

# The Beacon

July 2024 • Vol 18, No. 4

THOMAS PAINE NATIONAL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Founded in 1884 • New Rochelle, New York • ThomasPaine.org



## Frances (Fanny) Wright: 'The Female Thomas Paine'

by Gary Berton

Frances Wright has been called the “female Thomas Paine.” In important ways, she was. Fanny Wright was the first American feminist, a radical abolitionist, labor champion, powerful public orator, and one of the first philosophers making a public case for freethought. But it does her a disservice to be seen in terms of someone else’s achievements, even if it’s the incomparable Thomas Paine.

Fanny Wright deserves her own standing as an American hero and her own place of honor in American memory.

Frances Wright was born 1795 in Scotland to radical parents who supported the French Revolution and disseminated *Rights of Man*. Orphaned by three, she was raised by a progressive aunt in England who schooled her in the Enlightenment ideas of French materialists like Denis Diderot, who believed the world is made up of one substance, *matter*, which can be studied and understood.

By age 18, Fanny wrote her first book, the classic freethought treatise, *A Few Days in Athens*, which supported the ideas of Epicurus, the foundational touchstone for Western freethought and the ideals of free



**Frances Wright**

*Pioneering feminist and freethought orator.*

Portrait by Henry Inman, 1824.

### Quotes from Fanny Wright

“Equality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it.”

“It has already been observed that women, wherever placed, however high or low in the scale of cultivation, hold the destinies of human kind. Men will ever rise or fall to the level of the other sex.”

“The sciences have ever been the surest guides to virtue.”

“The hired preachers of all sects, creeds, and religions, never do, and never can, teach any thing but what is in conformity with the opinions of those who pay them.”

## The History of Paine’s Biographies

by Joy Masoff

*Part Two of a Three-Part Historiography*

Historians are challenged to remain ambivalent when writing about multi-layered Paine. We have Paine the political strategist, the enlightened idealist and utopian, the religious heretic, the economist, the journalist, the inventor, and humanitarian. Paine was vilified, idolized and all in between.

Many early accounts of Paine’s life were scurrilous attacks that painted him as drunken, filthy, cheap, self-aggrandizing, and a wife-beater. Scholars did not offer elevating views of Paine until the late 19th century.

*Continued on pg. 2*

*Continued on pg. 4*

## Frances Wright — Continued from Pg. 1

government. Inspired by Democritus, Epicurus asserted all matter is made up of tiny particles, called *atoms*. Wright finished writing her book in 1813, but it was not published at that time.

In 1818, she traveled to America and toured the new nation for two years, meeting and exchanging views with many of America's progressive minds. That experience became *Views of Society and Manners in America*, the 1821 analysis of U.S. society and government that offered insights well ahead of De Tocqueville's 1835 *Democracy in America*. The success of *Views* enabled Wright to get *Athens* printed in 1822.

*Society and Manners* opened doors for Wright. She was introduced in Europe to Lafayette, who admired the book. After a conversation with the author, he admired Fanny's talent and worldview, as well.

Wright accompanied Lafayette on his trip to America in 1824. They developed a platonic yet close relationship that led to her meeting Robert Owen in Indiana and visiting New Harmony, America's first socialist community. Wright embraced the ideals of socialism. She also embraced the need to end slavery to save the soul of America. After Lafayette returned to Europe, Wright stayed and became an American citizen.

She launched two projects that would define her for decades to come. With Owen, she started *The Free Inquirer*, the first freethought newspaper in America, and she began a failed attempt to liberate America's slaves held as chattel property.

The *Free Inquirer* set the standard for future freethought periodicals. It served to unite into one philosophical movement the components of progressivism: women's liberation (including the right to contraception and sexual freedom), abolition of slavery, labor liberation (including socialism), and free universal education. Wright and Owen both embraced these tenets, which were rooted in the works of Thomas Paine.

