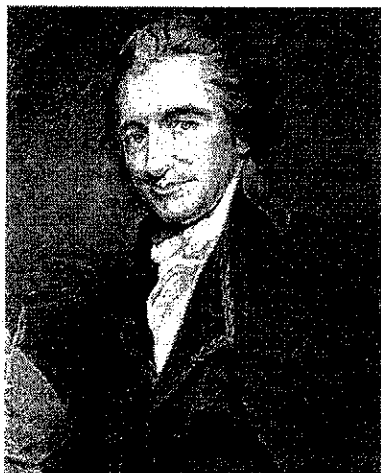


Erasure of Public Memory: The Strange Case of Tom Paine in Washington DC

by Richard Robyn

This article is the second in a series of three. The first instalment was in volume 17, number 3, Fall 2016. The series is an abridgment of Professor Robyn's paper presented in 2012 at the Iona College Symposium on Thomas Paine. One section, titled Paine's Life in the original, is omitted by the Bulletin. We continue here with the next section.



Paine's return to America and visit to the new capital

Plainly looking for an opportunity to return to America, Paine wrote to his old Revolutionary War comrade-in-arms Thomas Jefferson, then newly elected President of the United States and taking up residence in the President's House in the new capital of the republic. Jefferson

replied with an invitation to return to the country Paine helped to found.

When Paine had left America in 1787 following the revolution, he was famous, successful and revered as one of the key Founding Fathers of the new Republic. When he returned less than twenty years later, however, he was a much older man, crippled by his time in prison, and facing a very different public.

In fact, he returned to a hornet's nest of partisan political sniping. The America of 1802 was in the early stages of the Second Great Awakening of religious fervor. It was also a time of great political partisanship that saw the first serious divisions into parties, the Federalists versus the Republicans, culminating in 1800 in one of the most contentious elections in American history, with Jefferson and the Republicans triumphing over Adams and the Federalists.

The Age of Reason gave enough excuse for the religiously devout to hate him. The Federalists also attacked him for his ideas of government, for his association with the French Revolution, and for his friendship with President Jefferson.

Also still fresh in the minds of the public was his *Letter to Washington*, published six years before his return. While in prison in Paris, Paine had pleaded for assistance from the then-US Ambassador Gouverneur Morris and had written to his old friend George Washington, then serving his first term as the first president of the United States. No help was forthcoming, for reasons that are still not completely clear. In his bitterness for what he saw as a betrayal of their friendship, he had turned on Washington. Following his release from prison, he composed an incendiary open letter to the then-president.

Thus the stage was set for a contentious visit to the nation's capital. Jefferson apparently was aware of this possibility even before Paine's arrival. Although presumably the President's House was large enough to accommodate a visitor, the president apparently decided against that and sent an aide to secure quarters in a nearby hotel. At least one historian⁸ records that hotel residents refused to remain if Paine stayed there and only

the intercession of the president's aide and the fact that Paine was to register under an assumed name assuaged their fears.

Paine visited the Federal City from November 1802 to February 1803. He stayed at "Lovell's Hotel," described by Craig Nelson as "the only hotel in the Federal City"⁹ at the time. During the three months he stayed in Washington, Paine was a guest of President Jefferson in the White House. He likely wanted a job in the administration¹⁰ but Jefferson thought he was a bit too controversial in his opinions and held him off. Eventually Paine left and went to New York, where he died a few years later, in 1809.

However brief Paine's stay in Washington DC, the experience formed a critical part of his later life. It also reveals much about the young America and its warring factions and the kind of culture wars that resonate even to this day. Paine's visit formed what Jefferson historian Dumas Malone called the "first cause célèbre of Jefferson's administration."¹¹ It was not made easier by Paine's inability to stay out of political debates of the day. Far from being a silent witness to national political events, in his brief stay in Washington Paine jumped in with enthusiasm, perhaps a bit too much for the tricky times in which he had landed. He wrote a series of open letters that were published in the *National Intelligencer*, the leading newspaper of the new capital, that excoriated the Federalists in general and Adams in particular. In return, the Federalist press lambasted him and Jefferson. As one wrote in a Federalist newspaper about Paine coming to Washington, "he dines at the public table and, as a show, is as profitable to Lovell as an Ourang Outang, for many strangers who come to the city feel a curiosity to see the creature."¹²

Where did Paine stay?

With my students, I have attempted to pin down precisely where Thomas Paine stayed when he was in Washington. Where was "Lovell's Hotel"?

Lovell's has long disappeared into obscurity. William Lovell was apparently part of a small but hearty group of entrepreneurs, from shopkeepers to hoteliers, who braved the tough conditions of the early days of the new capital and attempted to make a go of their enterprises. While plans for a growing capital were big, and plainly there would be needs of newly arriving members of

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Footnote numbers continue following from the numbers in Part 1

8 John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 467.

9 Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 306.

10 *Ibid.*, 307.

11 Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term 1801-1805* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1970), 194.

12 David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 360.

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the government and their families and staffs, conditions for businesses were rough. According to one of the leading eighteenth century historians of the early days of the city, Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan, it was much more frequent to see failed enterprises on the auction block for sale than for them to make a thriving business that would last for many years.

