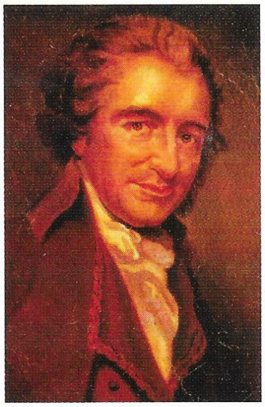
Revolution with PEN & INK

When Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* in 1776, he put into words what large numbers of patriots had been thinking—that America should declare its independence from Britain by whatever means possible.

by William C. Kashatus

By Christmas Eve 1776, the morale of the American troops had reached a low point. The British had forced General George Washington and his Continental Army to retreat from Brunswick to Trenton, New Jersey, and onto the western banks of the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. The British had set up camp on the river's east side. Once the Delaware froze hard enough for British forces to cross, Philadelphia itself would be within their grasp. If the British captured the patriot capital, all of Pennsylvania, the keystone of the American states, would be vulnerable.


THE GRANGER COLLECTION

Right: Thomas Paine, portrayed here by Auguste Millière, became an important molder of public opinion before and during the War of Independence. Left: Among the treasures displayed at the Thomas Paine Museum in New Rochelle, New York, are original editions of Common Sense *and* Rights of Man, *two of Paine's most influential works.*

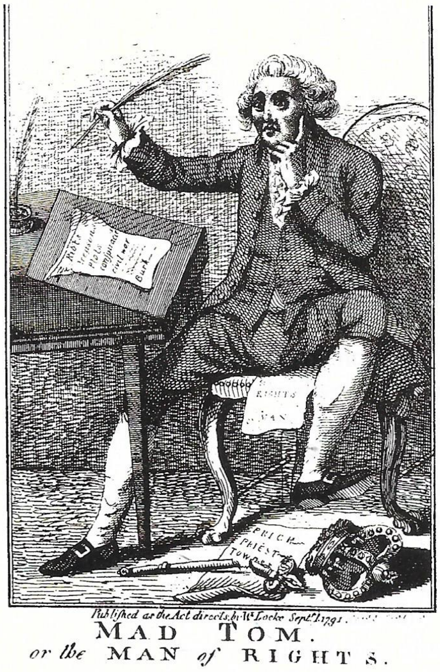
The American troops huddled around their campfires late in the afternoon of December 24. Dressed in shabby clothing and many with bandaged feet, they resembled little more than a ragtag band of backwoods fighters and forlorn militiamen. With the soldiers' spirits low and public support for American independence wavering, Washington feared for the Revolutionary cause. He resolved to make a stand, realizing that the clash would be a watershed in the colonial struggle for independence.

At nightfall, Washington ordered his officers to assemble the demoralized, poorly equipped, and greatly outnumbered troops and read to them Thomas Paine's *The American Crisis*. "These are the times that try men's souls," began the tract. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." Emboldened by Paine's words, Washington's men ferried across the ice-choked

Delaware through a storm of hail and sleet on Christmas night and the following day they routed the Hessian mercenaries occupying Trenton. Paine's writing had, once again, proved inspirational to the American cause.

THOMAS PAINE REMAINS one of the most fascinating and enigmatic of all Revolutionary patriots. Born in Thetford, England, Paine lost his job as a poorly paid exciseman after trying to obtain better working conditions for his fellow workers. He left England and arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774 at the age of 37, carrying letters of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, whom he had met in London.

After the death of his first wife and an unhappy second marriage, Paine cared little about his appearance. His large, pendulous nose was the most striking characteristic of his ruddy face, which appeared hardened from years of drinking. Yet this unprepossessing individual would help instigate a great political revolution in America. A staunch idealist, Paine possessed a special gift for the inflammatory, using prose as his weapon. Historians have credited his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* with mobilizing popular support for the American cause. The pamphlet went through 25 editions and reached hundreds of thousands of readers in 1776 alone, making "innumerable converts" to independence. Similarly, his series of *American Crisis* essays restored the morale of the beleaguered Continental Army and the spirit of independence among a wavering American public at an important juncture in the Revolutionary War.



