

The Beacon

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THOMAS PAINE NATIONAL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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The Curious History of Thomas Paine's Biographies

by Joy Masoff

Part One of a Three-Part Historiography

Even before Paine's death, his life was being dissected by those around him on both sides of the Atlantic. The earliest "biographies" of Paine were highly critical, politically-motivated smear campaigns funded by political enemies in high places. Each writer set out to debunk Paine's major works, especially *Common Sense*; *The Crisis*; and *the Rights of Man*.

The earliest published works were political hatchet jobs by Paine's enemies. Francis Oldys, a 1793 biographer, really was George Chalmers, masquerading as a University of Pennsylvania divinity professor. Chalmers painted Paine as a drunken, lazy wife-beater.

William Cobbett, another British expatriate in America, joined Chalmers in verbally tarring and feathering Paine. Cobbett's *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1797) built upon the foundation of Chalmers' work and quoted heavily from it.

Like Chalmers, Cobbett offered a running editorial commentary about Paine's embrace of enlightenment thinking and then picked up with Paine's life through his release from prison during the French Revolution. Cobbett wrote:

Whenever or wherever he breathes his last, he will excite neither sorrow nor compassion... men will learn to express all that is base, malignant, treacherous, unnatural, and blasphemous, by a single monosyllable, Paine.

This statement demands a word about the long and erratic relationship between Cobbett and Paine, the downs and ups of their often parallel lives.

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William Cobbett

A harsh biographer of Thomas Paine, Cobbett later recanted and removed Paine's remains from his New Rochelle gravesite for a grand monument in England that was never built.

Portrait by John Raphael Smith. Courtesy of The Farnham Museum

Banning Thomas Paine

by Richard Briles Moriarty

Thomas Paine and the banning of his works have long been intertwined. Suppression of his *Rights of Man* by the English government raged as he joined the French National Convention.

After King Louis XVI was convicted of treason in 1792, Thomas Paine argued that the former king had become "Citizen Louis Capet." Rather than execute him, Paine said he should be banished to America for immersion and education in republican principles.

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Thomas Paine Historiography — Continued from Pg. 1

Both were sons of the British working class. Both were successful pamphleteers, although Paine was more commercially successful. Both suffered some degree of egotism and arrogance.

Cobbett, the angry polemicist, later made a drastic emotional U-turn and disinterred Paine's corpse from its New Rochelle resting place for an envisioned monument to honour Paine in England, where it was not permitted.

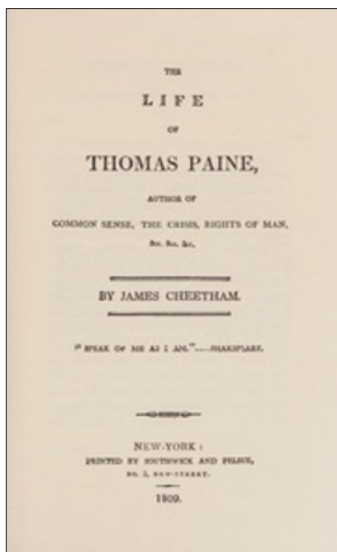
The Cheetham Biography

Shortly after Paine died in 1809, his enemies and friends began sharpening their quills. Some spewed vitriol, while others offered praise.

James Cheetham, the New York publisher of a newspaper called *The Citizen*, was a colleague of Paine turned bitter foe. Cheetham's *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1809) opened with a description of his first meeting with Paine in New York in 1802, shortly after Paine returned to the United States from France. A more unsavory description of the encounter cannot be imagined, which is interesting because Cheetham published Paine's writing in *The Citizen* for five years until a falling out (evidently over pay) led to Paine's refusal to write for him anymore.

Claiming impartiality, Cheetham wrote that his goal was "neither to please or displease any political party. I have written the life of Mr. Paine, not his panegyric [sic]." Rather than telling the life of Thomas Paine, Cheetham brought an indictment.

Cheetham said he'd interviewed many who knew Paine personally, describing them as people of the highest echelons of society. He ridiculed *Common Sense* as "Defective in arrangement, inelegant in diction..." While ostensibly analyzing all of Paine's writings, Cheetham relentlessly criticized them.



The Life of Thomas Paine, by James Cheetham

A newspaper publisher in New York who met Paine in 1802, Cheetham later wrote a scathing biography shortly after Paine's death in 1809.

