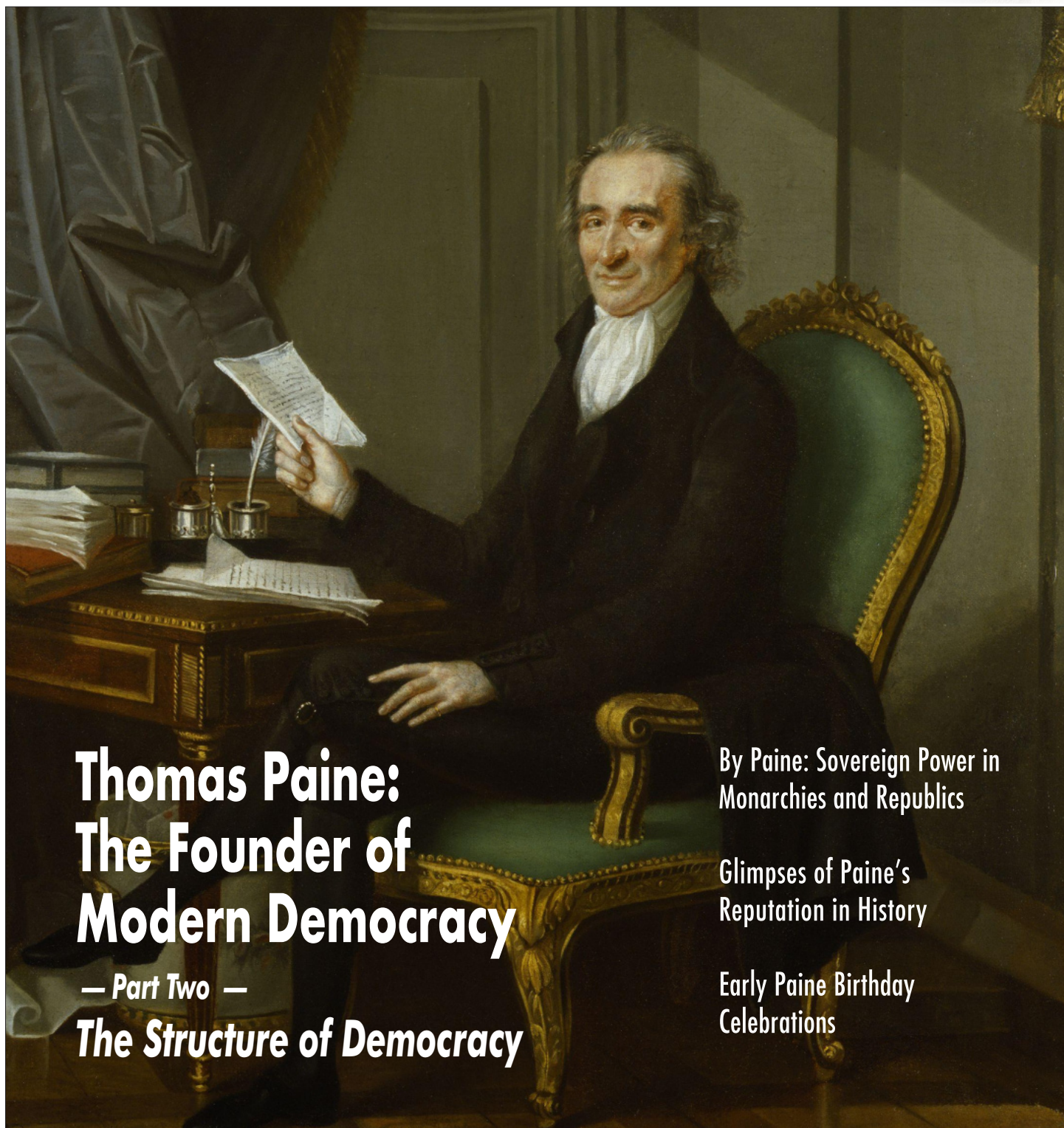


# The Beacon

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THOMAS PAINE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Founded in 1884 • New Rochelle, New York • [ThomasPaine.org](http://ThomasPaine.org)



## Thomas Paine: The Founder of Modern Democracy

— Part Two —

### *The Structure of Democracy*

By Paine: Sovereign Power in  
Monarchies and Republics

Glimpses of Paine's  
Reputation in History

Early Paine Birthday  
Celebrations



**About Thomas Paine**

# Thomas Paine: Founder of Modern Democracy

## *Paine's First Principles Support the Structure of Democracy*

by Gary Berton

*Part Two of Two Parts*

**T**homas Paine's first principles built the structure of democracy. The mechanisms central to Paine's political theories are rooted in his ideology of first principles. The basic foundation of these principles is equality, and as a direct result, justice. If equality is practiced, then people share equal justice.

