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Bicentenary of the death of
Thomas Paine

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PAINE AT THE CROSSROADS, 1763-1768

By the late George Hindmarch

*We live in curious times amid astonishing contrasts,
reason on the one hand, the most absurd fantasies on
the other..... a civil war in every soul.*
Voltaire

Paine's dismissal from his excise appointment at Alford left him with a shattered career, and without immediate prospects. His regular income had slipped from his grasp, but despite his swift change of fortune and the suddenness of his dismissal, he was probably quite well placed to look after himself for a few weeks while he took stock of his position and sought a means to make a living. He could always return to his trade of stay-making if nothing else was available, but he had put that trade behind him when he entered the excise, and he seems never to have considered it serious again.

Oldys, the chief informant about Paine's movements during his first English period, painted a very sorry picture of Paine after leaving Alford, but he probably did this to heighten the effect of Paine's dismissal in the minds of readers of his life, and also to cover the inadequacy of his own knowledge of Paine's next few months, and as usual when he was trying to convey a false impression, he carefully phrased his account to facilitate the drawing of adverse conclusions from unsubstantiated suggestions:

Our adventurer who appears to have had from nature, no desire of accumulating, or rather no care of the future, was now reduced to extreme wretchedness. He was absolutely without food, without raiment and without shelter. Bad, however, must that have been, who finds no friends in London. He met with persons who, from disinterested kindness, gave him clothes, money and lodging.

So strong has been the influence of Oldys over most later biographers of Paine, who appear not to have realised that the excise records were his chief source of information about Paine's first thirty-seven years, that the picture he painted has usually been accepted without question. But it was no wretched ragged beggar who rode his own horse from Alford to London, for simple

analysis of the known facts of Paine's excise career to date indicates a very different situation.

Grantham, a busy town, would not have been the cheapest place in England for an excise supernumerary to maintain himself in the conservative style of living expected of a minor official and under the watchful eye of his Collector, but Paine lived there without known difficulty from December 1762 until leaving for Alford in August 1764. A supernumerary's salary was only £25 a year, but on promotion to a ride officer in Alford, his salary would have doubled to £50, a considerable advance notwithstanding the attendant expense of acquiring and keeping a horse. His Alford duties entailed riding country roads that were frequently under water in winter, but which an exciseman nevertheless was required to negotiate, and he must have equipped himself with a serviceable wardrobe of stout clothing to enable him to continue riding in all weathers. And since Solomon Hansord (the landlord of the Windmill where Paine lodged) valued his excise connection sufficiently to retain it until he died, it is probable that Paine was able to lodge at the Windmill on very reasonable terms.

Paine applied for restoration to the excise within a year of leaving Alford, and it was by no means certain that his application would meet with success, for there were many instances of such applications being rejected by the excise board. When he did apply, his re-appraisal would have laid particular emphasis on whether he was free from debts, in accordance with standard excise practice; and this hurdle he was to surmount with consummate ease. It was in all probability as a thrifty young man with a supply of money saved during a year of quiet living that Paine returned to London, and there he would have been able to add to his reserves by selling the horse he no longer required. Nor would he have had any great worries about whether he would be able to find employment, for he himself was to detail the comparative ease with which a discharged excise officer could find a job when he came to write his *Case of the Excise Officers* a few years later:

The easy transition of a qualified Officer to a 'Compting-House' or at least to a School-Master, at any time, as it naturally supports and backs his Indifference about the Excise, so it takes off all Punishment from the Order whenever it happens.

Paine might have sought a teaching appointment in a country town such as Thetford or Alford, each of which maintained a notable school, but London seems always to have retained its magnetism for him. He had already lived there long enough to know the metropolis reasonably well and to appreciate that it offered the greatest scope for new employment; and it may have seemed the most attractive centre for his future studies. It was in London that John Wesley had his own church and this was sited not far from that other building to which Paine proposed soon to address himself – the Excise Office in Broad Street.

It is one of the stranger aspects of the story of Thomas Paine that the outstanding failure in his life – his personal religious struggle to promote a free community of men happily together in the light of the dispensations of a Supreme Being – has been largely lost to sight in the conventional accounts of his political struggles, which were but the means by which he strove to advance his mission. Not even the pioneer work of Moncure Conway, who first recognised religious motivation as the driving force in Paine's life, has done much to dispel the general prejudice that Paine was primarily a secular revolutionary; yet Paine, the political innovator, was merely the working guise of Paine the idealistic preacher. John Wesley originated the Methodist practice of associating humanitarianism with assemblies of religious harmony; his follower, Thomas Paine, went much further and saw that religious harmony and social fulfilment were two equally important sides of a single golden coin representing the wealth of a happy contented people.

It was during the years after Alford and prior to his emigration that we can now see most clearly the original Paine, and can glimpse the pattern of his probable development had Fate dealt more kindly with him. Although already scarred, Paine then looked at life with compassion blended with quizzical humour, and would probably have made his mark as an influential and popular commentator on human affairs, pointing the way towards amelioration of the common lot. But that was not the path which would have led Paine to the great historic part he was to play in world affairs. In his later life, like John Bunyan and George Fox before him, he was to feel that Providence had taken a special interest in him and had intervened to influence his progress; indeed it may have been because he felt himself unable fully to comprehend the mysterious working of the Divinity in his own life

that he did not publish an autobiography. And if there was one critical incident in which the Divinity covertly intervened to direct Paine's path towards his destiny, it was surely in his diversion from the standard excise life and into intellectual originality. After leaving Alford and returning to London, Paine would have returned naturally to the circles in which he had moved before going to Dover, and it would have been his old Methodist friends whose 'disinterested kindness', to borrow Oldys's words, helped Paine into his next profession of school teaching which was to become the springboard from which he made his great leap forward towards the spectacular achievements that lay ahead of him.

It was in July 1766, barely ten months after his dismissal from Alford, that Paine addressed himself to the Excise Commissioners. It is one of the unexplained inconsistencies in his story, which in most respects is poorly illustrated by personal documents, that Paine's application to them has long been known in full. It was first published as early as 1817 by Richard Carlile, an admirer of his political career who was persecuted and imprisoned for publishing Paine's writings although he did not accept his religious opinions. Carlile did not indicate how he learned the contents of Paine's restoration application, but it is likely that the source was Paine himself. The application read:

London, July 3, 1766.

Honourable Sirs,

In humble obedience to your honours' letter of discharge bearing date August 29, 1765, I delivered up my commission and since that time have given you no trouble. I confess the justice of your honours' displeasure and humbly beg to add my thanks for the candour and lenity with which you at that unfortunate time indulged me. And though the nature of the report and my own confession cut off all expectations of enjoying your honours' favour then, yet I humbly hope it has not finally excluded me therefrom, upon which hope I presume to entreat your honours' to restore me. The time I enjoyed my former commission was short and unfortunate – an officer only a single year. No complaint of the least dishonesty or intemperance ever appeared against me; and, if I am so happy as to succeed in this, my humble petition, I will endeavour that my future conduct shall as much engage your honours' approbation as my former has merited your displeasure.

I am, your honours' most dutiful humble servant,
Thomas Paine.

The board's minutes for the following day, July 4th record:

Thomas Paine, late Officer of Alford Outride Grantham Collection having petitioned to Board praying to be restored, begging Pardon for the Offence for

which he was Discharged and promising diligence in future; Ordered that he be restored on a proper vacancy.

