



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

by Richard Robyn

This article is the third in a series of three. The first and second installments were in volume 17, numbers 3 and 4. The text is slightly abridged from Professor Robyn's paper presented in 2012 at the Iona College Thomas Paine Symposium.

## Public memory

How is it possible that an historical figure of such importance to a country would be so shamelessly forgotten in its capital city? Even in a city in which he himself visited on a long-forgotten time in its earliest days? What can explain this level of erasure of public memory?

Lively sub-literatures have grown up in at least the fields of political science and history to examine "public memory", or how societies construct their pasts. Unlike the private memory we all have, or what we recall from our own individual past, public memory is "what a society remembers collectively or, after most private memories have faded or disappeared, the way it constructs the past from many sources."<sup>18</sup>

Hobsbawm and Ranger<sup>19</sup> have, among many others in these fields (see for example Bodner<sup>20</sup>, Kammen<sup>21, 22</sup>, and Young<sup>23</sup>), shown that the process of "invention of tradition" is a conscious process by which elites and popular movements create a politically usable history.

The process of public remembering involves the active construction of memorials, whether in the form of commemorative markers, statues or the like. In this way we as a society recall the most important parts of our past that is rapidly and inexorably slipping away. How does an entire society recall its past? As Young writes, "Public memory flows from private memory as well as from the official memory promoted by those we might call the 'keepers of the past'."<sup>24</sup> Important "keepers of the past" can be historians or political scientists; more often than not for public memorializing, however, they may be simply those that can marshal the funds necessary for expensive statues or pave the way for bureaucracies to approve the erection of markers: politicians, government officials, or other elites of civic society.

All human interaction is complex, and active remembering of any one event or historical figure necessarily involves the forgetting of certain other events or people that may not fit a preferred historical narrative. Young<sup>25</sup> writes about the Boston Tea Party and how at various times in American history the recalling of this historical event has been more or less active

and has been marked by certain preferred ways of thinking about such an unusual event that could be seen as either an important, thoughtful act of political rebellion or a radical and illegal prank.

*Loewen also notes this periodicity of commemoration, that markers are rarely of one time and place but are themselves affected by changing time and perspectives: Every historical site tells two different stories about two different eras in the past. One is the manifest narrative – the event or person heralded in its text or artwork. The other is the story of its erection or preservation. The images on our monuments and the language on our markers reflect the attitude and ideas of the time when Americans put them up, often many years after the event. Americans have typically adjusted the visible past on the landscape to make what we remember conform to the needs of the time.<sup>26</sup>*

Michael Kammen<sup>27</sup> has similarly been concerned with how "tradition" and its opposite, amnesia, have been a part of the reconstruction or invention of the American past. His focus is on the motivations of the keepers of the past to construct historical narratives, and finds that it is often a quarrel between traditionalists and modernists, or the "party of memory and the party of hope", frequently embodied at a particular time of recalling in which elites and populists struggled over preserving a memory.

Because this construction can be costly in terms of money, time, or energy, those that construct do so out of a certain interest that motivates them. At times this motivation may be at odds with the historical record. As Loewen writes, following an extensive examination of the public memorials of America and their inaccuracies, "some elements in our society have a vested interest in retaining and retelling certain falsehoods about our past ..."<sup>28</sup> This process of public amnesia could easily apply to Paine: "... courageous souls who challenged the United States to live out the meaning of its principles lie forgotten or even reviled,"<sup>29</sup> as Paine seems to be now in the nation's capital.

Why even be concerned about this at all? What effect does memorializing have on the public? Loewen<sup>30</sup> answers that it is

Continued on page 4, *Public Memory and Paine*

## Footnote numbers follow in sequence after the numbers in Part 2

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Fabian Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1999), 88.

<sup>19</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Michael G. Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Young, *Shoemaker*, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> James Loewen, *Lies Across America* (New York: New Press, 1999), 36.

<sup>27</sup> Kammen, *Mystic*.

<sup>28</sup> Loewen, *Lies*, 452.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-27.

important for several reasons: for the important role that history plays in human culture; because memorializing can make us feel good about our ancestors, our historical figures and therefore ourselves (and that elites, who more often have the means to erect monuments, might feel good about their positions of power and wealth, which is why most markers are erected, or others left out); and to help hold societies together, providing a shared community of values. "In conclusion," he writes,<sup>31</sup> "what a community erects on its historical landscape not only sums up its view of the past but also influences its possible futures."