"Mankind being originally equals in the order of creation," he wrote in *Common Sense*, "the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance."

"When a people agree to form themselves into a republic (for the word REPUBLIC means the PUBLIC GOOD, or the good of the whole, in contradistinction to the despotic form, which makes the good of

**If equality is practiced, then all people share equal justice.**

the sovereign, or of one man, the only object of the government) when, I say, they agree to do this, it is to be understood, that they mutually resolve and pledge themselves to each other, rich and poor alike, to support and maintain this rule of equal justice among them. They therefore renounce not only the despotic form, but the despotic principle, as well of governing as of being governed by mere Will and Power, and substitute in its place a government of justice." (*Dissertations on Government*, 1786)

**Inherent in the equality/justice principle are rights, both natural and civil — civil rights arising from natural rights.**

The structure of his democratic theory is like a house: the foundation of that house is equality and justice; everything else rests upon it. If this principle is compromised and weakened, the whole structure is vulnerable to corruption and oppression.



*Thomas Paine bust atop monument in New Rochelle*

Source: Thomas Paine Historical Association

**COVER ART: *Thomas Paine in London***

*Painting by Laurent Dabos, circa 1791*

Source: National Portrait Gallery (London), Wikimedia Commons

Inherent in the equality/justice principle are rights, both natural and civil — civil rights arising from natural rights. Natural rights are inherent and received upon birth, without exception. Defending these rights is the object of democratic government.

Resting on this foundation of rights are four support pillars constructing the structure of democracy. (1) Rejection of precedent, (2) No one should live worse than in the state of nature. (3) Recognition of the natural sociability of humanity. (4) Enlightenment and reason solve problems. A few thoughts on each:

*Continued on pg. 3*



*A World War II bomber named "Tom Paine"  
and photographer unknown.*

Source: Courtesy of Warfare History Network

## About Thomas Paine

# Glimpses of Paine's Reputation in History

by Gary Burton

**T**he majority of historians have gone along with ignoring or misrepresenting Paine in history, from 18th century UK Tories to 21st century American biographer J.C.D. Clark.

The reality was that the Federalists took over, wrote a constitution enabling plutocracy, and repressed the truth of Paine. Only two Paine biographers (Linton and Vale) were even half right about him.

Working class Americans last century were conscious of Paine and his reputation. U.S. Air Force mechanics in WWII England painted "Tom Paine" on the side of bombers, quoting him about conquering tyranny with the gifts these planes were dropping. ▲

## Paine: Democracy's Founder — Continued from Pg. 2

### 1. Rejection of precedent

Precedent got us into the problems of government. They represent the failures to ensure equality and justice. Precedent is the "originalist" interpretation of the Constitution; it's the way things were always done, which is the excuse to maintain "tradition." Precedent is the wall preventing people from building the democratic structures of a better world, Precedent reinforces structures that promote elitism, privilege, and injustice.

### 2 No one should live worse than in the state of nature.

If civilization has progressed, why are masses of the people worse off than if they lived in small groups in nature? That is not progress. The well-being of every person is what democracy insists upon. If many or most people live worse off than as small groups in nature, civilization is not progressing; it's regressing. *Why* is another discussion for another day.

**The well-being of  
every person is  
what democracy  
insists upon.**

### 3. Recognize the natural sociability of humanity.

Humans evolved as social animals. The human mind, Paine wrote, is "unfitted for perpetual solitude." That natural sociability is the basis of democracy. Building upon it is fundamental to democracy.

### 4. Enlightenment and reason solve problems

Knowing and using the real world around us must be the basis for knowledge, and applying that knowledge to solve problems. Anything else is invented to manipulate and confuse the people in their decision-making, which is anti-democratic.

