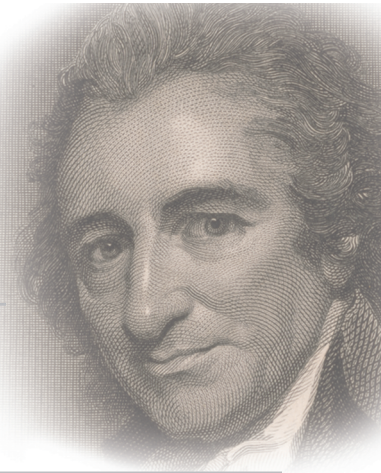


# The Beacon



May 2026 • Vol 21, No. 3

THOMAS PAINE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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

## From Common Sense to Independence



*Read about the Dunlap  
Broadside on Page 6*

**The Forester  
Letters**



**Paine and the  
Declaration**

**The Collected  
Writings**

# Common Sense Was Not Enough

## Paine's May 8, 1776 Forester Letter

Edited with Commentary by Richard Briles Moriarty

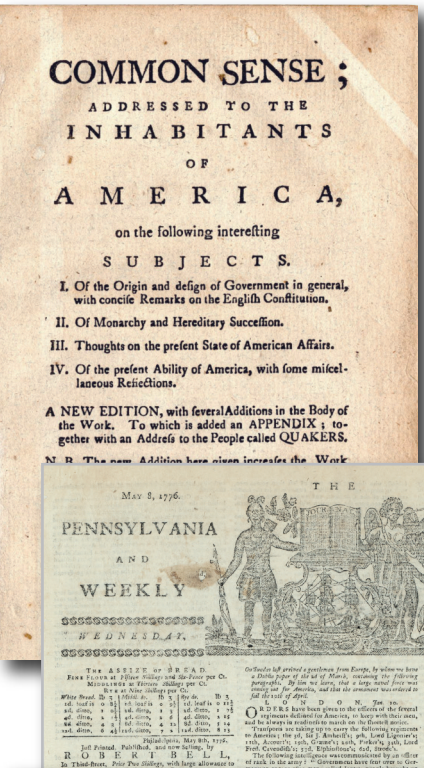
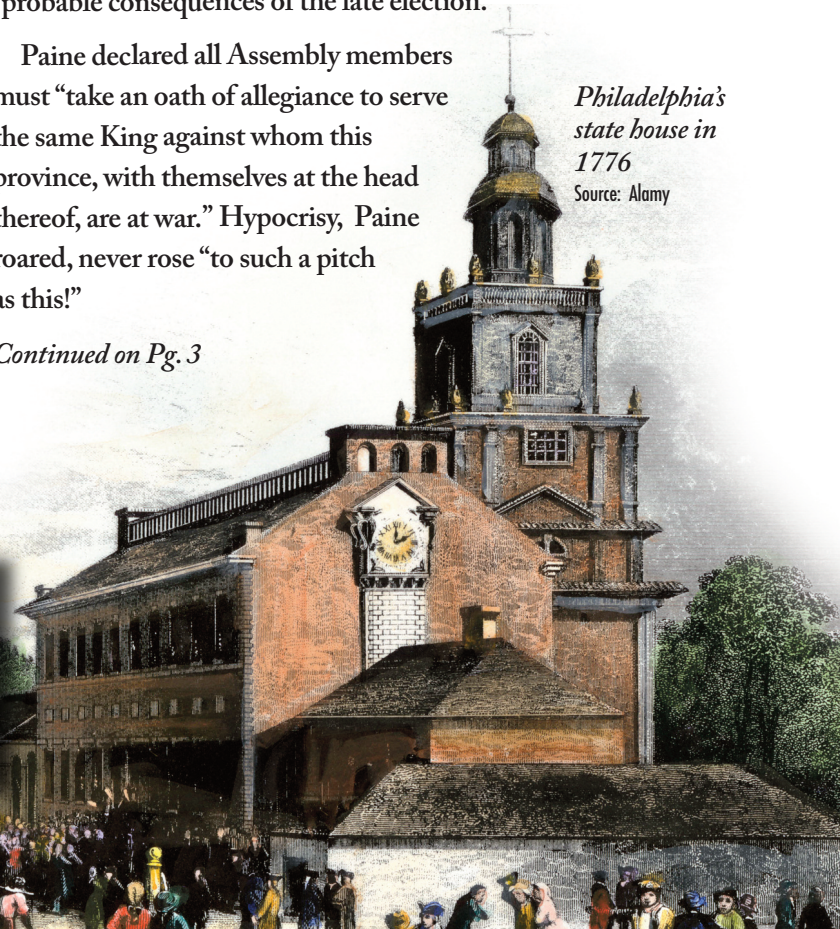
**C**ommon Sense moved many towards declaring independence from Britain. But the Pennsylvania Assembly was controlled by those advocating continued dependence on Britain. To neutralize demands to restructure, through a Convention, how Pennsylvania was governed, the Assembly scheduled and created new seats to be chosen in a May 1, 1776 election. As the election approached, it was expected to result in a majority supporting independence. Surprising everyone, the “dependent faction” prevailed, threatening to doom the independence movement. Paine and other radicals sought to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Through a May 8, 1776 “Forester” letter, Paine argued that the Assembly itself was illegitimate. Excoriating Quakers who supported reconciliation for travelling “to the summit of inconsistency” so rapidly “as to acquire autumnal ripeness by the first of May,” he warned that their “rotting time” approached. Broadening his assault to the entire “dependent faction,” Paine sought to expose “inconsistency, partiality, and injustice” of that faction, and “like an honest man, who courts no favor, to shew to them the dangerous ground they stand upon” as reflected in the “probable consequences of the late election.”