Although Paine did not specifically spell out these movements, his legacy led to the birth of these 19th century forces, evidenced by early annual celebrations of Paine's birthday held in the centers of these movements, a trend Wright herself helped to create.

In 1825, Wright helped form a multi-racial community near Memphis on land gained through Lafayette. To justify her plan to educate slaves for freedom.

Wright wrote, "A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger of Loss to the Citizens of the South." The experiment was plagued with problems — the cost of transporting slaves from Haiti, a free-love atmosphere stirring personal relationship crises, and mismanagement — all leading to its early demise.

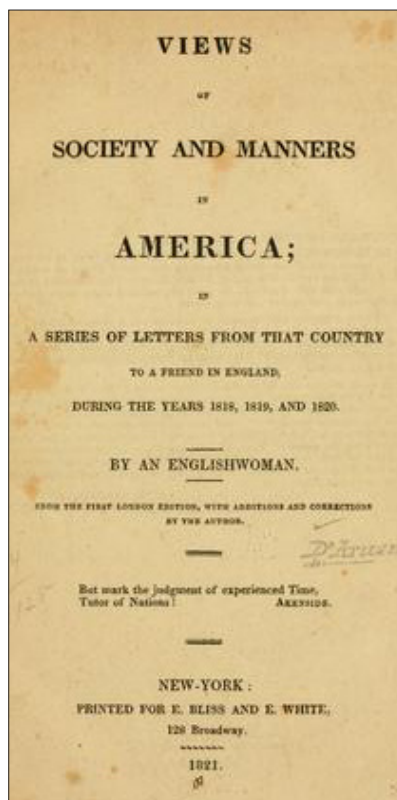
Frances Wright is most renowned for being the first woman orator in America. at a time when women were not accepted as public speakers. Starting in 1829, cresting 1833 to 1836, she toured the USA, speaking on women's sexual and educational liberation, the abolition of slavery, socialism and the evils of capitalism. Tying it together, she spoke on freethought and the absurdity of organized religion.

Drawing thousands to her speeches, She spoke in every major city in America, where "Fanny Wright societies" sprang up as centers for a growing social and political movement. Wright's success made her the target of an alliance between the clergy and press to oppose her.

Her movement was stymied by being too far ahead of its time, but it produced activists and laid the intellectual groundwork for the latter half of the 19th century when these movements reached maturity.

Wright married in 1838, at age 43 bearing one child. She soon divorced and spent her remaining years in Ohio, releasing compilations of her lectures. She remained inactive except for her involvement with women's health issues. She died at age 57 in 1852 and was buried in Cincinnati. ▲

**Gary Berton** is president of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association. Article first published in *The Truth Seeker*, January 2016. Edited for *The Beacon*.



*Views of Society and Manners in America*

Courtesy of the Open Library

By **Thomas Paine**

# A Letter to The Citizens of The United States

November 15, 1802 – First in a Series of Letters. Published in *The National Intelligencer*, Washington, DC [Verbatim text]

After an absence of almost fifteen years, I am again returned to the Country in whose dangers I bore my share, and to whose greatness I contributed my part.

When I sailed for Europe in the spring of 1787 it was my intention to return to America the next year, and enjoy, in retirement, the esteem of my friends and the repose I was entitled to. I had stood out the storm of one revolution and had no wish to embark in another. But other scenes and other circumstances than those of contemplated ease were allotted to me. The French Revolution was beginning to germinate when I arrived in France. The principles of it were good, they were copied from America, and the men who conducted it were honest. But the fury of faction soon extinguished the one, and sent the other to the scaffold. Of those who began that revolution, I am almost the only survivor, and that through a thousand dangers. I owe this, not to the prayers of priests, nor to the piety of hypocrites, but to the continued protection of Providence.