Courtesy of Allegheny College Library



Thomas Clio Rickman

A Quaker who befriended Paine in Lowes, Rickman became a London pamphleteer beside Paine and later wrote a positive 1819 biography.

Engraving by James Holmes after a painting by John Hazlitt. Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, London

So vituperative is Cheetham's tone that one wonders if there's any value in reading it, but it captures the ethos of the Paine-haters, giving a better understanding of the constant bile Paine faced throughout his life in the public eye.

Harford, Rickman, Sherwin, and Carlile

Ten years after Paine's death, a quartet of biographies appeared within months of each other: John S. Harford's *Some Account of the Life, Death, and Principles of Thomas Paine* (1819); Thomas Clio Rickman's *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1819); W. T. Sherwin's *Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Paine* (1819); and Richard Carlile's *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1820).

Harford picked up where Cheetham left off, offering a scathing portrait of a despicable human being. The other three mounted a defense against the virulent misrepresentations of Paine's life. Rickman, Sherwin and Carlile actually knew Paine and believed that fear of progressive ideas, not facts, were behind the grotesque portrayals being offered.

John Harford came from a wealthy British banking family. While he shared Paine's abolitionist sentiments and began his biography promising to be less vindictive than Cheetham, he unleashed an equally critical diatribe. While conceding that Paine did have "considerable natural talent," Harford presented Paine as cruel, unclean, constantly drunk, and miserly. He painted Paine as being possessed of an "inordinate spirit of egotism and selfishness which rendered him incapable of friendship to a single human being." He described those who befriended Paine as "chiefly low and disreputable persons."

Clio Rickman, a lifelong friend of Paine, set out to rescue his friend "from the undeserved reproach... cast upon it by the panders of political infamy."

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By **Thomas Paine**

Dissertation on First Principles of Government

Written in 1795 after the American Constitutional Convention [A verbatim excerpt]

There is no subject more interesting to every man [*sic*] than the subject of government. His security, be he rich or poor, and, in a great measure, his prosperity, are connected therewith; it is therefore his interest as well as his duty, to make himself acquainted with its principles, and what the practice ought to be.

Every art and science, however imperfectly known at first, has been studied, improved, and brought to what we call perfection, by the progressive labours of succeeding generations; but the science of government has stood still. No improvement has been made in the principle, and scarcely any in the practice, till the American revolution began. In all the countries of Europe (except in France) the same forms and systems that were erected in the remote ages of ignorance still continue, and their antiquity is put in the place of prin-

ciple; it is forbidden to investigate their origin or by what right they exist. If it be asked how has this happened, the answer is easy; they are established on a principle that is false, and they employ their power to prevent detection.

Notwithstanding the mystery with which the science of government has been enveloped, for the purpose of enslaving, plundering and imposing upon mankind, it is of all things the least mysterious and the most easy to be understood. The meanest capacity cannot be at a loss, if it begins its enquiries at the right point. Every art and science has some point, or alphabet, at which the study of that art or science begins, and by the assistance of which the progress is facilitated. The same method ought to be observed with respect to the science of government. ▲

Thomas Paine Historiography — Continued from Pg. 2

Rickman knew Paine better than anyone and had much in common with him. He grew up in Lewes, the coastal Sussex town where Paine lived, worked and became politically active between 1768 and 1774. The two men shared Quaker beliefs and a love of books. Rickman eventually moved to London, became a publisher of political pamphlets, and a lifelong friend.

William Thomas Sherwin, a London publisher, wrote the first unbiased assessment of Paine's life. For *Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Paine*, Sherwin interviewed Paine's personal and political friends to offer a biography devoid of mudslinging and name-calling.

Sherwin pointed at Chalmers, who was paid £500 to smear Paine's reputation. He pilloried Cheetham as a "treacherous apostate" and "illiterate blockhead."



Richard Carlile

A freethinking journalist who championed freedom of the press in England, Carlile was tried in 1819 and imprisoned for publishing Paine's books to help educate the working class.

Artist unknown. Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, London

One year later Richard Carlile, released *The Life of Thomas Paine*. Carlile also rebutted Cheetham's work by presenting an entirely laudatory portrait, built upon the same structure of analyzing each work in counterpoint to Paine's life at the time of its writing.