Atop the pillars is a roof protecting the structure of government from outside elements. The roof consists of constitutions with democratic structures and laws.

Building the opposite structure is the bizarre world of Edmund Burke, whose political theory is oligarchy. His foundation is order, not equality. Burke's pillars are "defending historical precedent," following "tradition," (not the Enlightenment ideals Paine advocated). Burke sought continuity, not change for the better. Burke saw humanity as a collection of "disconnected individuals." His roof atop government is prescriptive for elite rule, not democratic order, government by the people.

Paine challenged and changed the entire philosophical structure of government, not just for the people in the 18th century, but for everyone in the world today. ▲

*Read Part One in the July 2025 Beacon.*

**Gary Burton** is the president of the Thomas Paine Historical Association. (Originally published in *Democracy Chronicles*. Lightly edited for *The Beacon*.)



By Thomas Paine

# Regarding Sovereign Power in Monarchies and Republics

From *Dissertations on Government, etc.* — Philadelphia, February 18, 1786. [Verbatim, yet ALL CAPS are reduced for modern readers]

## PREFACE

I HERE present the public with a new performance. Some parts of it are more particularly adapted to the State of Pennsylvania, on the present state of its affairs; but there are others which are on a larger scale. The time bestowed on this work has not been long, the whole of it being written and printed during the short recess of the Assembly.

As to parties [Federalists or Republicans], merely considered as such, I am attached to no particular one. There are such things as right and wrong in the world, and so far as these are parties against each other, the signature of Common Sense is properly employed.

EVERY government, let its form be what it may, contains within itself a principle common to all, which is that of a sovereign power, or a power over which there is no control, and which controls all others; and as it is impossible to construct a form of government in which this power does not exist, so there must of necessity be a place, if it may be so called, for it to exist in.

In despotic monarchies this power is lodged in a single person, or sovereign. His will is law; which he declares, alters or revokes as he pleases, without being accountable to any power for so doing. Therefore, the only modes of redress, in countries so governed, are by petition or insurrection. And this is the reason we so frequently hear of insurrections in despotic governments; for as there are but two modes of redress, this is one of them.

Perhaps it may be said that as the united resistance of the people is able, by force, to control the will of the sovereign, that therefore the controlling power lodges in them; but it must be understood that I am speaking of such powers only as are constituent parts of the government, not of those powers which are externally applied to resist and overturn it.

**'In despotic monarchies this power [of control over others] is lodged in a single person, or sovereign.'**



*Scene at the signing of the United States Constitution in Philadelphia with George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton (left to right in the foreground),*

*Painting by Howard Chandler Christy, 1940.*

Source: United States House of Representative (east stairway). Wikimedia Commons

In republics, such as those established in America, the sovereign power, or the power over which there is no control, and which controls all others, remains where nature placed it — in the people; for the people in America are the fountain of power. It remains there as a matter of right, recognized in the constitutions of the country, and the exercise of it is constitutional and legal — This sovereignty is exercised in electing and deputing a certain number of persons to represent and act for the whole, and who, if they do not act right, may be displaced by the same power that placed them there, and others elected and deputed in their stead, and the wrong measures of former representatives corrected and brought right by this means. Therefore, the republican form and principle leaves no room for insurrection, because it provides and establishes a rightful means in its stead.

In countries under a despotic form of government, the exercise of this power is an assumption of sovereignty; a wresting it from the person in whose hand their form of government has placed it, and the exercise of it is there styled rebellion. Therefore the despotic

*Continued on pg. 5*

## Sovereign Power — *Continued from Pg. 4*

form of government knows no intermediate space between being slaves and being rebels.

I shall in this place offer an observation which, though not immediately connected with my subject, is very naturally deduced from it, which is that the nature, if I may so call it, of a government over any people, may be ascertained from the modes which the people pursue to obtain redress of grievances; for like causes will produce like effects. And therefore the government which Britain attempted to erect over America could be no

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**'In republics, such as those established in America, the sovereign power, or the power over which there is no control, and which controls all others, remains where nature placed it — in the people.'**

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other than a despotism, because it left to the Americans no other modes of redress than those which are left to people under despotic governments, petition and resistance: and the Americans, without ever attending to a comparison on the case, went into the same steps which such people go into, because no other could be pursued: and this similarity of effects leads up to, and ascertains, the similarity of the causes or governments which produced them.

