

# The Beacon

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THOMAS PAINE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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## Thomas Paine's First Days in America

Did Paine Die  
Penniless?

Celebrating 250  
Years of  
Common Sense

Marking Paine's  
Monument

*Mouth of the Delaware*  
Painting by Thomas Birch, 1828  
Library of Congress



# Paine Arrives in America Stricken by Typhus

*Where, and why, did a loyalist doctor bring Paine back from the brink of death?*

By Richard Briles Moriarty

**A**s his London Packet approached the colonies in November 1774, Thomas Paine was not scanning for land. After turning northwards towards Philadelphia in Delaware Bay, he was not visualizing where, during the Seven Years War, French privateer ships awaited English prey within the folds of the eastern shore. Stricken with typhus fever that had ravaged his ship, the delirious and barely conscious Paine was confined to his cabin.

In a March 1775 letter to Franklin, Paine said he had “suffered dreadfully” during the voyage, “had very little hopes” he “would live to see America,” and that six weeks in the care of Dr. John Kearsley, Jr. —who “attended the ship

on her Arrival,” took Paine on as a patient, had him brought “on Shore,” and “provided a Lodging”—resulted in full recovery.

Why Kearsley? Many doctors then practiced in Philadelphia. Some Paine biographers assert that Kearsley had Paine brought to him because he heard about someone with a letter of introduction from

**Our knowledge of Paine’s 1774 voyage to America is confined to the March 4, 1775, letter he wrote to Benjamin Franklin.**

Franklin. Kearsley did not hear it through the grapevine.

He “attended the Ship on her Arrival.” Presumably appointed under Pennsylvania law to inspect the infected ship, he learned of Paine and the letter during that inspection.

Where did Kearsley inspect the ship and where did Paine recover? Paine biographers, who specify where the ship docked and Paine’s care occurred, assume Philadelphia locations. Instead, Pennsylvania law expressly prohibited ships “disordered with any infectious disease” from coming closer than Little Mud Island, seven nautical miles downriver, and required that infected persons be quarantined at a “hospital or pest house” on adjacent Province Island.

Unless the captain risked severe penalties by flouting Pennsylvania law and obtained Kearsley’s cooperation, Paine sailed no closer than Little Mud Island and was brought “on Shore” on Province Island.

Kearsley would not have defied a law requiring that infected ships be cleansed with vinegar. Kearsley derived significant income from operating a vinegar factory and vigorously advocated vinegar’s health benefits, recommending “bathing the body” of patients “with very strong warm vinegar” as “an auxiliary to stop the progress of putridity,” and drawing “hot steams of vinegar” and other ingredients “through a funnel into the lungs.”

The mortality rate for “highly intellectual” people who contracted typhus fever, like Paine, was “very high.” Paine’s delirium upon arriving suggested untreated severe typhus and heightened the prospect of death.

Available evidence indicates that Paine’s ship docked downriver, and that, quarantined on Province Island, he was rescued from likely death by Kearsley’s care. Cabin “passengers” like Paine had to pay for care. The hospital’s “Keeper” could charge for a passenger’s stay. Since Paine lacked financial resources, Kearsley having “provided a Lodging” during recovery may mean that he absorbed those charges.

Caring for Paine distant from Philadelphia was a considerable economic hit. Why did Kearsley decide to care for Paine without charge, perhaps pay the Keeper, and travel far downriver on multiple occasions? *Continued on Pg. 3*



*Province Island and Mud Island south of Philadelphia in the Delaware River.*

Detail from John Montrésor's survey of Philadelphia, 1777. Library of Congress

## Paine's Arrival—Continued from Pg. 2

Charity was an unlikely motivator. Kearsley prioritized his financial pursuits over needs of the poor. His uncle, dying in 1772, intended to create and fund an infirmary for poor women. Kearsley substantially delayed and nearly thwarted that bequest. Suing to obtain more from his uncle's estate, his claim prevailed before a jury though legally groundless, and his uncle's intent was realized only through additional donations by others.

Franklin's letter of introduction was also an unlikely motivator. Kearsley detested Franklin, who he sarcastically called "The Electrician," Kearsley accused Franklin of misusing public revenues for his private benefit and cynically predicted he would succeed because "he is wicked enough to Blind the people."