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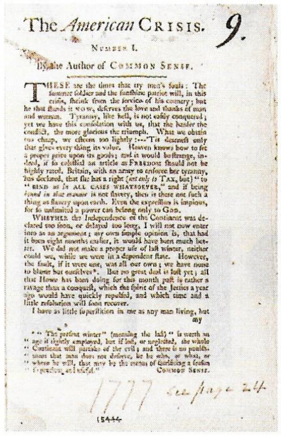

The *American* CRISIS. 9.

NUMBER I.

By the Author of COMMON SENSE.

THESE are the times that try men's ſouls: The ſummer ſoldier and the ſunſhine patriot will, in this criſis, ſhrink from the ſervice of his country; but he that ſtands it NOW, deſerves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not eaſily conquered; yet we have this conſolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we eſteem too lightly:—'Tis dearneſs only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to ſet a proper price upon its goods; and it would be ſtrange, indeed, if ſo celeſtial an article as FREEDOM ſhould not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared, that ſhe has a right (*not only to* TAX, but) "to "BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER," and if being *bound in that manner* is not ſlavery, then is there not ſuch a thing as ſlavery upon earth. Even the expreſſion is impious, for ſo unlimited a power can belong only to GOD.

WHETHER the Independence of the Continent was declared too ſoon, or delayed too long, I will not now enter into as an argument; my own ſimple opinion is, that had it been eight months earlier, it would have been much better. We did not make a proper uſe of laſt winter, neither could we, while we were in a dependent ſtate. However, the fault, if it were one, was all our own; we have none to blame but ourſelves*. But no great deal is loſt yet; all that Howe has been doing for this month paſt is rather a ravage than a conqueſt, which the ſpirit of the Jerſies a year ago would have quickly repulſed, and which time and a little reſolution will ſoon recover.

I have as little ſuperſtition in me as any man living, but

my

* "The preſent winter" (meaning the laſt) "is worth an "age if rightly employed, but if loſt, or neglected, the whole "Continent will partake of the evil; and there is no puniſhment that man does not deſerve, be he who, or what, or where he will, that may be the means of ſacrificing a ſeaſon ſo precious and uſeful." COMMON SENSE.

1777 See page 24

15444

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Above: A 1791 cartoon depicts Paine working on the Rights of Man, *in which he defended the early events of the French Revolution. Top: Paine published* The American Crisis *in December 1776, when the American cause had reached a low point. This title page is from the pamphlet's first edition.*

Paine's success rested with his unique ability to circulate among the highest and lowest orders of society. He worked hard to determine the political temper of the colonies, reading the newspapers of the day and frequenting the taverns and coffeehouses of Philadelphia, to buttonhole anyone with an opinion. At the same time, Paine could express the ideas of the political elites in language that the uneducated masses understood, having arrived at many of the same conclusions out of his own experience.

Yet Paine could also be temperamental, obnoxious in his challenge to authority, and difficult to like. Where others restrained themselves from speaking openly of independence from Great Britain, Paine celebrated the concept of "revolution" and urged the colonists to follow suit. He was a radical gadfly who dedicated his life to the one and only thing he held dear—defending the God-given liberty of every man. No wonder John Adams, Congress's strongest advocate of American independence, both respected and feared him, remarking that "without the pen of Paine the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain."

The North American colonies were ripe for revolution in the mid-1770s. After decades of loyalty to the Crown, the colonists' relationship with England was becoming strained. Saddled with a staggering £140 million debt from the Seven Years' War, Britain became financially dependent on the colonies and instituted a series of acts that used everything from tea to stamps to raise revenue. For the colonists, these acts, most of which restricted colonial trade, represented a sharp break with their long-held assumption that the British government would not interfere with the free pursuit of their economic interests. At the same time, Americans began to perceive Parliamentary policy as a systematic attack on their fundamental liberties as British subjects. The strongest resistance to these measures came from Massachusetts, where colonists boycotted British goods and destroyed tea in opposition to the new taxes.

On June 1, 1774, Parliament responded by closing the port of Boston until damages were paid. British lawmakers eliminated due process in colonial judiciary proceedings and gave the royal colonial governor the power to limit town meetings to as few as one a year. These so-called "Coercive Acts" were clearly designed to punish the Massachusetts colonists and intimidate any other colony that planned to resist imperial policy. Instead, the acts only served to unite the colonies in a common cause.

