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THOMAS PAINE NATIONAL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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Thomas Paine and the Iroquois democracy

By Adrian Tawfik

A growing academic consensus accepts that cultural exposure to New World indigenous people profoundly shifted European society, helping to inspire the Enlightenment and calls for democracy.

Europe's view of the New World as an exotic curiosity (satirized in Swift's 1726 *Gulliver's Travels*) became curious about those living in natural realms for fresh ideas on governance and society.

As Europeans' contact with Native Americans increased, writers like John Locke, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed ideas about natural law and natural rights inspired by native ways, asserts Donald Grinde Jr. and Bruce Johansen in their 1991 *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy*.

Grinde and Johansen observe, "European philosophers functioned essentially as their nations' early industries, importing raw materials from Native America (and other tribal societies around the world), packaging them, and then exporting them around the world as natural-rights philosophy."

Rousseau, in particular, contrasted extreme poverty in urban Europe to the egalitarian societies in the New World. He read about the Nambicuara peoples in the Amazon and the Iroquois in North America — unlike anything that's existed in Europe since the classical era of a Greek democracy and Roman republic.



An Iroquois Assembly

Painting depicts Seneca Iroquois orator and chief Red Jacket. After the American Revolutionary War, when most Iroquois moved to Canada, he negotiated with the new United States to secure part of the old Seneca territory in western New York.

"The Trial of Red Jacket," painting by John Mix Stanley, 1869, oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum

By Thomas Paine

A Letter to Kitty Nicholson Few

January 6, 1789 — An excerpt

A thousand years hence (for I must indulge in a few thoughts), perhaps in less, America may be what England now is! The innocence of her character that won the hearts of all nations in her favor may sound like a romance, and her inimitable virtue as if it had never been. The ruins of that liberty which thousands bled for, or suffered to obtain, may just furnish materials for a village tale or extort a sigh

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Kitty Nicholson Few

Kitty and William Few were friends of Thomas Paine. Catherine "Kitty" Nicholson (1764–1854) in 1788 married William Few of New York, a signer of the U.S. Constitution. Also a New Yorker, Kitty was the daughter of Commodore James Nicholson of the Royal Navy.

A miniature painting by John Ramage, 1787, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Kitty Few — Continued from Pg. 1

from rustic sensibility, while the fashionable of that day, enveloped in dissipation, shall deride the principle and deny the fact.

When we contemplate the fall of empires and the extinction of nations of the ancient world, we see but little to excite our

regret than the mouldering ruins of pompous palaces, magnificent monuments, lofty pyramids, and walls and towers of the most costly workmanship. But when the empire of America shall fall, the subject for contemplative sorrow will be infinitely greater than crumbling brass or

marble can inspire. It will not then be said, here stood a temple of vast antiquity, — here rose a Babel of invisible height, or there a palace of sumptuous extravagance; but here, ah painful thought! the noblest work of human wisdom, the grandest scene of human glory, the fair cause of freedom rose and fell! ▲

**‘But when the empire
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Iroquois — Continued from Pg. 1

A generation later, America’s founders, influenced by writers like Rousseau, understood Native Americans from their own direct contacts, notes Johansen in his 1990 *Ethnohistory* article, “Native American Societies and the Evolution of Democracy in America.” Grinde added in a 1992 *Akwe:kon Press* article, “Iroquoian Political Concept and the Genesis of American Government,” the strongest native influence on the founders was the six-nation Iroquois League of Nations.

The Iroquois Influence

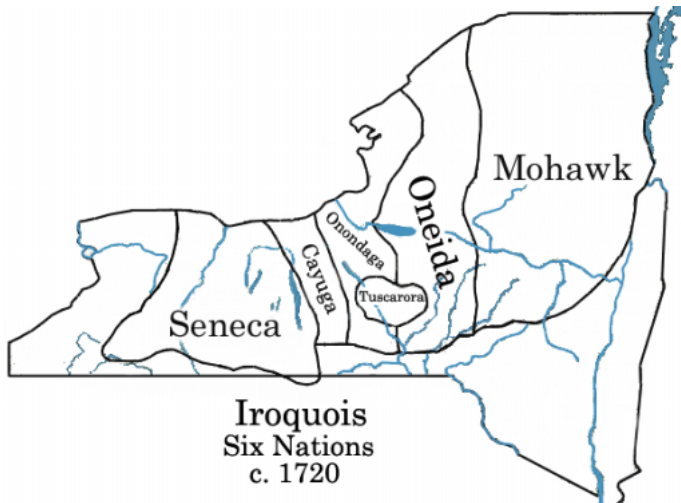
To show their influence, Benjamin Franklin in 1753 joined a delegation from Pennsylvania signing a treaty with the Iroquois League of Nations, says Walter Isaacson’s biography of Franklin. After meeting the Iroquois,