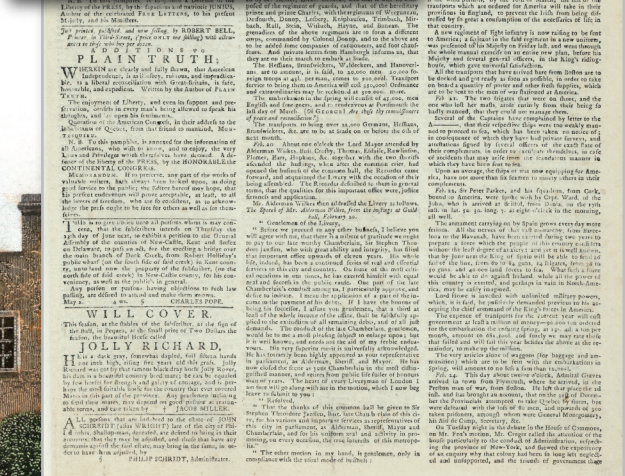
Paine declared all Assembly members must “take an oath of allegiance to serve the same King against whom this province, with themselves at the head thereof, are at war.” Hypocrisy, Paine roared, never rose “to such a pitch as this!”

Continued on Pg. 3

*Philadelphia's state house in 1776*  
Source: Alamy



The “Forester” letters appeared in the Pennsylvania Journal on April 3, 10, 24, and May 8, 1776



Read the full “Forester” letter at [thomaspaine.org/essays/american-revolution/the-foresters-letters/](http://thomaspaine.org/essays/american-revolution/the-foresters-letters/)

Join historian, William Hogeland, and Moriarty on May 9, 2026 for a discussion of Paine’s May 8, 1776 Forester letter in the wider context of the events that resulted in the Declaration.

## Common Sense Was Not Enough—Continued from Pg. 2

By pretending moderation, “we are running into the most damnable sins. It is now the duty of every man from the pulpit and from the press, in his family and in the street to cry out against it. Good God! Have we no remembrance of duty left to the King of Heaven! No conscientious awe to restrain this sacrifice of sacred things? Is this our chartered privilege? This our boasted constitution, that we can sin and feel it not?” Yet that “sin lies not” with the “people” but with “the fountain head” and the delusions it has imposed on others.” The “guilt centers in a few, and flows from the same source,” that failed to protect Pennsylvania in recent frontier conflicts.

While those favoring independence “had to sustain the loss of those good citizens who are” fighting in Canada, the Tories “by never stirring out, remain at home to take the advantage of elections” and “Germans, of property, zealots in the cause of freedom, were likewise excluded for non-allegiance.” Yet “the tory non-conformists, that is, those who are advertised as enemies to their country, were admitted to vote on the other side” which is a “strange contradiction indeed!” Adding in Quakers who were “duped by the meanest of all passions, religious spleen,” the “combined impact allowed the” proprietary dependants to support the British and Proprietary power against the public. Despite “having many of our votes rejected, others disqualified for non-allegiance, with the great loss sustained by absentees, the maneuver of shutting up the doors between seven and eight o'clock, and circulating the report of adjourning and finishing the next morning, by which, several were deceived,” the candidates favoring independence did surprisingly well.

