

Erasure of Public Memory: The Strange Case of Tom Paine in Washington DC

by Richard Robyn

This article is the first in a series of three. The series is an abridgment of Professor Robyn's paper presented at the Iona College Conference on Thomas Paine in 2012. The section omitted here is titled *Paine's Life*.



The nation's capital has innumerable monuments and commemorative markers to a wide variety of important (and perhaps not so important) public figures. Artists, poets, scientists, politicians, statesmen and diplomats -- from the famous to the obscure -- have been recognized with a statue or marker in a city that steep

itself in them. In fact, Washington, DC, might rank among the first cities of the world in commemorative statues and monuments.

In particular, the Founding Fathers have been well represented with their own monuments because of their important contributions to the establishment of this country. Besides George Washington and Thomas Jefferson with their own world-famous major memorials, those critically important to the founding of the Republic and recognized with statutes include James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Rush, John Witherspoon and many others. While most of these statues were erected in past centuries when memorializing individuals might have seemed to be more the order of the day, as recently as 2002, signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and author of the Virginia Bill of Rights George Mason received his own well-deserved recognition with a memorial.

Not only are American-born historical figures from the Revolutionary era recognized, but their foreign-born compatriots as well. In one location alone, Lafayette Square across from the White House, several are commemorated: Baron von Steuben, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Jean de Rochambeau and the square's namesake himself, Marquis Gilbert de Lafayette.

Yet one of the Revolutionary era heroes who has gone unrecognized with any memorial or historical marker of any sort to date is arguably one of the most important of them all: Thomas Paine. The author of *Common Sense* and other political writings critical to public opinion during the early period of revolutionary fervor, and who himself suffered with General Washington and the colonial army in the early dark days of the war, is arguably as much a revolutionary hero as any recognized now.

In fact, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that Paine goes unrecognized in the city that owes its very existence (at least in part) to his influence. Along with *Common Sense* and other political writings, Paine had such

an impact on public opinion at a critical juncture of the early Revolutionary War that John Adams once declared, "history is to ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine."¹ That Adams, a fellow Founding Father and sharp observer of the times, said this even as he was no friend of Paine's and in fact became a bitter political enemy in the early years of the Republic, speaks volumes about the impact Paine had.

This lack of recognition is made all the more poignant in light of the little-known fact that the aged author visited the city in its very earliest days, when it was better known as the Federal City, and stayed for several months. Yet with even this personal visit to the city, long an accepted means of commemoration of some sort with an historical marker, Paine's presence in the nation's capital is unmarked.

As the director of an undergraduate academic/internship program in Washington DC, I have spent countless hours with my students walking the streets of the city, often drawing their attention to historical markers and statues. Yet until recently, in reacquainting myself with Paine's life through reading the fine biography *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution and the Birth of Modern Nations* (2006) by Craig Nelson, I had not even realized that the famous author had visited the nation's capital. It did not seem to me that I had ever seen a marker or memorial to him.

Along with my students, I have explored this situation. We have in fact found that there exists not one memorial, statue, or even an historical marker in the nation's capital to commemorate this important historical figure or his impact on American history and government.

Statues of Thomas Paine have been erected elsewhere in America, we found, in places that he had frequented and lived. These include New Rochelle, NY; Bordentown, NJ; and Morristown, NJ. Paine is recognized with a bust at the New York University Pantheon of Heroes in the Bronx, NY, and with a life-sized statue at Washington Crossing Historic Park in Pennsylvania. Overseas, there is a statue to Paine in his birthplace in Thetford, England, where he could have been seen as a traitor for helping an important colony separate from the mother country; and in Paris, France, where he is regarded as a hero. Historical markers of numerous types have been placed at significant locations for Paine: his birthplace, the places where he worked in England, in Philadelphia where he published *Common Sense*, in New York City at the Thomas Paine Park, and others.

So we know that there is no trace of public memory devoted to Paine in Washington DC, as there are in other places. Our examination of this motivated us to explore Paine's time in the city and to attempt to find out more detail about this obscure period of American history, specifically in trying to locate where exactly Paine stayed when he was there.

¹ Thomas Del Vecchio, *Tom Paine: American* (New York: Whittier Books, 1956), 45.

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We then went further into the topic, to examine the historical record, especially as it relates to the treatment of Tom Paine and his place in American and world politics, in trying to explain this erasure of public memory in the nation's capital. It is so complete that it seems somehow more than by mere accident or overlook. In the following, I will present evidence, aided by the literature on public memory, to examine why Paine could have been erased so completely. The possible reasons why could also have an echo in our own contemporary culture wars, often bitter and seemingly unresolved, as Paine's impact and legacy have been complicated by factors of religion, politics and the nature of American society.

Paine's contributions

Most Americans know little about Thomas Paine other than his writing of *Common Sense* and perhaps other various pamphlets supporting the revolution. He occupies a fleeting and somewhat shadowy place in the pantheon of heroes of the revolution, a brilliant writer perhaps but a rabble rouser also. We honor him for his helping to instigate the revolution with stirring words ("these are the times that try men's souls ...") but worry that his talent was only of a moment when fiery rhetoric was needed. So little is known of his life or his later contributions to political thought that we are left with the feeling that he might not have succeeded at a non-revolutionary time when cooler heads were needed beyond the war, to win the peace and then establish a working government. And then there are these vague suggestions that he was a drunk, a bankrupt, an atheist and a failure at anything else in life other than pamphleteering. Altogether a rather shady character.