Franklin saw all Native Americans in an increasingly positive light, especially the Iroquois. He worried that their societies and lives were threatened by European immigration and imports of rum.

Franklin wanted the colonies to follow the Iroquois example. “It would be a very strange thing, if six nations of ignorant savages [*sic*] could be capable of forming a scheme for such a union,” Franklin said in a 1751 letter to James Parker, but “a like union should be impractical among ... ten or a dozen English colonies.”

Franklin joined Pennsylvania delegates when representatives of seven British-American colonies met in 1754 to discuss problems with British rule. Franklin’s “Albany Plan” proposed imitating the Iroquois League of Nations by uniting the colonies as one political body of smaller states, under the Crown.

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R. A. Nonenmacher, Wikimedia Commons

Franklin's Albany Plan is seen as a precursor to the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution. His "Articles of Confederation," published a year before *Common Sense*, proposed a federal structure akin to the Iroquois League.

During the French And Indian War (1754-1763), Native Americans were treated as pawns of the British and French empires in their Seven Years War. The Iroquois, as significant British allies, controlled more than 75 percent of the land that now forms New York State (see map), where much of the war was fought.

Later, in May 1776, weeks before the Declaration of Independence was signed, the Continental Congress invited Iroquois leaders to Philadelphia. The Iroquois gave John Hancock, President of Congress, the name of *Karanduan*, meaning "The Great Tree" (see Paine's "Liberty Tree" poem below).

Iroquois League of Nations and the U.S. Constitution

There's no scholarly consensus on the thesis of the Iroquois influence on modern democratic structures. Yet similarities exist between the U.S. Constitution and the Iroquois systems of government:

1. Reliance on community consensus for decisions.
2. Bicameral legislature (Iroquois had one for men and one for women).
3. States (or Sachems) with equal voting power regardless of population.
4. Systems for admission of new member states (Sachems).
5. Balance of power between federal and state (Sachems).
- h. Separation of military and civilian leadership.

8. Restricting members from holding more than one office.
7. Procedures to impeach representatives (a process called "knocking off the horns").
9. The caucus, an Algonquian word, for a political organization or meeting where discussion and consensus are emphasized over voting or formal rules of procedure.

In 1988, Congress passed a resolution by the Select Committee on Indian Affairs (H. Con. Res. 331) that recognized the influence of the Iroquois on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Enter Paine

Thomas Paine defended the Iroquois League of Nations and took their democracy to a new level.

Paine's high regard for natural human rights and a republican system of government in *Common Sense* was highly influenced by the Iroquois example, confirmed Eric Sherbert in the 2006 *Canadian Culture Poesis*.

To show how government evolve, Paine wrote the parable of a remote settlement growing into a society. His fable's civics lesson on democracy was recognizable to the Iroquois people as well as the American settlers. In *Common Sense*, he voiced hope for the new world:

Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her [freedom]. – Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

For Paine, America was a land where the evils of despotism had yet to take root, says Daniel Paul in the 2007 *We Were Not the Savages: First Nations History, Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations*. After his arrival in the colonies, Paine developed a sharp interest in the "Indians" who lived in a natural state, alien to the urban and supposedly civilized life around him in England, later in Philadelphia and New York.

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About Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine's role in the French Revolution

Excerpt from "Thomas Paine, The Apostle of Liberty" an address by John Remsburg, President, American Secular Union, 1916

The pen of Paine was as mighty as the sword of Washington. *Common Sense* was the glorious sun that evolved a new political world; each number of the *Crisis* a brilliant satellite that helped to illumine this New World's long night of Revolution.