Those favoring independence “have stood the experiment of the election, for the sake of knowing the men who were against us. “Alas, what are they!”

“One half of them ought to be now asking public pardon for their former offences; and the other half may think themselves well off that they are let alone. When the enemy enters the country, can they defend themselves? Or will they defend themselves? And if not, are they so foolish as to think that when it is our duty to search the corrupted wound to the bottom, that we, with ten times their strength and number (if the question were put to the people at large) will submit to be governed by cowards and tories.” The “English fleet and army” have, “instead of going against those colonies where independence prevails most,” gone “against those only where they suppose it prevails least.” The May 1 election “is a fair invitation for them to come here.” We can hardly expect “those who have invited them” to “turn out to repulse them” if only because they could muster few armed men. If the English invade Pennsylvania, we should “levy the expense attending the expedition against them, on the estates of those who have invited them.”

Richard Briles Moriarty is a TPHA Board member who, after retiring from a legal career in 2016, is focused on Paine research and scholarship.

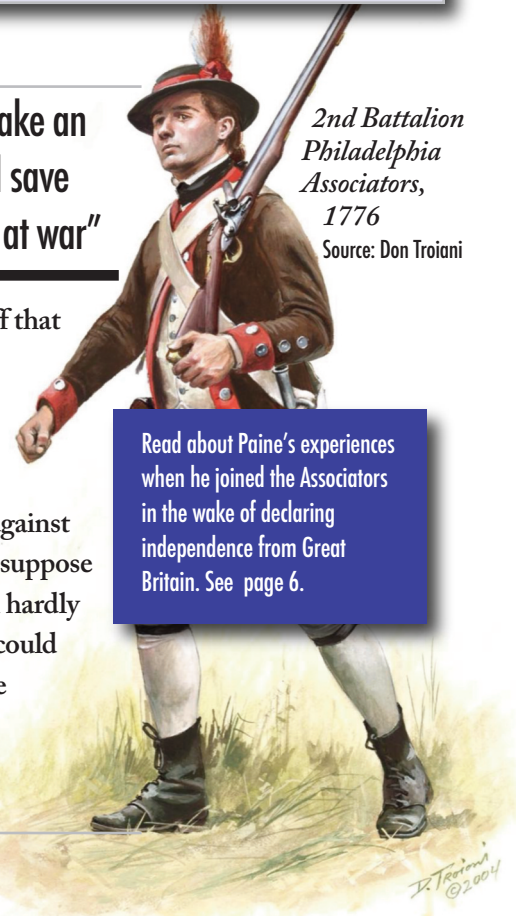
## What Were the Forester Letters?

In February 1776, a month after *Common Sense* was published, Congress deep-sixed a draft Committee Report that emphasized how deeply Congress desired reconciliation with Britain because that draft contains hints that independence was an alternate option. While some colonial legislatures cautiously loosened their instructions to Congressional delegates to allow them to consider independence options, Pennsylvania, New York and other colonies persisted in instructing their delegates to actively resist any such efforts. With William Smith, writing as “Cato” in Pennsylvania newspapers, arguing forcefully for reconciliation, the fervor created by *Common Sense* was insufficient. Paine remained silent as Smith’s published letters piled up. He finally let loose, from March 28, 1776 on, with his Forester letters. Before the May 1 election, Paine focused on refuting arguments made by Smith. After that disastrous election, he did not just shift gears. Paine drove a new vehicle aimed at eliminating the Assembly and transforming Pennsylvania’s government into one controlled by radicals and strongly supporting independence. Without the efforts of Paine and other radicals, July 4 would likely now be just another date on the calendar.

**“All Assembly members must “take an oath of allegiance to serve and save the king” against whom “we are at war”**

2nd Battalion  
Philadelphia  
Associators,  
1776

Source: Don Troiani



Read about Paine’s experiences when he joined the Associators in the wake of declaring independence from Great Britain. See page 6.