On September 5, 1774, delegates from 12 colonies convened in Philadelphia at the First Continental Congress. They declared the Coercive Acts void, urged Massachusetts to form an independent government, advised the people to arm themselves, and adopted economic sanctions against Britain. On October 14 the delegates passed their own *Declaration and Resolves*, which claimed for the colonial assemblies exclusive power of legislation subject only to royal veto. Their argument was, after all, against Parliament, not King George III. Nor did they seek to alienate themselves from British rule, but to effect a reconciliation of differences by asserting their rights as British subjects. At least that was the colonial objective until Thomas Paine redefined their struggle.

When Paine arrived in Philadelphia, he found employment as an editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. While the printer, Scotsman Robert Aitken, set the policies for the newspaper, ensuring that all articles would "avoid the suspicion of

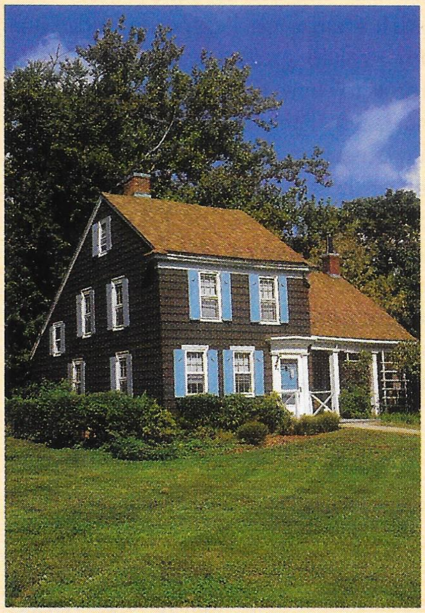
TIME TRAVELER

The Thomas Paine Cottage and Memorial Museum

It may be located in a tony section of New Rochelle, New York, but the Thomas Paine Cottage is, in its contrasting modesty, a reflection of the man who made it his home at the end of his life.

The cottage, preserved by the Huguenot and New Rochelle Historical Association, lies at the edge of what was once a 300-acre farm the New York state legislature presented to Paine in 1784 in recognition of his services to American independence. Paine spent many intervening years in France before settling on the farm in 1804. Nearly all of the original property has long since been usurped by developers, and the cottage itself was moved a short distance in 1908, but the modern world still ends at the door. A small reception room leads into what is called the "Paine Room," where the eminent thinker slept on a straw mattress on the floor. The room contains two chairs that Paine used when he boarded at Bayeau's Tavern across the street and a rare Franklin stove presented to Paine by its inventor. Perhaps the most startling object is the life-size wax figure of Paine. Eerily lifelike down to its ink-stained fingertips, it sits near the window through which a disgruntled handyman, in a dispute over a debt, once fired a bullet at the philosopher. The small rooms upstairs contain pieces from various eras, including a lock of Andrew Jackson's gray hair, a Star of Bethlehem quilt, the buttons from Boss Tweed's coat, and various relics associated with the city of New Rochelle, which was founded by Huguenot settlers.

When Paine died, neglected and ignored, on June 8, 1809, he was living in a boardinghouse on Fulton Street in New York City. He had moved to the city at the request of a friend, William Carver, who said he would take care of the depressed writer, but following a series of arguments Carver asked Paine to leave his home. After Paine's funeral on June 9, his body was transported to New Rochelle and interred on the farm he still considered home. As he wrote in his will, "I desire to be buried on my farm at New Rochelle. The place to be a square of twelve feet, to be enclosed with Rows of Trees, and a Stone or Post and rail fence, with a headstone with my name and age engraved upon it, Author of 'Common Sense'." Strangely, his remains were not allowed to rest. A British pamphleteer and reformer named William Cobbett, feeling that Paine was unappreciated in the United States, purloined the remains in 1819. Although he intended to give the bones a proper monument in England, he somehow lost them in shipping. Consequently, although visitors may view the site of Paine's grave, it is with the melancholy knowledge that all that was mortal of Paine himself has vanished (or has it?—see page 58).



NEW YORK STATE GAVE PAINE THIS COTTAGE IN NEW ROCHELLE IN RECOGNITION OF HIS SERVICES TO THE NATION.

