Defending God: Thomas Paine's last crusade and the contest over his memory

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Defending God: Thomas Paine’s Last Crusade
And the Contest Over His Memory

by
Theodore William Marotta

A Dissertation
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Abstract

This dissertation is focused on two key elements. First, it offers a new interpretation of Thomas Paine's religious writings, arguing that Paine was not attacking organized religion, but rather was *defending* God. Second, this dissertation explores Thomas Paine's hotly contested place in America's historical memory by focusing on Paine’s supporters—men like Thomas Edison, Robert Ingersoll, and Joseph Lewis, and organizations such as the Thomas Paine National Historical Association of New Rochelle, New York—who fought for decades to restore Paine's reputation in the eyes of Americans, and the tremendous difficulties they experienced as a result of their efforts to restore Paine among the pantheon of America’s Founding Generation.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been a long time in the making. I committed myself to this project several years ago, and along the way I likely should have been committed on a few occasions. Despite the hardships and minor bouts of insanity that come with writing a dissertation, it can be rewarding in myriad ways, not just in the fulfilling of a long-time goal, but also in the meeting of new colleagues and friends, and in developing a richer and fuller understanding of one of my great heroes: Thomas Paine. Of course, completing this dissertation would have been impossible without the help of countless people who lent their time, energy, and support to my research along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Richard Hamm, whose enthusiasm and gentle prodding kept me writing even when I didn’t want to. During one of our first meetings, he offered this advice: “Write around the edges.” This simple yet profound suggestion made immediate sense to me. I wrote around the edges until, before I knew it, I had completed a dissertation. Professor Hamm’s comments on my chapters, and his counsel in general, were always thoughtful and helpful, and I am indebted to him for keeping me on track throughout the process. I’d also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Nadiesza Kizenko and Gerald Zahavi, for their insightful comments, and for helping to make my dissertation defense an exciting and unforgettable experience. Thank you as well to Gary Berton, Director of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, New York, who guided me through boxes and boxes of Paine-related materials housed in the van der Weyde collection at Iona. I would have been lost without his patience and help. I would also like to thank Mariam Touba, Reference Librarian at the New York Historical
Society, who, in the early stages of my research, was instrumental in helping me uncover some materials that would ultimately make up the substance of the chapter on Robert Ingersoll that follows in the pages below. Thanks also to Harvey Kaye at the University of Wisconsin, for his sense of humor and for his encouragement throughout this process. And a big thank you to Mike Daly, Assistant Professor and Librarian at my institution, Fulton-Montgomery Community College, who, in the eleventh hour, helped me navigate the utterly counterintuitive world of Microsoft Word, and dragged me across the finish line.

I would also like to thank my parents for their inexhaustible wealth of support, emotional and material, and for their tireless encouragement along the way. Words fail me, other than to say that I hope I made you proud. Thank you also to Richard and Virginia Molea, my mother- and father-in-law. Richard was kind and thoughtful enough to send newspaper clippings along to me related to Thomas Paine over the years; I appreciated them very much and they were always both useful for my research and also were an inspiration for me to keep on writing.

Finally, and most importantly, I owe an enormous thank you and a huge debt to my beautiful wife, Michele, and my lovely daughters, Neve and Nola. Their patience and love made this dissertation possible. Quite simply, I could not have done it without you. I am eternally grateful to you, I love you forever, and I dedicate this dissertation to you.

Okay, alright, I can hear the faint stirrings of the orchestra preparing to play me off stage, so I will end with this...

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“To trace the curve of Paine’s reputation is to learn something about hero worship in reverse.”

—Dixon Wecter
Thomas Paine lived an extraordinary life. Born in Thetford, England in 1737, he was something of a failure, holding menial jobs as a staymaker and excise collector, until he arrived in Philadelphia in 1774, so ill from the grueling passage that he had to be carried off the ship. Bearing a letter of recommendation from his friend, Benjamin Franklin, who described Paine as “an ingenious worthy young man,” he was soon editing the *Pennsylvania Magazine* and honing his writing skills on a variety of subjects. The growing conflict between England and her colonies would inspire Paine to pen one of the most influential revolutionary and political manifestos in history, *Common Sense*, which many consider to be the catalyzing force for the colonies’ final break with England in July of 1776. Paine was present for, and participated dramatically in, the most transformative events of the 18th century: the American and French Revolutions. He is credited with first using the phrase, the United States of America, and numbered among his friends Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and James Monroe.

He was a war correspondent during the American Revolution, traveled with General Washington and his beleaguered troops, and remained doggedly loyal to the cause for eight long years. That first brutal and demoralizing winter of 1776 would see Paine drawing his mighty pen again, this time to bolster the esprit de corps of the Continental Army. Amid the grim news of military setbacks and troop desertions, Paine would write the first in a series of *Crisis* papers, highlighting his ability to shift from plain-spoken polemics to elegant and equally rousing prose with these famous opening
words: “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 their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”¹ During the course of his life he risked his freedom on several occasions, and barely escaped death on others. His was a time when freedom of speech was not an inalienable right—Paine and many of his publishers suffered dearly for their involvement in the publication of Paine’s articles.

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, he again risked his freedom upon his return to England, and was forced to flee from sedition charges after the publication of part two of the explosive *The Rights of Man* in 1792. Escaping to France, he participated in the drafting of the new French constitution, pleaded passionately, though unsuccessfully, for the life of the king, fell afoul of the Jacobins, and was arrested in 1793 and held in the Luxembourg prison for a year during Robespierre’s reign of terror, night after night watching dozens of his friends being led off to the scaffold. It was only through a propitious accident, the matter of an open door, that Paine himself did not lose his head. As the story goes, Paine was ill with a fever while imprisoned, and had received permission to open his prison door to benefit from a breeze. The custom was that guards would mark with chalk the doors of prisoners who were slated for execution the next day, and Paine’s time had come. Since Paine’s door was opened onto the hall, the mark was placed on the interior of the door, so that, later, when it was closed, the mark was invisible to the guards who had come to retrieve the doomed. Just a few days later, Robespierre fell and Paine thus passed from death to life.

Before Paine was taken to the Luxembourg, he hastily finished the manuscript of part one of *The Age of Reason* and smartly passed it along to his friend, Joel Barlow, just as he was being led away to an uncertain fate. He wrote part two after his release, while he recovered from illness at the home of the American ambassador to France, James Monroe. The reaction to *The Age of Reason* was swift and harsh. Members of the clergy replied to Paine’s theological works with extraordinary zeal, often relying on personal attacks to demolish Paine’s character and reputation. Back in America, some of the men whom Paine had claimed as friends openly criticized him and even shunned him, while others watched silently as Paine’s fortunes faded, and the Federalist newspapers mocked him mercilessly. *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s most controversial work, along with his own character and legacy, would be the subject of angry debate for decades after its publication. The controversy surrounding *The Age of Reason* was almost entirely the cause of Paine’s tragic end and turbulent afterlife, a sad fact when one considers Paine’s life of prodigious writing, international celebrity, and indefatigable service to the cause of liberty and to freethinking ideas around the globe.

When an exhausted Paine returned home to America in 1802, he found himself a pariah in the country he had helped found, and his death in 1809 would do nothing to quell the controversy surrounding his religious writings. One of Paine’s earliest biographers and closest friends, Thomas Clio Rickman, later observed that, in his “retirement to America, towards the close of his life, Mr. Paine was particularly unfortunate; for, as the author of the ‘Age of Reason,’ he could not have gone to so unfavorable a quarter of the world. A country, abounding in fanatics, could not be a
proper one for him whose mind was bold, enquiring, liberal, and soaring, free from prejudice, and who from principle was a deist.”

By the time Paine died, he had been so thoroughly vilified by his critics and ostracized by society that his passing drew almost no public attention, and few publicly grieved the loss of this once great figure in the American creation story. He may well have been nearly forgotten in the annals of history were it not for the tireless efforts of a small group of men and women who believed deeply in his life and writings and who dedicated much of their lives to restoring Paine to his proper place in America’s historical consciousness.

The purpose of this dissertation is two-fold. First, I will offer an entirely new interpretation of Thomas Paine’s monumental religious work, *The Age of Reason*, which challenges the consensus view that Paine’s most controversial piece of writing was a strident attack on religion. I intend to prove through a careful analysis of the text that Paine’s main purpose in writing *The Age of Reason* was to defend God. Quite simply, Paine believed God was better than man, but the characterizations of the Deity in the Old Testament in particular revealed Him to possess nothing but the worst of human passions. Paine hoped through forceful argument to redeem the reputation of God as an extraordinary and benevolent Creator, who by definition was above the base and vile human passions that men had ascribed to Him. The profound misunderstanding of the true intent of *The Age of Reason*, a misunderstanding that lay at the heart of virtually every printed word on the subject, is arguably the greatest cause of Paine’s sullied reputation in the eyes of history, and I hope to stimulate new discussion about Paine’s

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great theological work, and contribute to the recent and emerging interest in Paine studies.

Second, I will explore the daily challenges of the men and women who fought tirelessly to defend Thomas Paine and to promote his writings and legacy in an America that considered Paine to be largely a disreputable and, in some quarters, utterly despicable radical with atheism in his heart. Paine was indisputably not an atheist; but the prevailing religious prejudice against Paine, compounded by more than two centuries of scurrilous attacks against him and his character, presented a nearly Sisyphean task for those who hoped to restore his legacy in American memory. There is a common thread in the stories of the individuals who fought for Paine’s legacy: they were all enormous personalities; they were all deeply affected by Paine’s writings and by his example; they suffered similar public backlashes as a result of their advocacy of Paine’s ideas; and they all possessed a fearlessness and tireless tyranny of will that closely mirrored Paine’s. The daily struggles of the men and women who sought to restore Paine to what they believed was his proper place in the pantheon of the Founding Generation reveals just how deeply the antipathy toward Paine had become in the United States after the publication of The Age of Reason. As mentioned above, many who publicly championed Paine after his death faced a vicious backlash that paralleled Paine’s own experiences, and through this shared experience Paine supporters came to understand on a deeply felt level just how tragic the later years of Paine’s life truly were. The successes, and failures, of Paine’s die-hard supporters will be a major focus of this dissertation.

It is clear that many Americans found it nearly impossible to reconcile Paine’s contribution to American independence with Paine’s efforts to challenge Christian
dogma. Unlike many of the Founding Generation who still tower in our history books and in the form of elegant monuments on the National Mall, Paine is a marginalized and largely discredited Founder for few but the most ardent devotees of his life and writings. Americans appear perfectly able to overlook the fact that Washington and Jefferson were slave owners, but have great difficulty accepting Paine’s religious views. Religion has always been a kind of third rail in American culture and, as if to protect themselves from its dangers, many Americans have recoiled from The Age of Reason for well over two hundred years. Paine once rightly noted that intolerance was not so very different from tolerance: “The one assumes to itself the right of withholding liberty of conscience, and the other of granting it.” Unfortunately, Paine would get from his critics in America a far larger dose of the former than the latter, and he almost never got what he really wanted from his fellow citizens: acceptance.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I will first establish context by delving into the controversy surrounding The Age of Reason, in particular the hostile reaction to its publication by members of the clergy, by the press, and by historians and biographers of Paine, many of whom, I argue, have failed to comprehend the true meaning of the work and thus have shaped their understanding around a false premise—that The Age of

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3 For example, in a court case pitting striking union workers against the Paine Lumber Company of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and its owner George M. Paine, the great civil rights attorney Clarence Darrow invoked the name of Thomas Paine in his closing arguments. Observing a visceral, and decidedly negative, reaction in the courtroom, Darrow realized that he had erred: “I have not sized up the religion of this jury,” Darrow admitted, “and perhaps I have made a mistake.” Source: Clarence Darrow, Attorney for the Damned, ed. Justice William O. Douglas (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 283.

Reason was fundamentally a strident attack on organized religion. Chapter 1 will also serve as a historiographical sketch of the literature that has been published about The Age of Reason, both during Paine’s lifetime and in the two centuries that followed. Scathing personal attacks lay at the heart of many of the criticisms of The Age of Reason, and these ad hominem attacks, levied by some members of the clergy, along with some early, hostile biographies of Paine, helped to reify in America’s consciousness a false perception of Paine that he was some kind of monster, or at least a fallen angel, who at one time had been renowned for his contribution to the cause of liberty, but plunged from his high position when he chose to attack Jesus Christ—becoming the kind of infidel who, according to Theodore Roosevelt, “estees a bladder of dirty water as the proper weapon with which to assail Christianity.” The three damning words of Roosevelt, who decried Paine as a “filthy little atheist,” cemented the belief that Paine was an infidel and a boor, and that The Age of Reason was a scurrilous attack on revealed religion. Even the efforts of recent biographers to present Paine in a more objective fashion still reflect the consensus view of Paine’s religious writings, and have thus failed to shed new light on The Age of Reason or the man who wrote it.6

In Chapter 2, with the context of the controversy and misunderstanding surrounding The Age of Reason firmly established, I will offer a new interpretation of


6 Although Moncure Conway’s two-volume The Life of Thomas Paine (1908) remains one of the best, it has often been criticized for being more of a panegyric than a biography; and more recent biographies, beginning with Alfred Owen Aldridge’s Man of Reason (1959), Gregory Claeys’s Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought (1989), up through Craig Nelson’s Thomas Paine (2006), have attempted to present Paine’s life and writings with a more objective and dispassionate tone. Although, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, when it comes to The Age of Reason, objectivity seems nearly impossible to achieve.
Paine’s religious work. Through a close textual analysis of *The Age of Reason*, I will show that Paine was not attacking Christianity. Rather, Paine was defending God. In what remains one of the finest Paine biographies, Moncure Conway claimed that historians must bore through a mountain of prejudice in order to arrive at an understanding of *The Age of Reason* as the work of “an honest and devout mind.” The ways in which Paine’s religious writings have been maligned and misunderstood are myriad, and the mountain of prejudice to which Conway referred is indeed imposing. Thus, some excavation is required, and an entirely new interpretation of *The Age of Reason* is long overdue. Paine believed in God; that is beyond dispute. But more importantly, Paine believed that the stories in the Bible were a libel against God, and fought to redeem God’s reputation, to bring the world to a right and proper understanding of the true magnificence of the Deity. Paine’s greatest crime was not in attacking the Bible, I argue, but rather in insisting simply that God was better than Man, and for that he suffered dearly.

In Chapter 3, I shift the focus of the dissertation toward some of Paine’s greatest champions, who fought for years to rehabilitate Paine’s tortured legacy, beginning first with the boundless energy of one of the greatest orators of the nineteenth century, Robert Ingersoll. Ingersoll dedicated a significant portion of his public life to defending Thomas Paine, whose suffering at the hands of ignorant and often malicious attackers Ingersoll considered to be one of the great tragedies of history. Ingersoll sought to save Paine from infamy, not only because he idolized Paine, but also because he believed passionately that Paine’s theological writings, if given their proper attention and respect, would do great good for humanity. Ingersoll’s struggle to defend Paine and *The Age of Reason*
came at a price, and in this chapter I will detail the enormous backlash that Ingersoll faced as a result of his public defense of Paine. Ingersoll’s experience at the hands of an angry religious community would closely parallel Paine’s, and his experience clearly motivated Ingersoll to fight even more aggressively to defend Paine’s memory from being unjustly maligned.

In Chapter 4, I turn my attention to Paine’s most famous supporter, Thomas Alva Edison, who in his time lent his energy and celebrity to defending Paine. Edison discovered Paine at an early age and became a lifelong devotee of both his work and his example, in particular Paine’s fearless and abiding curiosity about the natural world. Edison wrote eloquently in defense of Paine, sensing in him a kindred spirit and, like Ingersoll, Edison thought Paine’s writings were grossly misunderstood—a misunderstanding that was ultimately a tragic loss for mankind. Chapter 4 will also detail Edison’s membership in and collaboration with the Thomas Paine National Historical Association of New Rochelle, New York (TPNHA). The TPNHA, with the help of their most famous member, was able to establish a memorial building and museum in Paine’s honor in the city of New Rochelle—a goal they had long dreamed of achieving. William van der Weyde, a lifelong champion of the Paine cause, plays a vital role in this chapter as well. From his position as president of the TPNHA during these years, van der Weyde exchanged dozens of letters with Edison in an effort to garner Edison's support for a host of projects, most notably the Paine building. Thanks to van der Weyde's tireless efforts, Edison himself, frail and deaf to the applause of a large crowd, would break ground for construction on the building on a drizzly spring day in 1925. The struggle over the
creation of the Paine building, and Edison’s support in making the building a reality, is a focal point of this chapter.