Paine's history was given newspaper publicity in September 1871 when *The Scotsman* printed a letter from Mr. B. F. Dun, who had been for many years an officer in the excise. This letter first disclosed the Board's misleading minute of Paine's dismissal from Alford which Dun had seen on a visit to Somerset House [where the records were stored], and this fresh item about Paine attracted journalistic comment from G. J. Holyoake, who apparently received a further letter from Dun which the latter passed on to Moncure Conway. Dun seems merely to have disclosed the dismissal minute, expressed routine departmental opinions, and given a short conventional biographical sketch of Paine which included his previously-known restoration application in full as a natural sequel to the dismissal minute. But Dun's connection with the excise induced Conway to overrate him as an informant, with the result that instead of subjecting Dun's account to critical scrutiny, Conway welcomed it at face value as supplying additional authentic information beyond that already publicised by Oldys.

There are several points arising from Paine's restoration petition which call for consideration when reconstructing his position at this time. The first is the address at the top of his letter, the single word London. No experienced person in any age addresses to a government office an appeal which he hopes will elicit a favourable reply, without making arrangement to be informed of the response. There is but one logical conclusion to be drawn from Paine's use of this single word address, he addressed his letter from the London Excise Office itself during personal attendance there, and arranged to call again as necessary to be informed of any progress.

It would have been quite inconsistent with the detailed vetting Paine had to undergo on first applying for an excise appointment, if there had been no formal re-appraisal before re-appointment after an alleged offence incurring dismissal, with its consequent heavy blot on his official character. Perusal of the exercise archives reveals a number of instances of applicants for restoration failing to pass this second vetting, and where reasons for rejection are recorded, inquiries into personal solvency figure prominently. Yet Paine's formal application dated July 3 was approved by the Board on the following day; the circumstances indicated by this

apparently swift processing of his application are not difficult to envisage when the ways of the excise are taken into account.

Instead of conducting his restoration application by letters submitted through the post, Paine initiated his attempt by a personal call at the central office, where he would have been interviewed by the official responsible for such matters, who at the time was a Mr. Earle. Paine's record would have been examined, and any necessary enquiries conducted by Earle, who would have invited a formal application from Paine on their satisfactory conclusion, which Paine therein made out on the spot. In accordance with standard excise routine his letter would have been headed by the name of the office of origin; thus the single word *London* was all that was necessary.

The tone of Paine's petition has surprised some commentators, who have thought it servile; but his repeated expressions of humility has occasioned no raised eyebrows amongst excisemen, in the experience of the present writer. For Paine's letter is a perfect example of the style Commissioners are believed to consider fitting in addresses to their august selves. It is highly probable that the petition was phrased on the advice, and possibly dictation, of Earl. Paine's own character shows only where he claims he was never accused of dishonesty or intemperance, and thereby excludes any admission of having stamped a survey [having stamped an item/s as having been taxed but not having actually been so].

Earl would have re-examined the circumstances of Paine's dismissal scarcely two months after processing Swallow's [William Swallow, Paine's supervisor] appointment as supervisor at Caister following restoration, and in 1766 he was probably better informed than Paine himself about the outcome of the affair at Alford. As a responsible headquarters official experienced in personnel and disciplinary matters, had been aware of Swallow's admitted misconduct at Alford [Swallow was later himself dismissed having admitted faking the charges against Paine]. It is to be observed that the board's minute restoring Paine speaks of his begging pardon for his offence, although he had not done so; it is likely that Earle under-wrote his petition by a report based on a personal interview which gave this impression, and that he did so to obviate any possible reluctance on the part of the commissioners to refuse the application. That Paine's petition struck the right note with the

board is demonstrated by the remarkable swiftness of its acceptance, and the fact that it took place only a day after Paine submitted it is a further strong indication that he penned it in the excise office and did not submit it through the post. John Tucker, another discharged officer, whose application for restoration was considered at the same time as Paine's, does not appear to have been as well advised about the appropriate style of petitions as Paine had been, and he did not conform to the requisite ritual grovelling; the minute recording Tucker's failure immediately follows that detailing Paine's success.

Restoration did not confer swift re-appointment to an excise station, and Paine would surely have had his name added to a waiting list; there was nothing he could do now except to wait patiently for a summons to return to the service, but in order to ensure that the summons when it was eventually issued should reach him, it was necessary for him to register his private address with the board and keep the central office informed of any subsequent change in personal circumstances during the waiting period. Paine therefore would have reported his post-restoration addresses and movements for inclusion in his personal file; there Oldys found them in due course when he was given access to that file, and he abstracted for publication such details as suited his purpose.

Oldys cognisance of Paine's excise records explains very simply his remarkable proficiency as the first biographer of Paine, and his ability to disclose details which other biographers have not been able to verify should have pointed to the main source of his information. However, as Paine had no reason to declare his movements between his first dismissal and his restoration, Oldys was not informed of this period from excise sources, and it was probably to cover his ignorance about those months that he depicted Paine as having been penniless and homeless at that time.

There is an interesting error of fact in the Oldys account of Paine's restoration. Whereas the board's minute books establish absolutely that Paine was restored on July 4, Oldys dates that event as July 11, although the manner of writing the figure 4 in the minute book precludes any confusion with 11. The working system in the personnel section is detailed in the excise archives. It was the task of the clerks to translate the board's decisions into

appropriate instructions and letters, and this could only be done after the minutes of the day had been written up and passed to them. The restoration minute bears the appropriate tick, the initials of the supervising official appear on the page, and these marks and the subsequent note 'he has had notice' are indications of subsequent action which would not have been completed for a few days, and would have appeared in Paine's file where Oldys would have found it recorded. In that file the completion of action was probably dated July 11, and Oldys mistook this date for the restoration date itself.

The further details Paine registered with the board after his restoration had been approved, enabled Oldys to reveal significant fact about the ensuing period, which was a very important one in Paine's life; for it was now that he was able to extend his education and prepare himself for his great intellectual advances. Oldys informs us that he began to teach at the great academy kept by Mr. Noble in Goodman's Fields, earning a salary of twenty pounds a year, with an allowance of another five pounds for finding his own lodgings in nearby Whitechapel at the house of a hairdresser named Oliver.

Daniel Noble, Paine's new mentor, was one of a group of Baptist ministers who included Arminian views in their philosophy, and he would this have been amicably disposed towards Wesleyan Arminians, from whom may have come the recommendation that led to him employing Paine as an assistant. However, it may have been that Paine had taught in other places during the ten months when his movements remain unknown to us, and that he worked his way up to Noble's establishment through experience of teaching in lesser schools.

The dissenting academies owed their origin to the Act of Conformity of 1662 which had forbidden dissenting ministers to teach in established colleges and had driven them to found their own centres of learning. Their original attitudes of mind had guided their academies to a much higher standard of instruction than was to be found in the long established grammar schools such as the one Paine had himself attended at Thetford. The main impetus was not conditional on proficiency in the latin language, but was placed upon developments in the scientific world; in consequence, some of the clearest-sighted and most influential men of the country were glad to send their sons to these academies, which accepted

adherents of all faiths, and were rated by many progressive minds as superior to universities.