But while I beheld with pleasure the dawn of liberty rising in Europe, I saw, with regret the lustre of it fading in America. In less than two years from the time of my departure some distant symptoms painfully suggested the idea that the principles of the revolution were expiring on the soil that produced them. I received, at that time, a letter from a female literary correspondent, and in my answer to her, I expressed my fears on that head in the following pensive soliloquy.

.....

I now know, from the information I obtain upon the spot, that the impressions that then distressed me, for I was proud of America, were but too well founded. She was turning her back on her own glory, and making hasty strides in the retrograde path of oblivion. But a spark from the altar of *Seventy Six*, unextinguished and unextinguishable through that long night of error, is again lighting up, in every part of the union, the genuine flame of rational liberty.

As the French revolution advanced it fixed the attention of the world, and drew from the pensioned pen

of Edmund Burke a furious attack. This brought me once more on the public theater of Politics, and occasioned the pamphlet *Rights of Man*. It had the greatest run of any work ever published in the English language. The number of copies circulated in England, Scotland and Ireland, besides translations into foreign languages, was between four and five hundred thousand.

The principles of that work were the same as those in *Common Sense*, and the effects would have been the same in England as it had been in America, could the vote of the nation been quietly taken, or had equal opportunities of consulting or acting existed. The only difference between the two works, was, that the one was adapted to the local circumstances of England, and the other to those of America. As to myself, I acted in both cases alike; I relinquished to the people of England, as I had done to those of America, all profits from the work. My reward existed in the ambition to do good, and the independent happiness of my own mind.

But a faction, acting in disguise, was rising in America they had lost sight of first principles. They were beginning to contemplate government as a profitable monopoly, and the people as hereditary property. It is, therefore, no wonder that the *Rights of Man* was attacked by that faction, and its author continually abused. But let them go on, give them rope enough, and they will put an end to their own insignificance. There is too much common sense and independence in America to be long the dupe of any faction, foreign or domestic.

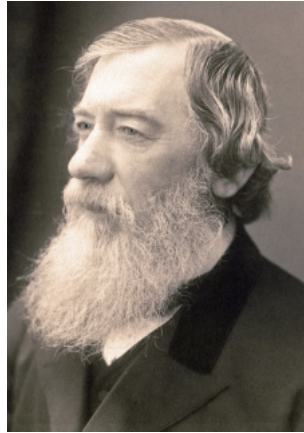
But, in the midst of the freedom we enjoy, the licentiousness of the papers called federal (and I know not why they are called so, for they are in their principles anti-federal and despotic), is a dishonour to the

*Continued on pg. 7*



## Paine Historiography — From Pg. 1

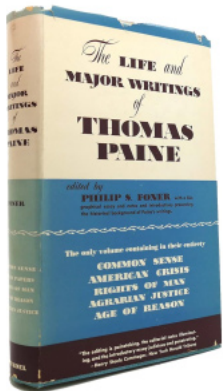
Moncure Daniel Conway's 1892 *The Life of Thomas Paine* attempted to rescue him from the rubble of distorted historical memory. Rather than quote unreliable earlier documents, Conway started anew, traveling across England, America and France to walk the streets where Paine lived, worked, fought, and faced death. Conway's aim was to pull Paine from the historical gutter and lift him up to the pantheon of great revolutionaries.



Moncure Daniel Conway

Photographer: Russell and Sons, London  
Courtesy of Dickinson College

Paramount among 20th century studies was Philip S. Foner's 1945 *Life and Major Writing of Thomas Paine*. Previous biographers focused almost entirely on Paine as a political disruptor. Foner offered other sides of Paine as an economist, philanthropist, deist, scientist, and poet. Foner gave us Paine as a radical ideologue grappling with the fractures between aristocracy and meritocracy as the walls between the two crumbled, calling Paine "the right man at the right place, at the right time."



Alfred Owen Aldridge's 1959

*Man of Reason* was less favorable, placing Paine on the other side of greatness as a man whose out-sized personality self-sabotaged his public career. He described Paine as having a "solitary manner of existence" and "an undeniably difficult personality." Unlike Foner, Aldridge saw Paine as a historical accident, undeserving of his fame.