The TPNHA is itself the focus of Chapter 5. Established in 1884 for the purpose of promoting the life and works of Thomas Paine, as well as to defend Paine from the vicious attacks that had long hounded him, the TPNHA remains a vital organization in the fight to restore Paine’s legacy and promote new Paine scholarship. However, despite some enormous successes along the way, the TPNHA faced years of hardship and financial turmoil, along with a constant struggle to grow and maintain a national membership. The group also found itself in an often-hostile relationship with another historical organization in New Rochelle, the Huguenot Association. Since 1909, the Huguenots have maintained the small cottage in New Rochelle where Paine lived for a time after his return from France. But the Huguenots had, and still have, little interest in promoting Thomas Paine, whose religious writings they found particularly offensive.7 The TPNHA found itself bitterly at odds with the Huguenots for decades in their struggle to redeem Paine’s reputation, and that struggle would descend into angry disputes over seemingly small issues, like whether there should be a sign in front of Paine’s cottage bearing his name, to much larger disputes over the ownership of important Paine artifacts, and ultimately over mission of the Paine Association itself. As I will detail in

7 On a personal note, when I began my research for this dissertation I called the Thomas Paine Cottage, hoping to find some help from the cottage’s caretaker and member of the Huguenot Society, John Wright. At the time knowing nothing about the strange (and strained) relationship between the Huguenots and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, I asked Wright if he could point me in the direction of some good sources on Paine. Not only did he not recommend any sources, he also politely told me not to waste my time writing about Paine because, Wright argued, he was a largely irrelevant historical figure of little significance. Generally on the margins of history, Wright told me, was where Paine belonged.
this chapter, despite their often combative relationship, the two groups would slowly merge together over the course of the twentieth century, and find themselves in a turbulent partnership that hampered the TPNHA’s efforts to promote Paine to a national audience for decades.

In Chapter 6, I will focus on a few specific efforts by Paine supporters to have Paine permanently memorialized, namely in the form of public monuments, including a successful campaign to place a Paine bust in the Colonnade of American Immortals on the old New York University campus, and a failed effort to establish a monument in Washington, D.C. Another enormous personality, Joseph Lewis, plays a key role in this chapter. Although far less well known than Edison and Ingersoll, Lewis was a tireless supporter of the Paine cause; but Lewis was a lightning rod for controversy in his own right, and occasionally did more harm than good when he stepped into the public spotlight in behalf of Paine. Lewis and the TPNHA were at the center of efforts to have Paine memorialized; they struggled for decades, sometimes in concert and occasionally at odds, to overcome the enormous prejudice toward Paine. The level of resistance on the part of Paine’s critics to give any public acknowledgment to his historical significance is, at times, truly astounding, and I will detail that resistance, along with the media coverage of the Paine monument campaigns. From atop a Thomas Paine monument is the perfect vantage point from which to survey just how thoroughly controversial Paine was, and how much he remains a tortured figure in America’s consciousness.

In my conclusion, I will offer a brief summary of this dissertation, along with some proposals for continued research into the study of Paine’s hotly contested place in American memory.
In terms of sources and methods used in this dissertation, I of course relied heavily on the writings of Thomas Paine for my interpretation of *The Age of Reason*. The works of Paine have been assembled in two valuable collections, Philip Foner’s single-volume *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (1945), and William van der Weyde’s ten-volume *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine* (1925), both of which I drew on not only for the thorough chronicling of Paine’s writings, but also for the astute introductory comments made by the editors. Little did I know, when I began reading his collection of Paine’s writings, just how intimately I would get to know William van der Weyde, who from his position as president of the TPNHA would be a driving force behind the effort to restore Paine’s legacy.

Fortunately for my research, Paine was a prolific writer, and so too were the subjects of Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, Robert Ingersoll and Thomas Edison. *The Works of Robert Ingersoll* are funny, sharp, and insightful; and they were instrumental, along with some key biographies, including Susan Jacoby’s *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (2013), and Orvin Larsen’s *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll* (1962), in helping to flesh out my brief sketch of Ingersoll’s life and death, along with his passionate defense of Paine, detailed in Chapter 3. Edison’s *Diary and Sundry Observations* (1948) are a delightful and informative read; Edison’s wry humor and irreverence are strikingly similar to Paine’s. His collected writings played a vital role in helping me to understand Edison’s incredible appreciation for Thomas Paine and the extraordinary influence Paine had on his life.

I also relied greatly on the secondary literature on Thomas Paine, in the form of Paine biographies and general histories of the United States. These secondary sources
were key to establishing Paine’s tortured place in our history, and helped to show just how often Paine’s reputation had been maligned, how falsehoods about him had been perpetuated, and how his religious writings were so deeply misunderstood. For my research for Chapter 1, I also turned to the published replies by members of the clergy, including most notably the Bishop of Llandaff’s *An Apology for the Bible* (1854), to establish the ways in which critics of Paine among the clergy often relied on damning ad hominem attacks to sully Paine’s reputation. ⁸

The van der Weyde Collection at the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle was crucial for my research in general, and particularly for Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Sifting through hundreds of newspaper clippings and the enormous collection of meeting minutes, personal letters, budgets, and newsletters from the TPNHA, I was able to construct a narrative thread of their efforts to promote Paine through the establishment of memorials and the construction of the Paine Memorial Building in New Rochelle. I was also able to trace the conflict between the TPNHA and the Huguenot Association, their eventual merger, and their ultimate and bitter separation.

Along with the remarkable van der Weyde collection, I also consulted archived materials and local histories housed at the New Rochelle Public Library to help me better understand Paine’s long, odd, and often unfriendly relationship with the city of New Rochelle—from the original land grant of a 300-acre farm in New Rochelle given to

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⁸ See Franklyn K. Prochaska, "Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason Revisited," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1972), and in particular Patrick Wallace Hughes, *Antidotes to Deism: A Reception History of Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2013), for thoughtful syntheses of the responses to *The Age of Reason*. Although Hughes offers some salient examples of members of the clergy who steered largely away from personal attacks and focused instead on refuting Paine’s theological arguments, it is the members of the clergy who resorted to ad hominem attacks to damage to Paine’s reputation that are the focus of my analysis.
Paine by the State of New York, to his brief residency in the cottage on that property, and his eventual burial on (and abrupt removal from) a plot adjacent to the cottage. I was also able to glean a better understanding of the public reaction by residents of New Rochelle to the dedication of the first public monument to Paine, a marble obelisk erected mere yards from his former cottage, the details of which I have laid out in Chapter 6. The van der Weyde Collection and the documents and microfilmed newspaper clippings housed in the New Rochelle Public Library were invaluable in helping me to tell the story of Paine and his relationship not only with the city of New Rochelle, but also with America broadly speaking throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I also called upon the collection of Paine-related documents at the New York Historical Society in New York City, where I first discovered the Reverend Uzal Ogden’s *Antidote to Deism*, a perfect example of the type of ad hominem attacks levied against Paine, on which I rely in Chapter 1, and Robert Ingersoll’s *Vindication of Thomas Paine*, which first exposed me to Ingersoll’s fierce defense of Paine, which I use to great extent in Chapter 3. Although newspaper articles on the subject of Paine were abundant in all the archived materials I explored, and they play a key role in telling the story of this dissertation, I also relied on the incredibly useful research tool, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, which gave me access to a wider variety of national newspapers that may have been otherwise out of reach.

Much has been written about the life of Thomas Paine, and for that I am grateful, but to paraphrase Merrill Peterson in his work, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, not much has been written about what history has made of Thomas Paine, and for
the purposes of this dissertation I consider myself lucky. I will now turn to the extraordinary story of the controversy surrounding *The Age of Reason*, offer a new interpretation of Paine’s most infamous work, and detail the struggles of a remarkable collection of Paine supporters who championed his cause and fought to reclaim his memory over the course of two hundred years since his death.

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"No book on the subject of religion has been more misunderstood or misrepresented than this work by Thomas Paine."

—William van der Weyde, in his introduction to *The Age of Reason*
As Eric Foner has noted, “When Paine died in 1809, Americans almost totally ignored the passing of one of the most celebrated figures of the Age of Revolution.”¹ This assessment is undeniably true; Paine died virtually alone, a pariah in his adoptive home country—a country that he played no small role in helping to establish. Denied the burial in the Quaker cemetery he had requested, and with scant few in attendance, Paine’s body was laid to rest on the property of his New Rochelle farm. Few mourned his passing. As a final insult, Paine’s remains were unceremoniously dug up (albeit by an admirer and not a critic) and were subsequently lost to the ages, although rumors abounded for decades about their ultimate resting place.² Despite this sad fact, it would be wholly inaccurate to say that Paine had, or has, been forgotten. In fact, Paine has remained a lightning rod throughout the over two hundred years since his death, and a Google search of the name Thomas Paine turns up over four million results. University of Wisconsin Professor Harvey Kaye wrote of Paine that, while “academics have been squabbling over his place in the history of ideas, politicians and public intellectuals have been fighting over his political legacy. Liberals and radicals have continued to muster his

² In the Manual of Westchester County it is alleged that the executors of William Cobbett (who is mistakenly identified in the manual as “Corbett”) discovered a trunk full of bones “which were supposed to be the bones of Paine; the chest was sunk in the river Thames.” Cobbett stole Paine’s remains from his resting place in New Rochelle and brought them back to England in the hopes that he could give him a proper burial and have a monument built for him. Neither plan materialized, nor since have Paine’s remains. *Source*: Henry T. Smith, *Manual of Westchester County Past and Present; Civil List to Date 1898*, Vol. 1 (White Planis: Henry T. Smith, 1898), 82.
Conservatives and liberals alike quote him freely, though some appear ignorant of many of Paine’s positions that they would likely find repellent. Archconservative Glenn Beck, who in 2009 published a book entitled “Glenn Beck’s Common Sense: The Case Against An Out-Of-Control Government, Inspired By Thomas Paine,” apparently does not know that Paine, in his essay Agrarian Justice, published in 1795, was one of the first advocates for Social Security. Ronald Reagan quoted Paine in his first inaugural address, declaring “we have it in our power to begin the world over again;” but as Jack Fruchtman notes in Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom, there “is some question of whether the President fully understood the radical thrust of Paine’s statement.” President Obama quoted from Paine’s The Crisis in his first inaugural address, but chose not to acknowledge the source, perhaps because he felt that Paine, if not the uplifting quotation, was too controversial.

Paine’s memory continues to be hotly contested and, undoubtedly, the singular explanation for Paine’s precipitous fall from grace in the eyes of Americans, along with the continued controversy over his legacy, was the publishing of The Age of Reason and the great furor it sparked. In the aftermath of its publication, Paine the Founding Father became Paine the radical, Paine the stumbling drunkard, or Paine the wretched atheist. Thomas Edison, the prodigious inventor and Paine admirer, wrote in his diary that if “Paine had ceased his writings with ‘The Rights of Man’ he would have been hailed today as one of the two or three outstanding figures of the revolution. But ‘The Age of

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Reason’ cost him glory at the hands of his countrymen—a greater loss to them than to Tom Paine.”\(^5\) Most Americans, then and now, were unprepared to accept Paine as both a political and a spiritual revolutionary, and as Gregory Claeys has observed, “a surprising proportion of the American public continues to find Painite theology threatening.”\(^6\)

*The Age of Reason* was, and remains, a work that has been widely misunderstood, and as a result, greatly maligned. So, too, was the character of its author, and this has distorted the image of Paine in our collective memory. Paine made many enemies when he decided to publish his thoughts on religion, particularly among the clergy, and they attacked him tirelessly not only for his infidelity, but also for the extraordinary threat he posed to the social order. He was pilloried by many in the religious community for the rest of his life, and the attacks continued after he died, in some cases becoming more ferocious. As the long-time Paine champion and biographer Moncure Conway lamented, the false claims and misunderstandings about Paine and his religious writing “have accumulated for generations, so that a mountain of prejudice must be tunneled before any reader can approach the ‘Age of Reason’ as the work of an honest and devout mind.”\(^7\)

The following pages will examine some key moments when the image of Paine and his religious writings were distorted—in effect, when more earth was heaped atop the “mountain of prejudice.” Paine had his supporters, and his biographers too, but many of them exacerbated the misunderstanding of his religious writing by relying on old

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interpretations of the text and attaching themselves to an already-established nomenclature used to describe* The Age of Reason* as a strident assault on Christianity.

Even among his supporters, many could only accept Paine as the great revolutionary hero who penned *Common Sense* and set the colonies on a path toward independence. They recoiled at his thoughts on religion. Foner wrote: “It was only among those willing to accept him in full—his religious writings as well as political—that Paine remained a hero.”

As of the time of this writing, it would be fair to say that the number of Americans who fit Foner’s description is extraordinarily small. Perhaps a long-overdue reinterpretation of *The Age of Reason*, which will be the subject of the next chapter, will change that. But first we must turn our attention to the early critics who leveled their rhetorical guns on Paine, maligning both his writings and his memory.

As Paine no doubt expected, the publication of *The Age of Reason* spawned a legion of angry critics, particularly among the clergy. And Paine was also aware that there were obvious dangers to his reputation and legacy inherent in tackling the subject of religion. As Herbert Morais notes, “it required courage to take up the crusade against revealed Christianity; it meant the loss of social respectability. To speak pretty nothings was one thing; to court martyrdom for one’s views was quite another.”

Many in the religious community saw Paine as an existential threat, and sought to destroy his personal reputation and refute his arguments any way they could. They launched a relentless, and often quite vicious, siege against every thing that Paine represented. Franklyn Prochaska

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8 Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 269.
notes that some thirty replies to *The Age of Reason* were published in the years after its release. Based on his thorough research for his dissertation, Patrick Hughes has upped that number to over seventy. The responses from some members of the clergy were sometimes shockingly mean-spirited and rife with personal attacks against everything from the drinking habits of Paine to the way he dressed and kept his home. As Audrey Williamson observed, “Christian charity is not always a characteristic of clergymen…and wishful thinking will dismiss the evidence, when a political or religious prejudice needs to be sustained.” These early critical responses were instrumental in framing the distorted image of Paine in our historical memory.

The Reverend Uzal Ogden’s *Antidote to Deism* seems to typify the mixture of unhinged hostility, mischaracterizations, and ad hominem attacks to be found in some of the anti-Paine literature emanating from some members of the clergy. Ogden’s table of contents contains such chapter titles as “Gross ignorance of Mr. Paine,” “Mr. Paine insults the understanding of Americans,” “Mr. Paine’s book devoid of reason,” “Impious absurdity of Mr. Paine,” and “Weakness, depravity and impertinence of Mr. Paine.” Resorting to the standard line of attack that Paine was an alcoholic, Ogden explained that perhaps Paine had found that the bright, unflinching glare of “Divine Revelation gave too much pain to his reddened EYES of intemperance;* and, therefore, in hopes of obtaining ease, closed them against the sun-beams of the gospel.” Obviously not one for subtlety,

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Ogden attached an asterisk to the word *intemperance*, and Ogden’s note reads thus:

“This expression alludes to a well known fact that unhappily, Mr. Paine is a drunkard.”

Gamaliel Bradford has noted how common it was for Paine’s critics to rely on personal attacks rather than point-by-point rebuttals of his arguments: “The bitterest enemies, hunting every flaw in a character always exposed to the largest public view, could establish nothing but that he sometimes drank and that he was not clean.”

In keeping with that spirit, Ogden called Paine a “champion of infidelity,” who, “with almost unparalleled effrontery,” has “taken upon him to calumniate and blaspheme the Christian religion.” Ogden claimed that Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* “to excite us to join in a REBELLION against God…and to embrace his fallacious, gloomy and uncomfortable scheme of deism; a scheme, which, if adopted, would eventually rob us of virtue and happiness; plunge us into ignorance and error; superstition and idolatry, and fix on us the fetters of slavery.” If Ogden truly believed that was the message of *The Age of Reason*, then no wonder he was so concerned. Contemplating why Paine would write such a monstrous work, Ogden could not help but conclude that Paine had anything but the worst of intentions. Relying almost exclusively on ad hominem attacks, Ogden alleged that, fearing imprisonment and perhaps for his life, Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* in order to “ingratiate himself with the National Convention of France, by publicly declaring he was at least, as good a Deist as any of them, and therefore, perfectly

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13 Rev. Uzal Ogden, *Antidote to Deism. The Deist Unmasked; or An Ample Refutation of all the Objections of Thomas Paine, Against the Christian Religion; as contained in a Pamphlet, intitled, The Age of Reason; addressed to the Citizens of these States.* (Newark: John Woods, 1795), 15.


15 Ogden, *Antidote to Deism*, vi.

16 Ibid., 13.
French and patriotic, with regard to his religious opinions.”

This is an odd line of attack, considering that Paine had already stuck his neck out in defense of the king, and *The Age of Reason* was in part an attempt to quell the anticlerical fever that had swept France. One wonders how carefully, or if at all, Ogden read *The Age of Reason*.

Ogden, like so many of Paine’s critics who feared the consequences of Christians drifting from their faith, asked rhetorically, “what are the blessings of DEISM? The Deist, in wretchedness and blindness, gropes his way through this world of time, and, at length, stumbling on death, he plunges into eternity, with extreme uncertainty whether he shall exist or not, beyond the grave; or if he shall not be annihilated by death, without any rational hope, that he shall enjoy felicity!”

Ogden here echoed the sentiments of many—not just in the clergy—who saw deism as a kind of proto-nihilism, an utter destruction of hope and a belief in nothing. Ogden’s reading of Paine’s religious writings was profoundly incorrect. As the next chapter will show, Paine was a deep believer and a builder, not a destroyer. As is abundantly clear throughout *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s enduring friendship with God seemed to satisfy him completely; there was nothing bleak about it, there was no drab patina of disbelief in Paine’s cosmogony, and Paine had no doubt it would prove satisfactory to anyone who believed as he did.

Ogden also challenged Paine’s dismissal of revelation, arguing that what Paine would have called natural philosophy “hath a necessary dependence on revelation. Religion is but a name, when unconnected with a well grounded hope of immortality, which men could not fully have enjoyed, unless it had been revealed to them.”