Early hotels often grew out of taverns and boarding houses (also called "ordinaries"). Bryan's survey¹³ of the hotels in Washington around the time of Paine's arrival confirms that Lovell's was one of the earliest. But it was by no means the first hotel in Washington D.C. It might have been among the first and at that time the only hotel in the area of the President's House, but it was not the only one in the entire city. At that time, two virtually separate hamlets were growing up in the city, one in the area of the chief executive's residence and the other near the newly built Capitol building.¹⁴

Old copies of the *National Intelligencer* in the Library of Congress give some clues as to where Lovell's might have been located. An ad that first appeared in the November 3, 1802, issue of the *National Intelligencer* and submitted by one William Lovell announced that a "Union Tavern and Washington Hotel" had just opened. The hotel was described as on Pennsylvania Avenue, "first home east of the President's and one mile from the Capitol." Lovell adds reassuringly that the avenue has "pavement all the way."¹⁵

Bryan's history of the early capital confirms this and provides some detail:

*The erection of a building that came into use as a rival tavern to the Little Hotel on F Street, was begun by William Lovell in June, 1800, in the square to the south. It was located on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue between 14th and 15th streets, and adjoining the alley on the west. The place was known as the Union Tavern and Washington Hotel, and also as Lovell's Tavern.*¹⁵

... Farther west on [Pennsylvania] avenue at Nos. 1417-1423 was the two-story and attic hotel of William Lovell.¹⁶

This block of the city, between 14th and 15th Streets and noted on early maps as "Square 225," is now the location of two present-day hotels, The Hotel W (formerly the Hotel Washington) and The Willard Hotel. As my students and I discovered by walking the block, however, the present-day numbering system doesn't correspond exactly to the numbers that Bryan pointed out existed at the time, and there is no "alley" that bisects the block. Where were numbers 1417-1423 Pennsylvania Avenue?

Unfortunately, the histories of both the contemporary hotels, as detailed as they are, especially in the case of The Willard with an illustrated history¹⁷ and its informative exhibition in its rear lobby area, only go back as far as the early days of the modern hotels in the middle of the nineteenth century. They couldn't help us to locate the tavern-hotel that existed there in 1802.

Perhaps maps would help. As we discovered by visiting the excellent resources of the Library of Congress Map Division, the earliest maps of Washington DC were surveyors' tracts that blocked out the streets, broad avenues and public buildings of the city as it was being formed. In fact, as Geography and Map Reference Specialist Ed Redmond related (2007 email correspondence and later discussion), the record shows that private buildings such as hotels and homes did not appear on

maps of Washington until mid-nineteenth century, too late for the brief career of William Lovell and his hotel and tavern.

However, a further searching through the maps in the collection revealed one that has proved useful: Artemus Harmon's (1931) "Historical Map of the City of Washington, View of the City and Location of the Houses in the Year 1801-02." This map, apparently drawn up many years later from descriptions of residents of the time, is large and indicates private buildings as well as public ones. It also shows one building in the middle of the Pennsylvania Avenue side of block 225, precisely the possible location of Lovell's.

From the research we conducted during the spring semester of 2008 on our Paine Project, therefore, we could confidently say that the old Lovell's Hotel in which Thomas Paine resided during his stay in Washington DC was on the present-day property of The Willard, specifically the premises of the Occidental Restaurant.

My students helped in general in some of the research, although mostly contributing helpful suggestions in discussions over the general direction of the "Paine Project," as we came to label it. One student, however, eagerly took on more research footwork, especially as I felt we needed to confirm ownership of the Lovell's Hotel. This student, Steven Scerbovski, made several forays into the musty records of deed ownership at the National Archives and the DC Recorder of Deeds. At first nearly discouraged by the state of the records, which are indeed musty and with rather misleading bibliographic records and indexing, Steven stuck with the work in true historian fashion. He confirmed that William Lovell did indeed purchase the property for the hotel and that it was indeed deeded on May 21, 1800, although this is a full year before Bryan fixes it. In addition, an interesting side note is that Lovell purchased it from James Hoban, the architect of the White House, among other iconic buildings in Washington. Another interesting outcome of this research is finding that the property was in fact rented from Hoban and not bought outright.

It was here in November of 1802 that one of the signal figures of the Age of Enlightenment and a prime motivating force behind the American Revolution, Thomas Paine, rode in a carriage from his landing point in Baltimore. It was here he stayed for three months, and made his forays into the rough world of early Washington, DC.

One can imagine that it was rough going physically for the unfinished streets and rude furnishings of a capital city in the making, at that point little more than a frontier town being carved out of the Maryland and Virginia tidewater country. Paine must have picked over muddy and rutted streets as he walked to the President's House for his meetings and dinners with his old friend Thomas Jefferson.

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13 Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan, "Hotels of Washington Prior to 1814" (*Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 7, 1904), 82-88.

14 Keane, *Tom Paine*, 467.

15 Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan, *A History of the National Capital from its Foundation Through the Period of the Adoption of the Organic Act* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914-16), 344.

16 *Ibid.*, 517.

17 Richard Wallace Carr and Marie Pinak Carr, *The Willard Hotel: An Illustrated History* (Washington, DC: Dicmar Publishing, 2005).

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But it was also a rough world for the political infighting that was then a part of the Washington scene. Politics on the grand national scale visited itself onto the small world of the frontier capital. Almost certainly as a result of this, other than his visits to the President's House or to the *National Intelligencer*, Paine apparently ventured out infrequently. He was seldom a part of the budding social scene of Washington.

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CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE *BULLETIN*, PART 3: *Public Memory and Amnesia and Thomas Paine*