Carlile's Paine is a man above reproach, a man so honest that he would not let a friend correct one of his grammatical errors, saying, "he only wished to be known as what he really was, without being decked with the plumes of another."

Vale and Linton

These early works cannot be read as traditional biographies, but they prove useful as a way to understand Anglo-American radicalism in the eighteenth-century. Cobbett, Harford, Rickman, and Carlile

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Banning Paine—*From Pg. 1*

During his startlingly bold presentation to the French National Convention, Paine quoted Robespierre's arguments in 1791 that "the death penalty is essentially unjust and... the most repressive of penalties," that it "multiplies crimes more than it prevents them" and constitutes "cowardly assassinations" through which one crime is punished by another.

As Marat assaulted Paine's arguments, Robespierre remained silent, but likely gritted his teeth as Paine quoted his own eloquent and unanswerable plea against capital punishment. Paine's persuasiveness nearly turned the tide.

Paine's position was dramatically more radical than that of Robespierre and Marat. Instead of treating Louis as a king gone bad, Paine proposed, consistent with his arguments since *Common Sense*, that all kings, simply because they are kings, are tyrants.

Paine's arguments were dangerous to the increasing yet tenuous dominance of Robespierre and the Jacobins. His plea not to kill the king was published by the French government in 1792, yet Paine's efforts resulted in his 1793 imprisonment.

Now jump ahead in time. Gutzon Borglum, designer of Mount Rushmore, sculpted an eight-foot statute of Paine for unveiling in Paris on the 200th anniversary of his birth in 1937. The statue showed Paine pleading to the National Convention to spare Louis Capet.

When Nazi Germany conquered France, the statue was hidden from the Vichy Government, which at the instigation of the Nazis ordered removal of all "statues and monuments of copper alloys situated in public places and administrative locales," purportedly "to recycle the metallic components for industrial production." The real purpose was sending metals to Germany for recycling into military uses.

In 1945, W.E. Woodward predicted that Borglum's hidden statue would be unveiled in Paris in the near future, which it was in 1948. Despite plans for moving

the statue to America, it remains far more appropriately in Paris on display in Parc Montsouris.

During World War II, Borglum's statue was at risk less because Paine's books were banned by the Nazis — although they were — and more because military lust demanded metal.

Governments purportedly devoted to free speech are hardly immune to banning Paine's books.

R. Wolf Baldassarro observed in a 2011 blog post, "Banned Books Awareness: Thomas Paine," that *Common Sense* in the 1950s was barred from

U.S. Information Service libraries during the McCarthy era by the government of the United States of America, the country whose name and perhaps existence Paine created through that very pamphlet.

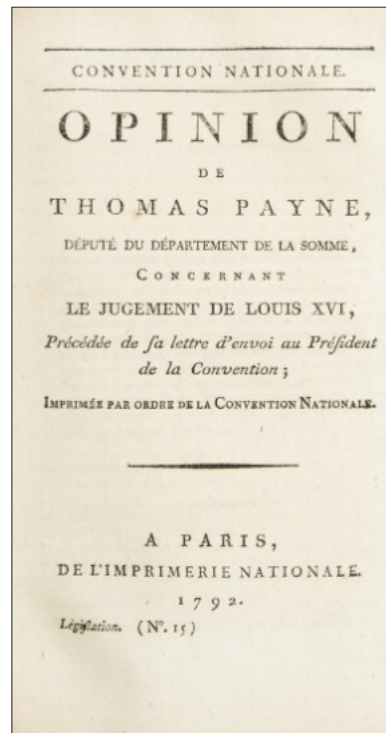
For more than a quarter-century, from 1795 to 1822, Paine's *The Age of Reason* was banned in the United Kingdom, reports *The Banned Books Compendium* by Grigory Lukin. He noted that an English publisher of *The Age of Reason* was sentenced in 1797 to a year of hard labor.

In 1819, Richard Carlile was prosecuted because he included *The Age of Reason* in a collection of Paine's works. Carlile read the entire book into the court record, ensuring even wider publication. He then was sentenced to a year in prison. Carlile actually served six years, Lukin wrote, because "he refused any 'legal conditions' on his release."

Lukin identified the 32 books most often banned worldwide. Two of those books, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, were authored by Paine.