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17 Ibid., 14.
18 Ibid., 50.
19 Ibid.
first place, Paine did believe in revealed religion, just not the kind to be found in the pages of books. In fact, Paine had boldly declared, “there is no man that believes in revealed religion stronger than I do.” For Paine, God revealed Himself routinely in the natural world. In the second place, Ogden seems to be arguing that humans would have been incapable of contemplating a future state of consciousness without the biblical revelation of the Old Testament. Ogden had obviously never read The Epic of Gilgamesh.

In an effort to stave off what Paine knew would have been a permanent stain on his reputation and a distortion of his writings, Paine responded energetically to many of the attacks against him; in fact, he devoted much of the remainder of his life to it, and his reply to Ogden’s Antidote to Deism is a concise and clever critique of the very premise of Ogden’s argument. Paine’s retort was simple: “An antidote to Deism must be Atheism. It has no other antidote—for what can be an antidote to the belief of a god, but the disbelief of God? Under the tuition of such pastors, what but ignorance and false information can be expected?”

To say that many in the clergy who replied to The Age of Reason did not wish Paine well would be a tremendous understatement. In the first of several letters to Paine that would ultimately comprise Dr. Richard Watson’s An Apology for the Bible, Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff, made his feelings abundantly clear: “I begin with your preface. You therein state, that you had long had an intention of publishing your thoughts upon

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religion, but that you had originally reserved it to a later period in life. I hope there is no want of charity in saying, that it would have been fortunate for the Christian world, had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention.”

Watson’s *Apology* is regularly mentioned in the historiography of Paine as a typical response to *The Age of Reason* from a member of the clergy, and a rather innocuous one at that. It was certainly the most widely circulated. What is routinely overlooked is the degree of vitriol that Watson displays. Paine, to the best of my knowledge, never wished anyone, even his worst enemies, any harm; but Watson, like Ogden and others, believed that Paine was doing untold damage to Christianity and to the world with his religious writings, and so felt compelled to smear both his name and his writing. If Paine succeeded in converting the masses to his way of thinking, then the Church imagined nothing but apocalyptic scenarios playing out. “In accomplishing your purpose,” Watson wrote, “you will have unsettled the faith of thousands…and have thereby contributed to the introduction of the public insecurity, and of the private unhappiness, usually and almost necessarily accompanying a state of corrupted morals.”

Watson, fearing that Paine’s style was uniquely calibrated to reach mass numbers of people—and therefore particularly dangerous, announced that he would write his own letters in a “popular manner” in the hopes that they would be read by the “class of readers, for whom your work seems to be particularly calculated, and who are the most likely to be injured by it.” This seems to suggest that Watson feared Paine less because

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 13-14.
of the content of his work *per se*, but rather because his writing was so accessible.

Certainly other deists had spoken of and published their thoughts on religion; this was not completely novel. Prominent deists like Ethan Allen and Elihu Palmer were no less subtle in their language; they barely received scorn from the public, but were rather generally forgotten by history.

But Thomas Paine could legitimately claim to have ushered in an internationally revolutionary political epoch with his pen alone. It was one thing if a few intellectuals were discussing deism in a salon somewhere; it was another if the great pamphleteer Paine was writing about it, and the great, unwashed masses were reading it. When Paine wrote in plain language that was meant for a much wider audience, it became particularly troublesome for the men who held the levers of power. “Thus,” as Herbert Morais observed, “the anti-Christian tendency of militant deistic ideology was too dangerous for the peace of society. It concealed tons of social dynamite which, if set off, would destroy not only organized religion but the social order.”25 Other historians have noted this salient fact. Ralph Roper argued that Paine “wrote *The Age of Reason* for the masses to read, and they read it. That was his unpardonable sin.”26 Adolf Koch echoed this sentiment in *Republican Religion* as well, claiming that attempts “to make infidelity a gospel for the multitudes…caused the faithful to raise the alarm.”27 Patrick Hughes has argued a similar point, writing that, while Paine’s critics “were concerned about what he wrote in *The Age of Reason*, they were more concerned about how he wrote it, for whom

he wrote it, and *that Paine* wrote it.”\(^{28}\) The Revolution in France no doubt exacerbated these fears and turned them into an outright dread, and it is impossible to understand fully the reaction to *The Age of Reason* without taking into account the historical context of the bloody anti-Christian spectacle that was unfolding in France.

Despite that Watson feared the infectious power of Paine’s writing, and hoped thoroughly to discredit Paine, he did make the occasional surprising concession. Paine focused considerable energy in *The Age of Reason* to highlighting errors in the Bible, and Watson accepts many of Paine’s arguments without great resistance: “Receive but the Bible as composed by upright and well informed, though, in some points, fallible men, (for I exclude all fallibility when they profess to deliver the word of God,) and you must receive it as a book revealing to you, in many parts, the express will of God; and in other parts, relating to you the ordinary history of the times.”\(^{29}\)

But, despite the occasional concession that Watson made—which has earned him the reputation among some historians as having largely ceded the argument to Paine, Watson, like Ogden, did not hesitate to use the worst form of argument, the ad hominem attack: “There is certainly some novelty, at least, in your manner, for you go beyond all others in boldness of assertion, and in profaneness of argumentation; Bolingbroke and Voltaire must yield the palm of scurrility to Thomas Paine.”\(^{30}\) Watson also issued an eerie warning: “...your abuse of holy men and holy things will be remembered, when your arguments against them are refuted and forgotten.”\(^{31}\)

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\(^{28}\) Hughes, *Antidotes to Deism*, v.

\(^{29}\) Lord Bishop of Landaff Richard Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, 60.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 84.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 158.
man who believes his opponent is no match for him, Watson appeared to dismiss Paine completely: “You have barbed anew the blunted arrows of former adversaries; you have feathered them with blasphemy and ridicule; dipped them in your deadliest poison; aimed them with your utmost skill; shot them against the shield of faith with your utmost vigor; but, like the feeble javelin of aged Priam, they will scarcely reach the mark, will fall to the ground without a stroke.”

Of course, Watson scarcely believed his own prose, for why would he bother writing such an apology if he, and other members of the religious community, had nothing to fear from Paine’s polemics?

Obviously, the effect of Paine’s *Age of Reason* on the faithful was nominal, especially in America—there is little evidence of a great conversion experience to deism for large numbers of Americans. In fact, quite the reverse appears to be true. The Second Great Awakening would not be long in coming after Paine died. The reason behind the limited impact is difficult to determine, although one could speculate that it had something to do with the efforts of the church—and many others to be discussed below—to malign Paine and his writing. Of course, the misinterpretation and misreading of *The Age of Reason* was by no means always deliberate and malignant in nature. But there is also something about the temperament of Americans that plays a role. In *Republican Religion*, Adolf Koch argues that, although Americans had experienced a political revolution in 1776, they were far too conservative for a religious one, and many recoiled in horror at the dual revolution unfolding nightmarishly in France: “The American liberal, while a republican in politics, was unable to accept republican religion. Consequently the religious implications of Revolutionary thought were quickly

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32 Ibid., 164.
submerged and freethought became an isolated and irresponsible element in nineteenth-
century America.” But regardless of how Americans felt about Paine’s understanding of God, some men of the cloth never relented in their efforts to malign him.

One of the most fascinating elements of the numerous replies to The Age of Reason from the clergy is how often they seem to agree with Paine, even if they do not know or acknowledge it. The replies from the clergy did untold harm to Paine’s reputation and led to gross misunderstandings of Paine’s religious writings, but Paine and members of the clergy often used almost identical arguments to prove the existence of God. In his response to The Age of Reason, Reverend Jeremy Belknap, who does not condescend to mention Paine by name (he calls him a “popular writer”), as if to rebut some imagined denial of the existence of God that Paine never made, offers this proof of God’s presence: “Why does the sun shine by his own luster, and the moon and planets borrow their light from him? How immensely swift and universally diffused are his rays? But what connects the particles of them together, or what force drives them to the utmost limits of heaven? What power confines the celestial globes to their orbits? What hinders them from rolling at large in the ethereal space? Or Keeps them from falling into the Sun, the centre of their attraction?” This passage does not differ much from some of Paine’s arguments. Take, for example, a passage from Paine’s speech entitled “The Existence of God,” in which he argues that the perpetual motion and predictability of the solar system is incontrovertible proof of the Creator’s presence: “Who then breathed into

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33 G. Adolf Koch, Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964), xi.
the system the life of motion? What power impelled the planets to move, since motion is not a property of the matter of which they are composed? If we contemplate the immense velocity of this motion, our wonder becomes increases, and our adoration enlarges itself in the same proportion.”

It is strange indeed that Belknap, Watson, and so many others were worried that disbelief in God would be the end result of reading *The Age of Reason*, when Paine’s true object was continually and forcefully to affirm His existence. Paine was routinely declared an atheist, which is inexplicable. If there is one point that Paine makes repeatedly clear in *The Age of Reason*, it is that he believes in God. Again, this speaks to how profoundly misunderstood *The Age of Reason* truly was, and remains, and it is particularly sad that Paine suffered his worst attacks from the Christian church. One can only conclude that the members of the church who responded to *The Age of Reason* either did not read it, were willfully being deceptive in accusing Paine of atheism, or could not comprehend that Paine’s claims of religiosity were truthful. Despite that Paine believed in God and routinely proclaimed his belief, his proclamations fell on deaf ears. As Kerry Walters notes: “in the eyes of his Christian contemporaries, apostasy from scriptural faith was tantamount to godlessness.” It is no wonder that Paine could not help but opine late in his life that, of “all the tyrannies that afflict mankind, tyranny of religion is the

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worst. Every other species of tyranny is limited to the world we live in, but this attempts a stride beyond the grave and seeks to pursue us into eternity.”

It was not just the Church that maligned Paine and *The Age of Reason*. Many of Paine’s former compatriots and friends shunned him for his supposed infidelity, and those who never much liked him to begin with had all the more reason to vilify him. One of Paine’s first biographers, James Cheetham, who, writing contemporaneously had the opportunity to cast Paine’s reputation permanently for posterity, took every opportunity to libel both the man and his religious writings, making the audacious claim that Paine’s “intention [in writing *The Age of Reason*] was more completely destructive than that of any other author that perhaps ever lived. While conspiring to subvert all government, he meditated the overthrow of all religion.” The Federalist newspapers had their way with Paine as well, calling him, among other things, ‘the scavenger of faction,’ a ‘loathsome reptile,’ a ‘demi-human archbeast,’ and ‘an object of disgust, of abhorrence, of absolute loathing to every decent man.’ It would come as no surprise that Paine would find enemies among the Federalists; even if he had never written a word on the subject of religion, he was still too much of a democrat ever to be trusted.

The America to which Paine returned in 1802, after years in Europe, months in prison, and the explosive publication of *The Age of Reason*, was an unwelcoming, hostile place. Not long after he arrived, he was arrested for indebtedness—a stinging insult to

the man who had helped launch American independence. In his history of the United States, Henry Adams described a glowing letter that Thomas Jefferson had sent to Paine, applauding Paine for his “useful labors” and inviting him to accept passage to the United States from France aboard a vessel called the Maryland. Adams, in his inimitable way, characterized the hostile environment in the United States awaiting Paine upon his return: “Had Jefferson written a letter to Bonaparte applauding his ‘useful labors’ on the 18th Brumaire, and praying that he might live long to continue them, he would not have excited in the minds of the New England Calvinists so deep a sense of disgust as by thus seeming to identify himself with Paine.”

Other Paine contemporaries were largely publicly mute on the subject of Paine’s writings, save for the always-noisy John Adams and his cousin, Sam, and few rose publicly to his defense. John Adams, at one time an admirer of Paine for his contribution to Independence, came to despise both the man and his shift from political to religious writing: “I know not whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no severer satyr on the age. For such a mongrel between pig and puppy, begotten by a wild boar on a bitch wolf, never before in any age of the world was suffered by the poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a career of mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine.”

Samuel Adams wrote a public letter to Paine, which is reasonably cordial, at least initially, but then it turns decidedly unfriendly; he applauds Paine for his service to the

42 A Letter from John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, October 29, 1805.
cause of the Revolution and to liberty, but chides Paine for writing a “defense of infidelity,” which would be “injurious to the feelings and so repugnant to the true interest of so great a part of the citizens of the United States.”

Although he did not live to see the uproar caused by the publication of *The Age of Reason*, Ben Franklin had advised Paine to remain silent regarding religion, arguing:

“Think how great a portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes habitual, which is the great point for its security.” The always-quotable Franklin added, “he who spits in the wind spits in his own face.”

Washington was silent. Too silent, for Paine’s liking, which prompted Paine to write a withering public letter to the general, over the protests of Paine’s loyal friend, James Monroe, which generated some controversy of its own. Paine believed that Washington—through the ambassador Gouverneur Morris—could and should have done more to get him out of the Luxembourg prison. He felt betrayed by Washington, and his emotions got the better of him. The letter did nothing to improve Paine’s reputation in the United States, and some have argued the letter to Washington damaged it beyond all

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45 James Monroe replaced Gouverneur Morris as ambassador to France after Morris’s recall, and Monroe secured Paine’s release from the Luxembourg. Paine, who had grown deathly ill while in prison, convalesced for several months at the home of Monroe and his wife on the outskirts of Paris. While staying with the Monroes, Paine penned the letter to Washington despite Monroe’s attempts to discourage him.
repair. As Dixon Wecter noted: “[Paine’s] enemies never let the people forget that Paine had attacked both Washington and God.”

The cipher Jefferson surely sympathized with Paine’s writings, but privately encouraged Paine not to publish his third part of *The Age of Reason*, sensing that Paine had crossed the Rubicon as far as the subject of religion was concerned. Benjamin Rush was clearly offended by Paine’s thoughts on religion, finding them to be “so offensive to me that I did not wish to renew my intercourse with him.” And Henry Adams, in his aforementioned history, noted this sad detail: “It is disappointing to find that a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Robert Treat Paine, had his name changed in 1801 from Thomas to R.T. Paine, Jr., through hatred of the more famous Thomas.”

One of Paine’s earliest biographers and closest friends, Thomas Clio Rickman, who did what he could in 1819 to correct the historical record that James Cheetham had so badly distorted in his scandalous biography of Paine a few years earlier, later commented that Paine's return to America "was particularly unfortunate; for, as the author of the ‘Age of Reason,’ he could not have gone to so unfavorable a quarter of the world. A country, abounding in fanatics, could not be a proper one for him whose mind was bold, enquiring, liberal, and soaring, free from prejudice, and who from principle was a deist.” Rickman also echoed one of Paine’s long-held beliefs: “Of all wrath, fanatical wrath is the most intense; nor can it be matter of surprise that Mr. Paine received from great numbers in America an unwelcome reception, and was treated with

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48 Ibid., 109.
neglect and illiberality.”\textsuperscript{50} And, as Gamaliel Bradford, author of \textit{Damaged Souls}, has observed, in reaction to Paine’s shift from political to theological writing, Americans’ attitudes “changed from extreme enthusiasm to bitterness, a contempt, a hearty repudiation, which lasted for a century at least, is hardly now forgotten, and would be difficult to surpass in the history of human prejudice.”\textsuperscript{51}

Paine was even denied the vote upon his return to America on the grounds that he was not a citizen. As Moncure Conway made clear, Paine’s citizenship was never legitimately in question; it was “precisely that of all Americans who, born under the British flag, took the side of the American flag.”\textsuperscript{52} But Paine’s citizenship was questioned not just because his frank expressions on the subject of religion made him appear alien to many Americans. I suspect it was also because he was a self-declared citizen of the world. He considered the United States his home, but that he saw himself also as part of a greater, interconnected whole seemed clearly to disagree with the more colloquial and feverishly patriotic core of many Americans. To be a citizen of the world, to wish the world well and to do good to make that happen, seemed by definition to make one separate from, perhaps even an enemy of, the United States. Paine’s brand of deism along with his vocal internationalism then, were seen as dangerous character flaws, almost un-American in the eyes of citizens whose xenophobia and nativism have been so often and so easily aroused. Effectively shunned from his former place atop the pedestal among the eminent founding generation, Paine could do little but eek out his final years, vainly attempting to reclaim his reputation and clarify his true intent in writing \textit{The Age}

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The New York Times}, October 21, 1899.
of Reason. He devoted much of his writing after his return to America to the subject of religion, but at that point it was extremely difficult for him to find any willing publishers, so his efforts were frustrated. What would come to be known as the third part to The Age of Reason would not be published until after Paine’s death in 1809.

Paine’s religious writings, along with his reputation, had already been badly sullied by the clergy, by some of his former friends, by the press, and by a few of Paine’s earliest biographers. But the coup de grace came decades after Paine died, when Teddy Roosevelt called Paine a “filthy little atheist.” Roosevelt was wrong on all three counts, and in an 1899 letter to the New York Times, Moncure Conway rose to Paine’s defense, first decrying Roosevelt’s biography of Gouverneur Morris—from where the infamous slur originates—as “a unique collection of blunders,” and then assailing Roosevelt’s assertion that Paine was either filthy, little, or an atheist: “This sentence,” Conway wrote, “long ago denounced by myself and others without eliciting any retraction, must now remain as a salient survival of the vulgar Paine mythology, and as the most ingenious combination of mistakes ever committed in so small a space in any work professing to be historical.”

Conway was correct. Had Roosevelt taken even a perfunctory glance at the first few sentences of The Age of Reason, he would have encountered Paine’s simple testament, from which he never wavered: “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope

for happiness beyond this life.”

Or, if Roosevelt had chanced to read Paine’s 1797 Paris address to the Society of the Theophilanthropists, he would have read Paine’s sharp critique of the arrogance of atheism.

