

## TPF President Edward Dodson reports on recent activities---

On March 3, 2018, I hosted the showing of the Ian Ruskin film, "The Life of Thomas Paine: To Begin the World Over Again", at the Cherry Hill, NJ public library. The program was attended by around 50 people. I briefly introduced the film and later responded to questions from the audience.

On April 25th, I gave a one-hour talk on Thomas Paine to a newly-formed American Revolution Roundtable. The group is organizing to discuss the history of the battles and other aspects of the Revolution as occurred in the southern portion of New Jersey. My talk was the first presentation to the group. About 20 people attended, including one person who is a volunteer at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia. —EJD

## Benjamin Franklin Letter, relating to The Age of Reason

Sent to the *Bulletin* by Edward Dodson



TO THOMAS PAINE.

[Date uncertain.]

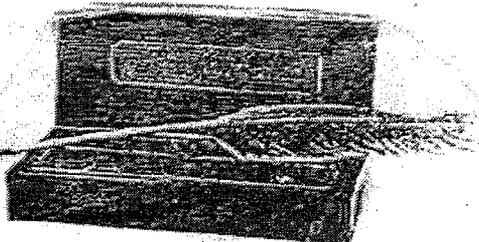
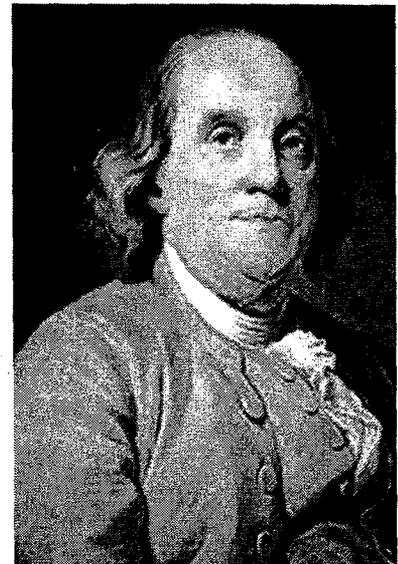
DEAR SIR,

*I have read your manuscript with some attention. By the argument it contains against a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the foundations of all religion. For without the belief of a Providence, that takes cognizance of, guards, and guides, and may favor particular persons, there is no motive to worship a Deity, to fear his displeasure, or to pray for his protection. I will not enter into any discussion of your principles, though you seem to desire it. At present I shall only give you my opinion, that, though your reasonings are subtle and may prevail with some readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general sentiments of mankind on that subject, and the consequence of printing this piece will be, a great deal of odium drawn upon yourself, mischief to you, and no benefit to others. He that spits against the wind, spits in his own face.*

*But, were you to succeed, do you imagine any good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life, without the assistance afforded by religion; you having a clear perception of the advantages of virtue, and the disadvantages of vice, and possessing a strength of resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common temptations. But think how great a portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes habitual, which is the great point for its security. And perhaps you are indebted to her originally, that is, to your religious education, for the habits of virtue upon which you now justly value yourself. You might easily display your excellent talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and thereby obtain a rank with our most distinguished authors. For among us it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots, that a youth, to be raised into the company of men, should prove his manhood by beating his mother.*

*I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person; whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise against you, and perhaps a good deal of regret and repentance. If men are so wicked with religion, what would they be if without it. I intend this letter itself as a proof of my friendship, and therefore add no professions to it; but subscribe simply yours, B. Franklin*

The letter is reprinted in Jared Sparks, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin* (1840, Boston: Tappan, Whittemore and Mason) X, 281-282. Whether the original letter still exists and where it might be archived I could not discover, although a good possibility would be the American Philosophical Society. —Edward Dodson



## Letter from Franklin to Paine...Again: Views on Religion

In the last *Bulletin*, volume 19, number 1, we printed a letter addressed to Thomas Paine and signed by Benjamin Franklin in which the writer expresses stern caution about publishing negative views on religion. The letter is undated. The *Bulletin* made the assumption that Franklin was criticizing Paine's *The Age of Reason*, and clearly erred in that unwarranted assumption.

BUT, Victor Madeson, TPF vice-president, made a good catch on this article: *The Age of Reason* was published in 1794-5, Franklin died in April 1790, obviously he could not be writing a letter about the published work. Madeson continues, that Franklin's letter would have been written to someone else, on the same topic, and, of course, earlier than 1790. So far, Madeson has not sent further information or clues about the Franklin letter: that is, when and to whom it might have been written.

So, awaiting additional information or discussion, we offer the following thoughts on the letter.

- It is found in volume X, pages 281-282, in Jared Sparks' exhaustive ten-volume compendium, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, of 1840. There it is addressed to Paine, without date, and signed by Franklin.
- Paine had stated several times that he planned to write his opinions on religion. "Soon after I had published the pamphlet 'Common Sense,' in America, I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion." The subject was long in his mind, and he may have put some thoughts on paper.
- Some components of the letter suggest that what Franklin could have been commenting on were Paine's ideas drafted in

*preliminary, manuscript, digest* form, which Paine, rightly devoted to Franklin and looking for his critical thinking, may have sent on to him.

~ The letter's first sentence refers to a manuscript, not a publication: *I have read your manuscript with some attention.*

~ And, towards the end of the first paragraph, it is clear that the manuscript has not yet been sent to be published: *....the consequence of printing this piece will be, a great deal of odium drawn upon yourself, mischief to you, and no benefit to others.*

~ Then, near the end of paragraph two, another sentence hints that the article or book has not gone to publication: *You might easily display your excellent talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and thereby obtain a rank with our most distinguished authors.*

~ The third, and last, paragraph starts with this sentence: *I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person; whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise against you, and perhaps a good deal of regret and repentance.* According to Franklin, the manuscript has not been seen by anyone else, and it should not be. If it were already published, of course, it would have been seen by anyone and everyone.

~ The letter concludes with the sympathetic words that usually passed between the two friends: *I intend this letter itself as a proof of my friendship, and therefore add no professions to it; ....*

We hope to learn some substance on this topic. Stay tuned.