In this fresh environment, and at the comparatively late age of twenty-nine, Paine at last had access to the new learning of his day, and was able to join whole-heartedly in the study and evaluation of advances in scientific knowledge. Astronomy figured high in his interests, and he himself recorded that as soon as he was able he had purchased a pair of globes and attended philosophical lectures, where he would have made the acquaintance of some of the most notable astronomers of his day, and perhaps established contact with other pupils of note. His close associated of later days, Thomas Rickman, was himself to record:

I remember when once speaking of the improvement he gained in the above capacities and some other lowly situations he had once been in, he made the observation: "Here I derived considerable information; indeed I have seldom passed five minutes of my life, however circumstanced, in which I did not acquire some knowledge".

Education is most swiftly accomplished in the early years of life. As spring is the season when nature reproduces last year's foliage in quick green growth, so is youth the time when the knowledge our forefathers slowly gathered is most easily re-created by progressive study under the guidance of teachers. But even brilliant young students may not develop into skilful practitioners until student days are left behind and they approach their work from practical angles. There are differences which can produce varying attitudes to problems from relatively unquestioning students and objectively viewing operatives, and these are perhaps never more impeding than when a practical man becomes a scholar. Difficulties that may not occur to an academic student may then arise out of his remembered experience to hinder smooth acceptance of progressive tuition. Because his practical mind already reaches out from intermediate stages, he is less likely to be able to accept scholastic opinions as secure platforms by which to advance towards his goal.

Paine not only had a mind thirsty for knowledge, but he possessed also a varied background against which to set his new ideas. In the ten years that had elapsed since he left his parental home, his restive spirit had led him into many situations. He had worked in town and country, at sea and on land; he had been apprentice and

master-tradesman, religious convert and preacher; he had been stay-maker, privateersman, class-leader, exciseman and now schoolmaster, and he may have followed other professions as well since Rickman referred to 'some other lowly situations he had been in' without specifying them.

A man who comes late to the fount of contemporary knowledge has to struggle harder than his youthful contemporaries if he is to benefit fully from his opportunity; but if such a man succeeds, he acquires erudition more widely and more soundly based than theirs, for in the process he will have worked out within his own mind and from his own initiative many more problems than they; and in overcoming these additional difficulties he develops an indigenous momentum of thought which carries him forward more swiftly than his fellows. This enables him to appreciate the wider implications of new concepts, to relate them to the every-day world he already knows and understands, and to realise how they will be viewed by the ordinary people who inhabit it.

As his comment to Rickman makes clear, Paine used his return to the scholastic sphere to expand his existing knowledge; he would also have been able to fill in some of the gaps in his original schooling that had resulted from the restricting tenets of his Quaker father, and to re-examine questions that had troubled him, such as the concept of redemption which had perplexed his childish mind. He would not have been concerned to construct a basic philosophy as a young student might have been, but rather to test and advance the views he had already worked out during his chequered career to date. In a dissenting academy headed by a minister, Paine would have had opportunities not only to acquaint himself with the progress of science, but also to study the early history of Christianity. The new ideas he encountered did not disturb his basic belief in God, but they seem to have stimulated re-appraisal of the attitudes of the Anglican Church. Paine's analytical mind began to identify pagan traditions that had been grafted onto the original teaching of Jesus by church-makers; this had probably happened when pagan communities had been absorbed into the expanding early Christian church as their members had accepted the essence of the message of Jesus, but had retained their festivities and superstitions deriving from their interpretation of the annual waning and waxing of the sun, and of other important natural phenomena.

Paine reversed this process, and began to reject these additions, streamlining his personal religion into a simpler faith revolving around the ideas he found good in the philosophy of Christ. This simplified Christianity did not conflict with the emergent scientific view of the universe, which Paine eagerly studied with the help of his newly acquired globes under the guidance of the astronomers whose lectures he was now able to attend. As a schoolmaster he now had facilities for after-school studies, whereas during his earlier period in London (as a journeyman staymaker) he had worked daily for from six in the morning till eight at night. But as, and probably because, his own beliefs became strengthened through simplification, he found it difficult to countenance and excuse the indecision in lesser minds thrown into confusion by conflict between paganised Christianity and scientific concepts, and deplored the attitudes who became more confused they more they studied. A few years earlier, when Paine began to express in print his views as they had so far evolved, he developed the forceful style which was to become the hall mark of his major writings. From a careful sympathetic arrangement of his premises, he proceeded swiftly to his conclusions, and punched home his message in striking phrases that seized the imagination of his readers:

Among the various Kinds of Idolatry we have upon record, that of worshipping the heavenly bodies, seems of all others the most plausible and rational. Consider the Sun as an immense fountain of light and heat, ripening by his influence into lie and action all the several tribes of the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdoms, and you may, I think, easily conceive how obvious and natural it was for the uninstructed heathen to mistake such a body for the God of this lower world. I remember at school being much pleased with Herodotus's worshippers of the Moon, waiting to hail and welcome their rising Goddess with all the festivities of music, dancing &c., they were really idolaters of taste. In all the grand machinery of the creation, I hardly know so fine an object as the rising full moon, especially in summer. After an oppressively hot day, which has thrown a languor upon both mind and body, an anything equal "the coming of a grateful evening mild", ushered in by such a glorious harbinger? What exquisite painting! What scenery! A very luxury of nature! One of her richest repasts! Every sense seems regaled, every faculty harmonised and disposed to favour thought and reflection. An yet how lost, how utterly lost is all this to millions and millions? Why? Because we all look through different glasses; one has the lens of his (mind's) eye so thick and horny that he sees no objects distinctly. Some view everything through the medium of gain; others through the misty glass of sensual pleasure. Some are blinded by ambition, others drunk and besotted by intemperance. But of all, one is most vexed by those who are TOO SHARP-SIGHTED TO SEE, or, in other words, who have too much learning to have any taste at all, who are so

bewildered in the labyrinth of science falsely so-called, that they are lost to everything worthy of their notice. Admirable work this!, to be learnedly stupid. A man in such a case is like a warrior pressed to death with the weight of his own armour.

The works of Herodotus, the Greek historian and traveller whose descriptions made a strong impression on Paine's mind, were available in translation when Paine was 'at school' in the academies of Noble and Gardner; the importance attached to them is evidenced by the prefatory comment of the translator Isaac Littlebury that Herodotus first advanced history from fable and poetic fiction to 'true dignity and lustre'. Paine probably used such translations and other kindred works to trace the residual forms of ancient practices in contemporary dogma. Philosophers of old had always been strongly influenced by the paramount importance of the sun in human affairs, and had progressed to a study of other celestial bodies, as the standing stones of Stonehenge and the massive sextant carved in the rock near Samakand bear witness, and, as the horoscopes widely printed in our own day confirm, such influences are slow to loose their grip. But Paine was an original thinker, and instead of becoming over awed by the immensities of the skies, his flexible mind found confirmation of divine purpose in the minutiae of Creation as well as its most significant manifestations:

One of the loudest Infidel batteries that have been play'd off against revealed religion, is that it abound in mysteries. "It is absurd (they say) to require our faith in matters confessedly above the reach of our understanding". The objection, at first sight, appears formidable enough, but it will be found, upon examination, to carry with it very little or no force at all. *Whether* a thing exists, and *how* it exists, are certainly two very different enquiries. Even among the objects of sense, which we may be supposed to be the best acquainted with, are every moment forced to acknowledge numberless truths, which, with the uttermost stretch of our faculties, we can no way fully conceive, nay, which we have hardly any competent idea of at all. The various modifications of matter, the exquisite mechanism, and organisation of animal and vegetable bodies, &c, are (as to their first *rationale*) utter secrets to us, and so they will ever remain. A single blade of grass is as effectual a puzzle-wit for all the philosophers on earth, as is its Solar System, and twenty other Systems added to it.