The most likely rationale for Kearsley taking on Paine's care is ironic. A Loyalist who forcefully opposed American resistance to England, Kearsley was, as friends and foes perceived, "violent" in his Loyalist views and actions. Before and after Paine arrived, Kearsley headed "The Association"

**Dr. John Kearsley, Jr.,  
a Loyalist in  
Philadelphia, took on  
Paine as a patient, and  
saved his life.**

that was designed to assure all "Englishmen" actively support British forces, drink to their success against the Americans, and "combine together to join the British Forces when they should arrive."

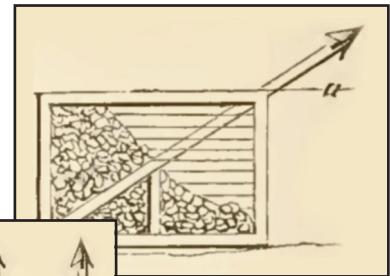
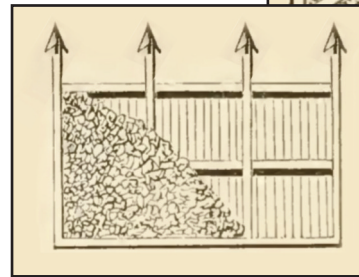
Did Kearsley view the Englishman Paine as a potential Association member and fodder for his Loyalist plans? During his inspection, did Kearsley read notes in Paine's cabin and recognize his extraordinary written communication skills? This explanation gains traction by considering Kearsley's actions in October 1775 that were, to Pennsylvanians supporting the American cause, stunningly treasonous.

Kearsley tried to send a map to London that disclosed precisely where British ships could maneuver around carefully constructed and critically important sharpened log structures sunk into the Delaware River — *chevaux de frise* — to reach and attack Philadelphia. The map was accompanied by a letter proposing that, if Britain sent troops, Kearsley would lead those troops and an equivalent number of Loyalists who, he promised, would come forward. Those papers were intercepted and Kearsley and his co-conspirators were

arrested. Kearsley remained imprisoned until, 53 years old, he died in November 1777.

Locations of those *chevaux de frise*—the prime defense protecting Philadelphia from British ships—were deeply held secrets. Other Loyalists were hanged for far less egregious activities.

*Chevaux de frise—  
"Fresian Horses"  
were spiked top  
defensive barriers  
sunk in rivers.*



Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852)

Kearsley presumably read Paine's *Common Sense* and his first four *Crisis* essays, published before November 1777. Imagine Kearsley's rage while consuming Paine's proclamation that "every Tory is a coward" and, "though he may be cruel, never can be brave." Or Paine's claims that "the instant that" a Tory "endeavors to bring his toryism A TRAITOR" and that a "traitor is the foulest fiend on earth."

Did Kearsley realize that, had he not cared for Paine, independence may never have transpired? Dwelling on that irony, would execution shortly after arrest have seemed an attractive alternative? Rather than being hanged in October 1775, Kearsley watched helplessly for two years —perhaps going insane—as his world turned upside down and the decision to bring Paine back from the brink gave birth to his nightmare. ▲

**Dr. Kearsley was  
"violent" in his Tory  
views and actions  
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Paine arrived.**

Richard Briles Moriarty is a TPHA Board member. An expanded version of this article, with citations, was published in *The Journal of the American Revolution*, <https://tinyurl.com/47ps7jpd>.



# Paine in Wartime

## A Lifesaving Invention



In June 1775, American soldiers had to retreat from a battle they would likely have won just because they ran out of gunpowder. That shortage was not alleviated until years later when the French began sending gunpowder to America.

250 years ago this month, while Paine was speedwriting *Common Sense*, he addressed this critical shortage of gunpowder that threatened to bring the American rebellion to a grinding halt. He and a colleague conducted experiments on how families could make gunpowder from commonly available materials, with his report on the process and the results being printed in newspapers in Pennsylvania and other colonies.

**Philadelphia November 14, 1775** Experiments made since Friday last by Captain Pryor and Mr. Thomas Pain, for the purpose of fixing some easy, cheap, and expeditious method of making Salt-Petre in private Families, in order to shew the practicability of a plan, proposed by Mr. Pain of forming a Salt-Petre Association for voluntarily supplying the public Magazines with gunpowder

### FIRST EXPERIMENT

**Friday afternoon** we sawed an old cask (of little or no value) into two tubs, and bored an hole in the bottom of each near to the side, of about the size of a common cork, and stopt it with a wooden peg; over each hole, we put a full handful of straw, then filled the tubs with earth, taken from the bottom of the cellar, and poured water thereon, filling it up as it sank in, till the water flood about an inch above the earth. This is the same as setting a lye tub.