So why did Roosevelt label Paine an atheist? The answer is most likely because Roosevelt had never actually read *The Age of Reason*; or if he had, he misread it. He probably formed an impression of Paine, as countless others had, based on hearsay and distorted interpretations that had been passed down to him. And Roosevelt’s words compounded those distortions exponentially. Virtually everyone who has written about Thomas Paine in the years following Roosevelt’s infamous slur have made mention of it, have tried to correct the record, and usually excoriate Roosevelt for propagating such a falsehood, but almost no one has elaborated on why Roosevelt made this claim, or the public debate it stirred.

It is clear that Gouverneur Morris, who never shied away from an opportunity to criticize Paine, had it out for him at a very early stage, long before Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* and even before *The Rights of Man*. During the Silas Deane affair,

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55 Thomas Paine, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), 751. Paine’s speech, entitled “The Existence of God,” remains one of the most clear and persuasive arguments he ever made that he was a true believer. His challenge to atheists that they produce a machine capable of creating perpetual motion similar to the force that keeps the planets predictably in their orbit shows that his stay in the Luxembourg had not robbed him of his sense of humor.

56 See Dixon Wecter’s article, “Hero in Reverse,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Winter 1942), for an examination of the private debate between Roosevelt and William van der Weyde, the editor of a multi-volume collection of Paine’s writings, which I have used extensively here, over the use of the phrase “filthy little atheist.” Roosevelt eventually, albeit begrudgingly, admitted privately to van der Weyde that he should have used the word *deist* instead of *atheist*, but he remained stubbornly insistent that his characterization of Paine as *filthy* was accurate. Although Wecter amply covers the private row between Roosevelt and van der Weyde, he does not examine the public debate it stirred.
Gouverneur Morris “urged Paine’s plebeian origins as sufficient reason for dismissal. He argued that Congress had no wish to punish Paine, but merely to turn out of office a man who ‘ought never to have been in it,’ a ‘mere adventurer from England, without fortune, without family or connexions [sic], ignorant even of grammar.’”

As a result, there is good reason to suspect that Morris, in his capacity as ambassador in Paris during the French Revolution, did not do much, if anything at all, to help secure Paine’s release from the Luxembourg Prison. Roosevelt approved of Morris’s inaction, apparently because Roosevelt despised Paine as much as Morris did.

Roosevelt took the time to libel Paine in his biography of Gouverneur Morris in a strange *non sequitur*, and the passage is so often quoted out of context that it seems worthwhile to print the entire section in full. In the chapter devoted to Morris’s time in Paris during the French Revolution, Roosevelt describes the bloody carnage of the Terror and the great number of men and women who went to the guillotine—including the queen, who died “with a brave dignity that made people forget her manifold faults.”

Amid the bloody details, Roosevelt pauses to mention one potential victim who got lucky:

One man had a very narrow escape. This was Thomas Paine, the Englishman, who had at one period rendered such a striking service to the cause of American independence, while the rest of his life had been as ignoble as it was varied. He had been elected to the Convention, and, having sided with the Gironde, was thrown into prison by the Jacobins. He at once asked Morris to demand him as an American citizen; a title to

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58 Theodore Roosevelt, *Gouverneur Morris* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 288. The quotation within the quotation, “where he amused himself with publishing a pamphlet against Jesus Christ,” is from a letter from Gouverneur Morris to Thomas Jefferson, which Roosevelt no doubt read while doing his research for the biography of Morris.
which he of course had no claim. Morris refused to interfere too actively, judging rightly that Paine would be saved by his own insignificance and would serve his own interests best by keeping still. So the filthy little atheist had to stay in prison, ‘where he amused himself with publishing a pamphlet against Jesus Christ.’ There are infidels and infidels; Paine belonged to the variety—whereof America possesses at present one or two shining examples—that apparently esteems a bladder of dirty water as the proper weapon with which to assail Christianity. It is not a type that appeals to the sympathy of an onlooker, be said onlooker religious or otherwise.  

*The Age of Reason* is many things but is least of all a pamphlet against Jesus Christ. Paine admired Jesus Christ and said good things of him. That a future president felt passionately enough about Paine to hurl insults at him nearly a century after his death clearly suggests that his religious writings continued to rankle, and that Roosevelt was among a number who still considered Paine’s ideas dangerous. Roosevelt was also wrong in alleging that Paine had no claim to American citizenship. As noted above, Paine was as much a citizen as Washington or Jefferson. But what may be more fascinating is that Roosevelt’s careless remark, buried in a biography of Gouverneur Morris, generated a controversy of its own, when some of Paine’s defenders stepped in to speak in behalf of the man who could no longer defend himself. Moncure Conway was one of the most notable, but others also stepped into the fray, including Cyrus Coolidge, who lamented that there was “a time when to slander and malign the memory of Paine was a virtue. There was a time when, as a New York pastor publicly stated, every orthodox minister considered it his duty to preach against the ‘horrible infidel, Tom Paine,’ without taking the trouble to become acquainted with the life and writings of that

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59 Ibid., 288-89.
remarkable man.” But Coolidge could not believe that such a man as Governor Roosevelt could so grossly mischaracterize Paine in his biography of Morris. Coolidge hoped that Roosevelt, “as an honest man, he will familiarize himself with the true facts about Paine, and have manhood enough and courage enough to acknowledge his mistakes.”

Conway strenuously objected to Roosevelt’s three words, and did his best to publicly shame the then-governor of New York. “Although his attention has been called to his gross errors,” Conway wrote, “privately as well as publicly, the Governor, with all his good qualities, seems unequal to an admission of his mistakes, and he thus imposes on his literary contemporaries the necessity of arraigning not only the errors but the competency, or else the honesty, of their author.”

The public controversy dragged on for years and into Roosevelt’s presidency. A Chicago atheist named M.M. Mangasarian also defended Paine, holding Roosevelt’s “religious training responsible for his narrow views,” and complaining that in “politics we are civilized; in religion we are still barbarians.” Apparently, Mangasarian had exchanged letters with Roosevelt, asking him to correct the record publicly, which Roosevelt refused to do. Mangasarian concluded that, while Roosevelt is worthy of respect in some areas, “he is so small in others that it seems incomprehensible that one man can be capable of doing and saying things so wide apart. I pity his ignorance, and

61 Ibid.
the worst I wish him is that he may in time become enlightened.”\textsuperscript{64} A Chicago-based group calling itself the Independent Religious society assembled at Orchestra Hall on February 14, 1909, to hear an address by Mangasarian entitled “The Real Lincoln,” and after which drafted a series of resolutions demanding that Roosevelt retract his claim that Paine was a filthy little atheist. The society resolved that Mangasarian, as their representative, “call upon the president in Washington to request him in an earnest and respectful manner, and in consideration of the splendid virtues of Thomas Paine and his matchless services to the nation in ‘the times which tried men’s souls,’ to withdraw publicly his regrettable and indefensible censure of one of the first citizens of the republic who helped to make the world freer by his genius and grander by his heroism.”\textsuperscript{65}

In another letter to the \textit{Times}, a contributor sympathized with Mangasarian’s plight: “Let your correspondent ‘M.M.’ take heart. The rabid fulminations in certain quarters are merely the snarls of the toothless old hound.” The contributor also mocked Roosevelt’s ignorance: “What matters it if a certain illustrious American nimrod, in a moment of fish-wifely wrath, has pointed to that heroic figure of two great efforts for human liberty, Thomas Paine, as a ‘filthy little atheist.’”\textsuperscript{66}

Roosevelt never took the time either to familiarize himself with the facts about Paine, or to correct the historical record publicly. And, strangely enough, although the \textit{Times} was running articles that gave voice to Paine supporters who sought to clear the record about his spirituality, the newspaper seemed to be sowing even more confusion. A

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, February 15, 1909

Others, including the great 19th-century orator, Robert Ingersoll, and the eminent inventor Thomas Edison, who will be the subject of other chapters, championed both Paine and *The Age of Reason*, but few today remember their efforts. Roosevelt’s claim stung badly. Dixon Wecter famously observed that “To trace the curve of Paine’s reputation is to learn something about hero-worship in reverse.”

Roosevelt’s three words seemed to complete Paine’s stunning reverse apotheosis.

Despite the best efforts of Paine’s many biographers to rehabilitate Paine’s image and to demonstrate that Paine believed in God—in fact, to refute Roosevelt’s claim—many misperceptions about his religious writings persist. This persistence continues in part because Paine’s historians have generally accepted and perpetuated the notion that Paine was savagely attacking Christianity in *The Age of Reason*. When referring to Paine’s religious writings, historians offer words like “scathing,” “merciless,” “ridicule,” “attack,” “vituperative,” “sardonic,” “disdainful,” and “acid.”

Alfred Owen Aldridge called Paine a “strident” iconoclast, and wrote “there is no doubt that a large part of his

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Age of Reason is a savage attack on Christianity.”70 Herbert Morais called the work a “powerful engine of destruction,”71 and characterized The Age of Reason as “the first blast of deistic dynamite to disturb the complacency of the faithful.”72 A.J. Ayer closed his chapter on The Age of Reason in his Paine biography with this summation, “…whatever logical objections there may be to Thomas Paine’s deism, one cannot but admire the force and courage of his attack not only on Christianity but on any form of religious superstition.”73 Jack Fruchtman asserted that Paine “cared little for the established beliefs and institutions of his day. He attacked them all. Even less did he heed the consequences of verbally assaulting the institutions he so hated.”74 James Smylie argued that The Age of Reason was an attack on Christianity, and, “at least implicitly, against Protestantism.”75 Prochaska made the claim that “Innocence, optimism, and candor fostered The Age of Reason, qualities that when joined often find expression in wrath.”76 And Mary Agnes Best, in her 1927 Paine biography, claimed that Paine, after his release from Luxembourg, “raged against the idea of God which he

72 Ibid., 120.
believed was responsible for making men cruel.”  

On the 200th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine, a writer for *The New York Times* reflected back on the controversy surrounding *The Age of Reason*, concluding that perhaps Paine’s “reverence for the God of Nature was lost sight of in the reckless vehemence with which he attacked the God of the churches…What survives of him is his hatred of injustice, his belief in humanity. The rest, as Hamlet said, is silence.”  

At least in 1937 the *Times* had for the moment accepted the fact that Paine believed in God. 

The above passages typify what has become the consensus view of Paine’s religious writing: wrathful, destructive, almost instinctively, unthinkingly iconoclastic. Many historians approached *The Age of Reason* as the literary equivalent of an incendiary bomb. Some stood up for him, or at least approached the work with a more nuanced eye, but few, save for perhaps Robert Ingersoll, saw Paine’s religious writings as anything but a strident attack on Christianity and an ill-conceived misreading of the temperament of American audiences. It was certainly from the heart, most agreed, but better left unsaid. This kind of understanding of Paine’s writing appears almost to have become reflexive and casual, and as such most historians of Paine have clung to a particular and distorting vocabulary to describe Paine’s religious writings. Alfred Owen Aldridge, who has written arguably one of the best biographies of Paine, claims—and this is certainly and obviously correct—that “most people view *The Age of Reason* as a formal attack on religion…” and he was also correct in noting that Paine was in part attempting to prevent

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the French from “running headlong into atheism.” But Aldridge also claimed that *The Age of Reason* was only nominally “directed against atheism,” which, as the subsequent chapter will demonstrate, is to miss the point of the work entirely.

In the years since the publication of *The Age of Reason*, it also became fashionable for his critics, along with many of his biographers, to dismiss his religious writings as “nothing either very new or very convincing.” For instance, Prochaska concluded that “Paine’s religion was unsatisfactory to philosophers because of its insufficient arguments, and largely irrelevant to those it hoped to reach because it lacked emotional appeal.” To say that *The Age of Reason* lacks emotional appeal is a gross misrepresentation. *The Age of Reason* is suffused with emotional appeal. It is the plea of a dying man. As Moncure Conway noted, *The Age of Reason* represents “the agony and bloody sweat of a heart breaking in the presence of crucified Humanity.” It is not simply a book, Conway wrote, “it is a man’s heart.”

It is, of course, obviously true that countless others had preceded Paine in writing thoughtfully about deism, and Paine’s critics in the religious community were well versed in having to respond to any published works that seemed to threaten Christian orthodoxy. In his dissertation entitled “Antidotes to Deism: A Reception History of Thomas Paine’s

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80 Ibid., 230.
The Age of Reason, 1794-1809,” Patrick Hughes notes that, “As many of the respondents to The Age of Reason were fond of pointing out, Paine was but the most recent (and often the least skillful) example of a century-long intellectual tradition that has sought, unsuccessfully, to undermine the very foundations of revealed religion.”84 But I argue that the consensus view that Paine was not breaking any new ground comes from a misreading of The Age of Reason as fundamentally an attack on revealed religion and Christianity broadly speaking. What makes The Age of Reason uniquely special is not the ways in which Paine attempts, for example, to discredit the Mosaic accounts in the Old Testament, which other perhaps more scholarly deists had done effectively in the past. It is Paine’s indefatigable and spirited defense of his Creator that makes The Age of Reason a document worthy of careful study. The passion that Paine displays in defending God is what gives The Age of Reason its great emotional and historical significance.

Despite what appear to be reflexive and often dismissive assessments of The Age of Reason as an unoriginal and angry anti-Christian screed, some historians have gotten nearer the mark in understanding The Age of Reason as a deeply religious work. In Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom, Jack Fruchtman wrote: “To ascribe the word ‘apostle’ to Thomas Paine, even when it is linked to freedom, is to emphasize the essentially religious character of his work.”85 And in Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature, Fruchtman added that Paine was “convinced of his specially appointed role to preach the coming perfection through man’s agency. God’s work, the cause of liberty,

legitimized the work of the political activist and theological reformer. These roles united in the person of Thomas Paine."^86 F.J. Gould took a similar tack in seeing Paine as a kind of evangelist, arguing that the “essential religion for the prophet of the ‘Age of Reason,’ was a humane behaviour towards mankind, and a joyous study of natural law, based upon confidence in a divine, eternal Wisdom.”^87 Noel Gerson argued that *The Age of Reason* was primarily an “affirmation of [Paine’s] faith and consequently of all true faith, the only faith to which a thinking man could adhere.”^88 Ira Thompson came perhaps closest of any of his biographers to understanding Paine’s motivation for writing *The Age of Reason*, arguing that Paine’s “criticisms of the Bible arose from his deep religious convictions, and from his interest in and insistence upon what he considered to be the correct worship of God.”^89

Despite some of the more nuanced interpretations of Paine’s religious writings, there is still a generally accepted notion that Paine was savagely attacking Christianity, and that Paine’s principle mission was to liberate men from the shackles of organized religion. As Noel Gerson explained in a way that seems to typify the consensus view, Paine believed that “man could not be completely free until he rid himself of the religious superstitions of the past, which bound and gagged him as much as political oppression.”^90

^90 Gerson, *Rebel! A Biography of Tom Paine*, 188.
But the truly astounding and entirely overlooked argument of *The Age of Reason*, which will be the subject of the following chapter, is the extraordinary lengths to which Paine went to free God from the shackles of men.
“Why is man afraid to think?”
—Thomas Paine, from “Remarks on Robert Hall’s Sermons,”

*The Age of Reason*
When Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia in 1774 at the age of thirty seven, he began an astounding and rapid metamorphosis—from a man almost wholly unknown and of little apparent use to the world, into a man whose writings electrified the ages and troubled the sleep of monarchs. Almost overnight a man at once celebrated and vilified, few who knew of Paine had no opinion of him. With the publication of *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine became an international celebrity and, more importantly, someone whose words were to be taken very seriously. His pen had the power to rattle empires. Paine’s writings had an azure clarity, a sharpness and relentlessly dogged persistence to them. He had, of course, consciously crafted them that way to be comprehended by a mass audience, and that was in part the brilliance of his style. He had no patience for the thought of colonists crowded around guttering candles in taverns and parlors along the Eastern seaboard, vainly struggling to comprehend his meaning, or worse yet, having his words interpreted by some elitist third party.

The astounding success of *Common Sense*, both as a publishing sensation and as the work responsible for pushing many colonists off the tottering fence of ambivalence and toward independence, certainly was incontrovertible proof to Paine that his words were hugely influential to an enormous audience. Following *Common Sense* were his equally strong *Crisis* papers, in which Paine penned some of the greatest and most moving prose of his life, and which General Washington deemed important enough to have read to his soldiers on the eve of the crossing of the Delaware. Years later, his
*Rights of Man* created such a furor in his home country of England that he was forced to flee to Paris in order to avoid imprisonment.

It should come as no surprise then, that after such a meteoric and profoundly influential writing career as his, Thomas Paine was used to being understood. So when Paine finally focused his attention on the subject that had long occupied his mind, religion, he undoubtedly assumed there would be no difficulty in conveying his ideas. Some might disagree with his argument, he surely thought, but no one would misunderstand it. And yet, as we have seen, Paine’s theological works remain some of the most greatly misunderstood and maligned writings of all time. Paine certainly expected criticism; he knew he was stirring a hornets’ nest when he began composing his thoughts on religion, and he had experienced plenty of persecution after the publication of *The Rights of Man*. But *The Age of Reason* was different. When Paine gave the just-completed manuscript to his friend Joel Barlow shortly before being taken to the Luxembourg prison, he had no reason to believe that he would live long enough to hear, much less respond to, any criticism. *The Age of Reason* was the last thing Paine believed he would ever write. It was his last will and testament.