In the Old World liberty remained, as it still remains to a large extent, yet to be wearisomely achieved. In France the people were struggling against a corrupt and oppressive government. Paine enlisted his services in the cause of freedom there. He advocated a Republic, and organized the first Republican society in France.

But Louis was permitted to resume his reign, and tranquility having been for a brief season restored, Paine went to his native England, where, in reply to Burke's "Reflections on the French Revolution," appeared his *Rights of Man*. With a desperation characteristic of the detected robber, the Government suppressed his work; but not until it had kindled a fire in Europe which tyrants have not yet succeeded in extinguishing, and in the glare of whose unquenchable flames may be read the doom of monarchy.

The storms of revolution bursting forth afresh, Paine again repaired to France. A joyous reception awaited his arrival at Calais. As his vessel entered the harbor a hundred cannon thundered "Welcome!" As he stepped upon the shore a thousand voices shouted "Vive Thomas Paine!" Bright flowers fell in showers around him; fair hands placed in his hat the national cockade. An immense meeting assembled in his honor. Over the chair he sat in was placed the bust of Mirabeau [a Jacobin leader] with the colors of France, England and America united. All France was ready to honor her defender.

Three departments, the *Oise*, the *Pas-de-Calais*, and the *Puy-de-Dome*, each chose him for its representative. He accepted the honor from Calais and proceeded to Paris. His entry into the French capital was a triumphal one. He was received as a hero, an intellectual hero who... had vanquished Europe's most brilliant champion of monarchy, and vindicated before the tribunal of the world mankind's eternal rights.

He took his seat in the National Convention. A stupendous task devolved upon this body--the formation of a new Constitution for Republican France. Its

most illustrious statesmen and its wisest legislators must be chosen to prepare it. A committee of nine was named: Thomas Paine, Danton, Condorcet, Brissot, Barrere, Vergniaud, Petion, Gensonne, and the Abbe Sieyes. To Paine and Condorcet chiefly was the work of drafting it assigned by their colleagues.

Then came the trial of Louis XVI and the beginning of those turbulent scenes which culminated in the Reign of Terror. The convention was clamoring for blood. Paine had been one of the foremost in overthrowing the monarchy. He believed the king to have been tyrannical, to have been the pliant tool of a corrupt nobility, and of a still more corrupt priesthood. But he did not deem him deserving of

death, nor did he believe that the best interests of France would be subserved by such harsh measures.

But the Terrorists threatened with vengeance all who should dare to oppose them. To plead the cause of the king might be to share his fate. A vote by any member in favor of saving his life might bring an overwhelming vote against that member's own life. They had resolved that the king should die, and led by such men as Robespierre and Marat, there were assembled



La liberté

Jeanne-Louise (Nanine) Vallain . Oil on canvas, circa 1793.
Museum of the French Revolution

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Meet the TPNHA Board

Discovering the truth about Thomas Paine

by Edmund Smith

A curious teenager sifting through my fathers small library, I opened up a cardboard-boxed book by Joseph Lewis, *Inspiration and Wisdom from the Writings of Thomas Paine*, signed by the author. Contained within were numerous short and longer quotes of Paine's writings, filled with such clarity, power and sense! I felt drawn back to that book numerous times.



Edmund Smith,
TPNHA Board

I came to Paine not as an academic, but as a "common man." My life's bent was as a naturalist, eventually a science teacher. History was a hobby for light dabbling. Always pulled toward Paine, I once asked a

high school social studies department chair what he thought of Paine. He grimaced and said he despised Paine for having sought the execution of King Louis XVI, who had supported the colonies against England. I believed him and assumed I had misread Paine. Soon after, I read the truth about him in France. I was shaken that a respected history teacher could err so badly.

In time, I learned that much of Paine's "history" is false — he was a drunk, a filthy little atheist. "He had lived long, did some good and much harm." The true history of Paine's treatment was worse — spat on when he returned to America, denied service, denounced in newspapers and physically accosted in the streets. Even the Quakers refused him burial privileges.

Why then did young Lincoln have a copy of *Age of Reason* and quote from it, causing his concerned friends

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French Revolution — Continued from Pg. 4

the most determined and the most dangerous men of France. The galleries, too, were filled with an excited mob of fifteen hundred — many of them hired assassins, fresh from the September massacre. "We vote," protested Lanjuinais when the balloting commenced, "under the daggers and the cannon of the factions."