The originality of mind Paine first displayed in his religious writing was later to find expression in his secular works also. Historians, like students of Nature, were drawn naturally to the influence of the Suns; and it was not by accident that Louis XIV of France became known as the Sun King, and that English history, even in the

twentieth century, has been presented mainly in terms of the sovereign and his entourage. But modern commentators are coming to place less weight upon central authority and greater emphasis upon the effects by plebeian personalities. As long ago as the eighteenth century Thomas Paine had the vision to see the divine patterns in the minute as well as in the enormous, and he was one of the earliest to appreciate the potential goodness of the human spirit even in its modest manifestations in the minds of ordinary people. He realised that effective power could spring from such tiny units if peaceful persuasion could induce coalescence of a multitude of them in a common concerted purpose, and an understanding of how such persuasion could be exercised was to come to his mind over the following years. As Trevelyan has indicated, the beginnings of democracy as we know it are all traceable to the writings of Thomas Paine, and the power of this new force in domestic politics was to grow as his work was to become known to the general public through the mass distribution of cheap editions of his books, which Paine was always keen to promote.

RETURN TO THE EXCISE

Although the progression on Paine's thinking may have been continuous, his career was destined to embrace a number of disjointed episodes, and in May 1767 he faced again the prospect of a change in his way of life when the opportunity arose for him to return to the Excise. In the Cornish town of Grampound, George Chappell the resident exciseman had been ill for some months, and when his supervisor reported that he was unlikely to be able to resume his duties, the Excise Bard decided that he should be retired under the pension arrangements of the day. As no other exciseman had applied for the vacancy, the Commissioners turn for a successor to the waiting list, at the head of which now appeared the name of Thomas Paine, who was duly appointed. The Grampound post was a town division, otherwise known as a footwalk, which rated above an outride, so the posting was in the nature of a promotion for Paine as well as restoration to active service.

The term footwalk indicated an excise station where the work was sufficiently concentrated to be covered by foot instead of on horseback; but any impression of comparatively easy travelling which this seems to imply is misleading, for footwalks could be far

from comfortable postings. The Commissioners had considered the ambulatory powers of their officers, and set the limits of footwalks as up to twelve miles overall for regular traders and up to sixteen for those visited occasionally, so town officers commonly walked up to twelve miles a day, with an extra four thrown in now and again for variety. It is not surprising that after being ill for several months Chappell was thought to be incapable of copying with the excise work in Grampound.

Lack of competition for the vacancy may have reflected the character of the town and its reputation amongst visitors. John Wesley preached there, and recorded an unfriendly reaction from the mayor, who asked him to move on. Such surly resentment of newcomers may have been a feature of local attitudes at the time, which an incoming exciseman might have had to face also. The operation of political bribery at parliamentary elections furnishes another illustration of the local atmosphere; one freeman of Grampound received more than one hundred pounds in cash during the six years preceding the election of 1754 to secure his vote. Local worthies accustomed to be treated with such exaggerated consideration could have been prickly customers of the exciseman, and throughout Cornwall these revenue officers had become accustomed to performing their duties with scant regard for the procedures decreed by the Board for the protection of the revenue. And Grampound, like Alford, was a one man excise station where the exciseman was thrown largely on to his own resources. Paine, as a restored officer, would have been particularly vulnerable to official repercussions if he was again represented as being at fault by his superiors or by influential local traders.

Paine may have had some idea of the peculiar excise conditions in Cornwall, which were so unusual that rumours about them must have circulated in the service; he may have consulted Earle and had been informed about them, or he could have made contact with London excisemen to keep himself familiar with service conditions in order to facilitate his eventual return to duty. Alternatively he may have been sufficiently wrapped up in his current activities to wish to continue them. Whatever his reasons, Paine decided against Grampound and requested to be allowed to await a further vacancy. His rejection of the proposed appointment was probably a wise one, as events were to demonstrate.

In the summer of the following year the Board ordered a general inspection of the Cornwall Collection which was organised in four districts under its collector, and was probably administered by between forty and fifty local officers. As a result of the consequent report, the collector and one supervisor were dismissed, the three remaining supervisors were reduced to officers and removed to other collections, two officers were dismissed, twenty-seven reprimanded and six admonished. The supervisor Truro, whose district included Grampound was dismissed; he was reported as having been remiss in Grampound in particular, where he rarely bothered to re-gauge important brewing vessels to ensure that beer duty was accurately charge, and the interchangeable letters in his stamp for marking hides, which should have been periodically changed as a safeguard against malpractice, had not been varied in thirteen years and had become rusted in their positions. The supervisor at Launceston was demoted to one of the town divisions at Lewes in Sussex, where he would have been able to recount the slaughter of the Cornish excisemen to his Lewes colleagues, amongst whom was numbered at that time Paine himself, who was probably thankful to have escaped being involved in the débâcle.

As Paine sought restoration in the summer of 1766, only ten months after being dismissed, he must have seriously considered returning; but from movements he subsequently reported to the Board, Oldys was able to recount:

Paine's desire of preaching now returned on him: but applying to his old master for a certificate of his qualifications to the bishop of London. Mr. Noble told him, that since he was only an English scholar, he could not recommend him as a proper candidate for ordination in the church. Our adventurer, however, determined to persevere in his purpose, without regular orders. And he preached in Moorfields, and in various populous places in England, as he was urged by his necessities, or directed by his spirit.

A contemporary account of aspiring Methodist preachers at Moorfields is to be found in the memoirs of the publisher, James Lackington, who was at the time estranged from the Methodist movement to which he owed his start in business, and to which he later returned. Some latitude is therefore called for when considering his unfavourable comments, and his disparagement of itinerant Methodist preachers whom he depicted as frequently lodging at the houses of sympathetic widows, and readily abandoning their itinerancy if offered a permanent home by one of

them. An essay by Paine entitled *Forgetfulness*, which he probably wrote many years later and which was preserved by being copied by a friend, also sheds some light on Paine's movements at this time. In it he speaks of himself being 'about the summer of 1766' in a fenland village and lodging with a widow who was also sheltering a young lady in a depressed frame of mind following an unhappy love affair. Paine mentioned these circumstances because he was able to dissuade the young lady from an attempt at suicide, but in the present context they serve as an indication that Paine could already have been engaged in itinerant preaching about the time he applied for restoration in the Excise.

If Paine was already a circuit preacher in the summer of 1766, it means that he had been approved by the Methodist organisation. His practical experience and his repeated changes in his way of life would have indicated his adaptability, and hence his suitability for a nomadic life, and his experience of riding the difficult sunken roads of Eastern England as an exciseman would have made him a natural choice for East Anglican circuits. Paine possibly returned to Alford as an itinerant preacher about a year after he left it; he may have learned what had happened to Swallow after his own departure, and he may also have played a part in preparing the ground for the establishment of a Methodist group in the town, which was to come about within few more years.

At this critical stage in his life, it seems that Paine stood at a crossroads, with the separate paths of two different professions – the Excise and the Methodist ministry – diverging before him. But it would seem that he had not yet decided which path he would follow although he would soon have to make up his mind to which he proposed to devote the rest of his life. It is suggested here that the reason for his delaying his decision was his desire to pursue his evangelistic career as an ordained minister, a course which John Wesley encouraged his lay ministers to follow, and until he has ascertained his prospects for ordination Paine preferred to keep both his options open.