Yet Paine survived his stay in the Luxembourg and did live to learn that, much to his surprise and dismay, there were countless critics, and, worse yet, many had completely misunderstood the point of his writing *The Age of Reason* in the first place. Despite Paine’s best efforts to clarify his meaning in the numerous publications that followed the release of the explosive *Age of Reason*, the clamor that arose around it became such an enduring cacophony that Paine himself could not be heard above it, and after he died the noise continued for two hundred years. Because his critics were so
relentless in their efforts to discredit Paine, and because many of his supporters and
biographers either misunderstood or simply accepted the conventional arguments about
the meaning of his religious writings, it has become almost an axiom that Paine was
savagely attacking Christianity. As a result, history is left with a flawed understanding of
*The Age of Reason* and an even more unclear view of Paine’s motivation for writing it.
Complicating the understanding of *The Age of Reason*, historians have for too long
focused on and become mired in debate over the merits of Paine’s argument—and
whether his theological interpretation was sound or flawed. This seems wholly to miss
the point of *The Age of Reason*. What compelled him to write for such a prolonged
period of time about religion, to return to it again and again—to make it, by and large, the
focus of the remainder of his written work? I argue that Paine’s religious writings remain
misunderstood because his principle motive for writing them remains misunderstood.
The Bible, an exasperated Paine once wrote, “is a book that has been read more, and
examined less, than any book that ever existed.”¹ Ironically, the same is true of *The Age
of Reason*.

Paine was not writing to attack religion, as his defenders, critics, and biographers
almost universally claim. He was writing, earnestly and passionately, to defend God.
Paine considered the Old and New Testaments collectively to be an outrageous libel
against the Creator, and he took up his pen in God’s defense in the same way as he did in
the defense of liberty. Paine was out not just to liberate mankind from the chains of
political and religious tyranny. That surely was a part of his mission and he devoted his

Historical Association, 1925), 328.
life to it from the time he arrived in Philadelphia until his death. He was also on another
mission: to liberate God from the shackles of men. To act as God’s earthly attorney and
to challenge ossified belief systems that had accumulated over millennia was no small
feat. But only a man who had shattered centuries of conventional wisdom about
hereditary monarchy and helped to usher in an astonishing epoch of international
revolution could think himself equal to the task.

Despite over two centuries of misunderstanding about Paine’s motivations, the
evidence of Paine’s crusade to defend God remains ever-present and available to the
curious reader on every page he wrote on the subject. A close analysis of Paine’s
writings reveal with dramatic consistency that Paine had taken it upon himself to defend
the honor of his creator from malignity and ignominy. As demonstrated in the last
chapter, in virtually every Paine biography, Paine is described as a vituperative attack
dog, an iconoclast who mercilessly derided organized religion. But little is offered in the
way of what motivated him to write. Why was Paine so passionate? As I will illustrate,
Paine felt compelled to defend the honor of his Creator, whom he believed was being
unjustly maligned, not only because it was the truthful and just thing to do, but also
because he believed it would bring mankind back to an awed reverence for God. To flip
the conventional interpretation—that Paine was attacking Christianity—and instead see
Paine’s writings as a spirited defense of God is crucial, because his conviction that the
Creator was being unjustly smeared helps to explain Paine’s ferocity in His defense; it
also makes the last twenty years of his life all the more poignant.

In this chapter, I will focus first on parts one and two of the monumental work,
The Age of Reason, written before and after his stay at the Luxembourg prison. I will
then turn to the religious writings he composed in the aftermath of *The Age of Reason’s* publication, after Paine began to get a clearer sense of how dramatically his writing was being misunderstood. It is in these later writings that we find Paine’s most spirited defense of God. It must have come as quite a shock to him that he, whose words had in the past been so influential to such a huge audience, was finding himself forced to clarify his position over and over again. Paine, the adorer of God and friend of mankind, surely must have felt a deep sense of disappointment in those who failed to comprehend his meaning. His clarion call in defense of the Almighty had been misinterpreted. Paine’s disappointment and frustration becomes more evident in his later religious writings, but it is to his first effort—his opening arguments—that I shall now turn.

As Thomas Paine famously recounted, his doubts about Christianity—though never about the existence of God—came at a very early age, and he remembered vividly a sermon he attended when he was about seven years old on the subject of the crucifixion of Christ:

After the sermon was ended, I went into the garden, and as I was going down the garden steps (for I perfectly recollect the spot) I revolted at the recollection of what I had heard, and thought to myself that it was making God Almighty act like a passionate man who killed His son when He could not revenge Himself in any other way, and, as I was sure a man would be hanged who did such a thing, I could not see for what purpose they preached such sermons. This was not one of that kind of thoughts that had anything in it of childish levity; it was to me a serious reflection, arising from the idea I had that *God was too good to do such an action, and also too almighty to be under any necessity of doing it.* I believe in the same manner at this moment; and I moreover believe that any system
of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system.”

This epiphany led him not to atheism, but rather to a deeply reverent deism, and a belief that the God of the Bible was not the true God. Paine’s extraordinarily well developed sense of justice, even at that early age, would not permit him to accept the awful way that his Creator was being characterized. It seems that Paine’s impulse to defend God from the calumnies of the Bible had long been on his mind, but he hesitated until later in his life for fear that his motives would be called into question. As he explains: “I intended it to be the last offering I should make to my fellow-citizens of all nations, and that at a time when the purity of the motive that induced me to it could not admit of a question, even by those who might disapprove the work.”

Early in the first part of *The Age of Reason*, Paine expresses his deep desire that “man would return to the pure, unmixed and unadulterated belief of one God, and no more.” Paine worried that the anticlericalism that had swept Revolutionary France was plunging the country into atheism, which Paine feared as much as religious fundamentalism. Both were forms of infidelity, as far as Paine was concerned, and both were insults to the Creator. If he could present a clear and incontrovertible argument that God was infinitely just, that God was not the cruel monster depicted in the Old Testament and the gullible fool on display in the New Testament, then perhaps he could save France from Godlessness. Paine here largely stands as attorney and character witness for the

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3 Ibid., 3.

4 Ibid., 6.
Almighty, and goes to show that the Bible is not the word of God. Men wrote the stories in the Bible, avers Paine, and there is nothing “more derogatory to the Almighty, more inconsistent with His wisdom, more contradictory to His power, than [the Bible] is.”

Paine has no patience for those who simply swallow the fantastic “fables” presented by the “Christian Mythologists.” But some, Paine allows, “have been so enthusiastically enraptured by what they conceived to be the infinite love of God to man, in making the sacrifice of Himself, that the vehemence of the idea has forbidden and deterred them from examining into the absurdity and profaneness of the story.”

Throughout his writings, Paine chooses with care, and takes ownership of, the word “profane,” using it with great frequency. Paine has deftly chosen to appropriate the word in a preemptive strike of sorts, against those in the clergy who would try to use that word against him.

After concluding his introductory remarks, Paine embarks on a close examination of the Old and New Testaments, without, we would later learn, the use of a Bible at his disposal to which he could refer. At the outset, Paine denies that the texts are the word of God for the simple and obvious reason that some unknown men decided by voting “which of the books out of the collection they had made should be the WORD OF GOD, and which should not.”

Paine immediately launches into his defense of the Almighty against the lies of the Bible: “When we contemplate the immensity of that Being who directs and governs the incomprehensible WHOLE, of which the utmost ken of human sight can discover but a part, we ought to feel shame at calling such paltry stories the Almighty.”

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5 Ibid., 17.
6 Ibid., 19.
7 Ibid., 21.
Word of God.” 8 Paine also adroitly dispatches with the words “revelation” and “prophet.” The Bible is not revelation, Paine argues, because it is hearsay. Anything other than the direct transmission of information from God to an individual is not revelation. Paine, who once wrote “there is no man that believes in revealed religion stronger than I do,” had a decidedly different notion of what true revelation was, which will be discussed below. 9

Also, according to Paine, the ancient meaning of “prophet” was not someone who could predict the future, but rather was intended to describe a poet or musician. Therefore, Paine concludes, the “axe goes at once to the root, by showing that the original meaning of the word has been mistaken; and consequently all the inferences that have been drawn from those books, the devotional respect that has been paid to them, and the labored commentaries that have been written upon them, under that mistaken meaning, are not worth disputing about.” 10 At any rate, God was too smart ever to choose to communicate to humanity through language. The very concept of language as a vehicle for transmission of the word of God is fundamentally flawed:

The continually progressive change to which the meaning of words is subject, the want of a universal language which renders translation necessary, the errors to which translations are again subject, the mistakes of copyists and printers, together with the possibility of willful alteration, are of themselves evidences that the human language, whether in speech or in print, cannot be the vehicle of the Word of God. 11

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8 Ibid., 23.
11 Ibid., 30.
In his concluding remarks concerning the Old Testament in the first part of *The Age of Reason*, Paine again rises, lawyer-like, to the defense of the Almighty: “when I see through the greater part of this book scarcely anything but a history of the grossest vices and a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales, *I cannot dishonor my Creator by calling it by His name.*”

Paine’s critics often accused him of being nothing but a demolitionist; he enjoyed the spectacle of watching the mighty façade collapse, they argue, but then left nothing but rubble and dust for others to clean up. He himself was not a builder. I disagree.

Running parallel to his defense of God was Paine’s abundantly clear theology. In a passage entitled “Defining the True Revelation,” Paine lays out his vision for a pure, unadulterated religion, one based on reason and natural philosophy. If the “word” of God cannot be found in the Bible, then where can we find it? What is true revelation? It is the Creation. “THE WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD,” Paine writes, “and it is in this word, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man.”

Paine elaborates further on this idea of Creation as the true revelation, and his reverence is so abundantly clear and genuine:

> It is only in the CREATION that all our ideas and conceptions of a Word of God can unite. The Creation speaks a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all

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12 Ibid., 31. Italicis mine.
13 Ibid., 41-42.
Paine concludes: “In fine, do we want to know what God is? Search not the book called the Scripture, which any human hand might make, but the Scripture called the creation.” Natural philosophy, the study of the natural world, is the study of the word of God. And Paine might have later added: Is not that enough? Is not the entire world and all of its overflowing abundance and breathtaking beauty enough to study and to satisfy one’s soul for several lifetimes?

Paine takes particular issue with Christianity for spreading the great lie that God would have been willing to have His own son brutally tortured and murdered in order to redeem mankind, and for introducing the very concept of a redeemer in the first place. Again, Paine appropriates language that might have more commonly belonged in the arsenal of the church and makes it own. For example, Paine makes the remarkably bold claim that Christianity is in fact “a species of Atheism—a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God.” Paine argues that Christianity “introduces between man and his Maker and opaque body, which it calls a Redeemer, as the moon introduces her opaque self between the earth and the sun, and it produces by this means a religious, or an irreligious, eclipse of light.” The study of the Bible is not the study of God. It is, rather, “the study of human opinions and of human fancies

14 Ibid., 43.
15 Ibid., 44.
16 Ibid., 40.
17 Ibid.
One of the great sins of the Christian faith, according to Paine, is that it “has abandoned the original and beautiful system of theology, like a beautiful innocent, to distress and reproach, to make room for the hag of superstition.” Paine’s profound love of God, combined with his abiding sense of justice, fills him with indignation. The idea that the church has poisoned the relationship between man and his Creator—a relationship that at its core is so perfect and pure, and so beautifully simple—makes Paine palpably angry.

Regarding the biblical tale of Adam and Eve, Paine reduces it to a comically absurd idea that simply does not stand up to logic, and is an obvious insult to the greatness and intellect of the Almighty. Paine writes at length and with obvious wonder about the astonishing power that God must have, since He created our solar system and the multiplicity of solar systems spanning several hundreds of millions of light years. “From whence, then,” Paine asks incredulously, “could arise the solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on His protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple?” Paine often uses humor in his defense of God, as he does by considering the kind of harried life that God would have to live if the story of Adam and Ever were thought through to its absurd conclusion. Note too how Paine also appropriates the word “irreverent” in the following passage: “And, on the other hand, are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent and a redeemer? In this case, the person who is irreverently called the

18 Ibid. 50.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 85.
Son of God, and sometimes God Himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of deaths, with scarcely a momentary interval of life.”

As Paine brings part one of *The Age of Reason* to a close, he offers some advice on the best way to serve God: “…the only idea we can have of serving God is that of contributing to the happiness of the living creation that God has made.” Paine also reiterates his point that the Bible is a fundamentally flawed way of transmitting the word of God, and therefore is not His word at all. If God is truth simply stated, then mystery, miracle, and prophecy are all creations of the church, because God would not use such flawed, contradictory, and outright opaque means of communication. Again, claiming the word “irreverent” for his own purposes, Paine dismisses the concept of prophecy as understood in biblical terms:

“If by a prophet we are to suppose a man to whom the Almighty communicated some event that would take place in the future, either there were such men or there were not. If there were, it is consistent to believe that the event so communicated would be told in terms that could be understood, and not related in such a loose and obscure manner as to be out of the comprehension of those that heard it, and so equivocal as to fit almost any circumstance that might happen afterward. *It is conceiving very irreverently of the Almighty to suppose that He would deal in this jesting manner with mankind*, yet all the things called prophecies in the book called the Bible come under this description.”

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 89
23 Ibid., 99. Italics mine.
As Paine introduces the second part of *The Age of Reason*, he explains his haste in writing part one, which he had originally intended to wait until later in life to pen. He needed to get it finished before he was arrested and, no doubt, he presumed, executed. The situation in France had deteriorated badly, beginning with the execution of the king, for whose life Paine, as a member of the Convention, had passionately pleaded in vain. In explaining the violent unraveling of France and its descent into atheism, Paine again takes a moment to defend God: “The idea, always dangerous to society, as it is derogatory to the Almighty, that priests could forgive sins, though it seemed to exist no longer, had blunted the feelings of humanity and prepared men for the commission of all crimes.”

Paine begins part two with remarkable confidence (or is it false bravado?), in effect telling all of those who attacked part one that he had written it with a veritable hand tied behind his back. Paine seems to be getting his first sense that, unlike everything he had written before, the first part of *The Age of Reason* has been widely misunderstood. As if to acknowledge this, Paine reminds readers that he did not have the benefit of either the Old or New Testament with him when he wrote the first part, and had recited any passages from it purely from memory (which is truly remarkable in its own right). This may have been, Paine seems to be saying, the reason why anyone even bothered to try and refute his arguments, and why there may have been some misunderstanding about his intentions. Now, in part two, he was writing at his full strength, Testaments in hand, with no disadvantages. He is practically daring his critics from the outset, warning that they “will now find that I have furnished myself with a Bible and a Testament; and I can say also that I have found them to be much worse books

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24 Ibid., 104. Italics mine.
than I had conceived. If I have erred in anything in the former part of ‘The Age of Reason,’ it has been by speaking better of some parts of those books than they have deserved.”

Paine returns again the a close analysis of the Old and New Testaments, in an effort to show incontrovertibly that they are not the word of God, and sharpens his argument that anyone who reveres the Creator must see it as their religious duty to reject them as libelous. Paine sees the Old Testament as particularly onerous because of the numerous instances in which God orders men to invade and conquer villages, and to kill every man, woman, and child without mercy: “There are matters in that book,” Paine observes, “said to be done by the express command of God, that are as shocking to humanity and to every idea we have of moral justice as anything done by Robespierre, by Carrier, by Joseph le Bon, in France, by the English Government in the East Indies, or by any other assassin in modern times.” Paine, of course, knew first hand of what Robespierre was capable; he had seen dozens of his friends led away to the guillotine and had barely escaped the scaffold himself. To see God presented in such an awful and deplorable way clearly affected Paine, and in lawyerlike fashion, Paine rises to His defense, almost warning the members of the church to be very careful about what they attribute to God, for it amounts to defamation: “To charge the commission of acts upon the Almighty, which, in their own nature and by every rule of moral justice, are crimes, as all assassination is, and more especially the assassination of infants, is matter of serious concern.”

26 Ibid., 112.
27 Ibid., 113.
The bulk of part two is focused on exposing what Paine believes are the fundamental flaws of the Old and New Testament. And as Paine makes abundantly and repeatedly clear, he is not attacking Christianity but is rather defending the honor of God against these works. In order to prove that the Old Testament is not the word of God, he must prove that the stories in it are not true. Once he has established this fact, Paine believes, he will require no further evidence to show that they are not the word of God.

For instance, Paine asserts that Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are not written by Moses, as it is claimed by the Church, because they are written in the third person: “it is always, the Lord said unto Moses, or Moses said unto the Lord, or Moses said unto the people or the people said unto Moses; and this is the style and manner that historians use in speaking of the persons whose lives and actions they are writing.”