But the contributions of Thomas Paine to America and indeed the greater humanity go far beyond political pamphlets on the revolution and *Common Sense*, as significant as that was, and he was far from a shady character in person. His story is one of meteoric rise to prominence and genuinely long-lasting impact on the political developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then an equally precipitous fall from grace that started in his later life and has extended through history even to this day. While he enjoyed his brandy, there is no evidence that he drank to excess. While he could have made a fortune with his writings, he gave much of it away, especially to the cause of the American Revolution. He died in obscurity but apparently not poverty, with an estate that included property. He was emphatically not an atheist but a deist, as we shall see when we encounter his seminal work *The Age of Reason*. He was also a man of great personal courage mixed with a generous amount of "political incorrectness" in his personal and professional dealings. He did not suffer fools gladly, and made his views known with often little regard for the consequences. And the consequences, as we shall see, were great indeed to his larger reputation.

Let us look at what those contributions were.

With *Common Sense*, published in early 1776, Paine instantly became the best-selling author of eighteenth century America. With his later works, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, he became one of the best-selling authors of the nineteenth century on the continent as well. More than this, however, with these works he solidified his place as a deep and systematic thinker of the first order.

Common Sense was a short book, but longer and more substantial than what we may conceive of as a simple pamphlet, and sold more than 100,000 copies within a few weeks of its publication. In a total population of three million colonists in America, the printed run of the pamphlet would eventually be the equivalent of selling approximately 30 million copies today. It was written in the early days of the war, when the rush of anger over Lexington and Concord had faded and the reality had set in that the weak and unorganized colonies might be attempting to take on in serious warfare the greatest military power on earth. Public opinion was by no means on the side of the rebels, and to argue for rebellion was to take a great personal risk. One could have been arrested for treason. In *Common Sense*, Paine argued with direct and straightforward prose that was easily accessible to the common man, putting the rebellion in simple terms. It was not so much a rebellion against taxation, he wrote, as it was an attempt to achieve the all-important goal of self-government: "The cause of America is, in great measure, the cause of all mankind."

It was, in Craig Nelson's words, "America's first self-help book"² for its guide to government without the need for a monarch. And who better than someone from the mother country to tell the Americans that they really had no need for the services of a king or, as Paine called him, the "Royal Brute of Britain"? As it said in the subtitle, the pamphlet was from the perspective of "an Englishman", and Paine wrote with devastating wit and logic to take apart the monarchy of his own country, pointing the way to government of the people. "Should an independency be brought about ... we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again."³

The pamphlet was an immediate success. It galvanized a quarrelsome people, dispirited by early reversals in the war and uncertain about the proper course of action for the future. Nothing could more clearly convey this than to take a quick survey of opinion before its publication. In November, 1775, two months before *Common Sense*:

- Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to a friend: "There is not in the British Empire a man more cordially loves a union with Great Britain than I do." Six months later he would pen the radical Declaration of Independence.
- George Washington toasted King George III at dinners.
- Joseph Warren, a Boston radical who was killed at Bunker Hill later in 1776, wrote, "An independence from Great Britain is not our aim. No, our wish is, that Britain and the colonies may, like oak and ivy, grow and increase in strength together."⁴

What had moved each to the momentous decision to separate from England and commit to a war for independence, to risk their lives and, in the case of Warren, to give his later at

2 Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution and the Birth of Modern Nations* (New York: Viking, 2006), 84

3 Thomas Paine. *Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1955), 52.

4 Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 16.

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Bunker Hill? There may have been many reasons for each individual, but in no small part it was a reading of *Common Sense*. Across the colonies, Americans by the thousands learned from their reading of it and made their own choices, many frightened by his words and not in support of independence; many others the opposite. As Washington said to his secretary Colonel Joseph Reed, the book was "working a powerful change there in the minds of men".⁵

With *Common Sense* and the later *American Crisis* series of essays, Paine became the first to propose American independence in writing, an accomplishment that is still undervalued for its impact on the course of the revolution or for its implications for his own personal safety when it became known who the author of such a treasonous work was. To Paine also goes the honor of the first published use of the name "United States of America", which he coined in *American Crisis II* when he suggested the Federal Union of States.⁶ Joel Barlow later summarized Paine's significance for the cause: "Washington's sword would have been wielded in vain had it not been supported by the pen of Paine."

It may be enough for one man to name a country, lay out its founding principles and helpfully urge a people toward revolution and self-government, but Paine went further. One might say he was a true child of the Enlightenment for his remarkable commitment to freedom for all people, regardless of race, gender or social status.

He was among the first in America to propose in print the abolition of slavery. His essay, "African Slavery in America," was written in 1774 and published on March 8, 1775 when it appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, well in advance of the organized mass abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century.

In his writings, he pointed out the reality of human brotherhood, advocated justice for women and proposed the education of children of the poor at public expense. His pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* is recognized by none other an authority than the Social Security Administration as the first published advocacy of old age pension. In international affairs, he proposed arbitration and international peace and could be said to be one of the first to suggest a great republic of all nations of the world, the forerunner of the United Nations.⁷ He was one of the first to urge the purchase of the great Louisiana Territory. He suggested protection for animals in an age in which cruelty to animals was legendary.

[This abridgment omits the next section, **Paine's Life**]

⁵ Kaye, *Thomas Paine*, 17.

⁶ Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 112.

⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 122.

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