**Second**, Saturday morning we drew the liquor off, throwing it up till it run clear, the quantity was about three gallons, which we put into a kettle and boiled to about three quarts.

**Third**, We took a little wooden keg, bored an hole, as in the former ones, stopt it with a cork, and covered the bottom of the tub with cut straw to about three or four inches, on which we put about the same depth of wood ashes, and gently poured thereon the hot liquor, so as not to make holes in the ashes; after letting it stand a few minutes to settle, we drew it off, (throwing it up again till it ran clear) when it ceased running, we put on about a quart of cold water to drive out the lye which the ashes had sucked up.

**Fourth**, We boiled this second liquor to about a pint and a half then poured it gently off, into a basin, leaving the scum and sediment behind; after it had stood about a quarter of an hour to settle, we again poured it into two earthen soup plates, set them in a cool place till next morning, at which time the sides and bottom of the plates were beautifully covered with crystals of Salt-Petre sprung up like large blades of grass, being in quantity about quarter of a pound.

**SECOND EXPERIMENT.**  
As we judged we had not got all the Salt-Petre from the earth in the tubs, we poured thereon (i. e. on the same earth) some *boiling water*; on Monday we drew it off, and proceeded with it as before; on Tuesday morning it produced a larger quantity of Salt-Petre than in the former experiment, and about two ounces of common salt.  
N. B. The lye which remains is called mother of nitre, and is to be put by and boiled up with the second lye of the next process, when it comes from the ashes.  
As these experiments were made to promote the public good, it is hoped the several printers will give them places as soon as they can.  
\* The earth of cellars, stables, barns, and out-houses, open to the air, but covered from rain and sun, is impregnated with nitre or salt-petre more or less; likewise the soil under the floors of barns, which are raised from the ground where fowls, hogs, &c. shelter, will afford a large quantity.---We took about an inch and an half from the surface.

Philadelphia, November 14, 1775.  
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From the *Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, Friday, November 24, 1775



# The Myth of Paine's Pennilessness

By Joy Masoff

**I**n April 1797, as Napoleon Bonaparte continued his meteoric rise, Thomas Paine made his way to 4 Rue du Théâtre Français. With his knock on the door, life changed for Nicolas and Marguerite Bonneville and their very young children. Paine had grown close to the couple during the early days of the French Revolution. Now, stateless and homeless in the wake of the Committee of Public Safety's Terror, an 11-month incarceration that almost killed him, and his long recuperation at the home of American Minister to France, James Monroe, Paine had been invited to take refuge at the Bonneville home. Madame Bonneville expected the great man to stay for a fortnight. Instead, he stayed for six years.

Surrounded by the Bonneville's circle of writers and intellectuals—headstrong, passionate, and yet still optimistic

**Paine not only found a haven at the home of Nicolas and Marguerite Bonneville, he found a family.**

even in the wake of so much death—Paine new companions rekindled his revolutionary spirit. The Bonneville's were great admirers of Paine. They even named their fourth-born son, Thomas Paine Bonneville, in the great man's honor the year after

Paine arrived at their home, and asked him to serve as godfather. As Paine's fortnight turned into months and then years, his presence as a doting, albeit eccentric, "grandfather" became the norm, while the family's hospitality towards him—between 1797 and 1802—became the foundation of an abiding friendship.

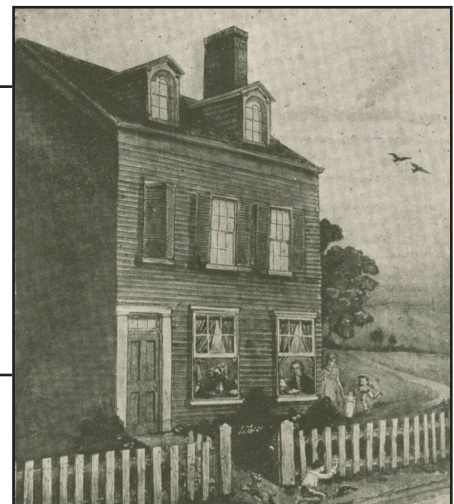
In 1802, Nicolas Bonneville was arrested by Napoleon and his printing presses were seized just as Paine was finally preparing to return to the United States. Paine saw a way to pay the struggling Bonneville's back for their generosity, so Madame Bonneville and three of her four boys—12-year-old Louis, 5-year-old Benjamin and 4-year-old Thomas, sailed to America shortly after Paine's return, planning to stay until Nicolas could get back onto a solid financial footing. Instead, for the next seven years in New York, this "odd couple," became a part of Paine's sometimes eccentric orbit. Little Nicolas was to frail to travel and remained in France, while Louis, the oldest, was unhappy in New York,

so arrangements were made for him to return to France and to the care of a family friend until he could be reunited with his father.