Paine has a gift for sublime humor, and he uses it well to discredit the belief that Moses wrote the books attributed to him in the Old Testament. Not only were the so-called Mosaic accounts of the Creation not written by Moses (they were, in fact, written by an anonymous author, according to Paine), but also this anonymous author appears to have caught himself in a strange lie. According to the unknown writer pretending to be Moses,

no man knows where the sepulcher of Moses is unto this day, meaning the time in which this writer lived; how then should he know that Moses was buried in a valley in the land of Moab? for as the writer lived long after the time of Moses, as is evident from his using the expression of unto this day, meaning a great length of time after the death of Moses, he certainly was not at his funeral; and on the other hand, it is impossible that Moses himself could say that no man knows where the sepulcher is unto this day. To make Moses the speaker would be an improvement on the play of a

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28 Ibid., 119.
child that hides himself and cries *nobody can find me*; nobody can find Moses!\(^{29}\)

Once Paine believes he has incontrovertibly established that the Bible is not the word of God, he can boldly declare that “there is no authority for believing that the inhuman and horrid butcheries of men, women and children, told of in those books, were done, as those books say they were, at the command of God.”\(^{30}\) And here Paine offers a salient passage that gets to the very heart of Paine’s motives for writing *The Age of Reason*: “It is a duty incumbent on every true Deist, that he vindicate the moral justice of God against the calumnies of the Bible.”\(^{31}\)

Paine passionately believed in truth and justice. His life is a testament to that. It is no wonder, then, that he was so morally outraged by the depiction of God in the Old Testament. His reverence for his maker compelled him to act as God’s earthly attorney, to prove that God was better than all of those awful stories. Paine unhesitatingly declares that the Bible is “a book of lies, wickedness and *blasphemy*; for what can be greater *blasphemy* than to ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty?”\(^{32}\) Paine has developed an interesting argument here, that it is not blasphemy to *disbelieve* the Bible, as conventional wisdom would have it, but rather to *believe* it. In the same way that Paine has appropriated the word “profane,” and “irreverent,” Paine also takes ownership of the word “blasphemy.” This is a brilliant stroke, an effort again to rob his

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 123-124.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 122-123.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 136. Italics mine.
critics among the clergy of the language they might use against him. Believing that he has made his point abundantly clear, he moves on. But, as we will see, Paine finds himself, almost incredulously, having to return to this idea again in his later writings.

After Paine believes he has demonstrably and incontrovertibly proved that the Bible is not the word of God, he confidently challenges his critics who had vehemently criticized the first part of *The Age of Reason*: “What shadow of pretense have ye now to produce for continuing this blasphemous fraud?” He accuses the clergy of being mired in cruel superstition, and then asks rhetorically, is it because you “feel no interest in the honor of your Creator, that ye listen to the horrid tales of the Bible, or hear them with callous indifference?” As if offering his closing arguments to a jury, Paine concludes that the stories in the Old Testament are as “fabulous and as false as God is true.”

Paine moves then to the New Testament and the equally fabulous stories it contains, for instance, the idea that God debauched a woman who was engaged to be married, which Paine decries as “blasphemously obscene.” Paine asks his readers why we even bother ourselves in believing these fraudulent stories. “Is it not more safe,” Paine proposes, “that we stop ourselves at the plain, pure and unmixed belief of one God, which is Deism, than that we commit ourselves on an ocean of improbable, irrational, indecent and contradictory tales?” Not only do we lose our moral compass and become mired in the dreadful swamp of mystery and superstition, but we also “believe unworthily of the Almighty” if we think that, for instance, God could be so cruel as to have his only

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33 Ibid., 151.
34 Ibid., 152.
35 Ibid., 186.
36 Ibid., 218.
37 Ibid., 223.
son crucified.\textsuperscript{38} The stories in the Old and New Testaments, Paine again declares, “are all fabulous inventions, dishonorable to the Almighty….”\textsuperscript{39}

In his conclusion to the second part of \textit{The Age of Reason}, Paine reveals a particular strain of anger and indignation over the idea of revelation, a theme he has touched on before: “The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation.” It angers him in particular because these things have been done in the name of God, and because it “has been the most dishonorable belief against the character of the Divinity.”\textsuperscript{40} Paine closes with a call to service in defense of God; he hopes he will not be the only soldier in this army of peace:

\begin{quote}
It is incumbent on every man who reverences the character of the Creator, and who wishes to lessen the catalogue of artificial miseries, and remove the cause that has sown persecutions thick among mankind, to expel all ideas of revealed religion, as a dangerous heresy and an impious fraud. What is it we have learned from this pretended thing called revealed religion? Nothing that is useful to man, and everything that is dishonorable to his Maker.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Some critics of Paine have argued that Paine chose a decidedly strange way to prevent the French people from plunging into atheism. Surely he could have taken a different tack. I argue that this argument is rooted in a profound misunderstanding about Paine’s motives and purpose. It is clear that Paine sees that the only way to bring mankind to a right understanding of God is to zealously defend God from the awful

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\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 241.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 242.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 269.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 271.
\end{flushright}
mischaracterizations of Him in the Bible. Proving that the words in the Bible are not God’s words is essential to Paine’s case. A man who believes in a cruel God will do cruel things. Free a man from the shackles of revealed religion, and instill in him an awed belief in the greatness of the Creator, and that man will strive to make his world a better place. Organized religion not only dishonors the Creator, it also sows tremendous confusion, which, Paine argues, will result in more disbelief. Paine believes that organized religion is likely to produce atheists because it is so ugly and confusing.

Taking the teachings of the Old and New Testament together, Paine argues, a man sees them as a “confused mass, he confounds fact with fable; and as he cannot believe all, he feels a disposition to reject all.” Paine adds, “A man, hearing all this nonsense lumped and preached together, confounds the God of the Creation with the imagined God of the Christians, and lives as if there were none.” For Paine, this is the ultimate tragedy.

Of course, Paine’s work was not finished when he concluded the second part of *The Age of Reason*. Paine continued to publish his thoughts on religion and to refute his critics at every opportunity, to continue his defense of God until his death in 1809. These later writings, which Paine intended to publish as a third part of *The Age of Reason*, come in the form of letters, a speech given in Paris before the Society of Theophilanthropists (Adorers of God and Friends of Man), and a series of articles in a deist tract called *The Prospect, or View of the Moral World*, published by his friend Elihu Palmer. In the so-called *Prospect Papers*, along with the other collected writings, Paine makes some of his strongest arguments in defense of God. It must have been painfully clear to Paine shortly

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42 Ibid., 277.
43 Ibid., 277.
after part two of *The Age of Reason* was published that it would take the remainder of his life to clarify the position he had laid out in part one. The man who was so accustomed to being understood must have been a bit shaken by the vociferous attacks from his critics. And even his supporters and friends, either willfully or accidentally, had misunderstood or distorted his meaning. One can detect a hint of exhaustion in Paine’s later writings. He no doubt *was* exhausted; his health was never quite the same after the terrible illness he suffered while imprisoned in the Luxembourg. And he was also, no doubt, beginning to lose his faith, at least a little, in humanity. This sense of exasperation surely was what prompted him at one point to exclaim: “The Christian system of religion is an outrage on common sense. Why is man afraid to think?”

Despite his fatigue, Paine’s writing is in many ways sharper and more focused in his later works. He is able to say in a few words what took him one hundred pages in *The Age of Reason*. In a letter published in 1797, Paine writes to an unnamed friend, “You form your opinion of God from the account given of Him in the Bible; and I form my opinion of the Bible from the wisdom and goodness of God manifested in the structure of the universe and in all works of creation.” Here Paine continues his passionate defense of God, concluding that the “result in these two cases will be that you, by taking the Bible for your standard, will have a bad opinion of God; and I, by taking God for my standard, shall have a bad opinion of the Bible.” Paine again explains why he must defend God

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46 Ibid.
against the calumnies of the Bible: “The Bible represents God to be a changeable, passionate, vindictive being; making a world and then drowning it, afterwards repenting of what he had done, and promising not to do so again. Setting one nation to cut the throats of another, and stopping the course of the sun till the butchery should be done.”

This portrait of God is so monstrous, that Paine cannot help but exclaim: “All our ideas of the justice and goodness of God revolt at the impious cruelty of the Bible. It is not a God, just and good, but a devil under the name of God that the Bible describes.”

Recounting for his friend one of the innumerable instances of slaughter commanded by God in the Old Testament, Paine declares: “…all our ideas of the justice and goodness of God give the lie to the book, and as I never will believe any book that ascribes cruelty and injustice to God, I therefore reject the Bible as unworthy of credit.”

Paine continues his tactic of appropriating language here as well. Far from accepting the title “infidel,” a word that had been so frequently hurled at him, Paine makes the bold claim that “all are infidels who believe falsely of God, whether they draw their creed from the Bible, or from the Koran, from the Old Testament, or from the New.”

Paine now knows that many who have read The Age of Reason, including some whom he numbered among his friends, have completely misunderstood it, and taken his critique of Christianity as a frontal assault on God, rather than a passionate defense of Him. Paine therefore concludes his letter, describing his motive for writing it in as clear and blunt a way as he can muster: “It is written to satisfy you, and some other friends

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47 Ibid., 290.
48 Ibid., 291.
49 Ibid., 292.
50 Ibid., 293.
whom I esteem, that my disbelief of the Bible is founded on a pure and religious belief in God; for in my opinion the Bible is a gross libel against the justice and goodness of God, in almost every part of it.”

Many of Paine’s biographers dismiss Paine’s writings after *The Age of Reason* as mere redundancy, but there are some incredibly powerful arguments made here, again, I argue, as a result of the fact that Paine had come to understand that his defense of God had been lost in a cloud of controversy. If he had any chance in succeeding to explain his position, he would need to refine and streamline his writing. While it is true that Paine does return to familiar arguments in his later writings, he also develops new arguments that are worth exploring for their forcefulness and inventiveness. Older, wiser, and a tad bitter, Paine constructs massive rhetorical siege walls. In his exchange of letters with Samuel Adams, after Paine’s return from France in 1802, he appears as counsel to the Almighty before the jury of public opinion once again. He also takes a moment to vindicate himself from what he believes are the mounting false claims against him. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Samuel Adams’s letter to Paine is reasonably cordial at first; he applauds Paine for his service to the cause of the Revolution and to liberty, but then chides Paine for writing a “defense of infidelity,” which is “injurious to the feelings and so repugnant to the true interest of so great a part of the citizens of the United States.” Warning Paine against the dangers of sowing political and religious discord in the United States by continuing to defend infidelity, Adams concludes his letter with the

51 Ibid.
admonition: “Felix qui cautus.” Paine indignantly responds to Adams’s claim that he had written a defense of infidelity by asking: “What, my good friend, do you call believing in God infidelity? For that is the great point maintained in ‘The Age of Reason’ against all divided beliefs and allegorical divinities.” Here we can see the frustration mount. If there was a character flaw to be discovered in Paine—and surely his critics found an innumerable supply of them—it was his tendency to feel that his sacrifices and contributions to the world went unappreciated. He nursed grievances and resentments that piled up inside him, and occasionally he would loose them on the public, his worst and most peptic example being the letter he sent to George Washington in 1796. An injured Paine explains to Adams the great personal risk that he had taken by writing The Age of Reason, and also for standing up for the life of the French king, which was, in part, the reason why he was imprisoned:

I endangered my own life, in the first place, by opposing in the Convention the execution of the King, and by laboring to show they were trying the monarchy and not the man, and that the crimes imputed to him were the crimes of the monarchical system; and I endangered it a second time by opposing atheism; and yet some of your priests, for I do not believe that all are perverse, cry out, in the war-whoop of monarchical

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53 Ibid., 298.
54 Ibid., 299.
priest-craft, What an infidel, what a wicked man, is Thomas Paine! They might as well add, for he believes in God and is against shedding blood.\textsuperscript{56}

It is also quite clear from the last passage that Paine has come clearly to understand that what had seemed so obvious and commonsensical to him has been lost almost entirely on the audience he was hoping to reach. Past experiences had given Paine a sanguine sense of self-importance, but this was surely beginning to wane.

In 1797, a British barrister named Thomas Erskine, who had previously defended Paine during a trial against \textit{The Rights of Man}, took charge of the prosecution against Thomas Williams for publishing \textit{The Age of Reason} in England. In his arguments during the proceedings against Williams, Erskine first extolled the virtues of a free press, arguing that through the “communications of a free press, all the errors of mankind, from age to age, have been dissipated and dispelled,” but then noted that blasphemy was a clear exception.\textsuperscript{57} Every man is free speak his mind, Erskine told the jury. And every man “has the legal right to investigate, with modesty and decency, controversial points of the Christian religion; but no man, consistently with a law which only exists under its sanctions, has a right not only broadly to deny its very existence, but to pour forth a

\textsuperscript{56}“Correspondence with the Hon. Sam Adams,” Ibid., 303.

\textsuperscript{57} Thomas Erskine, "Great Speeches by Great Lawyers-Speech of Thomas Erskine, For the Prosecution, in the Proceedings Against Thomas Williams, for Publishing Paine's "Age of Reason."," \textit{google.com/books}, 1797, 557. https://books.google.com/books?id=Y0o4AQAIAAAJ&pg=PA551&lpg=PA551&dq=Thomas+Williams+for+publishing+The+Age+of+Reason.&source=bl&ots=PB4oCadFYe&sig=Dz_RnZvffTH4cCPWhOWgSTzenQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=EPkGVazYOO nsASfnOLAAQ&ved=0CD0Q6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=Thomas%20Williams%20for%20publishing%20The%20Age%20of%20Reason.&f=false (accessed March 17, 2015).
shocking and insulting invective, which the lowest establishments in the gradations of civil authority ought not to be permitted to suffer, and which soon would be borne down by insolence and disobedience, if they did.”

Would “any decent man contend,” Erskine asked rhetorically, that society should tolerate and allow to go unpunished, “‘libels of the most shameless obscenity, manifestly pointed to debauch innocence, and to blast and poison the morals of the rising generation?’”

The great concern for Erskine was the deleterious effect that the publication of *The Age of Reason* would have on the masses, and in that he shared the similar concerns of the members of the clergy who railed against Paine. Paine’s writing was more forceful, influential, accessible, and widely read than most; and these factors rendered “a public attack upon all revealed religion, from such a writer, infinitely more dangerous.”

According to Erskine, Paine’s writing represented an existential threat to good government and to civilization in general, because it treated “the faith and opinions of the wisest with the most shocking contempt, and stirs up men without the advantages of learning or sober thinking to a total disbelief of everything hitherto held sacred, and, consequently, to a rejection of all the laws and ordinances of the State, which stand only upon the assumption of their truth.”

Not surprisingly, after Erskine concluded his arguments, the jury—with barely any deliberation—convicted Williams and sentenced him to three years in prison, although the sentence was reduced to one year—still a draconian measure for exercising freedom of speech, and clear evidence that Paine’s time was not so very free at all.

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58 Ibid., 559.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 564.
61 Ibid., 565-566.
In response, Paine, ever the pugilist, fired off a letter to Erskine, in which he crafted his most elegant defense of God and the clearest explanation for writing *The Age of Reason*. Paine took great issue with the charge of blasphemy against Williams, and since Paine had previously appropriated the word in his earlier writings, he felt that he was on solid ground in using his own definition of the word to show that the charge against Williams was utterly baseless. Paine defined blasphemy as “the simple idea of hurting or injuring the reputation of anyone, which was its original meaning,” and claimed that it was a word that long predated Christianity. Here Paine hones his argument: “A book called the Bible has been voted by men, and decreed by human laws, to be the Word of God, and the disbelief of this is called blasphemy. But if the Bible be not the Word of God, it is the laws and execution of them that is blasphemy, and not the disbelief.” Paine again is insisting that it is not blasphemy to disbelieve the Bible but rather it is blasphemy to believe it. As for the veracity of the Bible, Paine offers this testament: “My own opinion is, decidedly, that the evidence does not warrant the belief, and that we sin in forcing that belief upon ourselves and upon others.” Paine argues plainly that the Bible makes a mockery of God: “Strange stories are told of the Creator in that book. He is represented as acting under the influence of every human passion, even of the most malignant kind.” Furthermore, “The obscene and vulgar stories in the Bible

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63 Ibid., 312.

64 Ibid., 313.

are as repugnant to [deistical] ideas of the purity of a divine Being, as the horrid cruelties and murders it ascribes to Him are repugnant to our ideas of His justice."\textsuperscript{66}

Paine had, by then, heard from many of his critics that he simply did not understand the Bible, and therefore had no business writing about it. It was a text that required biblical scholars to unravel the mystery and interpret it for the masses. Any attempt by a layperson to interpret the bible would be the pointless and dangerous exercise of a dilettante. One such critic who made this claim was the Bishop of Llandaff, and Paine takes the opportunity to demolish the Bishop’s argument with his razor sharp wit:

Perhaps I shall be told in the cant language of the day, as I have often been told by the Bishop of Llandaff and others, of the great and laudable pains that many pious and learned men have taken to explain the obscure and reconcile the contradictory, or as they say the \textit{seemingly contradictory}, passages of the Bible. It is because the Bible needs such an undertaking, that is one of the first causes to suspect it is NOT the Word of God: this single reflection, when carried home to the mind, is in itself a volume. What! does not the Creator of the Universe, the Fountain of all Wisdom, the Origin of all Science, the Author of all Knowledge, the God of Order and of Harmony, know how to write?\textsuperscript{67}

Paine adds, “For my own part, my belief in the perfection of the Deity will not permit me to believe that a book so manifestly obscure, disorderly, and contradictory can be His work. I can write a better book myself. This belief in me proceeds from my belief in the Creator.”\textsuperscript{68} In continuing his argument that to believe the Bible is blasphemy, Paine recalls the utterly horrific atrocity that is Noah’s Flood, arguing, “If the story be not true, we blasphemously dishonor God by believing it, and still more so in forcing, by laws and

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 750.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 330.
Finally, taking a more serious tone, Paine points to a specific passage in the book for study: “The Bible makes God to say to Moses, Deut. VII. 2, ‘And when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee, thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them, thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them.’” Paine considers this passage to be a vile slander of God, and responds indignantly and unequivocally: “Not all the priests, nor scribes, nor tribunals in the world, nor all the authority of man, shall make me believe that God ever gave such a Robespierrian precept as that of showing no mercy; and consequently it is impossible that I, or any person who believes as reverentially of the Creator as I do, can believe such a book to be the Word of God.” If Paine were in a courtroom, he would have been shouting at the rafters.