An attempt can now be made to reconstruct Paine's position at this period, using as a basis the Oldys account, which would have drawn upon dated information given by Paine to the Excise Office:

Mr. Noble relinquished Paine, without much regret, to Mr. Gardner, and then taught a reputable school at Kensington; yet, owing to whatever cause, he here acted as usher only the first three months of 1767.

The adverse slant of Oldy's writings cannot conceal Noble's regret at Paine's departure in early 1767, and it is also clear that Paine's assistance was sought by a school of considerable standing, although nothing is further known about Mr. Gardner, its proprietor. Since Paine returned to Noble, a minister, when seeking a recommendation to the bishop of London in the spring of 1767 at the time of leaving Gardner, it is clear that Paine decided to test his prospects in the church about the time when he would have been preparing for another summer as an itinerant Methodist minister. In May 1767, when the excise station at Grampound was offered to him, Paine may have wished to hold himself readily available for ordination studies, and it would have been for this reason that he decided against departing for distant Cornwall. And since the only known reason why Noble did not recommend him for ordination is his lack of classical education, Paine may well have concluded that the ministry was not closed to him, and that his chance of acceptance would be greatly enhanced if he added proficiency in the classics to his growing erudition.

The Oldys account leaves little room to doubt that Paine was again a circuit preacher in the summer of 1767. Great interest would attach to any reliable accounts of Paine's preaching style, as they would indicate his approach to his listeners; even Oldys gives a hint in his remark that Paine preached 'as directed by his spirit', for Paine's spirit was characterised by originality, and his sermons may have been arresting. But the scant references to his work in the field which have survived give no indication of his effectiveness beyond intimating that he was at last adequate in his addresses. However it is probable that Paine found a return to an itinerant life precluded continuation of the rapid advances in self-education that he had enjoyed during his periods as a schoolmaster in London. If acquisition of the classics, especially a knowledge of the latin language, had become one of his objectives, he may have found the prospect of another settled period in the Excise increasingly attractive because of the attendant improved facilities for systematic study.

Paine's rejection of Grampound probably resulted in his name being returned to the bottom of the list of restored officers awaiting

re-appointment, and it took nine months for his name to work its way back to the top. Then, at Abergavenny in Wales, Robert Henry Whitney, after having been seven times reprimanded and thrice admonished in the preceding three years, again incurred censure and was dismissed. The detailed account of the Board's minute book of the multiple faults of this hardened offender once again highlight the harshness of Paine's dismissal after an unestablished first offence at Alford. Daniel Jones of Wells Outride in Somerset obtained Abergavenny, and Paine was posted to Somerset, but following receipt of a letter from a certain Edward Dalton, the Board decided on different arrangements. Dalton, the officer at Lewes 4th Outride was now appointed to Abergavenny, Jones was ordered to remain at Wells, and Thomas Paine was appointed to the Lewes vacancy on February 29, 1768.

Thus a new chapter commenced in Paine's life that was to have consequences which at the time neither he nor anyone else may have envisaged.

BOOK REVIEW

THOMAS PAINE: IN SEARCH OF THE COMMON GOOD. Edited by Joyce Chumbley & Leo Zonneveld. 144pp. Illustrated Paperback. Nottingham, Spokesman Books, 2009. ISBN 978-0-85124-762-5. £12.00.

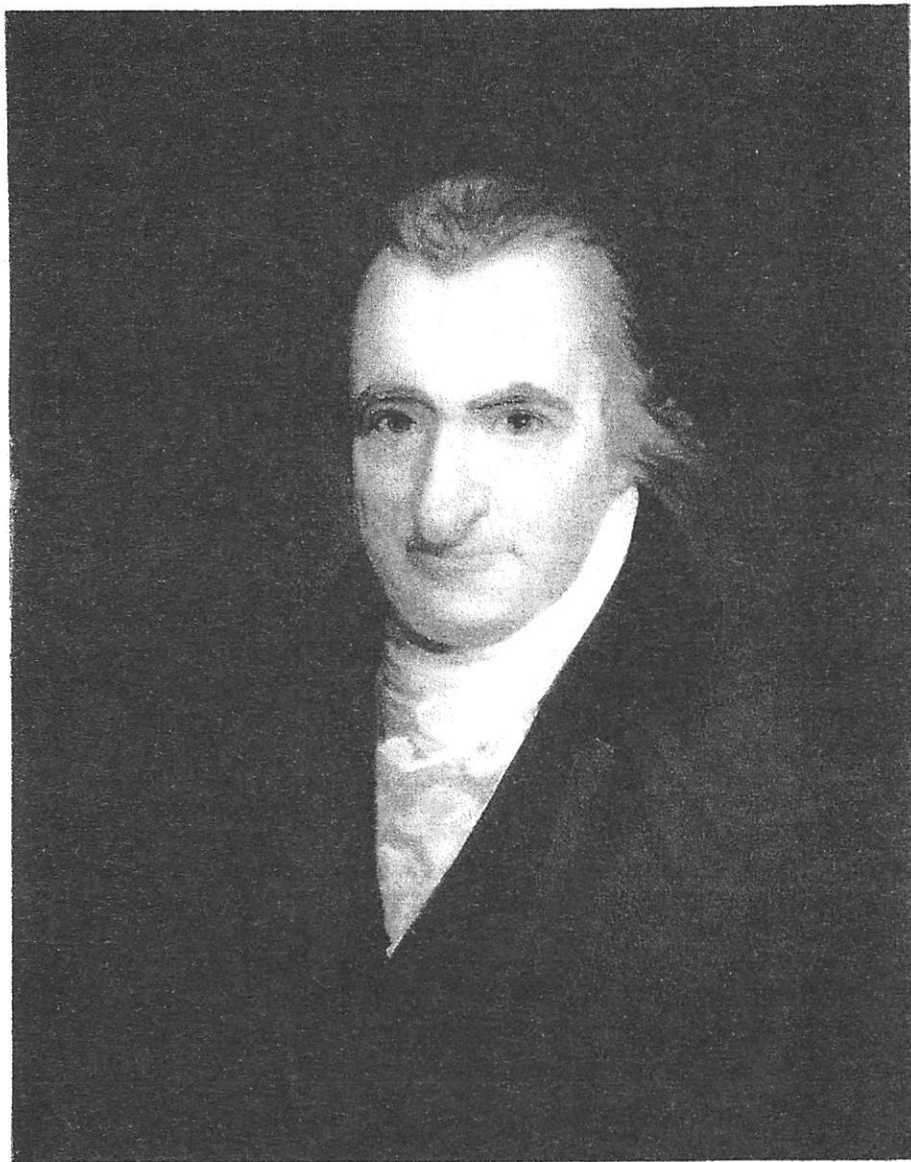
On International Human Rights Day, December 10, 1987, an international group of Paine enthusiasts met at the United Nations in New York under the auspices of the United Nations, in particular its Peace Studies Unit for a colloquium celebrating the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine. The event was organised by the United Teilhard Trust and the University of Peace (Costa Rica) with support from the Thomas Paine National Historical Association of New Rochelle and the Thomas Paine Society, whose president Michael Foot, gave the first address on 'Thomas Paine and the Democratic Revolution'. Much of the inspiration for the event had been generated by the late Florence Stapleton, a member of the TPS, and Nat Mills, also deceased, who had created an informal Thomas Paine readers group. The initiative for this publication has been due to the work of Irwin

Spiegelman, the president of the Friends of Thomas Paine in the United States. Leo Zonneveld, of the United Teilhard Trust (the reference is to Teilhard de Chardin the Jesuit philosopher and palaeontologist), provides an introduction which briefly discussed the various contributions.