J. Troiani  
©2004

# Before the Committee

## Proto-Drafts and the Early Formation of the Declaration of Independence

By Jonathan Scheick

The drafting of the Declaration of Independence is most often narrated as a linear sequence of events: the Continental Congress appointed a Committee of Five; an initial draft was prepared; the committee reviewed it; and Congress debated and revised the text before adoption in early July 1776. This account, drawn largely from Jefferson's later recollections and supported by surviving drafts, describes the formal phase of composition. Yet this narrative has also come to function as an origin story.

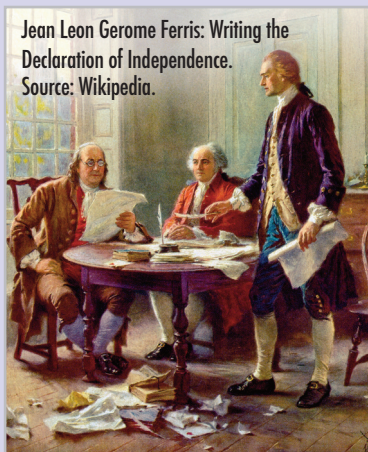
By treating the appointment of the Committee of Five as the beginning of the Declaration's creation, historiography has tended to conflate the onset of formal drafting with the emergence of textual formation itself. This assumption leaves a significant stage unexplored: the period preceding committee appointment in which ideas, language, and possibly written formulations circulated informally and helped shape the framework that Congress ultimately authorized for drafting.

Rather than challenging the established historical record, this study proposes that it is incomplete. The later recollections of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson describe what may be understood as Phase II of the process: the moment when Congress formally assumed responsibility for producing a Declaration and delegated the task to a committee. The central question addressed here is whether a Phase I existed: an earlier, informal stage of development that preceded

### From Idea to Action

The mythification of the Declaration's birth has become a staple of American history with Jefferson as the hero of the event. He is sometimes pictured sitting late into the night, crumpled papers tossed on the floor, writing draft after draft. It likely did not happen that way.

This narrative has come to function as an origin story that ignores the importance of "Phase I"—the informal circulation of ideas and provisional language that was being discussed after *Common Sense*. Early drafts helped shape the framework that Congress ultimately authorized. Material traces of this earlier phase exists, as suggested in this article.



Jean Leon Gerome Ferris: Writing the Declaration of Independence. Source: Wikipedia.

The well-documented "Phase II," in which Congress formally delegated the drafting to Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston, was likely preceded by many private conversations amongst statesmen—Thomas Paine among them.

congressional delegation, and what material traces of that stage may still be discerned. In this article, the term "proto-draft" refers to provisional writings, such as memoranda, frameworks, or draft statements, circulated for evaluation or adaptation prior to formal committee drafting, rather than to a complete or authoritative declaration text.

### Revolutionary Print Culture & Informal Drafting Practices

By 1776, political argument in British North America was deeply embedded in print culture. Pamphlets, broadsides, newspaper essays, and open letters functioned not only as vehicles of persuasion but also as sites of experimentation. Political ideas were frequently articulated in provisional textual forms that were intended to be revised, adapted, or absorbed into other documents.

Eighteenth-century legislative and committee practice likewise relied heavily on informal written submissions. Draft resolutions, memoranda, and proposed statements of principle often circulated privately before being formalized. Such texts were not typically preserved once their immediate utility had passed. The absence of surviving early drafts, therefore, does not imply their

nonexistence; rather, it reflects the disposability of working documents in a period before systematic archival preservation, a feature common to eighteenth-century legislative and political practice.

## Before the Committee—Continued from Pg. 4

### The Problem of the “First Draft”

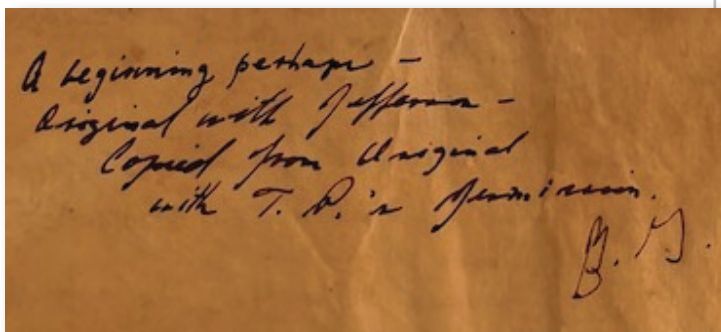
Standard narratives tend to treat Jefferson’s “Rough Draft” as the beginning of the Declaration’s textual history. Yet even within the established documentary record, this assumption is unstable. Editorial commentary in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* acknowledges that portions of the Rough Draft were copied from earlier texts, including material previously written in other contexts. As Julian P. Boyd demonstrated in his reconstruction of the Declaration’s textual evolution, the surviving Rough Draft itself presupposes an earlier compositional layer, fragments of which survive only partially, confirming that the extant manuscript tradition does not capture the document’s full drafting history.