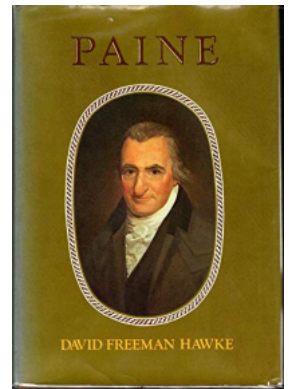
The Foner-Aldridge divide (saint or sinner) was characteristic of almost every 20th century Paine biography, revealing how little the debates about Paine's character had changed since the early 19th century.

As the American bicentennial approached, several Paine biographies emerged. Audrey Williamson, a British theater journalist, became enamored with Paine by writing a 1963 biography of George Bernard Shaw, an admirer of Paine. Her 1973 *Thomas Paine: His Life, Work, and Times* unearthed new information on Paine's

metamorphosis from a young political fledgling to a polished polemicist. Like Conway, Williamson built her framework by studying the times, places and faces, and then situating Paine in the midst of them.

Samuel Edwards' 1974 *Rebel! A Biography of Thomas Paine* attempted to psychoanalyze Paine, beginning with the assertion Paine had "mommy issues" that led to a distrust of women unless they were cheap blondes. Scholars were united in their dismissal of Edward's book. In fact, Aldridge, no fan of Paine, called it a work of "perversion and deception."

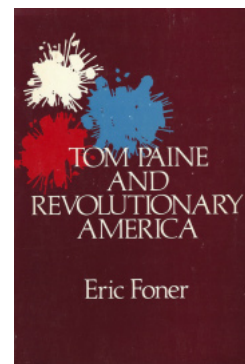
The most successful bicentennial biography was David Freeman Hawke's 1974 *Paine*. He gave no detours into sexual suggestiveness like Edwards, no mini-travelogues like Williamson. Instead, Hawke found new primary sources, particularly papers from the American Philosophical Society's Gimbel Collection. He presented Paine as an inventor as well as a writer.



He plumbed the entire Paine historiography, sifting through everything written — even disputed early "biographers" — with a fresh eye.

However, Hawke found it impossible to write about Paine without forming an opinion of the man and expressing it, a bias that critics of the work have pointed out. Williamson wrote with admiration, Hawke with a disapproving smirk. Williamson tried to place us in Paine's world, Hawke in Paine's mind. Little attention was paid to Paine as a man dependent on his connections to others, both negative and positive. The move to see Paine as more than an ideologue was beginning to occur, but the idea of important human connections was still not being made.

The most foundational bicentennial work was Eric Foner's 1976 *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*.



The nephew of Philip Foner focused on 13 crucial years in the life of Paine and the fledgling United States, 1774 to 1787. Foner suggests that Paine was constantly trying to define who he was and who he would become. The topic of personhood was beginning to percolate as a

*Continued on pg. 5*

## Meet a TPNHA Member

# Paine's Agrarian Justice Resonates Most with Me

by Harvey Simon

I find in Thomas Paine's writing his active humanity, intelligence, principles of fairness, action, courage and responsibility for his actions a continuing satisfaction that attracts me to his "voice" every day.

His original, outrageous ideas and arguments in defense of social fairness — regardless of conventional authoritarian obstacles and punishments — were a boon to the human condition.



Harvey Simon  
TPNHA Member

Then as now, people are people, who need food, clothing, shelter, health, and justice. Why withhold their access to the means for living when a practical solution already exists for ubiquitous fairness? Paine in his 1797 work, *Agrarian Justice*, proposes a real-world system for funding a universal basic income. He starts with the headline, "Means by Which the Fund Is to be Created."

Paine's writing in *Agrarian Justice* most resonates with my own personal sensibilities. He says, "Civilization, therefore, or that which is so called, has operated, two ways, to make one part of society more affluent, and the other part more wretched, than would have been the lot of either in a natural state."