As well as Michael Foot, there were eleven other speakers, Professor Ian Dyck on, 'Thomas Paine: World Citizen in the Age of Nationalism'. David Branff on, 'The Forgotten Founding Father: The Impact of Thomas Paine'. Professor Eric Foner on, 'Thomas Paine and American Radicalism during the American Revolution'. Charles Francisco on, 'Thomas Paine: A Most Un-Common Man'. Professor Bernard Vincent on, 'From Social to International Peace: The Realistic Utopias of Thomas Paine'. Clive Phillpot on, 'In the Footsteps of Thomas Paine'. The Hon. Paul O'Dwyer on, 'Thomas Paine Never Died'. Professor Sean Wilentz on, 'Paine's Legacy'. David Henley on, 'Thomas Paine: An Emerging Portrait'. Robert Muller on, Remarks on the Present State of the World, Inspired by the Philosophy of Thomas Paine'. Professor Zofia Libiszowska on, 'The Reality of the Constitutional Vision of Thomas Paine'. This last was read as Professor was not able to leave Poland.

I will make no attempt to comment on any of the contributions, to fully appreciate them calls for reading them, it is sufficient to say they contain much that is of great value and it is good that they have been now been put into print thanks to Dr. Chumbley, a TPS member, who transcribed them.

In addition to the lectures the book is well illustrated with colour photographs taken by Clive Phillpot and others showing the participants, and reprints some of the correspondence that went on in the planning stages. There is also an index. This is a splendid contribution to the Paine bicentenary and the Friends of Thomas Paine in the United States who sponsored it deserve the gratitude of all those interested in Paine and his ideas.



Thomas Paine
by John Wesley Jarvis.
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
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Thomas Paine and the Iron Bridge of Diplomacy

Ellen L. Ramsay

THOMAS Paine (1737-1809), author, editor, stay maker, excise man, small farmer, inventor, citizen of three countries, military courier, first US Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, clerk to the Pennsylvania Assembly, and pamphleteer for the Enlightenment, not only built diplomatic bridges between countries at a time of conflict, but also forged plans for bridges of iron that would cross the chasm between geography and politics. As the moments of war, post-war reconstruction and currency crisis unfolded, Paine documented and unravelled politics for citizens living in an age of personal uncertainty and helped to erect a symbolic bridge into what he hoped would be an age of common sense and reason.

Thomas Paine, the man, struggled with the dual tasks of earning a living and creating a body politic. During his lifetime Paine faced jealous political opponents (some half his age) who campaigned to ruin his career and personal life, and who prepared slanderous biographies to be published before and after his death.¹ Nonetheless, Paine left a legacy as a writer and a proponent of democracy that survived through the widespread support of mechanics and working class people who supported his ingenuity, honesty, and promotion of Enlightenment causes (universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery, the demise of superstition, democratic government, the creation of full employment, a welfare system, and a retirement pension scheme). His writings, distributed as pamphlets and letters to the working class of the world, also reached the ears of presidents and reformers. Nineteenth and twentieth century supporters of Paine kept his legacy alive and extended the principles of the Enlightenment so that the bicentenary of Paine's death on June 8, 1809 will be commemorated around the world this year.

Thomas Paine's *bridge of diplomacy*, both as a practical bridge and as a symbolic bridge between nations and political eras, centred on

¹ Moncure D. Conway (1832-1907), American abolitionist, biographer and researcher of the Paine manuscripts discusses the biographies of Paine in his volumes, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, New York: G. Putnam, vol. I, 1892, preface, pp. ix - xvi.

his proposal for a single span iron bridge braced by strong abutments cast from nature in the design of a spider's web. The bridge was never completed. His bridge design and his political proposals were however taken up by others in Paine's three countries of residence (England, the United States and France) and eventually extended around the world. Paine's political bridge spanned three countries on two continents during a period when countries had sunk themselves under the debt of war. Faced with costly domestic reconstruction, collapsing banks, and currencies dissolving in quicksand, governments forced to find solutions to failing domestic economies.

Thomas Paine, the bridge builder, faced his own difficulty of finding governments willing to invest in durable iron bridges to replace the wooden and stone bridges that were being swept away by strong water currents, ice and sand flows - an enduring problem for governments accustomed to short term solutions and temporary construction in an era of war. As a political reformer, Paine also tried to build bridges between regions of the world that had sunk into debt from military expenditure. The idea of political diplomacy for Paine became paramount and inseparable from governments investing in long-term civilian infrastructure projects. For this reason, the author of an early draft (1775) of the American Declaration of Independence (1776) including a clause to abolish slavery,² the Pennsylvania Constitution in 1776, and revisions to the French Constitution of 1791 became a designer of bridges for civilian use.

Paine's Schuylkill River bridge, designed for its fortitude, easy portability and repair, was to have thirteen columns to commemorate each of the thirteen states in the Union and was subsequently adapted to meet the political needs and practical engineering requirements of the three principal countries involved in the American War of Independence. Paine eventually offered his design to countries in northern Europe as he struggled to find an investor. The War had been an expensive war for all involved. Parliamentary reformers in England estimated that the expense from the English side alone had been £139,521,035 by 1781 and an additional £1,340,000 in compensation payments not including the £4,000 per

² Paine's draft of the 1776 Declaration of Independence appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on 18 October 1775 under the penname "Humanitas." Paine arrived in America from England on 30 November 1774 and secured employment as a writer for the *Pennsylvania Journal* in 1775/6.

year in stipends paid to loyalists from 1788.³ The French incurred similar expenses for their part. In the aftermath of the war, Paine predicted the collapse of the international monetary system unless politicians rapidly learned the skills of political diplomacy and economic intervention.

Paine, an English republican, had become a supporter of American Independence and moved to the United States in 1774, one year prior to the War of Independence. He was to personally witness two revolutions in his lifetime - the American War of Independence and the French Revolution - and his contribution to American independence included serving as a government secretary, military courier and clerk to the Pennsylvania Assembly, in addition to helping build the Bank of North America, a citizens' subscription bank founded in May 1780 with his own subscription of \$500. The Bank became incorporated by Congress and then by the State of Pennsylvania on 1 April 1782.⁴ The purpose of the bank was to help fund the wounded war veterans of George Washington's army, but the bank came under attack when it became too large and was unable to repeal its charter. Paine wrote about the general economic collapse and saved the bank with the distribution of his pamphlet entitled, *Dissertations on Government, the Affairs of the Bank and Paper Money* (1786), in which he pointed out that the greed of the banks had caused them to lend money without proper security and that public claims had been exorbitant. He also pointed out that the debt of the banks was to be passed on to the subscribers who owed 6% interest in perpetuity on their holding while the banks continued to invest their money at 10-12% and speculators received an additional 20-30% on their investments. Paine argued against the creation of a paper currency to see the country through the crisis. Paine was left with personal financial debt as a result of the collapse of the bank and could not pay his own 6% interest in perpetuity and thus embarked on his bridge project in 1785.⁵

³ Charles Bradlaugh, "The Impeachment of the House of Brunswick," *Freethought Publishing Company Tracts*, London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1880, p. 45.

⁴ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 221.