LEE SNIDER/PHOTO IMAGES; COURTESY OF HUGUENOT & NEW ROCHELLE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

A five-minute stroll up North Avenue brings the visitor to the Thomas Paine Memorial Museum, a handsome classical building. Paine enthusiast Thomas Edison turned over the first spadeful of earth in its construction in 1925. The museum, administered by the Thomas Paine Historical Association, displays Paine memorabilia and serves as a meeting place for the association, which was founded in 1884 and bestows the Thomas Paine Journalism Award every year. New York City newspaperman Jimmy Breslin received it in 1999; other winners have included Mike Wallace, Garry Trudeau, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Robin MacNeil, and Fred Friendly.

The museum's library contains many first editions of Paine's writings (including *Common Sense*) as well as original manuscripts. One of the museum's most significant items is a Paine death mask fashioned by the same artist, John Wesley Jarvis, who painted the portrait of Paine that hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The museum has a portrait of Paine as well, this one painted by English portraitist George Romney. American writer Howard Fast considered this the best likeness of Paine that exists. "We see," Fast wrote, "a man with a rough-hewn, large-featured face, a fleshy, slightly hooked nose, a wide and sensitive mouth, and heavy black brows. His blue eyes are curious and skeptical, more examining than inviting, and lines of bitterness are etched about his mouth and chin. Not a good-looking man, but one whose face is alive and alert, whose brow is high and broad, and whose eyes are almost damning in their cold intentness."

—Joseph Gustaitis

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Thomas Paine Cottage is at the corner of Broadview Ave. and Sicard Ave., about two miles north of downtown New Rochelle, New York. The Thomas Paine Memorial Museum is slightly north of the cottage, at 983 North Ave. There is a small admission charge for both. The two sites are separately administered. For cottage hours call (914) 633-1776; for museum hours call (914) 632-5376, www.mediapro.net/cdadesign/paine/museum.html.

prejudice on the controversial issues of religion and politics," Paine managed the operation's day-to-day business. He also submitted nearly a fourth of all published articles, going by the pseudonyms of "Atlanticus," "Aesop," and "Vox Populi."

Most of Paine's early contributions were lighthearted, informative essays that resulted in a dramatic increase in circulation from 600 to more than 1,500 readers over a four-month period. Yet his best works were those in which he violated Aitken's policy by lashing out against England's rule. "When I reflect on Britain's involvement in the most horrid of all traffics, that of human flesh," Paine wrote in a March 1775 editorial attacking slavery, "I hesitate not for one moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain." Paine wasn't the first to raise the suggestion that the causes of American independence and abolitionism were closely related. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a prominent Philadelphia physician and member of the Continental Congress, had done so three years earlier. But Paine repeated the suggestion at a time when Americans were more receptive to those issues, making his writing more inflammatory as well as more relevant to American circumstances.

> Paine argued that "Americans should not feel any obligation to a crowned ruffian who sanctions war against them."

Following the British attack at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, Paine became even more vehement in his literary assault. Criticizing both King George and Parliament for sending troops "not for the defense of natural rights, but for the suppression of them," Paine urged Americans to "fight to defend their property as well as their political liberty."

Then Paine accused the British government of limiting the "social and political opportunities" of American women and encouraging Indians to attack innocent white settlers, making them the "tools of treachery and murder." He concluded with the prophetic statement, "the Almighty will separate America from Britain. Call it independence or what you will, it is the cause of God and humanity, and it will go on."

Aitken had read enough. He paid Paine for his last essay and told him to seek employment elsewhere. Nevertheless, the colonists wanted to read more. The British attacks on Lexington and Concord evoked greater sympathy for the American cause than had existed before. That is why Paine condemned the "obstinate American attachment to Britain" as well as those who hoped for reconciliation. "It was time to stir," he spoke up in the press. "Those who had long been settled had something to defend, those who had just come had something to pursue; and the call was equal and universal." Paine called for independence.

The writer saw America as an incubator for democracy where he could help champion the universal rights of all men. What's more, he eagerly wrote for public consumption what few of the delegates to the Continental Congress had dared to state in private, for fear of committing treason. Predictably, Congress's greatest advocates of an independent America—members like Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush—used Paine to test public opinion before making a definitive commitment themselves. They encouraged him to detail his arguments in a single pamphlet. Paine obliged by writing *Common Sense*.