By 1808, prone to a growing litany of frailties, Paine was not the easiest person to be around. The small town of New Rochelle, 22 miles from New York, was no panacea for a happy life. There was an ill-executed attempt on Paine's life by a disgruntled workman, and the town had infuriatingly refused to let him vote in an election, alleging that he was not an American citizen. As a result, the Paine-Bonneville "family" began spending more time in what is now Greenwich Village. Paine began facing physical struggles. A bad fall and episodes of transient ischemia made it difficult for him to hold a pen. But he was still busy trying to make the world a better place.

*Paine frequently sat at the window of Cornelius Ryder's house, with a stack of newspapers by his side.*

New York Public Library



As Paine shuttled between a series of rooming houses, Madame Bonneville became his occasional secretary: "I...went regularly to see him twice a week; but, he said to me one day: 'I am here alone, for all these people are nothing to me, day after day, week after week, month after month, and you don't come to see me.'" An aging, ailing man, who thrived on arguments in the service of great ideas, now roiled against the infirmities of old age and his confinement in lonely, shabby rooms. At the same time, the futures of the Bonneville boys weighed heavily upon Madame Bonneville. It was the central bond between Paine and her.

On June 8, 1809, Thomas Paine—physically diminished but with his mind still clear—died peacefully. With the reading of Paine's will, the responsibilities for his burial and the execution of his estate lay on Madame Bonneville's shoulders.

*Continued on Pg. 6*



## Paine's Bequest—Continued from Pg. 5

Whatever scholars may make of Paine's feelings about Madame Bonneville, and hers about him, there can be no disputing her position as the principal beneficiary in Paine's will. His bequest included "shares, movables, and money...for her own sole and separate use, and at her disposal, notwithstanding her coverture." Small amounts were dispensed to old friends, including Nicolas, but the most significant chunk, including 100 acres in New Rochelle, went to Madame Bonneville: "... in trust for her children ... their education and maintenance, until they come to the age of twenty-one years, in order that she may bring them well up, give them good and useful learning, and instruct them in their duty to God."

Madame Bonneville wrote, "Paine, doubtless, considered me and my children as strangers in America. His affection for us was... great and sincere." His generous bequest to the boys in his will proves that.

In March of 1810, Marguerite Bonneville, with Paine's dear friend Walter Morton by her side, took a stage-coach to Albany, and, associated with Paine's estate, posted a bond of \$14,000—an amount that would today be the equivalent in purchasing power of about \$359,973. Paine had indeed provided for his "boys." ▲

Know all men by these presents, that we Margaret Brazier Bonneville of the City and state of New York and Walter Morton of the same place, Merchant are held and firmly bound unto Benjamin Bonneville and Thomas Bonneville infant children of the said Margaret in the sum of fourteen thousand dollars lawful money of the United states, to be paid to the said Benjamin Bonneville and Thomas Bonneville their Executors, Administrators or assigns, for which payment well and truly to be made, we bind ourselves our heirs Executors and Administrators jointly and severally, firmly by these presents, sealed with our seals and dated this eleventh day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ten.

Whereas the above bounden Margaret Brazier Bonneville by an order of the Honorable John Lansing Junior Esquire Chancellor of the State of New York made at a Court of Chancery held for the state of New York at the Chancellors dwelling house in the

## What of Paine's "Dear Boys"?

Paine loved the youngest Bonneville boys. After his death, Madame Bonneville, with a boost from Lafayette, petitioned Thomas Jefferson for a place for Benjamin at West Point. He rose to Brigadier General in the U.S. Army as well as gaining fame as an explorer of the American northwest. The Bonneville Salt Flats and the Pontiac Bonneville are named for him.



Thomas Paine Bonneville did not fare as well. On January 1, 1812, now dropping the "Paine," the adolescent Thomas became a midshipman in the U.S. Navy. He was awarded a sword of valor for his service during a fierce battle, but Thomas was a discipline problem. Heroism and discipline did not go hand in hand. Thomas resigned from the Navy in 1816. In November 1820, he enlisted as an Army private for a five-year tour, took a 2-month leave for illness, left on March 26, 1821, and vanished from history's gaze.