Of all of Paine’s religious writings, the letter to Thomas Erskine is especially important because, in his most direct fashion, Paine reiterates what had long been his purpose in writing The Age of Reason. And now, writing in 1797, it has become more than abundantly clear to him that his motives have been almost universally misread and misunderstood. He must make this point utterly plain. The Age of Reason was not an attack, as so many countless critics had claimed, but rather a spirited defense. The purpose of The Age of Reason was not “to ridicule and bring into contempt the Holy Scriptures, but to show that the book called the Holy Scriptures are not the Holy Scriptures.” And here Paine makes the absolutely crucial distinction, leaving no doubt

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69 Ibid., 321.
70 Ibid., 331.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 333.
about his motives: “It is one thing if I ridicule a work as being written by a certain person; but it is quite a different thing if I write to prove that such work was not written by such person. In the first case, I attack the person through the work; in the other case, I defend the honor of the person against the work.”

Among the many misunderstandings that pervaded after the publication of The Age of Reason, one that clearly vexed Paine was the claim that he was an atheist. Nothing could have been further from the truth, and it surely must have astounded him that such an accusation was ever made, considering that fact that the very first section in part one of The Age of Reason is entitled “The Author’s Profession of Faith,” and in it Paine unequivocally declares: “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.” Nonetheless, while Paine continued to defend God in his later works, he also found the need to reaffirm his religiosity. In 1797, Paine helped cofound the Society of Theophilanthropists in Paris, and it survived for a number of years, until Napoleon suppressed its meetings. Addressing an audience of fellow Theophilanthropists, Paine gave a speech affirming his belief in God and chiding atheists who deny His existence. This speech is Paine at his most poignant. He knows that the fundamental truth of The Age of Reason, his unwavering affirmation of the existence of God, was lost on many of its readers. This must have been exceedingly frustrating for

73 Ibid. Italics mine.
Paine, world-renowned for his ability to speak in plain, crystalline language that was impossible to misunderstand.

Paine believed the way to combat atheism was to appeal to the non-believers’ interest in natural philosophy, and he makes an ingenious argument supporting the existence of God that appears, on the surface, to be wholly scientific and perfectly suited to the atheist: “The universe is composed of matter,” Paine declares, “and, as a system, is sustained by motion…and without this motion, the solar system could not exist.”76 But, notes Paine, “Motion is not a property of matter…. Were motion a property of matter, that undiscovered and undiscoverable thing called perpetual motion would establish itself.”77 If motion is not a property of matter and its natural state is to remain at rest, yet one can look to the sky and observe the planets spinning in an orderly and continuous orbit around the sun, then one is compelled to ask: “Who then breathed into the [solar] system the life of motion? What power impelled the planets to move, since motion is not a property of the matter of which they are composed?”78 The answer is obvious: Only God could set the planets in motion and keep them spinning in such a precise and unvarying manner. Paine then pokes fun at the non-believers: “When the pretenders to atheism can produce perpetual motion, and not till then, they may expect to be credited.”79

To further his case, Paine again makes observations of and draws conclusions from the natural world. Paine the philosopher poses a perennial question to the audience:

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
What is God? His answer is simple and undeniably logical: “It is a Being whose power is equal to his will.”\textsuperscript{80} To explain, he juxtaposes this Being with man. “Observe the nature of the will of man. It is of an infinite quality…Observe on the other hand, how exceedingly limited is his power of acting compared with the nature of his will. Suppose the power equal to the will, and man would be a God.”\textsuperscript{81} And looking to the animal world for further proof, Paine asserts: “We know nothing of the capacity of the will of animals, but we know a great deal of the difference of their powers. For example, how numerous are the degrees, and how immense is the difference of power, from a mite to a man.”\textsuperscript{82} If one can observe in the natural world a progression of power from the smallest to the largest creature, then “where is the difficulty in supposing that there is, at the summit of all things, a Being in whom an infinity of power unites with the infinity of the will? When this simple idea presents itself to our mind, we have the idea of a perfect Being that man calls God.”\textsuperscript{83}

In the conclusion of Paine’s address, he combines the several pieces of his argument, maintaining that, since his observations lead to a patently obvious and logical conclusion, no leap of faith (which would be an insurmountable challenge for an atheist) is required: “When, therefore, we discover a circumstance of such immense importance that without it the universe could not exist, and for which neither matter, nor any nor all the properties can account, we are by necessity forced into the rational conformable belief

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 753.
  \item \textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 754.
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
of the existence of a cause superior to matter, and that cause man calls GOD.”

This speech was as much an effort to convince atheists of the existence of God as it was a reaffirmation of his own faith to anyone who would listen. Sadly for Paine, his audience had already begun drifting.

Paine’s reply to the Bishop of Llandaff, which he intended to include in the third part of The Age of Reason, never saw the light of day during his lifetime—because, it seems, of the unwillingness of American publishers to lay their hands on it. It was published posthumously, in 1810, in a New York magazine called The Theophilanthropist. In it, Paine focuses on proving that Genesis was not the oldest work in the world, and also revisits his argument that Moses could not have written the parts of the Old Testament that are attributed to him. Paine also returns to his theme that there can only be one revealed religion—feeling, perhaps, that he had not made his point forcefully enough in The Age of Reason. Revelation is something that is communicated directly from God to man in a universally immutable language. The language Paine speaks of is the unchanging and predictable language of science and the natural world. God has created laws, and these are laws that all men must abide. They cannot be altered by human power. Men “cannot make a tree grow with the root in the air and the fruit in the ground; we cannot make iron into gold nor gold into iron; we cannot make rays of light shine forth rays of darkness, nor darkness shine forth light.” According to Paine, the true word of God

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84 Ibid., 752.
would resist destructive alteration. But we see that the book which they call the Word of God has not this property. That book says (Genesis i. 27), ‘so God Created man in His own image’; but the printer can make it say, ‘So man created God in his own image.’ The words are passive to every transposition of them, or can be annihilated and others put in their places. This is not the case with anything that is of God’s doing; and, therefore, this book called the Word of God, tried by the same universal rule which every other of God’s works within our reach can be tried by, proves itself to be a forgery.\textsuperscript{86}

After his return to America, Paine contributed a series of papers to a deistical journal called \textit{The Prospect, or View of the Moral World}, over the course of the year 1804. Paine covers a lot of ground here, some new, some old. But now, late in his life, Paine is still mostly keeping up the familiar charge, defending God from the continued and scathing attacks coming from, of all places, members of the clergy. In the first of the \textit{Prospect Papers}, Paine responds to a sermon by a Protestant minister named Robert Hall. By now, Paine has been called an infidel in literally dozens of scathing responses to \textit{The Age of Reason}. But Paine flatly rejects this epithet, boldly declaring: “If what Christians believe is not true, it is the Christians that are the infidels.”\textsuperscript{87} How could any right-thinking man with any sense of compassion believe the defamatory things written about God in the Bible, Paine asks. “The obscene and vulgar stories in the Bible are as repugnant to our ideas of the purity of a divine Being,” he writes, “as the horrid cruelties and murders it ascribes to Him are repugnant to our ideas of His justice. It is the

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 787.

reverence of the Deists for the attributes of the Deity that causes them to reject the
Bible.”88 Paine returns again to a critique of the redemption through Christ and its utter
defiance of common sense: “The story of the redemption will not stand examination.
That man should redeem himself from the sin of eating an apple by committing a murder
on Jesus Christ, is the strangest system of religion ever set up. Deism is perfect purity
compared with this.”89 In some passages, he becomes more cutting, in others more
philosophical, but in almost all cases, his reasoning is sharp and compelling. In
concluding his critique of the idea that Jesus had to be brutally murdered in order to
redeem mankind, Paine offers this humorous counterfactual: “It is an established
principle with the Quakers not to shed blood: suppose then all Jerusalem had been
Quakers when Christ lived, there would have been nobody to crucify him, and in that
case, if man is redeemed by his blood, which is the belief of the Church, there could have
been no redemption; and the people of Jerusalem must all have been damned because
they were too good to commit murder.”90 It is these outrages on common sense that
seem particularly to rankle Paine. If God is so powerful and so intelligent, and Paine has
no doubt that He is, then why is He depicted as such a gullible and petty fool? The story
of the Tower of Babel is another that Paine sees as insulting and defamatory to his
Creator. After offering a brief synopsis of the story, Paine renders his judgment: “In the
first place, the familiar and irreverend (sic) manner in which the almighty is spoken of in
this chapter is offensive to a serious mind. As to the project of building a tower whose
top should reach to heaven, there never could be s people so foolish as to have such a

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 790.
90 Ibid., 790-791.
notion; but to represent the Almighty as jealous of the attempt, as the writer of the story has done, is adding profanation to folly.”

Although Paine was often cutting, he could write sweetly as well. In a paper addressing what he called the “stupid Blue Laws of Connecticut,” Paine suggests that the best way to honor the Sabbath would be simply to get outside and enjoy God’s creation.

One of the finest scenes and subjects of religious contemplation is to walk into the woods and fields, and survey the works of the God of the Creation. The wide expanse of heaven, the earth covered with verdure, the lofty forest, the waving corn, the magnificent roll of mighty rivers, and the murmuring melody of the cheerful brooks, are scenes that inspire the mind with gratitude and delight.

The man who spends his day “Entombed within the walls of his dwelling…shuts from his view the Temple of Creation. The sun shines no joy to him. The gladdening voice of nature calls on him in vain. He is deaf, dumb and blind to everything around that God has made. Such is the Sabbath-day of Connecticut.” Here Paine beautifully reaffirms his religiosity, asserting that one of the greatest ways to reverence the Creator is simply to enjoy his creation.

One essay, “On Deism, and the writings of Thomas Paine,” is particularly noteworthy, not just for its content but also because, as William van der Weyde notes, it was published anonymously—a strange fact made the more unusual by the fact that Paine refers to himself in the third person. Take, for example, the following passage: “With

93 Ibid.
respect to morality, the writings of Thomas Paine are remarkable for purity and benevolence; and though he often enlivens them with touches of wit and humor, he never loses sight of the real solemnity of his subject.”

Although Paine has nicely described his own writing style, one is left to wonder if this a rare moment when, after all that he has been through, the redoubtable Paine has lost his nerve? It will become clearer in his later writings that Paine has perhaps begun to resign himself to the fact that he has lost his audience, and that his defense of God is falling on deaf ears. Despite this increasing realization, Paine again explains his reason for so scrupulously scouring the Old and New Testament for evidence of its veracity. He has an obligation to the truth:

The God of truth is not the God of fable; when, therefore, any book is introduced into the world as the Word of God, and made a groundwork for religion, it ought to be scrutinized more than other books to see if it bear evidence of being what it is called. Our reverence to God demands that we do this, lest we ascribe to God what is not His, and our duty to ourselves demands it lest we take fable for fact, and rest our hope of salvation on a false foundation.

Paine is arguing that it becomes absolutely necessary to question with intense scrutiny any book that claims to be the word of God; to do otherwise would be to dishonor Him. The book could easily have been written by a pretender, and therefore be fraudulent. Christians might generally look upon the Koran as the work of a pretender, and no doubt the reverse is true. Why, then, does not each examine with the same skepticism their own holy texts?

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95 Ibid. Italics mine.
In another essay entitled “Biblical Anachronism,” Paine shows that he still has the razor wit that characterized much of his writing. Of the story of Noah’s Ark, Paine quips: “My opinion of this story is the same as what a man once said to another, who asked him in a drawling tone of voice, ‘Do you believe the account about No-ah?’ The other replied in the same tone of voice, ah-no.”

It is fitting that the last work Paine published (that is, published in his lifetime) should be dedicated to the subject of religion. “Examination of the Prophecies,” was published in 1807, two years before his death. At the close of his preface, Paine again offers an explanation of his purpose in writing *The Age of Reason*:

As in my political works my motive and object have been to give man an elevated sense of his own character, and free him from the slavish and superstitious absurdity of monarchy and hereditary government, so in my publications on religious subjects my endeavors have been directed to bring man to a right use of the reason that God has given him, to impress on him the great principles of divine morality, justice, mercy and a benevolent disposition to all men and to all creatures, and to inspire in him a spirit of trust, confidence and consolation in his Creator, unshackled by the fables of books pretending to be the Word of God.

Paine again revisits the idea that the prophecies contained in the Old Testament, allegedly predicting the coming of Jesus Christ, are not prophecies at all. In his preface, Paine tirelessly explains the nature of dreams, that they are in some ways moments of unconscious insanity, and at any rate seeing something in a dream is certainly nothing that anyone could claim is real and true with any authority. Dreams are ephemeral.

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things, invented things. The dreaming mind has “the wild faculty of counterfeiting memory. It dreams of persons it never knew, and talks to them as if it remembered them as old acquaintance.”98 If we understand dreams according to Paine’s understanding, then we cannot help but conclude “how absurd it is to place reliance upon dreams, and how much more absurd to make them a foundation for religion, yet the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, begotten by the Holy Ghost, a being never heard of before, stands on the foolish story of an old man’s dream.”99 Paine has common sense enough not to pay any regard to his own dreams, “and I should be weak indeed to put faith in the dreams of another.”100 Again, Paine stands up for his God, who has been so savagely maligned in the Bible: “The Allwise Creator has been dishonored by being made the Author of fable, and the human mind degraded by believing it.”101

In a moment never mentioned in any of Paine’s biographies so far as I can tell, and decidedly atypical for Paine the loner, at the close of “Examination” Paine calls forth two witnesses in his behalf, that of the Roman philosopher Cicero, and a librarian at the University at Cambridge named Doctor Conyers Middleton, whose writing Paine had recently discovered. The first glimpse we get of Paine appearing to lose confidence, either in his ability to get his own works published, or in his ability to write clearly and convincingly, comes in the form of the anonymous essay mentioned in the above pages. And here again Paine reveals himself no longer to have the bravado that suffused his earlier writings. In his calling forth witness, we see a man whose confidence has been

98 Ibid., 197.
99 Ibid., 198.
100 Ibid., 213.
101 Ibid., 236-237.
shaken badly. Paine, it appears, no longer believes he can do this alone. Paine writes, “When, in the first part of ‘The Age of Reason,’ I called the creation the true revelation of God to man, I did not know that any other person had expressed the same idea. But I lately met with the writings of Doctor Conyers Middleton, published the beginning of last century, in which he expresses himself in the same manner, with respect to the creation, as I have done in ‘The Age of Reason.’” Since both of these esteemed men had written about the notion that the Creation is the true revelation, Paine calls them as witnesses to bolster his case, and quotes them at length. “In Middleton,” Paine testifies, “we see the manly eloquence of an enlarged mind and the genuine sentiments of a true believer in his Creator.” These are surely words that Paine could have written about himself. Paine closes his last published work with a final reiteration that the New Testament is nothing but a fable, and concludes by asserting his definition of infidel as the correct one: “The priests of the present day profess to believe it. They gain their living by it, and they exclaim against something they call infidelity. I will define what it is. HE THAT BELIEVES IN THE STORY OF CHRIST IS AN INFIDEL TO GOD.”

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102 Ibid., 276.
103 Ibid. Quoting Cicero: “The true law [it is Cicero who speaks], is right reason, conformable to the nature of things, constant, eternal, diffused through all… …the same eternal immutable law comprehends all nations at all times, under one common master and governor of all—God.” And quoting Middleton: “…this universal law [continues Middleton, meaning the law revealed in the worlds of the Creation] was actually revealed to the heathen world long before the Gospel was known, we learn from all the principal sages of antiquity, who made it the capital subject of their studies and writings.”
104 Ibid., 292.
In a subsequent letter to Andrew Dean, who had rented Paine’s New Rochelle farm and had expressed interest in Paine’s thoughts on the subject of religion, Paine again stands up for the Creator, arguing that the idea of the redemption again makes God to be a gullible fool, and a cruel one at that:

The Christian religion is derogatory to the Creator in all its articles. It puts the Creator in an inferior point of view, and places the Christian devil above him. It is he, according to the absurd story in Genesis, that outwits the Creator in the Garden of Eden, and steals from Him His favorite creature, man, and at last obliges Him to beget a son, and put that son to death, to get man back again; and this the priests of the Christian religion call redemption.”

It is no wonder then, that Paine has no reservations about declaring again that it is “blasphemy to call [the Bible] the Word of God.” Sadly, when Paine closes the letter, he encourages Dean to publish it—presumably because Paine, by this time, understood painfully well the near impossibility of publishing it himself.

As Paine approached the end of his life, he could look backward on a breathtaking arc. Unfortunately for him, the symphony of his life included a dreadfully long decrescendo. Despite the dramatic decline in his popularity and influence, Paine continued to write, offering his final thoughts on God and even his musings about whether there is a future state of consciousness after death. Paine’s “My Private Thoughts on a Future State” are a lovely testament to his deep and unwavering religiosity. Nothing but earnestness is present here: “I consider myself in the hands of

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106 Ibid., 296.
my Creator, and that He will dispose of me after this life consistently with His justice and goodness. I leave all these matters to Him, as my Creator and friend, and I hold it to be presumption in man to make an article of faith as to what the Creator will do with us hereafter.”