What remains unclear is whether earlier texts existed that were not authored by Committee of Five members and that circulated beyond Congress’s private papers. The possibility of such texts has received little sustained attention, largely because the evidentiary record is fragmentary. Nevertheless, fragmentary evidence is precisely what survives from informal drafting processes.

### The Sherman Copy’s Verso Inscription

The most significant material trace bearing on this question appears on a working draft copy associated with Roger Sherman. On the verso of this document is a contemporaneous inscription describing the text as “a beginning perhaps,” noting that it was “Copied from Original,” and recording that the copying occurred “with T.P.’s permission.”

Roger Sherman’s draft copy note



Several features of this inscription merit careful attention. The phrase “a beginning perhaps” signals provisionality. It does not describe a final draft, but a starting point; precisely the language one would expect for



Roger Sherman was a key Connecticut delegate to the Continental Congress.

a proto-draft. The explicit distinction between the copy and an “Original” indicates textual derivation rather than composition, implying the existence of a prior written text no longer extant. The reference to permission suggests that the “Original” was associated with an identifiable individual who exercised control over its use.

Importantly, the inscription makes no claim about authorship of the Declaration itself. Its evidentiary value lies in documenting a procedural act: the copying of a prior text for consideration or use in drafting.

### The Early Working Title & National Framing

The Sherman copy bears the heading: “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America in General Congress Assembled.” This same formulation appears in other early drafts, including John Adams’s fair copy and Jefferson’s Rough Draft. The presence of this fully articulated national designation at such an early stage is noteworthy, presupposing a unified political identity, representative legitimacy, and a national, rather than colonial, subject. That this framing appears consistently across the earliest surviving drafts suggests that it was not improvised during committee revision but inherited from an earlier conceptual layer.

### The Plausibility of Thomas Paine as “T.P.”

The initials “T.P.” on the Sherman inscription cannot be identified with certainty. With this in mind, Paine emerges as the most historically plausible candidate when contextual factors are considered. By early 1776, Paine was one of the most influential political writers in the colonies, actively engaged in arguing for independence at a national scale, closely connected to figures operating in and around Congress, and known for producing texts intended to catalyze action rather than to establish personal authorship.

This article does not claim that Paine authored the Declaration. Rather, it argues that Paine is a historically plausible figure to associate with a lost proto-draft that circulated informally prior to committee drafting.

## Before the Committee—Continued from Pg. 5

### Toward a Proto-Draft Selection Model

Taken together, the evidence supports a restrained but consequential inference: there is material evidence of a pre-committee textual layer; that layer already contained mature national framing; the Sherman inscription records a copying act from a prior “Original”; and the initials “T.P.” plausibly correspond to a known political writer engaged in national-level argumentation. The convergence of these facts is consistent with a drafting process in which multiple provisional texts circulated informally and for further development.

Comparable proto-textual stages are well documented in the drafting of several revolutionary-era state constitutions, where multiple provisional drafts, sometimes originating outside formal drafting bodies, circulated prior to adoption, though only the final texts were preserved in the official record. Such practices were consistent with broader legislative norms, in which informal draft texts and memoranda routinely preceded formal committee action and were rarely preserved once superseded. The possibility that a provisional declaration framework originated outside the formal drafting committee appears ordinary rather than exceptional within eighteenth-century practice.

