meet with those involved in political life. This year’s included meetings with several alumni: Alec Johnson ’04, a legislative assistant to U.S. Sen. Christopher Murphy of Connecticut; Brian No ’06, another legislative assistant; Pete Meachum ’91, chief of staff for Rep. Sean Duffy of Wisconsin; U.S. Rep. Suzan DelBene ’79 of Washington; Chris Wendell ’96, a senior planning officer in the State Department; and U.S. Rep. Stacy Plaskett ’84, of the U. S. Virgin Islands.

Separate from the course is a five-week summer program, also led by Gallagher, called the John F. Kennedy Institute in Government. The program, open to high school aged students and now more than 30 years old, is built around a core of courses that introduce students to how politics works in Western civilization, how American democracy functions, and public policy issues of the moment. It also includes a Washington trip.

In 1963, in one of his last messages to Choate, President Kennedy said, “I know that Choate continues to teach high ideals of public service and public responsibility.” For the past 69 years the course he inspired has continued to do just that.