



WHY DO WE REMEMBER JOSEPH LEWIS? BECAUSE HE REMEMBERED THOMAS PAINE!

by Martha Spiegelman

---How did statues of Thomas Paine come to be raised in Thetford, England; Morristown, New Jersey; Parc Montsouris, in Paris? Because Joseph Lewis, the renowned Freethinker of the mid-twentieth century, campaigned for these memorials and raised and donated funds for their creation.

---How was it accomplished that a U.S. postage stamp commemorating Paine was issued in 1968? Because Lewis lobbied with determination for it, starting in 1928.

---Why do many Paine advocates contend that he was the true author of the *Declaration of Independence*? Because in his book, *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence* (1947), Lewis put forward persuasive reasoning and explanations in support of Paine's authorship of the founding document.

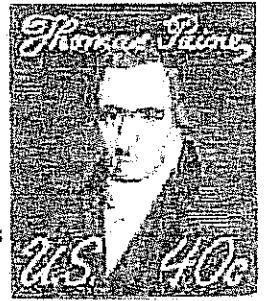
Joseph L. Lewis, son of a merchant, was born in 1889 in Alabama. He had little formal schooling and went to work at a young age. His avid life-long reading, nevertheless, brought him to Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899), "the Great Agnostic," and, in turn, to Thomas Paine. Ingersoll, in the latter part of the 19th century, played his role in keeping Paine before the American public, just as Lewis would do the same in the mid-20th century. The Great Agnostic was a Freethinker and Lewis became one too, but went on to be a "public atheist."

By 1920, Lewis, now in New York City, joined the newly founded Freethinkers Society for which, later as Freethinkers of America, he became its president and moving force all the rest of his life. He started a publishing company, Freethought Press Association, which received many contributions from prominent authors and was a great success in sales. It brought him sufficient wealth so that he and his wife could maintain three residences: in New York City, the town of Purdy in Westchester County, and Miami Beach. Most important, he used his wealth in many freethought and egalitarian causes, as outlined here.

His newsletter, *Freethinkers of America*, started in 1928, underwent name changes to *Freethinker*, and then to *Age of Reason*, a homage to Paine. As with his book publishing, the newsletter attracted many well-regarded writers (including Dr. David Rickards, see page 5). Lewis brought a number of legal suits to try to re-establish separation of religion and state in America as constitutionalists expected. He was mostly unsuccessful with the suits but his efforts kept the question in the minds of people generally as well as giving encouragement to freethinkers, nontheists and humanists. Lewis also provided the impetus and funds for restoration of the Ingersoll Birthplace Museum in Dresden NY, operated by the Center for Inquiry.

Lewis' dedicated atheism was often on view. At the ceremony for the Thomas Paine postage stamp in January 1968, in Philadelphia, Lewis asked that the prayer be omitted. "If Thomas Paine were alive, he certainly would oppose the injection of religion in his behalf." His request was ignored and he left the room even though the stamp was his very own achievement. He had originally been designated as master of ceremonies, an honor that was withdrawn days before the ceremony, probably because of his atheism.

Some may have called him irascible for his tenacious and lengthy argumentation and firm stands on principle. But many



were attracted to his heartiness and justness and generosity, and they were well-rewarded by his friendship. His own stated position was quoted in the *New York Times* obituary:¹ "An atheist cannot be mentioned in the same breath with that impulse and that conviction which produces religious mania, religious strife, religious hatred, religious prejudice. Religious love is clannish: Christian loves Christian and Jew loves Jew. Atheists love everybody, they are lovers of mankind."

Only a few months after the issuance of the Paine postage stamp, Joseph Lewis died of a heart attack, in 1968. In the *Times* obituary,¹ an associate is quoted saying that Mr. Lewis was "a jolly, good-natured, pleasant man, very energetic despite his age." One appreciation of him is by Carl Shapiro.² "No one in this century has done more research, written more essays, commentaries, articles, books, letters to newspapers, delivered more speeches, raised more money for the erection of statues, and dedicated almost 50 years in promoting the greatness of Thomas Paine than the late Secretary and Founder of the Thomas Paine Foundation, Joseph Lewis."

Anecdotes: ~ At the unveiling of a bronze marker at Paine's gravesite in New Rochelle NY, Lewis remarked,² "While it is true that Thomas Paine needs no monument, it is only too true that the American people, and the peoples of the world, do need a monument to Thomas Paine."

~ At the Paris dedication of the Paine statue, Lewis said,² "This statue is to be both a symbol and a beacon, a symbol of the eternal principles of justice and humanity for which Thomas Paine was so preeminently a representative, and a beacon to guide mankind in the solution of the problems that menace his peace and his happiness...and that the name of Thomas Paine will forever be synonymous with liberty, equality, fraternity!"

Books: Lewis wrote 20 books. Besides *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence*, he wrote about other Freethinkers: Lincoln, Jefferson, Franklin, Luther Burbank, Voltaire, Ingersoll. He wrote also on freethought, atheism, humanism, public education. His book *An Atheist Manifesto* (1954) countered the then popular notion that atheism was un-American and a Communist tool.

¹ *New York Times*, November 5, 1968

² Quotes came from www.freethoughtbooks.com. With Carl Shapiro's death seven years ago, the website and *Independent Publications* came to an end.