### Conclusion

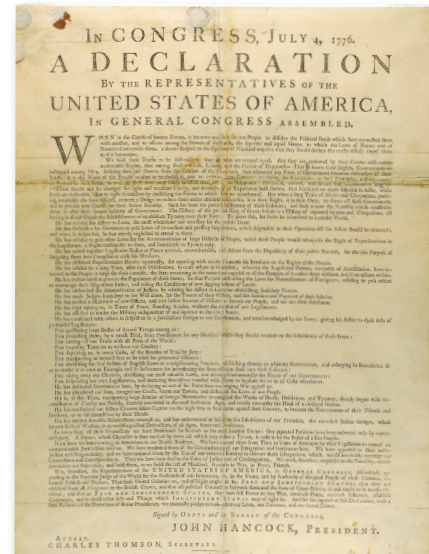
The absence of surviving proto-drafts of the Declaration of Independence should not foreclose inquiry into its earliest stages of formation. Informal drafting, textual circulation, and selective adaptation were standard features of eighteenth-century political practice, and their traces are often indirect. Historians have long recognized that key manuscript stages in the Declaration’s formation were likely discarded once superseded, reflecting standard eighteenth-century documentary practice rather than archival anomaly.

By attending to procedural evidence, such as the Sherman inscription and the early appearance of settled national framing, historians can begin to reconstruct a missing stage in the Declaration’s creation. This stage does not undermine established narratives but enriches them, offering a more realistic account of how foundational political texts come into being.

Jonathan Scheick is a TPHA Board member and Paine scholar.

### DID YOU KNOW?

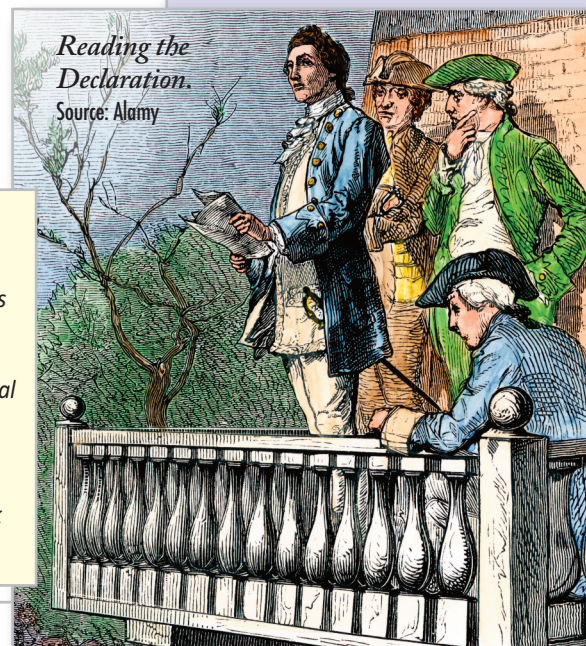
- **THE DECLARATION WASN'T SIGNED ON JULY 4TH.** Most delegates signed on August 2, 1776 — nearly a month after its adoption. July 4th was the date Congress approved the final text, not the signing ceremony.
- **CONGRESS AS A WHOLE MADE ABOUT 86 CHANGES.** A quarter of the original text, including a passage condemning the slave trade, was cut before signing.
- **THE DECLARATION WAS NEARLY LOST.** During the War of 1812, it was hastily rolled up in a linen sack and carried out of Washington by a State Department clerk just before British troops burned the capital.



### Spreading the News

On the night of July 4, 1776, Philadelphia printer John Dunlap produced about 200 copies of the newly adopted Declaration of Independence. Today, only 26 survive. The last to be found was in 1989, when a man browsing in a flea market bought a painting for \$4.00 because he liked the frame. Concealed behind the painting was an original Dunlap Broadside. In 2000, Sotheby's auctioned his copy for \$8.4 million.

Four days later, on July 8, Colonel John Nixon stood on the balcony of the Philadelphia State House and shared the words that changed the fate of the colonies and paved the way for the birth of a new nation.



# Thomas Paine: Collected Writings

## A Brand-New Landmark in Paine Studies

**T**homas Paine: *Collected Writings* is the first major new edition of Paine's works, bringing together all his writings in six breathtaking volumes that dramatically revise our previous understanding of his activities as a writer and his importance as a democratic theorist in the age of revolutions. It includes about 180 new letters and some two hundred works newly attributed to Paine, with twenty-nine works previously regarded as Paine's being deattributed.

Drawing on pioneering computerized text analysis that makes possible for the first time attributions of anonymous and pseudonymous texts, this collection includes newly identified pamphlets and newspaper and journal contributions. The collection also suggests that Paine was extremely active as a Grub Street oppositional Whig writer in the decade prior to the American Revolution. Many writings from the period of his residence in France (1792–1802) and his subsequent return to the United States are also restored to his published output. With Paine emerging as a much more consistent and serious democratic theorist than is often assumed, his contributions to revolutionary debates in America, Britain, and France were unparalleled.