Paine's human conscience and experience enabled him to see the forest for the trees. He saw the many benefits of social innovations versus loyalties to the unnecessary cruelties of the *status quo*, then and now.

As fair to fairness as fair can get, in my own opinion, a social justice system needs to be redirected to benefit its participants, not mostly the system itself.

In his 1802 letter to Samuel Adams about *Rights of Man*, Paine explains why in France he opposed the execution of the King. He was "laboring to show they were trying the monarchy, and not the man, and that the crimes imputed to him were the crimes of the monarchical system." This shows Paine's strong, clear vision of societal justice over mere punishment and hate.

For instance, in *Agrarian Justice*, Paine writes, "Practical religion consists in doing good; and the only way of serving God is, that of endeavoring to make his creation happy. All preaching that has not this for its object is nonsense and hypocrisy."

**Paine's writing  
is revolutionary  
because it is a  
democratic means  
to a democratic end.**

Indeed, Mr. Paine, even in the 21st Century, in my experience, religions tend to want to make God happy, not make his creation happy. Hence their flaw and the source of their injustice!

As far as I can tell about any important idea, Thomas Paine always said it first and better, much to my admiration, gratitude and enduring benefit.

Doing good work, indeed, Mr. Paine! ▲

**Harvey Simon, MPA**, works in public administration. He lives in New York City.

## Paine Historiography — From Pg. 4

line of study. Foner strived to ensure Paine was "successfully located within the social context of his age." His acknowledgment of Paine's personal connections to peers in his community is a link to the importance of interpersonal relationships in Paine's life.

Foner's work concentrated on America during its fracture with Great Britain. The unrest in France was a different beast, and Paine's response to that revolution was different, but it was not Foner's focus. ▲

**Next:** The last decade of the 20th century brings renewed interest in the life of Thomas Paine.

Read Part One and Part Three in the May and September 2024 editions of The Beacon.

**Joy Masoff** is a PhD candidate at work on *Thomas Paine and the Company He Kept: Family and Friendship in the Times That Tried Men's Souls*. She serves on the board of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association.



**TPNHA News****Bicentennial of the 'Farewell Tour' by the Marquis de Lafayette**

by Barbara Crane

Invited by President Monroe to commemorate the American Revolution and to celebrate America's friendship with France, the Marquis de Lafayette sailed back to America in 1824 and devoted a year to his "Farewell Tour" of all 24 states at the time. He was accompanied by Fanny Wright (see page 1).

Celebrating the 2024 bicentennial of Lafayette's visit to New Rochelle, the Thomas Paine National Historical Association (TPNHA) and the Huguenot & New Rochelle Historical Association (H&NRHA) in cooperation with the American Friends of Lafayette (AFL) and the City of New Rochelle will offer free events on Sunday, August 18, such as a re-enactment of Lafayette's welcome in New Rochelle and Westchester County.

The community gathering will feature local dignitaries, a Lafayette re-enactor, ceremonies, and family-friendly fun from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., all at Ruby Dee Park in front of the New Rochelle Public Library.

Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de La Fayette, Marquis de La Fayette (Lafayette) and Thomas Paine were closely aligned in the period leading up to the French Revolution. Paine lectured Lafayette and Jefferson in Paris in 1789 on democratic principles. In 1790, Lafayette sent the Key to the Bastille to George Washington through Thomas Paine.

All Lafayette Tour events in New Rochelle are free. For details, visit [CelebrateLafayette200.org](http://CelebrateLafayette200.org). ▲

*The Marquis de Lafayette*

Portrait painted in 1822 by Ary Scheffer, now on display in the U.S House of Representatives.