As true from *Common Sense* forward, governments purporting to support democracy and free speech will resist the radical impact of Paine's thoughts. People themselves can seek out his thoughts, absorb and act on them, a bottom-up legacy which would make Paine rejoice. ▲

Richard Briles Moriarty, during a 42-year legal career, served as an Assistant Attorney General for the Wisconsin Department of Justice and the Equal Rights Division. In retirement, he's focusing his research efforts on Thomas Paine.



Opinion of Thomas Paine Deputy of the Department of the Somme, concerning the Judgment of Louis XVI

French National Printing Office, 1792. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

About Thomas Paine

Lapham: Common Sense as Timely Today as in 1776

"Remarks on Thomas Paine" at Iona College in New Rochelle, October 19, 2012 [an edited transcript excerpt]

by Lewis H. Lapham

On being asked ten years ago to speak to the Thomas Paine National Historical Association here in New Rochelle, I assumed that it would be a simple matter of stringing together the literary equivalent of a laurel wreath and setting it upon the head of a statue. It had been several years since I'd read *The Age of Reason* or *Rights of Man*, but in my own writing I'd borrowed more than one of Paine's lines of argument, often unwittingly, nearly always to good effect, and I didn't think I'd have much trouble placing the figure of Paine on the pedestal of the heroic American past.



Lewis H. Lapham

Photograph by Joshua Simpson
Courtesy of Lapham Quarterly

Before appearing on the lecture I fortunately took the precaution of re-reading *Common Sense*, and instead of finding myself in the presence of a marble portrait bust I met a man still living in what he knew to be "the undisguised language of historical truth," leveling a fierce polemic against a corrupt monarchy that with no more than a few changes of name and title, could as easily serve as an indictment of the complacent oligarchy currently parading around Washington in the costumes of a democratic republic.

Invariably in favor of a new beginning and a better deal, Paine was speaking to his hope for the rescue of mankind in a voice that hasn't been heard in American politics for the last forty years, and the old words brought with them the sound of water in a desert:

When it shall be said in any country in the world, 'My poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want; the taxes are not oppressive...' when these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and its government.

Why is it that scarcely any are executed but the poor?

The abundance of Paine's writing flows from his affectionate and generous spirit. During the twenty years of his engagement in both the American and French revolutions, he counts himself "a friend of the world's happiness," believing that the strength of government and the happiness of the governed is the freedom of the common people to mutually and naturally support one another.

Republican democracy he conceived as a shared work of the imagination among people of disparate interests, talents and generations, and therefore as the holding of one's fellow citizens in thoughtful regard, not because they are beautiful or rich or famous, but because they are one's fellow citizens....

The force of Paine's writing is of a match with his purpose, which is to empower his readers with the confidence to know the value of their own minds. He frames his thought in language plain enough to be understood by everybody in the room, his remarks addressed not only to the learned lawyer and the merchant prince but also to the ship chandler, the master mechanic and the ale-wife. Paine's writing is revolutionary because it is a democratic means to a democratic end....

Unlike the political theorists employed by our own self-important news media, Paine doesn't think it the duty of the political

writer to keep things running quietly and smoothly. His aim is to arm ordinary individuals with the weapon with which to defend themselves against organized deception and arbitrary power. The intention is explicit in the composition of *Common Sense*, which is why it excited so welcome a response among readers everywhere in the colonies when it was published in January 1776. ▲

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

Lewis Henry Lapham edited *Harper's Magazine* from 1976 to 1981, and 1983 to 2006. He founded *Lapham's Quarterly* to focus on history and literature.

Thomas Paine News

New Rochelle Celebrates Thomas Paine Day on June 8

by Judah Freed

Thomas Paine Day in New Rochelle debuts as an official annual event on Saturday, June 8, 2024, following approval in April by the New Rochelle city council and mayor.

Celebration sponsors are the Thomas Paine National Historical Association (TPNHA) and the Huguenot & New Rochelle Historical Association (H&NRHA).

Exhibits will be open from 1 to 8 p.m. (EDT) in the Thomas Paine Memorial Building on North Avenue, where light refreshments will be served.

The evening program from 5 to 7 p.m. will feature Yadira Ramos-Herbert, New Rochelle's first woman mayor, and other invited local leaders.

TPNHA President Gary Berton then will discuss "Thomas Paine in the Age of Revolutions."

Suzanne Tanswell, chair of Paine Cottage Museum Affairs for H&NRHA, will offer closing remarks.