But to return. — The repository where the sovereign power is placed is the first criterion of distinction between a country under a despotic form of government and a free country. In a country under a despotic government, the sovereign is the only free man in it. — In a republic, the people retaining the sovereignty themselves, naturally and necessarily retain their freedom with it: for, wherever the sovereignty is, there must the freedom be; the second is the principles on which it is administered.

As the repository where the sovereign power is lodged is the first criterion of distinction; so the second is the principles on which it is administered.

A despotic government knows no principle but WILL. Whatever the sovereign wills to do, the government admits him the inherent right, and the uncon-

trouled power of doing. He is restrained by no fixed rule of right and wrong, for he makes the right and wrong himself and as he pleases. — If he happens (for a miracle may happen) to be a man of consummate wisdom, justice and moderation, of a mild affectionate disposition, disposed to business, and understanding and promoting the general good, all the beneficial purposes of government will be answered under his administration, and the people so governed, may, while this is the case, be prosperous and easy. But as there can be no security that this disposition will last, and this administration continue, and still less security that his successor shall have the same qualities and pursue the same measures; therefore no people exercising their reason, and understanding their rights, would, of their own choice, invest any one man with such a power.

Neither is it consistent to suppose the knowledge of any one man competent to the exercise of such a power. A sovereign of this sort, is brought up in such a distant line of life; lives so remote from the people, and from a knowledge of everything which relates to their local situations and interests, that he can know nothing from experience and observation, and all which he does know, he must be told. Sovereign power without sovereign knowledge, that is, a full knowledge of all the matters over which that power is to be exercised, is a something which contradicts itself. ▲

*Thomas Paine.*

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Offered here is the opening passage of "The Affairs of The Bank, and Paper-Money," written in the runup to the Constitutional Convention, pushed by federalists Alexander Hamilton and James Madison to replace the initial Articles of Confederation. The convention met in Philadelphia from May 25, 1786, to September 17, 1787. Paine was there.

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**'A despotic government knows no principle but WILL. Whatever the sovereign wills to do, the government admits him the inherent right, and the uncontrolled power of doing.'**

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## Thomas Paine Time Capsule

8

The Truth Seeker.

January, 1930

# Early Paine Celebrations

The Author-Hero's Birthday First Honored in the United States at a Gathering in Harmony Hall, New York, 1825, Sixteen Years After His Death.

By IRVING LEVY

**D**ESPITE America's ever expanding recognition of Thomas Paine, we must not forget that there were small courageous groups of Paine-loving libertarians in every decade of the last century following his death, to whom we Freethinkers owe an incalculable debt. It took free and lion-hearted characters to proclaim Paine and celebrate his accomplishments a hundred years ago. They had to be men of rare stamp.

The first reported celebration of Paine's birthday took place at the Bank Lodge, 45 William Street, New York, on Jan. 29, 1827. Benjamin Offen, later author of "A Legacy to the Friends of Free Discussion," presided over the dinner. During the course of an impassioned address he asked: "Citizens of a free and happy republic! What dreadful crime did Paine commit that his memory should be so hateful, that he should be mentioned with so much horror from the pulpit, and be made a scarecrow by bigoted priests to frighten children?" Messrs. Carver and Slater also spoke.

The account of the affair concludes as follows: "The dinner on this occasion was excellent. The greatest harmony and conviviality prevailed. Several appropriate songs were sung, and the company retired at an early hour evidently much gratified with the proceedings and deeply impressed with the importance of continuing the celebration of this anniversary."

The report of this celebration is to be found in Volume I, Numbers 2 and 3 of *The Correspondent* (New York, 1827), an early anti-theological weekly owned and edited by George Houston. This periodical was preceded only by *The Theophilanthropist* (New York, 1810), a short lived Free-thought monthly consisting of but nine numbers. It is particularly interesting to note that the office of *The Correspondent* during the major part of its initial year was located on Vesey Street at the corner of Broadway, not over one hundred and fifty yards from the present quarters of *The Truth Seeker*.