⁵ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 219. John Keane alternatively suggests that Paine turned to bridges in a "bout of restlessness" following the war (see Keane, p. 267) and Alfred Owen Aldridge suggests Paine emerged from the Bank difficulties a rich man who was freed up by his money to pursue the bridge designs. (see Aldridge, *Man of Reason: The Life of Thomas Paine*, Philadelphia & New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959, p. 108.) This author prefers Conway's interpretation because

Moncure Daniel Conway, the American abolitionist and biographer of the Paine manuscripts, stated that Paine had been referred to in his day as a "living Declaration of Independence"⁶ and had urged Americans to turn their thoughts from war to public efforts of reconstruction. Paine was an Enlightenment inventor who had used his scientific knowledge to invent a smokeless candle, wheels for carriages, as well as wood planers and now presented the more ambitious project of an enduring bridge for public use.⁷ Paine corresponded with and met Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), as both a politician and an inventor; with John Trumbull (1756-1843), painter of the American Revolutionary War; and Benjamin West (1738-1820), then a court painter for George III.

Paine's design for a single span iron bridge emerged at the time when iron foundries had started to turn from war production (cannons and cannon balls) in the early 18th century to civilian production (cast iron water mains, water pipes, sewers, fire engines, canals, door hinges and locks, water wheels and garden fences) in the late 18th century. The new technologies of iron ore smelting and iron casting came about as a result of the exhaustion of the tree stock that had fuelled the wars and industry of Europe from the 17th century. New fuel was required to replace the dwindling tree stock and coal used in the refining of iron ore by smelting charcoal became an alternative.

The first attempt to build a cast iron bridge is generally agreed to have taken place in Lyon, France in 1755. The next is believed to have been the Coalbrookdale Bridge (1777-1779) on the River Severn in England. By 1750 coke smelting had been established in Coalbrookdale, and the Coalbrookdale Company was able to build a bridge with a design by Thomas Farrols Pritchard (1723-1777) completed by Abraham Darby III (1750-1791) who worked with the Coalbrookdale Company. A shortage of pig iron meant that iron ore had to be imported from Norway, Spain, Sweden and Russia. There was, however, a plentiful supply of coal from the fossilized remains of the old tree stock of Europe and in America.

Conway investigated the available evidence closer to Paine's time, and did not rely on George Chalmer's 1793 biography of Paine.

⁶ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p.245.

⁷ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, The Cobbett Papers, vol. II, Appendix A, p. 456.

By 1783 and the Treaty of Paris, the best American trees had been cut to build English warships. The domestic use of trees in the United States had been severely restricted during the colonial period and only in the late 18th century were trees even considered for use in major bridge building projects. Oak was considered the wood of choice.⁸ America therefore embarked on a period of wooden bridges at a time when Europe was infatuated with the idea of more durable iron bridges. Thomas Paine, in his designs for an iron bridge in America pointed out that wooden bridges were impractical for a climate of freezing temperatures, ice, sand, silt and mudflows, and unstable river basins. Pennsylvania seemed a good state in which to erect his first iron bridge for both pragmatic and political reasons since it was a state both rich in coal and the first state to broker independence from Britain.⁹ In 1785 Paine had completed his plans for bridges over the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, the Harlem River in New York State, the Thames River in London, and the Seine River in Paris. While he waited acceptance of his designs in one place, he moved on to the next and tried to take with him a bridge of diplomacy while awaiting a practical bridge of peace.

The success of the Coalbrookdale Bridge in England with its single 100 ½ foot span over the Severn and a rise of 50 feet bearing 278 tons of cast iron on a thrust principle on strong masonry abutments demonstrated to Paine the success of the cast iron technology for a wide stream bridge with high arches to allow the passage of boats. The Coalbrookdale Bridge had proved that iron could provide a secure material capable of withstanding strong currents on a river basin of clay, rock or chalk.¹⁰ Cast and wrought iron bridges proved easy to transport in sections, repairable and highly durable due to the diagonal tension of bow and string suspension and were subsequently initiated all over the world.¹¹ Paine was just one proponent of iron bridges. When Paine began his iron bridge designs he, like others, knew that the Blackfriars Bridge in London had

⁸ John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995, p. 267.

⁹ Moncure D. Conway, *Addresses and Reprints, 1850-1907*, Boston and New York: The Riverside Press, 1909, pp. 403-406.

¹⁰ F.W. Sims (Ed.), *The Public Works of Great Britain*, London: John Weale Architectural Library, 1838, n.p.

¹¹ Capt. A.H.E. Boileau, *Outline of a Series of Lectures on Iron Bridges Delivered at the Calcutta Mechanic's Institute on 1841*, Calcutta: Mechanics' Institute, 1842, pp. 2-9; Hamilton Weldon Pendred, *Iron Bridges of Moderate Span*, London: Crosby Lockwood and Co., 1887, pp. 124, 140-1.

recently given way and two bridges over the Tyne in Northumberland (one by John Smeaton) had collapsed when the piers gave way in quicksand.¹²

Some biographers have credited Paine as the next pioneer of iron bridge design after Coalbrookdale although with the profusion of iron bridge designers in the period this is an unnecessary claim. Moncure Conway made no such claim and pointed out that the most enduring historians have not been concerned with hailing triumphal "firsts." Conway presented Paine's bridge design in more modest terms as simply an original iron bridge design, as this was Paine's own description. Conway searched Paine's patent of August 28, 1788¹³ registered by Paine for "Constructing Arches, Vaulted Roofs, and Ceilings on principals new and different to anything hitherto practiced." Paine proposed the basic design of his bridge as a section of a circle with iron abutments "dividing and combining" like "the quills of birds, bones of animals, reeds, canes, Etc." where the arch could be composed of any length "joined together by the whole extent of the arch and take the curvature by bending." The patent was granted in September 1788.¹⁴

Conway pointed out that the 100-foot iron arch designed by Thomas M. Pritchard and erected over the River Severn at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, did *not* anticipate Paine's design and that such arguments are not appropriate to the historical assessment of Paine's contribution to democracy and design. Conway thought it more politically important to point out that Paine remained destitute most of his life despite his political contributions. Had Paine's proposals for bridges been adopted they would have provided him with an income. As it turned out, Paine's political opponents attacked his small personal finances and land holdings in the United States leaving him destitute. Paine had to be buried on the small remaining portion of his farm land and then exhumed and transported overseas when the land was sold on because Paine had been unable to secure a grave plot in the local Quaker's yard. Meeting and knowing people

¹² Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, pp. 243, 254.

¹³ John Keane records the patent date as August 26, 1788 in his volume, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, p. 276.

¹⁴ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 242. For more on Paine's bridge design see Moncure D. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896, vol. IV, pp. 440-449. See also Paul Collins, "The Arch Revolutionary," *New Scientist*, 6 November 2004, pp. 50-51.

in high places had not advantaged Paine personally. Paine was well aware that he was being ruthlessly exploited. He kept notably quiet in political meetings apart from discussions of corporation, and the tone of his correspondence to Thomas Jefferson and other politicians became droll as he realised governments were not going to invest in his iron bridges.¹⁵

Paine hired John Hall, a mechanic from Leicester who had worked with the Boulton and Watt steam engine manufacturers, with John Wilkinson at the Coalbrookdale Company, and with Samuel Walker of Walkers and Co. in Yorkshire.¹⁶ Paine and Hall shared an interest in Pennsylvania politics and in Benjamin Franklin's election as president of the state. Paine belonged to a number of societies including the Society for Political Inquiries that met in Benjamin Franklin's library. The Society for Political Inquiries had 42 members while Paine was a member including George Washington, James Wilson, Robert Morris, Gouverneur Morris, and George Clymer.¹⁷ Hall assisted Paine with his model for a 400-foot single span iron bridge over the Schuylkill River. Paine completed the design and the mathematical side of the construction while Hall constructed the model to Paine's specifications.