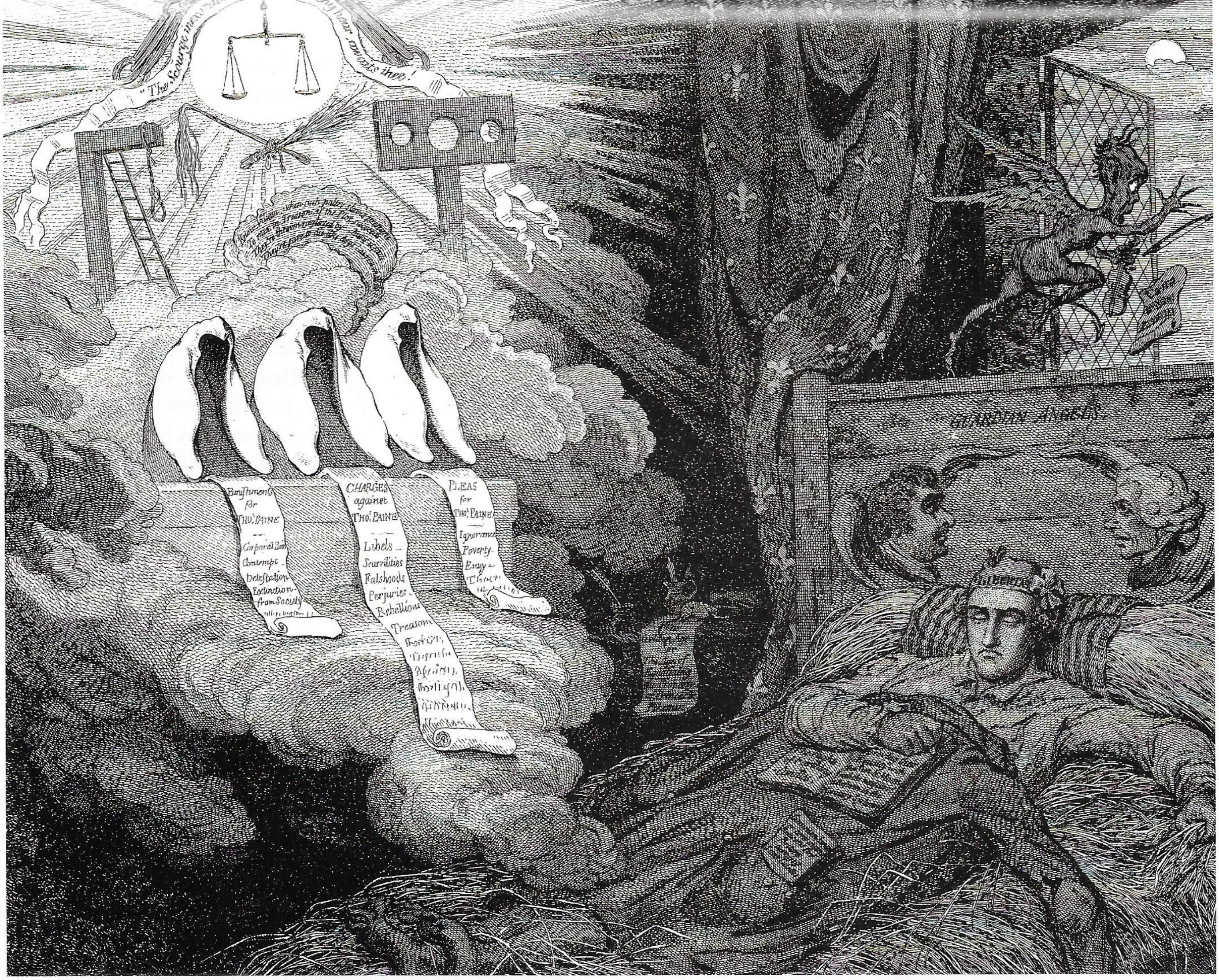
From late autumn 1775 until the publication of the tract in January 1776, Paine spent his days in his rented rooms along the Philadelphia waterfront, writing about revolution. At nightfall, he visited taverns to engage in political debate and drink. Paine was a painstakingly diligent writer. A brief paragraph might take him days or even weeks, because he scrutinized each sentence and checked and rechecked his punctuation and spelling. When he needed money he contributed a short story or poem to one of the local newspapers. The editor would pay him a small sum, enough to survive a few days more, so he could work on his masterpiece.