### Six Extraordinary Volumes

#### Volume I 1772–1782

Find editorials, magazine pieces, pamphlets and newspaper articles, includes the *Forester Letters*, the *Crisis* papers, the Deane Affair articles, and *Common Sense* with commentary by the editors.

#### Volume II 1782–1793

Share a crucial decade for Paine as he explored the theoretical foundations of the ideas he had first expounded in *Common Sense*, through prose and poetry.

#### Volume III 1793–1809

Two segments study Paine's writings while a prisoner during the French Revolution and its aftermath as Napoleon rose to power and Paine prepared to return to America.

#### Volume IV 1765–1809

This volume gathers all of Paine's existing letters to both well-known powermongers and intimate friends alike, revealing a more personal side of Paine.

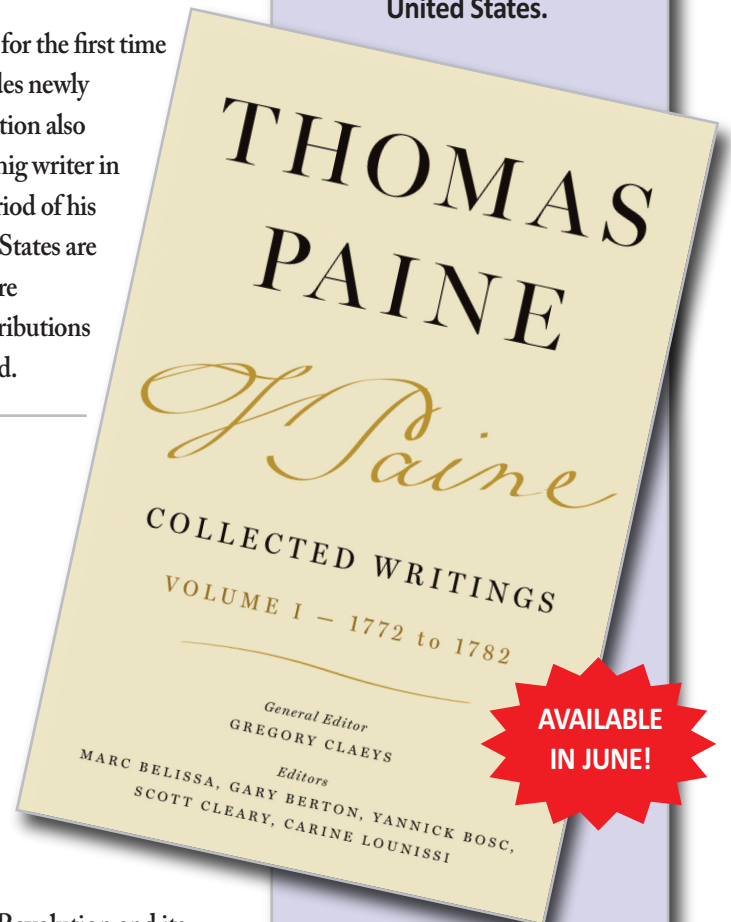
#### Volume V 1758–1772

Discover a trove of Paine's earliest writings, penned during a period that has been presented as "a great blank" in his career as an author.

#### Volume VI 1758–1772

Supplementary writings follow a time of political maturation for Paine as he engaged with a host of issues and causes in America, Britain, and France. Often written anonymously or under known or new aliases, these pieces suggest a very different narrative of his activities and development during this period.

- OVER 180 NEW LETTERS
- 200 NEW ATTRIBUTIONS
- In-depth commentary by an esteemed team of international scholars from Great Britain, France, and the United States.