The following year, 1828, a public dinner was given on Paine's birthday by a newly formed Free-thinking society calling themselves the New York Free Press Association, at Boisseux's Dancing Academy opposite Washington Hall on Reed Street corner Broadway, the tickets selling at one dollar apiece. Seventy gentlemen participated. A number of ladies entered as the speaking began. Mr. Offen again spoke, and in his address he definitely fixes the date of the first American celebration in Paine's honor. He said: "In 1825 a few friends of this city celebrated for the first time the birthday of Mr. Paine. Mr. Young of Harmony Hall was the only person who had the courage and liberality to provide a dinner on that occasion."



## Paine Association News

### Name Change now Official

The State of New York in August granted a Certificate of Amendment for the legal name of our organization to be the Thomas Paine Historical Association. Now it's official.

Leading a considerable effort dealing with bureaucracy were Richard Moriarty, Gary Berton and Barbara Crane.

Next steps are administrative updates with federal and state tax agencies, banks, utilities, insurance, and our regular vendors.

Our email address (for now) stays "tpnhamail@gmail.com". ▲

### Thomas Paine Friends Dissolves, Donates to TPHA and Memorial

The freethought nonprofit Thomas Paine Friends in Amherst, Massachusetts has dissolved. Internet activity is done. Most of its funds were donated to the TPHA and the rest to the Thomas Paine Memorial Association.

Northampton attorney Peter Irvine handled the dissolution with backing by the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Established in 2003, Thomas Paine Friends in 2016 hosted a Paine's birthday celebration with Bernie Sanders, Jim Hightower, Bill McKibben, and others. ▲

### The THOMAS PAINE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

The TPHA is the oldest historic association for a Founder, established in 1884. We are the authority on the life, works, and legacy of Paine, and have been assisting scholars and authors for decades.

#### FEATURED LINKS

The Collected Writings Project  
Shawmut's Copy of the Declaration of Independence  
Paine Documents  
Paine Gallery  
Major Milestones  
The D.C. Memorial Project  
The Paine Store (coming soon)  
The Beacon / Studies in Thomas Paine

*Thomas Paine*

Visit our Evolving New Website  
**ThomasPaine.org**

### Beacon Articles Wanted

Please propose article ideas for *The Beacon*. Can you write it, too?  
Ask: [JudahFreed.com/contact](http://JudahFreed.com/contact). ▲



### 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)

### TPHA MEMBERSHIP - Dues & Benefits

**Individual** - \$25 yearly (Beacon subscription)

**Family** - \$40 yearly (Beacon subscription)

**Supporter** - \$100 yearly (Beacon, Paine lapel pin)

**Donor** - \$500 for 1 year (Beacon, lapel pin, personal plaque)

**Benefactor** - \$1,000 yearly (All above & Memorial Building plaque)

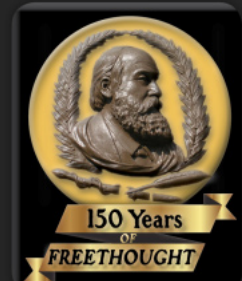
**Patron** - \$2,500, 1 year (All the above & a set of 2026 six-volume *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, signed by the Editorial Board.)



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

*The Thomas Paine Historical Association thanks our "sister" publication for their leadership.*

Visit [TheTruthSeeker.net](http://TheTruthSeeker.net)



# *The* THOMAS PAINE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



## About the Paine Association

**T**he Thomas Paine Historical Association upholds the mission of educating the world about the life, works and legacy of Thomas Paine.

TPHA 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.

TPHA has managed the international project to complete and publish *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, which doubles the corpus of known writings.

In New Rochelle, we operate the Paine Memorial Building and Museum, built 1925, where we hold educational programs. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, we gratefully welcome member support sustaining our efforts. ▲

### Thomas Paine Historical Association

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## The Beacon

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*The Beacon* is a bimonthly publication for the members and friends of the Thomas Paine Historical Association.

Revived in September 2023, *The Beacon* from TPHA extends the volumes of *The Beacon* by Gilbert Vale in the 1800s, both restoring the legacy of Thomas Paine.

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