In this perilous position what course would Paine pursue? Would he, like others, quietly acquiesce in these unjust proceedings? He had never yet faltered in his purpose of pursuing what he deemed the right. Would he shrink from danger now? No! above the wild storm of that enraged assembly, through his interpreter, rose the voice of this brave man in powerful, eloquent appeals in behalf of mercy. "Destroy the King," in effect, he said, "but save the man! Strike the crown, but spare the heart!" He pleads in vain; the king must die. Amid insults and execrations of a frenzied mob Louis is torn from the arms of his queen and children and hurried to the scaffold.

The Mountain has triumphed. The Jacobins, infuriated by the taste of a king's blood, will next devour

their fellow-members. The Girondins, the heart and brains of France, are expelled from the convention, dragged to prison and to the guillotine. Paine's plea for mercy can not be forgiven. He is imprisoned; sentence of death is finally pronounced against him; the hour for his execution, with that of his fellow-prisoners, is set.

Fortuitously he escapes. In summoning the victims for execution he is overlooked. Soon

after, and before the mistake is discovered, the bloody Robespierre is overthrown, and his own neck receives the blow he meant for Paine. The fall of Robespierre stems the crimson torrent and, in time, secures for Paine his freedom. His imprisonment has lasted nearly a year, a year never to be forgotten, a year of chaos, from which is to arise a fairer and a better France. ▲

**Terrorists threatened
with vengeance all
who should dare
to oppose them.**

Editor's Note: For 2023 readability, paragraph breaks were inserted into the above text from 1916. — jf

Edmund Smith — Continued from Pg. 5

to hide this fact from public view? Why was Jose Gervasio Artigas so inspired by Paine that he led the revolution that founded Uruguay? How could Robert Ingersoll and Thomas Edison come to write defenses of Paine with passion, eloquence and glowing praise?

I joined the TPNHA hoping to learn more of Paine, to discover if he wasn't, in fact, *optimis hominus*. Here I learned of Paine's anti-slave letter to Jefferson. I wondered, would there have been a Civil War if the founders listened? Would we have a prouder American history? No race massacres? No razing of Black Wall Streets? No Green Book? No impugned Black welfare mothers? No necessity for Black Lives Matter?

Here in the TPNHA, I learned that wherever Paine went, he profoundly moved the needle of progressive history. His pamphlets and books helped form modern America, England and France, earning immediate translations into other languages. That's known. Few know about his several weeks' sojourn in Mystic, Connecticut, with Madame Bonneville's family. Few know he dove into the creation of the Connecticut state constitution. For me, there is no greater catalytic enzyme to accelerate progressive movements everywhere he journeyed.

I ponder what were Paine's other achievements that we know nothing about, partly from many of his papers being lost in a fire, mostly from public rejection of him since *Age of Reason* was published in America.

When he wrote, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," what if the world had listened to his views regarding religion? Would Europe's Christians have engaged so deeply in the Jewish Holocaust?

Would there have been the Irish "Troubles?" Would Christians, Muslims and Jews still be squabbling over shared holy acres, scattered throughout the Mideast? Would there be war in Gaza and Israel today?

Why did the world miss its chance for the equitable, sustainable and happier world that Paine envisioned? Why did our ancestors not pay heed?

Carl Sagan, a Paine admirer, wrote:

What an astonishing thing a book is. Across the millennia, an author is speaking clearly and silently inside your head, directly to you. Thus I hear Thomas Paine speaking to me. He still lives. He still wants the world to listen.

To achieve the civilization we can still have, if only we listen and take action, have we fairly named ourselves *homo sapiens*, wise humans? Would a better fit be *homo insipiens*, senseless, or *homo acedians*, peevish?

I joined the TPNHA because Paine still lives among us, on bookshelves, yes, but moreso here in *The Beacon*. There are still statues to be cast, a national monument to be built, national school curriculums to be written, and biographical movies to be made with enough drama without the slightest exaggeration.

"We — even we here — hold the power and bear the responsibility," said Lincoln, channeling Paine when trying to save our nation. Do not both speak directly to us at this moment, as our modern American democratic government again teeters? ▲

Edmund Smith is a retired science teacher in Connecticut. He serves on the board of the TPNHA.