**Scenes from Thomas Paine Day on June 8 at the Paine Memorial Building**

## Paine's Letter to America—From Pg. 3

character of the country, and an injury to its reputation and importance abroad. They represent the whole people of America as destitute of public principle and private manners. As to any injury they can do at home to those whom they abuse, or service they can render

'In the midst of the freedom we enjoy, the licentiousness of the papers called federal (and I know not why they are called so, for they are in their principles anti-federal and despotic), is a dishonour to the character of the country, and an injury to its reputation and importance abroad.'

to those who employ them, it is to be set down to the account of noisy nothingness. It is on themselves the disgrace recoils; for the reflection easily presents itself to every thinking mind, that those who abuse liberty when they possess it, would abuse power could they obtain it; and therefore they may as well take as a general motto for all such papers, *We, and our patrons, are not fit to be trusted with power.*

There is in America, more than in any other Country, a large body of people who attend quietly to their farms, or follow their several occupations, who pay no regard to the clamours of anonymous scribblers, who think for themselves, and judge of Government, not by the fury of news-paper writers, but by the prudent fru-

gality of its measures, and the encouragement it gives to the improvement and prosperity of the Country, and who, acting on their own judgment never come forward in an election but on some important occasion. When this body moves all the little barkings of scribbling and witless curs pass for nothing. ▲

'Those who abuse liberty when they possess it, would abuse power could they obtain it'

### TPNHA Membership Dues and 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** - \$10,000, 1 year (All the above & a set of 2026 six-volume *Thomas Paine: Collected Works*, autographed by the Editorial Board.)



### Florida Veterans For Common Sense

*Volunteers inspired by Thomas Paine to counter the authoritarian threat.*

FloridaVeteransforCommonSense.org | Contact@flvcs.us



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.







# THE THOMAS PAINE NATIONAL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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

## About TPNHA

**T**he Mission of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association is to educate the world about the life, works and legacy 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 project to complete and publish *Thomas Paine: Collected Works*, which may double 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. ▲

## The Beacon

July 2024 • Vol 18, No. 4

THOMAS PAINE NATIONAL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
Founded in 1884 • New Rochelle, New York • ThomasPaine.org



**The Beacon is a bi-monthly publication for members of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association**

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

### **The Beacon – Editorial Committee:**

Judah Freed (Editor)  
Gary Berton

Frances Chiu  
Adrian Tawfik

To see print layout, in PDF menu select: View > Page Display > Two-Page View.

## Board of Directors

**Gary Berton,**  
TPNHA President  
Walton, NY

**Barbara Crane,**  
TPNHA Vice President  
Political Scientist  
New Rochelle, NY

**Scott Cleary,**  
TPNHA Secretary,  
Professor of English,  
Iona College  
Bedford, NY

**Eric Nowakowski,**  
TPNHA Treasurer  
Assoc. Director, Accounting  
Purdue Pharma  
Larchmont, NY

**Roderick Bradford**  
Editor, *The Truth Seeker*,  
and documentarian  
San Diego, CA

**Frances Chiu**  
Professor of Literature and  
History, New School, NYC  
West Hartford, CT

**Judah Freed**  
Journalist and author,  
*Making Global Sense*  
Denver, CO

**John Heidenreich**  
Chemistry Teacher  
New Rochelle, NY

**Josh Klein**  
Professor of Criminal  
Justice, Iona College  
New York, NY

**Greg McMurray**  
Writer, Paine scholar  
New York City

**Joy Masoff**  
Author and publisher  
Five Ponds Press  
San Marino, CA

**Jonathan Scheick**  
Professor of Psychology,  
Brookdale C.C., clinician.  
New Jersey

**Edmund Smith**  
Connecticut  
Retired Science Teacher

**Adrian Tawfik**  
Founder and editor,  
Democracy Chronicles  
Woodbury, NY

## TPNHA Benefactors

Nimick Forbesway  
Foundation

J.H. Johnson Charitable  
Educational Trust

World Union of Deists

Joy Masoff

Todd Stiefel Foundation

Matt & Luann Jacobs

Barbara Crane

Julia Holofcener