Finally, on January 10, 1776, Paine published *Common Sense*, a 47-page pamphlet that advocated American independence in language the common man could understand and, ultimately, defend. He depicted King George as a tyrant, a coconspirator with Parliament in an attempt to destroy the natural rights of the American colonists. Paine used strong, richly graphic images that aroused anger in his readers, comparing George to a "father-king" who relished his children, the Americans, as his main meal. "Even brutes do not devour their young," Paine exclaimed. "Out of fear for their freedom, many have fled England to America" in the hope of "escaping the cruelty of the monster."

Paine believed that monarchy was useless, having "little more to do than make war and give away places at court." He argued that "Americans should not feel any obligation to a crowned ruffian who sanctions war against them." Nor did Paine spare any criticism of the mixed constitution of Great Britain, considered at the time to be the most perfectly balanced form of government in the world with its divisions of King, Lords, and Commons.

"Why is the constitution of England so sickly?" Paine asked. "Because the monarchy hath poisoned the republic, the crown hath engrossed the commons." He believed a free America would do well to learn from England's mistakes and draft a republican constitution with annual assemblies and a president who would be chosen each year from a different colony. A unicameral legislature would be empowered to pass laws, but only by a three-fifths majority. "Let this republican charter be brought forth placed on the divine law, the word of God," he urged. "Let a crown be placed thereon, so that the world may know, that in America THE LAW IS KING."

After his assault on monarchy and hereditary succession, Paine turned to the "present state of American affairs." He argued that the situation had become



THE GRANGER COLLECTION

Often seen as a dangerous radical, Paine became the subject of many satirical cartoons, including Tom Paine's Nightly Pest, *a 1792 etching by James Gillray.*

so intolerable that Americans must "cease negotiating for a repeal of the Parliamentary acts and separate from England." By declaring her independence, America would ensure a strong, lasting commerce, the happiness of its people, and protection from a hopelessly corrupt Europe. Almost like a preacher urging his congregation to embark on a divinely inspired mission, Paine urged his readers: "O! Ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth!"

Common Sense struck a resounding chord within the American conscience. The timing couldn't have been better. Only a few days before its release, King George delivered his opening speech to Parliament calling for suppression of the American rebellion. *Common Sense* gave the Crown a direct and unequivocal response. It proved to be an immediate success, being instantly copied, parodied, and translated into the language of every country that sympathized with the American cause. Nearly 120,000 copies were sold in the first three months after its release, and by the end of the year about 500,000 copies had found their way into bookstores, private libraries, and taverns in both Europe and America. The widespread distribution and huge readership of the tract resulted in the appearance of pamphlets, broadsides, and newspaper articles devoted to the controversial issue of American independence.

While some patriots, like Washington and Governor Edmund Randolph of Virginia, applauded Paine's work, there were some strong voices of opposition. John Adams, for example, feared the effect "so popular a pamphlet might have among the people." While he believed the work to be a "very meritorious production" and agreed with its call for American independence, Adams took great exception to Paine's plans for government. "Such a unicameral system," he warned, "was so democratic without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium, that it must produce confusion and every evil work."

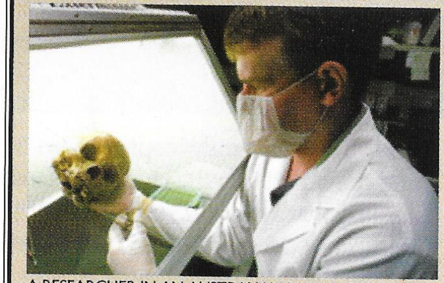
Paine wasn't a constitutional theorist. His task was tearing down governments, not creating them. While Congress eventually adopted his suggestion for a unicameral legislature and incorporated it into the Articles of Confederation, it proved to be a dismal failure, just as Adams had feared. Yet at the same time, *Common Sense* convinced many Americans who had previously been neutral on the subject of independence that a monarchy could no longer address their needs and that they should separate from England.

On July 2, 1776, when Congress voted for American independence, Paine's efforts were realized. He didn't seek personal fortune or fame, however, and downplayed his achievement, contributing whatever profits he made from the sale of his work to the Continental Army. Always restless as an observer, Paine yearned to be at the center of events. When the war turned against the Americans that year, Paine joined a ragtag group of Pennsylvania volunteers called the Associators in July 1776 and enlisted in the army where General Nathanael Greene took him on as his aide-de-camp.