*Thomas Paine
portrait at TPNHA*



*Thomas Paine
Memorial Building*



*Thomas Paine
Cottage*



*Thomas Paine
Monument*

Thomas Paine Day 2024

Exhibits: 1 to 8 p.m. • Evening Program: 5-7 p.m EST
983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, New York 10804

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The Brian Carter Jazz Trio will play live in the Memorial Building.

Thomas Paine Day is held on what's left of the 277-acre farm granted to Paine by New York State in 1784. On site is the relocated farmhouse cottage where Paine lived from 1802 to 1806; the Monument erected in 1839 near Paine's gravesite; and the 1925 Paine Memorial Building, now an historic landmark.

All 2024 Thomas Paine Day events are free, and the public is welcome. ▲

Sponsors



Due Credit for Thomas Paine Day

New Rochelle's City Council voted April 16 to establish June 8 annually as Thomas Paine Day. Council approved the petition after an April 9 public hearing where TPNHA board member John Heidenreich spoke, as did Jim and Geraldine Kaplan, leaders in saving the Memorial Building as a historical landmark in New Rochelle.

Day coordinators are Barbara Crane and Gary Berton (TPNHA) and Suzanne Tanswell (H&NRHA), supported by Margaret Downey at ThomasPaineMemorial.org. ▲

-jf



Florida Veterans For Common Sense

*All-volunteer nonprofit
inspired by Thomas
Paine to counter the
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FloridaVeteransforCommonSense.org
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Paine Historiography — From Pg. 3

all lived with one foot in America and the other in Britain. Much like Paine they were “ideological immigrants.”

A Compendium of the Life of Thomas Paine (1837) by Gilbert Vale was the first biographical study intended to look at Paine through an American lens, untinged by Whig versus Tory politics. Vale was London-born, but he openly tried to remove Paine’s story from friends and foes on European shores.

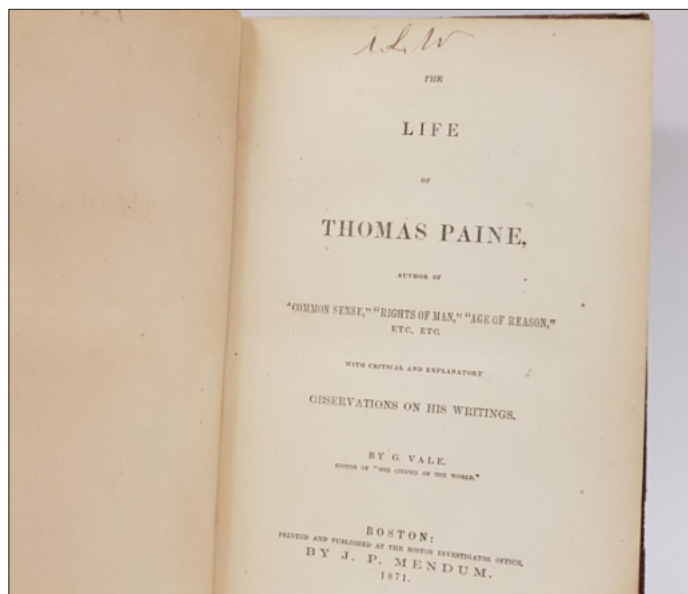
Vale wrote from avowed neutrality, determined to neither debase nor laud. He declared, “We are not... about to write a eulogy; to enhance his virtues, or to suppress his faults, or vices. Paine was a part of human nature, and partook of its imperfections.”

William James Linton’s *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1841) clearly shows where his sympathies lay. Linton called Paine a “sturdy champion of political and religious liberty.” In subsequent editions, Linton wove in brief profiles with homage quotes from some of Paine’s notable cohort — such as Benjamin Franklin and Mary Wollstonecraft — to further humanize him.

By the mid-1800s, Paine had become a man instead of a monster. The dawn of the 20th century would bring a new scrutiny to his life. ▲

Read Parts Two and Three in the July 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.



The Life of Thomas Paine, by Gilbert Vale

Title page of second edition in 1841, enlarged with appendix. Vale’s byline says, “Editor of ‘The Citizen of the World.’”

Courtesy of The Niederhoffer Collection and UniversityArchives.com

TPNHA Membership Dues and Benefits

Individual - \$25 yearly (Beacon subscription)

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

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



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

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About TPNHA

The 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. ▲

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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.

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