The Thomas Paine National Historical Association congratulates our "sister" publication on their 150th Anniversary!

The Truth Seeker has been the world's foundational source of freethought information continuously since 1873, longer than TPNHA has existed. The Truth Seeker was the main force behind our formation in 1884.



Iroquois — Continued from Pg. 3

After the Revolution began, Paine became secretary for commissioners sent to negotiate with the Iroquois.

After his personal encounters with the Iroquois, Paine cited them as a model for how a society might be organized.

They gathered at Easton, a town near Philadelphia on the Delaware River in January 1777. After this and subsequent personal encounters, with the Iroquois, Paine sought to learn their language. For the rest of his political and writing career Paine cited them as a model for how a society might be organized.

Iroquois influences are noticable in many of Paine's ideas about government and society. Not being noble-born nor wealthy, having personally suffered in England from abuses of wealth and power, Paine took pleasure in witnessing a natural society without any monarchy or aristocracy or established church.

The lack of money and private property in Iroquois society intrigued Paine. The influence is evident in his 1797 pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*, where Paine sharply criticized Europe's urban poverty:

The fact is, that the condition of millions, in every country in Europe, is far worse than if they had been born before civilization began, or had been born among the Indians of North-America at the present day.

Paine added, "The naked and untutored Indian is less savage than the king of Britain." Paine was harsh in contrasting the relatively peaceful nature of Native Americans to the "grand maniacal architect of systematic colonial oppression," claimed Vikki Vickers in her 2006, *My Pen and My Soul Have Ever Gone Together: Thomas Paine and the American Revolution*.

As a champion of human rights, Paine held compassion for the plight of Native Americans. In an age before the permanent devastation to come, Paine was not shy in predicting "that the native Indian would be absorbed into the mainstream of American culture." He did not foresee the violently enforced assimilation that occurred in the century after his death.

As for the Iroquois, during the Revolutionary War, they mostly allied with Britain. They trusted longstanding trade ties and promises to stop American expansion in New York. After Britain lost the war, many Iroquois resettled in Canada, chiefly Ontario. Those who stayed mostly moved onto reserved lands, such as Red Jacket negotiated for the Seneca in western New York.

The Iroquois League of Nations is long gone. Their society is still teaching us about democracy. ▲

Adrian Tawfik in 2011 launched the pro-democracy website, DemocracyChronicles.org. Currently living in New York, Adrian is a TPNHA board member.

'Liberty Tree' — A Lament for the Iroquois

Thomas Paine wrote a lament for the Iroquois League of Nations, using the term *Liberty Tree* as a metaphor for the passing of the Great Tree of Peace that played a major role in Iroquois spirituality. This is a little-known fact behind his famous 1775 poem, "Liberty Tree."

The celestial exotic stuck deep in the ground,
Like a native it flourished and bore;
The fame of its fruit drew the nations around,
To seek out this peaceable shore.
Unmindful of names or distinctions they came,
For freemen like brothers agree;
With one spirit endued, they one friendship pursued,
And their temple was Liberty Tree.
But hear, O ye swains ('tis a tale most profane),
How all the tyrannical powers,
Kings, Commons, and Lords, are uniting amain,
To cut down this guardian of ours.
From the East to the West blow the trumpet to arms,
Thro' the land let the sound of it flee:
Let the far and the near all unite with a cheer,
In defense of our Liberty Tree.

NOVEMBER IS

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THE THOMAS PAINE NATIONAL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

983 North Avenue • New Rochelle, NY 10804-3609 • tpnhamail@gmail.com

About TPNHA

The Mission of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association is to educate the world about the life, legacy and works of Thomas Paine.

TPNHA was 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.

TPNHA is managing the international effort to complete the collected works of Thomas Paine, which may double the corpus of known writings.

We operate the 100-year-old Paine Memorial Museum in New Rochelle, NY, where we hold educational programs. A 501(c)(3) educational non-profit, we are grateful for member support sustaining our efforts.

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The Beacon from the TPNHA extends the legacy of Gilbert Vale's influential *The Beacon* in the mid-19th century, both restoring the legacy of Thomas Paine.

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