While serving in the army, Paine worked to maintain its morale and secure foreign support for the patriot cause. Between December 1776 and April 1783 he wrote a series of 13 essays, later published collectively as *The American Crisis*. In these essays, Paine played upon the hatred of the British to stir the American public into greater support for the war as well as to attract a foreign military alliance. He reflected on the nature of the difficulties the Continental citizen-soldier experienced as he fought a prolonged war over a wide expanse of territory. He also criticized those Americans who refused to take up the patriot cause, even if they based their non-compliance on religious scruples.

Appointed by Congress to its Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1777, Paine became embroiled in an incident known as the Silas Deane affair. Congress recalled Deane, an American agent in France, from his post in Paris after hearing allegations that he had become involved in private arms dealing before the signing of a French-American alliance. Paine proceeded to slander Deane in the newspapers, supporting his accusations by referring to confidential papers. In so doing, he not only compromised his position as a diplomat but also publicly revealed that France had, indeed, negotiated with the rebellious colonies while still at peace with Britain. Under pressure from the French ministry, Paine resigned his position on January 8, 1779.

IS THIS THE SKULL OF THOMAS PAINE?


DAVID SPROULE

A RESEARCHER IN AN AUSTRALIAN LABORATORY CAREFULLY HOLDS A SKULL THAT MAY BE PAINE'S.

Modern molecular genealogy may determine if a human skull bought at an antiques sale in Sydney, Australia, is Thomas Paine's.

In 1988 John Burgess attended the Sydney Antiques Fair, where he met with an antiques dealer who had earlier claimed that a skull he owned may have been Paine's. Kept in an old handmade leather box, the skull had an inscription on it that read "THos PAINE"; another scratched marking could be interpreted as "Cobbitt" (political journalist William Cobbett disinterred Paine's bones and took them to England in 1819).

Burgess, who according to family tradition is a Paine descendant, purchased the skull, and his anthropologist wife, Hazel, is currently undertaking scientific research on it. If DNA material extracted from the skull is compared to that from a suitable Paine descendant, and the two samples match, it is likely that the skull is Paine's.

The search is now on for people descended from Paine through a strictly paternal line, because the DNA from the Y chromosome (the male chromosome) survives unchanged through succeeding male generations. (John Burgess descended from Paine via a maternal great-grandmother, so his Y chromosome would not contain the telltale genetic material.)

Yet the mystery of how Paine's skull ended up half a world away from his original burial place in New York, would still remain.

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Two years later, he made a much better impression on France when he traveled there with John Laurens, envoy of the Pennsylvania Assembly. They returned with both money and supplies for the Continental Army. Despite his success, however, Paine earned no recognition for his role in the mission.

Returning to England in 1787, he soon became embroiled in the political debate ignited by the French Revolution. His *Rights of Man*, which defended the Revolution against the attacks of British Parliamentarian Edmund Burke, proved to be even more inflammatory than *Common Sense*. Charged with seditious libel for advocating an end to monarchy in Britain, Paine escaped to France, where electoral assemblies elected him to the French National Convention. Once again, however, he fell out of the good graces of the government and spent almost a year in prison. While living in France, he wrote his final great work, *Age of Reason*, attacking the basic principles of Christianity.

In 1802 Paine eventually returned to America a bitter, disillusioned man. The attacks on organized religion in *Age of Reason* caused waves of anger around the nation. Now considered "a person to be avoided, a character to be feared," he lived the final years of his life as an outcast. The 72-year-old writer died in New York City on June 8, 1809.

Today, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* is widely regarded as a powerful expression of the American mind, just a step below the Declaration of Independence. His greatest legacy, however, was his faith in the ability of common people to determine their own political destiny. That faith allowed Paine to define a new vision of America as an asylum for universal freedom. ★

William C. Kashatus is the author of Conflict of Conviction: A Reappraisal of the Quaker Involvement in the American Revolution *(University Press of America, 1990).*

For more about the War of Independence, read "The First to Die," by Jeanne Munn Bracken. You can find it starting December 27 on the World Wide Web at TheHistoryNet: http://www.thehistorynet.com.

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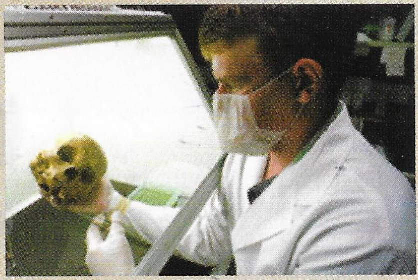

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