Know all men by these presents, that we Margaret Brazier Bonneville of the City and state of New York and Walter Morton of the same place, merchant, are held and firmly bound to Benjamin Bonneville and Thomas Bonneville, infant children of the said Margaret in the sum of fourteen thousand dollars lawful money of the United states, to be paid to the said Benjamin Bonneville and Thomas Bonneville, their executor administrators as assigned for which payment well and truly to be made, we bind ourselves, our heirs Executors and administrators jointly and severally firmly by these presents, sealed with our seals and dated this Lord, one thousand eight hundred and ten.

Whereas the above bounders Margaret Brazier Bonneville, by an order of the honorable John Lansing Junior, Esquire, chancellor of the state of New York, made at a court of chancery held for the state of New York at the Chancellor's Albany, the thirteenth day of March 1810, was appointed guardian of the persons and estates of the said Benjamin Bonneville and Thomas Bonneville, and the said chancellor's did at the same time further order that the said Margaret Brazier Bonneville should before she entered upon her trust as guardian of the said infants together with the said Walter Morton, execute to the said infants, a bond in the formal sum of fourteen thousand dollars conditioned for the faithful discharge of her trust as such guardian...

*A page from the Court of Chancery document.*

New York State Court of Chancery

Joy Masoff is a TPHA Board member. She is completing a PhD dissertation entitled *Thomas Paine and the Company He Kept*.

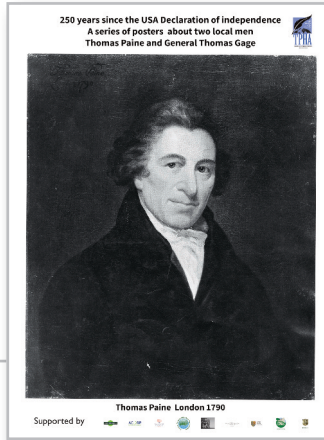


## COMMON SENSE AT 250 Legacies of Democracy from Paine to Today

**Friday-Saturday, January 9-10**

Lewes, UK, was where Thomas Paine first became a political powerhouse. Join virtually for a remarkable series of eight lectures by noted Paine scholars. ▲

<https://theitps.org/event/common-sense-at-250-legacies-of-democracy-from-paine-to-today/>



## KEEP IN TOUCH: Follow us at:



**NEW!** We want to hear from you, so join and follow us at Bluesky, Threads, and X. Find us online and follow, share, and add your thoughts.

<https://bsky.app/profile/thomaspaineha.bsky.social>

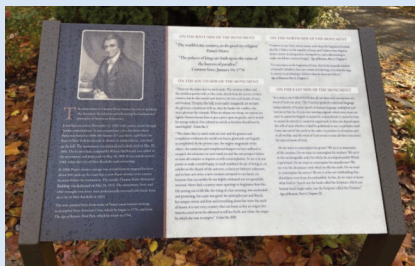
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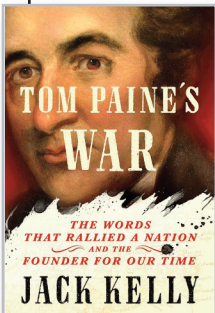


## Memorializing Paine

Visitors to New Rochelle's Paine Monument are now greeted with a long overdue historical marker, celebrating the achievements of an American hero. It features detailed explanations of the history of the 1839 monument. ▲

## Thomas Paine and the Revolutionary War

**Saturday, January 17,  
4 PM est**



Join Jack Kelly, historian and author, for an in-person talk based on Kelly's new book, *Tom Paine's War*—an “exploration of our nation's birth...a story of the

power of words—and the power of belief—and how both speak as well to America's current crisis.” ▲

**WHERE:** Thomas Paine Memorial Building, 983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY and Zoom (link on website).

**Don't miss our new features at**  
[www.Thomaspaine.org](http://www.Thomaspaine.org).

## More Upcoming January Events!

**Saturday January 24, 2 PM est**

### Conflicting Philosophies of Government in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution —A Perspective from Thomas Paine

A thought-provoking talk by Gary Berton, President of the TPHA, and editor of the new *Collected Writings of Thomas Paine*, from Princeton University Press. In person only. ▲ **WHERE:** Bordentown Historical Society, 302 Farnsworth Ave, Bordentown, NJ 08505

**Thursday, January 29, 7 PM est**

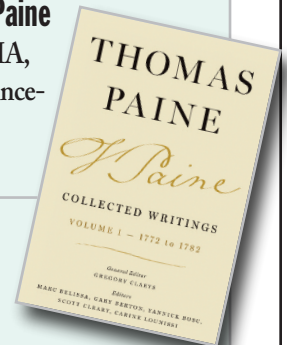
### The Times That Tried Men's Souls: Paine's Service During the Revolutionary War

