Among the many details of Thomas Paine’s accomplishments subject to ongoing discussion is the relationship he enjoyed with Benjamin Franklin. Clearly, Franklin was both friend to and mentor of Paine. With good reason, Paine could not but have enormous respect for this older man of letters and science.

How the pamphlet Common Sense came to be written by Paine is a matter of historical record. One of the most detailed and interesting presentations of this episode is provided by Edward Larkin in his introduction to a 2004 reprinting of Common Sense. Interestingly, Larkin does not comment one way or the other on Franklin’s role.

Various biographers of both Paine and Franklin assert that Franklin did, in fact, review the manuscript. Thomas Slaughter, in the introduction to Common Sense and Related Writings of Thomas Paine, states: “Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams also helped Paine with his text.” And, Walter Isaacson, in his biography of Franklin, writes: “Franklin offered him his wholehearted support along with a few suggested revisions.”

The facts may have been different, as detailed in Alfred Aldridge’s 1984 book, Thomas Paine’s American Ideology. The only assertion of Franklin’s involvement was made by William Duane, who in 1818 published Franklin’s memoirs. As Aldridge tells us, a month after the pamphlet appeared, Franklin privately wrote to General Charles Lee that he did not know who had authored Common Sense. However, Paine later wrote that he sent to Franklin the very first copy that came from the printing press. Would it not be strange that this copy found its way to Franklin without an accompanying note from Paine?

What we are left with is the account of events left by Dr. Benjamin Rush in a letter he wrote to James Cheetham in 1809. In reading this account, it is worth recalling, as Aldridge observes, that Rush “came to dislike Paine for his religious ideas and consequently made no attempt to be complimentary in his reminiscences.”

About the year 1775, I read a short essay with which I was much pleased, in one of Bradford’s [news]papers, against the slavery of the Africans in our country, and which, I was informed, was written by Thomas Paine. This excited my curiosity to be better acquainted with him. We met soon afterwards at Mr. Aitkins’ bookstore, where I did homage to his principles and his pen on the subject of the enslaved Africans. He told me that it was the first piece he had ever published here.

When the subject of American Independence began to be agitated in conversation, I observed the publick mind to be loaded with an immense mass of prejudice and error relative to it. Something appeared to be wanting, to remove them beyond the ordinary short and cold addresses of newspaper publications. At this time I called upon Mr. Paine, and suggested to him the propriety of preparing our citizens for a perpetual separation of our country from Great Britain, by means of a work of such length as would obviate all the objections to it. He seized the idea with avidity, and immediately began his famous pamphlet in favour of that measure.

He read the sheets to me at my house as he composed them. When he had finished them, I advised him to put them into the hands of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, and the late Judge James Wilson, assuring him, at the same time, that they all held the same opinions that he had defended. The first of those gentlemen saw the manuscript, and I believe the second, but Judge Wilson being from home when Mr. Paine called upon him, it was not submitted to his inspection. No addition was made to it by Dr. Franklin, but a passage was struck out, or omitted in printing it, which I conceived to be the most striking in it. It was the following—A greater absurdity cannot be conceived of, than three millions of people running to their sea coast every time a ship arrives from London, to know what portion of liberty they should enjoy.'

A title only was wanted for this pamphlet before it was committed to the press. Mr. Paine proposed to call it "Plain Truth." I objected to it and suggested the title of "Common Sense." This was instantly adopted, and nothing now remained, but to find a printer who had boldness enough to publish it. ...

However it all came together, what is certain is that Paine captured in words the sentiments of those who clearly thought of themselves as Americans— even if they could not yet openly say so.