### Amnesia and Thomas Paine

Even a cursory reading of the historical record in the case of Thomas Paine convincingly demonstrates that his reputation has undergone a dramatic change over time. Yet, while he has been vilified by some – including critics as powerful as presidents such as John Adams and Theodore Roosevelt – and forgotten by most, the trajectory has not always been in the negative. As Harvey Kaye<sup>32</sup> has shown, at different times in America's history and for those that represent different political viewpoints – from conservative to liberal – Paine has been taken as a hero. For some on the left, Paine represents a forceful advocate for self-government as the means to empower the poor, the disenfranchised, minorities and women; for conservatives and libertarians, his allegiance to individual liberties is inspiring. His fearless fight on behalf of the American colonies and their cause for independence unites most factions of American political thought. His patriotism is unquestioned.

*Has there been no attempt to memorialize Thomas Paine in the nation's capital? As we discovered in our research, there has in fact been at least one major attempt, and in the not so distant past: In 1991, a bill was introduced in Congress to authorize the Thomas Paine National Historical Association U.S.A. Memorial Foundation to construct a memorial to Thomas Paine in the District of Columbia. This bill became Public Law 102-407 in 1992 and was followed by another act of Congress in 1994 approving an Area I [on or near the National Mall] location for a Memorial to Thomas Paine, in accordance with the Commemorative Works Act (the National WWII Memorial was also included in this act).<sup>33</sup>*

Neither a site nor a design was ever selected for the memorial and the authorization expired, after one 1999 reauthorization, in 2003. Congress had provided no funds for the establishment of the memorial and apparently the effort to raise the money needed was too great, and public support for the building of more memorials on the Mall too little, especially as the momentum to construct the World War II Memorial gained ground around that same time.<sup>34</sup>

A key, however, to the original passage of this bill was that it had truly bipartisan support, from the liberal Ted Kennedy to the conservative Jesse Helms,<sup>35</sup> illustrating the potential reach of Tom Paine. Does the failure of this attempt, added to the fact that no

other memorial to Paine has ever been erected, show that his reputation has effectively been damaged in America's culture wars? Is Thomas Paine just too "hot" to handle? One would hope not.

While he may have been too much a radical and free-thinker for some in the past, it seems that a resurgence of interest and appreciation of Paine is occurring now. We may be in a period of greater appreciation of his impact and importance in our history. A few of the biographies that have been quoted from here are an indication of that tide.

Writing of the need to revisit history in our public memorials, Loewen observes, "Altering the landscape ... involves expanding our public history by telling about the past from ... 'new' perspectives. In the process, new markers and monuments will establish new stories and extol heroes – factually based, with feet of clay when appropriate, but role models nonetheless: 'American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it,' wrote James Baldwin."<sup>36</sup> Pierre L'Enfant, the architect of Washington, DC, hoped that the squares of the city of the nation's capital would have memorials and statues that "perpetuate not only the memory of such individuals whose counsels or military achievements were conspicuous in giving liberty and independence to this country, but also those whose usefulness hath rendered them worthy of general imitation, to invite the youth of succeeding generations to tread in the paths of those sages or heroes whom their country has thought proper to celebrate."<sup>37</sup> Thomas Paine would seem to fit the public memorializing that L'Enfant envisioned.

As I tell my students, whenever you think of the United States of America or hear the chant "USA., USA", think of Tom Paine, for he is the one who coined the term. Whenever you consider the country and its independence and the origins of self-government in the modern world, think of the contributions that Thomas Paine made.

And whenever you visit the nation's capital, and marvel at its monuments, consider that this most important of persons to its existence is not mentioned anywhere. Across the landscape of Washington, DC, not a mention, completely erased from our public memory.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Frederick Lindstrom, Assistant Secretary, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, email message to author, June 4, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> McCartin, Brian. Past director, Thomas Paine National Historical Association Museum. Personal phone interview. June 2, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Kaye, *Thomas Paine*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Loewen, *Lies*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> J.J. Jusserand, *With Americans of Past and Present Days* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 173.

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