An exciting Paine birthday event, organized by the Freethought Society and co-sponsored by TPHA and others. Jack Kelly, author of *Tom Paine's War*, will be the keynote speaker. ▲ **WHERE:** On Zoom. Visit <https://thomaspainememorial.org/>

**Saturday January 31, 4 PM est**

### Finishing the Revolution: Universal Suffrage and the Problem of Bicameralism

Dr. Daniel Gomes de Carvalho, Professor of Modern History, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, returns by popular demand. ▲ **WHERE:** Thomas Paine Memorial Building, 983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY and on Zoom (link on the website).





# In Honor of 250 Years of Common Sense— A New Way to Celebrate Thomas Paine!

**The Beacon is going to be made free to the public through our website!**

We want to thank you for your continued support for our work and helping us continue to expand our community and the resources we provide. As we prepare for the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, the 250th anniversary of Paine's *Common Sense* and the 100th anniversary of the founding of our Thomas Paine Memorial building in New Rochelle, we have reached a point where we are so proud of *The Beacon* that we plan to share the magazine and its stellar content for free with the wider world. As we are still working through the technical details, we don't have a date set just yet. But soon, all of *The Beacon* newsletters will be shared as articles at [thomaspaine.org](http://thomaspaine.org).

The benefits of this new format are going to be something we think everyone will appreciate. All of our articles will be discoverable by anyone searching for information on Paine and the American and French Revolutions, along with the Age of Democratic Revolutions where Paine had such an important impact. With the new web-based entry, you will be able to:

- **LEAVE COMMENTS** to discuss each article
- **SHARE ARTICLES** on social media,
- **SEARCH TOPICS** through all our back articles including those from the UK-based Thomas Paine Society with whom we recently merged.
- **TAG ARTICLES** so that if an article is about Paine's life in France, for example, you will be able to click a "Paine in France" link at the end of the article and see all other articles that relate.

As a core supporter, you are already signed up as members, and will continue to receive *The Beacon* by email as usual. But you will also receive exclusive early invitations to our Zoom and in-person events led by Paine scholars and experts from around the world as well as the latest updates on the *Collected Writings of Thomas Paine* project. On-site access to our Paine Library at the Thomas Paine Memorial Building and personalized research assistance from TPHA members is available along with being able to be first in line to participate in the revival of a venerable tradition—Paine birthday celebrations and toasts.

Upcoming benefits for supporters like you will also include discounts at the upcoming Thomas Paine store, with exclusive TPHA merchandise and more, as well as discounts for future events. We are thrilled to share our plans for the coming year and wish you very happy holiday season. ▲

## The Beacon

is a bimonthly publication of  
the Thomas Paine Historical  
Association (TPHA).

### Editorial Committee:

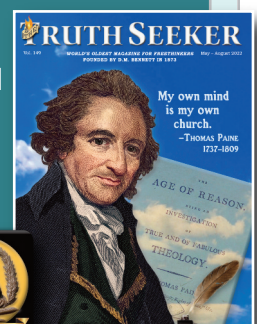
Judah Freed (Editor) • Frances Chiu  
Gary Berton • Richard Moriarty

The TPHA upholds the mission of educating the world about the life, works and legacy of Thomas Paine. We were founded in 1884 to correct the record on Thomas Paine by refuting negative propaganda and slanders perpetrated against him by most historians in the 19th century. We've since become the most reliable and accurate source of information about Paine worldwide. We assist scholars, authors, journalists, readers and anyone interested in Paine's life and work.

We operate the Paine Memorial Building and Museum, in New Rochelle, built in 1925, where we hold educational programs and offer tours. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, we gratefully welcome member support sustaining our efforts. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of our benefactors and partner organizations.

THE TRUTH SEEKER is the world's foundational  
source of freethought information since 1783:

longer than TPHA has  
existed. The publication  
was the main force behind  
our formation in 1884.  
Learn more about our  
"sister" publication at  
[TheTruthSeeker.net](http://TheTruthSeeker.net)



### Florida Veterans for Common Sense

An all-volunteer nonprofit advocate for  
veterans inspired by Thomas Paine to  
defend democracy, liberty, equality,  
and human rights.

[FloridaVeteransforCommonSense.org/](http://FloridaVeteransforCommonSense.org/) [Contact@flvcs.us](mailto:Contact@flvcs.us)