There was some pleasantness to Thomas Paine’s life in New Rochelle, as he took up residence there in the years between 1803 and 1807. Local people have left accounts of him as a cheerful neighbor who enjoyed seeing children. Undoubtedly, however, the years were also marked by at least two disturbing episodes: a shooting directed at the window of Paine’s cottage while he occupied it and his disenfranchisement at the polls. Both events are documented in all of Paine’s major biographies, but do we have a proper grasp of when they occurred?

Thomas Paine’s biographers usually state that it was on Christmas Eve 1804 when one Christopher Derrick fired into the cottage, but newspaper accounts of the event appear a full year later. Under a small headline, “Assassination,” the New-York Commercial Advertiser reports on January 31, 1806, “An attempt has been made to assassinate Thomas Paine.” Placing the event at “last Christmas evening,” it otherwise follows with a non-sensational account of the incident but fails to note that the assailant was a drunken, disgruntled ex-tenant rather than an ideological foe. The Federalist-leaning paper concludes the short article, “However mischievous have been the writings and conduct of Thomas Paine, every honest man will join in excoriating this diabolical transaction.” The same item is repeated the following day in another city paper, the Mercantile Advertiser, although without the condemnatory final sentence.

Why the discrepancy in the dates? It is likely that such disparate biographers as James Cheetham and Moncure D. Conway were misled by their reliance on Paine’s own letter describing the event. In a letter to William Carver bearing the date January 16, 1805, Paine explains, “What you heard of a gun being fired into the room is true—Robert and Rachel were both gone out to keep Christmas Eve and about eight o’clock at night the gun were [sic] fired.” (Rachel Gidney was Paine’s cook; the newspaper suggests that Robert was also a servant, although it is unlikely that Paine felt he could afford regularly to employ a second servant). Paine relates that with his help, Derrick was arrested and is now on bail with his trial to occur “in May next.” How to explain this peculiar chronology? It seems that Paine was merely doing what most of us do when writing checks and letters early in the calendar year: out of habit, we write in the old year. His letter must actually have been written early in 1806.

Most of Paine’s biographers follow through with his chronological error, although Margaret Bonneville, in a manuscript account of Paine’s life published by Conway, does appear to place the event in its proper late-1805 context—she recalls the shooting as occurring at about six, rather than eight, in the evening. Conway finds a record of Derrick’s court appearance in White Plains on May 19, 1806, as originally scheduled—not a year and a half later—but assumes Paine did not press the charge. By relying on newspaper accounts that went as far as London and Paris, Alfred Owen Aldridge, in his 1959 biography, Man of Reason, also sets the shooting in its correct time frame, but later biographers have not followed his lead.

Paine and Madame Bonneville are clear that his humiliation at the polls occurred in 1806; in his letter to James Madison, Paine identifies it as the election for members of Congress and state assemblies. Modern biographers then assume Paine made the trek up to New Rochelle to cast his ballot just as he was settling into his residence (with artist John Wesley Jarvis) in New York City in November 1806. But newspapers do not record any such election in the fall of 1806. Indeed, elections for statewide office in New York State were held, not in November, but on the last Tuesday in April, a practice followed from the Revolution until the adoption of a new state constitution in 1821. Accordingly, one finds through the newspapers that this particular election began on April 29, 1806 with polling taking place over three days. Paine, who had written a letter dated April 23, 1806 from New Rochelle, therefore had gone just a short distance to the polls where he was so shockingly rebuffed.

We might pause to remember that these two distressing events that beset the aging Paine occurred but five months apart (late December 1805 to late April 1806) and were not separated by nearly two years (December 1804 and November 1806) as in the traditional chronology.

Thomas Paine did determine to contest his disenfranchisement and prove his citizenship. He addressed letters from New York City to James Madison, Vice-President (and former New York governor) George Clinton, and Joel Barlow seeking affidavits and documents, particularly regarding the circumstances of his imprisonment in France during the Reign of Terror. The requests came in a flurry in early May 1807, a full year after the election where he had been turned away. Those of us all too familiar with modern courts could attribute it to the usual legal delays, but it may be that Paine procrastinated while he endured a particularly difficult year, suffering a stroke, quarreling with the aforementioned sometime friend and landlord, William Carver, and struggling through the minefield of New York politics where he publicly withdrew his support from the vituperative newspaper editor, James Cheetham. The excitement of the hard-fought gubernatorial election of April 1807 may have drawn Paine back in with the realization that he could not cast a ballot in this particularly close election. The heated campaign touched on international matters as Federalists and Republicans fought over the role of Irish refugees and émigrés in American politics, an issue most dear to Thomas Paine.

Madame Bonneville tells us that Paine lost his case to be restored to the voter rolls, but the lack of legal documentation makes it appear more likely that the case was dismissed or withdrawn before being fully adjudicated. For Paine, it was also time to take emotional leave of New Rochelle, as Madame Bonneville recounts, “He remained at New Rochelle till June 1807; till disgust of every kind, occasioned by the gross and brutal conduct of some of the people there, made him resolve to go and live at New York.” She does not detail such gross conduct, and since she wrote at length about the shooting and the disenfranchisement, there must have been some additional unpleasant events now lost to history. We do know that the City of New Rochelle ultimately would do its part to rectify the wrong, posthumously in 1945, fully asserting Paine’s citizenship and right to vote.