Paine and Hall presented two models for the Schuylkill River Bridge to Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, and General Morris in New York.¹⁸ One model was constructed in wood and the other in cast iron. The Schuylkill River models stood in Franklin's garden for some time before finally resting in Charles Willson Peale's Museum of Natural History in Philadelphia.¹⁹ By the nineteenth century, only one dilapidated model remained in the Peale collection, and no other bridge model was extant. It is believed that the bridge most closely resembling Paine's was the bridge over the River Wear at Sunderland in the north of England erected in 1796 by Thomas Wilson. While Wilson's bridge lacked the same web design it did contain circular reinforcements similar to those proposed by Paine and demonstrated that Paine's bridge could have seen its way into a

¹⁵ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 243.

¹⁶ John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, p. 268.

¹⁷ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 225.

¹⁸ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 218.

¹⁹ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. II, p. 318 and Appendix A, *The Cobbett Papers*, p.456.

completed project. The Wear Bridge stood 236 feet in width and 95 feet in height. It was unfortunate for Paine that his bridge designs were not commissioned for he had to move elsewhere in search of work.

In 1787 Paine returned to England and applied for a bridge patent in that country. Paine proposed a bridge design for the River Thames and approached iron men in the North of England to execute a model settling on Samuel Walker of Walkers and Co. near Sheffield who recommended that it be executed in wrought or cast iron. Paine proposed a bridge of 110 feet and built a model with money he and Peter Whiteside, an American Merchant in London, had raised. The model was built at the Rotherham works in Yorkshire and was erected in June 1790 at Leasing-Green (now Paddington Green). Visitors paid one shilling per person to help raise money for the project. In the meantime Paine went to Paris and proposed a bridge project there but was forced to return to London when Peter Whiteside's business failed. Whiteside fell £620 in debt for his portion of the bridge and Paine and the American merchants Cleggett and Murdoch had to act as Whiteside's bail. They paid his debt and as a result Paine lost the money for his aging mother's stipend. He then recovered the money through visits to his bridge by Sir Edmund Burke, the Duke of Portland, Lord Fitzwilliam of Wentworth House, Lord Lansdowne, Sir George Staunton and Sir Joseph Banks. However, no contracts for the bridge in England were forthcoming.²⁰ Moncure Conway pointed out that while Paine continued to look for financial means in England and France and continued to promote the American cause overseas, "In truth America was silently publishing what they could out of a starving English staymaker."²¹

Paine continued to propose the benefits of iron bridges over wooden bridges and to request commissions from governments in France, England, the United States and Northern Europe.²² Moncure Conway wrote of Paine,

In setting the nation at once to a discussion of the principles of such government, he led it to assume the principles of independence; over the old

²⁰ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. II, pp. 259-277.

²¹ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, pp. 244-245.

²² Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 220.

English piers on their quicksands, which some would rebuild, he threw his republican arch, on which the people passed from shore to shore. He and Franklin did the like in framing the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776, by which the chasm of "Toryism" was spanned. (Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 1892, vol. I, pp. 224-5)

The Schuylkill River contract was not secured due to "the imperfect state of iron manufacture in America" according to a letter from Monsieur Chanut, one of Paine's French contacts. "Something of the same kind might be said of the political architecture," added Conway.²³ Instead, the State of Pennsylvania erected a wooden bridge over the Schuylkill River between 1798 and 1805.

Paine travelled to France with a model of his Schuylkill River Bridge in 1787 that he presented to the French Academy of Sciences in the hope that he would gain the attention of backers there or in Northern Europe. He proposed an arch of 400-500 feet to span the Seine. The French Academy met with Paine and agreed to appoint a committee to report on his bridge. While awaiting the decision Paine entered into correspondence with Thomas Jefferson who was American Minister in Paris at the time.²⁴ The French Academy returned a cautious response to Paine's proposal, having examined iron bridge models. They agreed with him on material points and while generally favourable they expressed a preference to one of "our own" which turned out to be a less expensive and less enduring wooden bridge by Migneron de Brocqueville.²⁵ The same correspondence from the French Academy expressed an interest in the famous bridge at Schaffhausen built by Grubenmann, a carpenter, the model shown to Paine by Perronet, the King's architect.²⁶ Paine's bridge was never built. Paine nonetheless continued constructing a diplomatic and political bridge of friendship across the channel and sent his design to Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society in England.²⁷

Paine's mother in England was now 91 years old and Paine desperately needed money to support her. While Paine's bridge efforts had not come to fruition, Paine was granted honorary

²³ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 226.

²⁴ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 228.

²⁵ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 229.

²⁶ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 229.

²⁷ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 230.

citizenship in France and elected Deputy for Pas-de-Calais to the National Convention in 1792. It is not known whether his monetary situation improved from the position but it saved him from imprisonment in England for having written *The Rights of Man* (1791-2).²⁸

While Paine awaited decisions on his bridge he wrote *Danton Emigré*, an archaeological treatise on freemasonry and was nominated by the 1792 Convention to revise the 1791 French Constitution. However as the Legislative Assembly progressed and voting began to abolish the monarchy, Paine fell into disfavour for advocating that Louis XVI be tried by jury, followed by imprisonment or exile, rather than executed. Paine opposed the use of the death penalty, which he considered to be the weapon of the monarchy, and was in favour of a democratic peoples' constitution that supported trial by jury. On 11 December 1792 Louis XVI was placed on trial before the Convention, and was sentenced to death by a political vote of 380 to 310 on 19 January 1793 and executed on 21 January 1793.²⁹ Robespierre and his supporters in the Convention mistook Paine for a Girondist, which he was not. However, Paine was imprisoned for opposing the death penalty on December 25, 1793 and was only released on November 6, 1794 through the diplomatic work of General James Monroe, US Minister to France, who arranged for Paine to be granted American citizenship. While Paine was incarcerated he wrote, *The Age of Reason* (1794-5).

In 1873 Gustav Courbet, artist and Minister of Fine Arts under the 1871 Commune explained to the American abolitionist Moncure Conway that he had little time to paint a commission of artworks for the Governor of Ohio since he had been wrongly forced to pay off the debt of the raising of the Vendôme column in 1871.³⁰ Paine's bridge plans were also interrupted by revolutions, imprisonment, economic turmoil, drafts of constitutions, advice to newly formed governments, and the writing of pamphlets including *Common Sense* (1776), *The Age of Reason* (1794-5) and *The Rights of Man* (1791-2). Such was

²⁸ Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 230.

²⁹ Albert Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution 1789-1799*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977 (originally published as *La Révolution Française*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1965).

³⁰ Ellen L. Ramsay, *Moncure D. Conway: Rationalism, and the Abolition of Slavery*, London: Thomas Paine Society and The Freethought History Research Group, 2007, pp. 37-38.

the historical moment that public projects proposed by Enlightenment figures such as Paine only gradually pushed their way onto the world stage in the face of the rocky road of diplomacy and post-war reconstruction that had been temporarily undermined by the canon balls of war.

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Suggested Images:

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Robert Clark, *Component Parts of the Arch, shewing the construction of the Iron Bridge at Sunderland, over the River Wear*, 1798, pencil drawing, Science Museum, London.

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