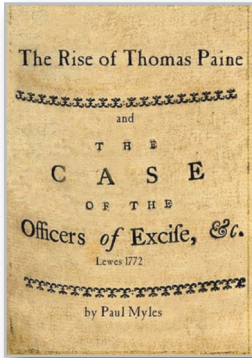


- Developed with TPHA Paine scholars Gary Berton and Scott Cleary
- Available this summer as a set or by individual volumes, from Princeton University Press



# Upcoming Early Summer Events

## FRIDAY, MAY 1 AT 2 PM EDT THOMAS PAINE AND THE ROOTS OF EARLY LABOR UNIONS



Celebrate May Day as Board Member Paul Myles discusses his fascinating book, *Thomas Paine and the Case of the Officers of Excise*. Discover how Paine's 1772 pamphlet emerged from a nationwide campaign by thousands of poorly paid excise officers seeking reform—what was arguably the first organized national labor movement within the British state and a precursor

to modern trade unionism.

▲ **WHERE:** Via Zoom and in-person at the Thomas Paine Memorial Building, 983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY. Zoom link on the website.

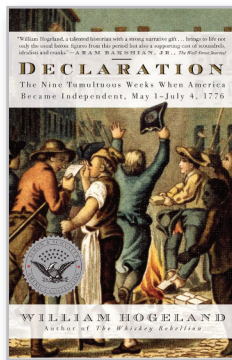
## WEDNESDAY, MAY 6 AT 6 PM EDT THE CLASS STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY AND THE MYTH OF THE FOUNDING

TPHA president Gary Berton takes the podium for a fascinating discussion that offers new truths about America's founding as a nation. Learn about Paine's impact on the formation of the American movement for democracy, his allies in this fight and his critique of the American Constitution of 1787. You will never look at America's "founders" in the same way.

▲ **WHERE:** Yonkers Public Library at 1 Larkin Center, Yonkers, NY 10701

## SATURDAY, MAY 9 AT 4 PM EDT COMMON SENSE WAS NOT ENOUGH

With a May 1776 Pennsylvania election going sideways was independence doomed? Not with Paine and compatriots, during the weeks before the Declaration, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. William Hogeland (*Declaration: The Nine Tumultuous Weeks When America Became Independent*) and Richard Briles Moriarty (TPHA Board member and Paine scholar) escort you on the roller-coaster ride that made independence possible.



▲ **WHERE:** Via Zoom and in-person at the Thomas Paine Memorial Building, 983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY. Zoom link on the website.

## THURSDAY, MAY 14 AT 7 PM EDT ON COMMON SENSE: MEDIA AND REVOLUTION FROM 1776 TO 2026

Director of American Studies at Boston University Joseph Rezek will reflect on the historical significance and contemporary resurgence of Thomas Paine's great pamphlet, *Common Sense*. Drawing connections between the media environment of the American Revolution and that of our own time, he will explain why *Common Sense* made such a difference in history and why it might be making a difference again today.



▲ **WHERE:** Via Zoom and in-person at the Thomas Paine Memorial Building, 983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY. Zoom link on the website.

## SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 2026 AT 2 PM EDT LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL: 250 YEARS OF PROGRESS SINCE 1776?

The major event this year: Our celebration of Thomas Paine Day on the 250th anniversary of *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence— A day to recognize and celebrate Paine's contributions to the formation of American democracy, including an imaginary conversation between Thomas Paine and the late Jesse Jackson and other presentations, followed by live jazz!

▲ **WHERE:** Thomas Paine Memorial Building, 983 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY. Free and open to the public.



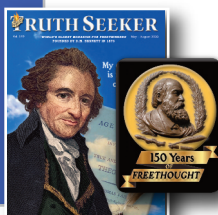
## The Beacon

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

Editorial Committee: Gary Berton • Barbara Crane • Frances Chiu Judah Freed • Joy Masoff • Richard Briles Moriarty • Adrian Tawfik

Our mission is educating the world about the life, works and legacy of Thomas Paine. We were founded in 1884 to correct the record on Thomas Paine by refuting negative propaganda and slanders perpetrated against him by most historians in the 19th century. We've since become the most reliable and accurate source of information about Paine worldwide. The TPHA relies on funding from people like you! We welcome any and all contributions and look forward to sharing new discoveries in this all important 250th anniversary year! Visit: [www.thomaspaine.org](http://www.thomaspaine.org)

THE TRUTH SEEKER is the world's foundational source of freethought information since 1873: longer than TPHA has existed. The publication was the main force behind our formation in 1884. Learn more at [TheTruthSeeker.net](http://TheTruthSeeker.net).



## Help Us Shape Future Beacons!

Take our new survey at [Thomaspaine.org](http://Thomaspaine.org). Link on the home page!

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