Paine’s last written works, which were published posthumously in 1820, are on the Calvinistic belief in Predestination, which Paine naturally considers an affront to the justice and goodness of God. Here Paine concisely offers a final defense of the Almighty and also of his particular manner of defending Him: “Nonsense ought to be treated as nonsense wherever it be found.”

Most poignantly, Paine, as if knowing the end was close, and that he had lost his American audience a long time ago, looks to the first American, Benjamin Franklin, for help. In his autobiography, Franklin had written about a series of religious sermons that had had a profound, though unexpected, effect on him, and Paine takes the opportunity to quote Franklin in the pages of his last writings: “‘It happened that they produced on me an effect precisely the reverse of what was intended by the writers; for the arguments of the Deists, which were cited in order to be refuted, appeared to me more forcible than the refutation itself. In a word I soon became a perfect Deist.’—New York edition of Franklin’s life, page 93.” As if to say that he knows that he has been unsuccessful in accomplishing his goals in writing The Age of Reason, and that his own audience had long since departed the theater, Paine steps aside and points


109 Ibid., 313.
instead to Franklin as a role model: “All America, and more than all America, knows Franklin. His life was devoted to the good and improvement of man. Let, then, those who profess a different creed, imitate his virtues, and excel him if they can.”

In his last will, Paine made a final affirmation for the ages: “The last Will and Testament of me, the subscriber, Thomas Paine, reposing confidence in my Creator, God, and in no other being, for I know of no other, nor believe in any other.” Paine could honestly, without hyperbole, and with some pride, write that he had “have lived an honest and useful life to mankind; my time has been spent in doing good, and I die in perfect composure and resignation to the will of my Creator, God.” With these poignant words, a testament to his abiding faith, Thomas Paine’s last crusade came to an end. It was now up to the living to defend him.

\[110\] Ibid.


\[112\] Ibid., 296.
“Sometimes I think that a lie is the healthiest thing that was ever born into the World.”

—Robert Green Ingersoll, during his address on Memorial Day, 1894, honoring Thomas Paine in front of the monument in New Rochelle.
When the Great Agnostic thundered across a stage at the height of his notoriety, he routinely found himself gazing out at thousands of rapt faces. When Robert Green Ingersoll erupted forth on the subject of Thomas Paine at New York’s Chickering Hall in June of 1878, the *Times* dutifully reported that the “hall was full and the audience listened attentively for two hours and a half.”¹ At an event in Chicago in October of 1896, while campaigning for William McKinley, he drew an audience of twenty thousand people, with all available standing room filled and three thousand more waiting outside.² He was the most famous orator of his time, captivating and riling audiences across the continent, as well as internationally. And although his choice of topic was often weighty and occasionally morbid, the press grudgingly had to note that his speeches were routinely interrupted by enormous peals of laughter from the audience.³ Even Ingersoll’s most vicious critics had to acknowledge, the man knew how to entertain, if not enlighten. In January 1880, after Ingersoll had given a particularly impassioned speech in defense of Paine, *The Chicago Tribune* could not help but admire the sheer power and ferocity of Ingersoll’s oratory: “However much religious people may be pained by Col. Ingersoll’s attacks upon their dogmatic beliefs by his irreverence, which to them will fall little short of profanity and blasphemy, and by his mockery of things that are sacred to them, they will at least concede that his tribute [to Paine] is an exhaustive, eloquent, and at times very impressive defense of the man who has been more maligned than any other man of

¹ *The New York Times*, June 30, 1878
³ Ibid.
this or the last century.”

Ingersoll numbered Eugene Debs and Walt Whitman among his friends, had a fan in Mark Twain, was asked (but declined) to serve as attorney for the defendants in the Haymarket bombing, and was one of the first to be at the side of President Garfield after he was felled by an assassin’s bullet. He was living, and shaping, the history of late-nineteenth century America.

Ingersoll’s fame—some would say infamy—as a late-nineteenth century gadfly seems all the more unusual since, as Susan Jacoby laments in her book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, he is virtually unknown in the twenty first century, presumably because Ingersoll did not just simply touch the third rail of American culture, he grabbed it with both hands and clutched it in a death grip. As Thomas Paine’s own bitter experience proved, religious Americans had little tolerance for criticism of their sacred cow. To court controversy in this way unleashed a hail of fire from the religious world, and while the Great Agnostic kept busy defending himself from withering attacks from the clergy, he also lent considerable time and energy to defending the Great Deist as well.

At every opportunity, Ingersoll fought to recast the historical memory of Thomas Paine. In fact, he devoted a great portion of his adult life to it, believing that an enormous injustice had been done to the man who had been abandoned by the country he helped found. In her biography of Ingersoll, Jacoby argues that one of Ingersoll’s “lasting accomplishments as the preeminent orator of his era was the revival of Paine in the historical imagination of a nation that had been the beneficiary, throughout its revolutionary era, of some of the most memorable words ever written in the cause of

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4 *The Chicago Tribune*, Saturday, January 31st, 1880.
Ingersoll bucked the trend in many ways, though, in that his defense of Paine was not simply to present Paine as the great political radical whose contribution to the cause of American independence was momentous. Ingersoll defended Paine in his complete form, religious opinions and all, which naturally made his task more arduous and exponentially more controversial. Ingersoll understood Paine’s last crusade better than virtually any other acolyte, and so was uniquely qualified to rise in his defense. As Ingersoll puts it, perfectly capturing the essence of *The Age of Reason*: “Paine thought the barbarities of the Old Testament inconsistent with what he deemed the real character of God. He believed that murder, massacre, and indiscriminate slaughter had never been commanded by the Deity.”

So what was the effect of Ingersoll’s oratory on Paine’s reputation in our collective consciousness? That is difficult to determine, but as Jacoby points out, Ingersoll’s was a time when few were able to command the audience of tens of thousands of people, most of whom—even if they vociferously disagreed with Ingersoll’s message—listened to him with undivided attention. One can speculate that Ingersoll’s repeated crisscrossing of the continent defending the legacy of Thomas Paine, and the near-constant press coverage of his speeches, must have had an impact on the consciousness of Americans in the late nineteenth century, such that Paine’s name was not forgotten in the twentieth and beyond. Without Ingersoll’s efforts, Paine may have drifted into obscurity. Or, he may have reified in the annals of history books merely as

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the man who wrote *Common Sense*.

Ingersoll, like his great hero, was a lightning rod; he suffered withering attacks from the press and the pulpit. Virtually every epithet that was hurled at Paine was slung in equal or greater measure at Ingersoll. For instance, after Ingersoll’s death, a Worcester, Massachusetts pastor preached to his congregation a few words about the late orator: “It is said there were enough fools in America to pay him $100,000 a year for his blasphemy. In view of the world-wide evil that he did, it is a proof of the long-suffering character of God that he was spared so long.”

In a sense, Ingersoll had twice the burden that Paine had. Ingersoll chose to fight in Paine’s behalf while simultaneously fending off attacks on his own reputation. This feat did not seem to overburden the peripatetic orator and prolific writer; he reveled in the controversy. But the attacks did ultimately inflict massive injuries on his historical legacy. Ingersoll carried his own version of Paine’s message to the masses: that a book so full of atrocities, a book in which a deity displays every single one of the worst human emotions, cannot be an inspired book. But the irony of his tireless efforts is that Ingersoll now languishes in greater obscurity than Paine ever did. Sadly, as Jacoby notes, “no champion arose in the twentieth century to do for Ingersoll what Ingersoll did for Paine.”

*The New York Times* opined after Ingersoll’s death that, as a result of his irreligion, he “never took that place in the social, the professional, or the public life of his country to which by his talents he would otherwise have been eminently entitled.”

The following pages will examine Ingersoll’s struggle

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10 Ibid., 165.
to rescue Paine from the clutches of those who had maligned both him and his writing, and the backlash Ingersoll suffered as a result.

Born August 11, 1833 in Dresden, New York, Robert Green Ingersoll was the youngest of five children. His father was Reverend John, a Congregational minister, and his mother was Mary Livingston, who died when Robert was only two. The reverend Ingersoll became a passionate abolitionist in the 1830s as the Second Great Awakening gathered momentum, but he found himself preaching to unready audiences at times and, as such, found himself on the move quite a bit. It was when he and his wife settled in Dresden, New York, that the young Robert Green was born.11 Mary Livingston died in 1835, apparently mortally weakened by the physical and emotional strain that John Ingersoll’s peripatetic calling placed upon her. The family moved often early in Ingersoll’s life, but they eventually settled in Illinois.12

Ingersoll became a member of the Illinois bar in 1854, and practiced law for most of his life, participating in several high profile cases. First a Democrat, then a Republican (in 1863, after news of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation reached him, he announced his intention to endorse the president’s plan and to switch his party affiliation), he served as a colonel in the Union Army for a brief period until he was captured; upon his release he resigned from the army and returned home to practice law.13 He had a long, successful legal career and a brief political one as well, first serving as attorney general for the state of Illinois, and then nearly capturing the Republican gubernatorial

nomination in 1868. Ingersoll lost the nomination because he refused to accept the advice of his Republican supporters that he pledge not to speak on the issue of religion during the campaign. Ingersoll took this principled stand—which cost him the nomination along with a bright political future—because he “did not want to be both governor and a hypocrite.” He did, however, continue to campaign and speak publicly for other Republicans, even at the presidential level, throughout the 1870s and 1880s.

Among Ingersoll’s many talents was his ability to write powerfully and to electrify audiences with his oratory. Take, for instance, his devastating critique of the use of corporal punishment on children: “Do not try to rule by force. A blow from a parent leaves a scar on the soul. I should feel ashamed to die surrounded by children I had whipped. Think of feeling upon your dying lips the kiss of a child you had struck.” As forcefully as Ingersoll could write, he could also write sweetly, almost poetically. For Ingersoll, “Love was the first to dream of immortality, -not religion, not Revelation. We love, therefore we wish to live.” Ingersoll’s blend of plain and clear language, humor, and ruthless logic bears a striking resemblance to Paine’s. As evidenced by his staggering 12-volume collected writings, Ingersoll was a prolific writer, and a loquacious fellow as well. While visiting Blarney Castle, he refused to kiss the famed Stone, claiming he of all people did not need its reputed powers. It would not be long before Ingersoll would focus his talents as a writer, along with his wry sense of humor, on the

16 Ibid., 106.
subject of religion.

Ingersoll believed in the Christian God as a young man, so much so that he could not abide Thomas Paine’s deism when he first encountered it. But he eventually wandered farther down the path toward irreligion than Paine ever dared. Paine was a committed deist; Ingersoll was an agnostic. He boldly declared that he did not believe in God, although he readily admitted that he did not know for sure. Ingersoll’s religious opinions were shaped at an early age, much like Paine’s, and it is no wonder that Ingersoll felt so much in common with his hero. As a child Ingersoll attended a typically interminable sermon, in which the minister harangued the congregation for hours, and then finally “came the catechism with the chief end of man…. The minister asked us if we knew that we all deserved to go to hell, and we all answered ‘Yes.’ Then we were asked if we should all be willing to go to hell if it was God’s will, and every little liar shouted ‘Yes.’”\(^\text{19}\)

Ingersoll had the wit of Paine, but often took his irreverence to new levels. “I feel as though I could exist without God just as well as he could exist without me,” Ingersoll once wrote. “And I also feel that if there must be an orthodox God in Heaven I am in favor of electing him ourselves. I am as much opposed to an autocrat hereafter as now.”\(^\text{20}\) Since Ingersoll considered Paine to be one of his great intellectual and spiritual mentors, it is no surprise that Ingersoll approached the Bible in the same way Paine did, as a work of human invention that greatly maligns a benevolent creator. Take, for instance, a passage from Ingersoll’s speech “How To Read The Bible”: “All that is necessary, as it seems to me, to convince any reasonable person that the Bible is simply

\(^{19}\) David D. Anderson, Robert Ingersoll, 22.

\(^{20}\) Ingersoll quoted in Larson, American Infidel, 77.
and purely of human invention, of barbarian invention—is to read it…read the Holy Bible, and you will be amazed that you ever, for one moment, supposed a being of infinite wisdom, goodness, and purity, to be the author of such ignorance and such atrocity.”

This nearly perfectly echoes Paine’s attitude about the appalling way in which the Bible portrays the Creator. Ingersoll also echoed Paine’s disgust with the biblical account of the Great Flood, in which God “drowned an entire world, which the exception of eight persons. The old, the young, the beautiful, and the helpless were remorsefully [sic] devoured by the shoreless sea. This, the most fearful tragedy that the imagination of ignorant priests ever conceived, was the act, not of a devil, but of a god, so-called, whom men ignorantly worship unto this day. What a stain such an act would leave upon the character of a devil!”

The influence of Paine upon Ingersoll is obvious. Unlike Paine, though, Ingersoll had no God he could call a friend, and his anger often came from a place having more to do with the dangers of the Bible as a stagnating force for humanity than with the decidedly unflattering light in which God almighty is cast within its pages. Ingersoll once declared the Bible “the enemy of human liberty—the greatest obstruction across the highway of human progress.”

Ingersoll had many enthusiastic admirers, including Edward Garstin Smith, whose introduction to *The Life and Reminiscences of Robert G. Ingersoll* reads more like a panegyric than a sober biography: “A nobler man never lived, and a more exemplary life has not come to the attention of mankind. I unhesitatingly say what others have also

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said—the world will never see his equal.”

But he suffered from no shortage of critics, some scathing, others downright libelous. Ingersoll knew as well as Paine the withering criticisms that a critic of the church would have to endure. And he, like Paine, often responded to these kinds of *ad hominem* attacks with incredulity. In the aftermath of a biting attack from the clergy, Ingersoll mused: “It does seem to me that if I were a Christian, and really thought my fellow-man was going down to the bottomless pit, that he was going to misery and agony forever—it does seem to me that I would try to save him. It does seem to me, that instead of having my mouth filled with epithets and invectives; instead of drawing the lips of malice back from the teeth of hatred, it seems to me that my eyes with would be filled with tears. It is a mystery to me why the editors of religious papers are so malicious, why they endeavor to answer argument with calumny.”

Not surprisingly, it was falsely alleged by his critics that he, like Paine, recanted on his deathbed. He was also repeatedly accused of surrendering in a cowardly fashion during the Civil War, and of being an inveterate drunkard and a murderer.

A religious newspaper claimed that his son had gone insane reading cheap novels, been committed to an asylum, and died a raving lunatic. Ingersoll took the time to respond to this charge in his inimitable way: “1. My only son was not a great novel reader; 2. He did not go insane; 3. He was not sent to an asylum; 4. He did not die; and 5. I never had a son!”

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24 Ibid.
On January 29th, 1871, the 134th anniversary of Thomas Paine’s birth, Ingersoll gave a landmark speech to honor the occasion before a capacity crowd in the city of Fairbury, Illinois. This effort was Ingersoll’s impassioned plea for Paine, and his greatest attempt to reclaim him for the ages. He wonderfully describes Paine’s writing style: “The writings of Paine fairly glitter with simple, compact, logical statements, that carry conviction to the dullest and most prejudiced.”

Ingersoll praises Paine for his political writings, calling him the “best political writer that ever lived,” and singles him out as one who “did more to cause the Declaration of Independence than any other man.”

Ingersoll notes that, at the end of the Revolution, Paine was nicely situated where he belonged, among the great and “respectable” men of the Age; but he was not content to stay there. “He chose rather to benefit mankind,” Ingersoll wrote, and thus risked his legacy, his fortune, and his life in the effort. As Ingersoll poignantly puts it, “He made up his mind to sacrifice himself for the good of his fellowmen.”

Propping Paine up even further, Ingersoll praises not only his courage, but also his conviction, particularly during those extraordinary days in Paris when Paine boldly stepped forward and pleaded for the king’s life. If one were to scour the history books, Ingersoll declares, one would “find but few sublimer acts than that of Thomas Paine voting against the king’s death. He, the hater of despotism, the abhorrer of monarchy, the champion of the rights of man, the republican, accepting death to save the life of a deposed tyrant—of a throneless king. This was the last grand act of his political life—the

29 Ibid., 61.
30 Ibid., 63.
31 Ibid., 68.
sublime conclusion of his political career.”

Of course, during all of the bloody chaos of the Revolution in France, Paine chose again to adhere to his convictions and to offer boldly to the world his thoughts on religion. And, as Ingersoll notes with obvious sadness, as a result of the publication of *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s services to the American cause of Independence “were instantly forgotten, disparaged, or denied. He was shunned as though he had been a pestilence. Most of his old friends forsook him. He was regarded as a moral plague, and at the bare mention of his name the bloody hands of the church were raised in horror.”

This harsh treatment of Paine was the supreme injustice for Ingersoll. Paine, to his very core, and amid all of the profound change that he had been witness to, “was the same unflinching, unwavering friend of his race; the same undaunted champion of universal freedom. And for this he has been hated; for this the church has violated even his grave.”

The church was brutal to Paine while he was alive, Ingersoll observes, but even worse after he died. When Paine was no longer able to defend himself, the church pursued him “with redoubled fury, and recounted with infinite gusto and satisfaction the supposed horrors of his deathbed, gloried in the fact that he was forlorn and friendless, and gloated like fiends over what they supposed to be the agonizing remorse of his lonely death.”

An incredulous Ingersoll wonders what could be the real reason why the church held so much contempt for Paine, and why they have never ceased in their efforts to

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32 Ibid., 65.
33 Ibid., 66.
34 Ibid., 67.
calumniate him even decades after his passing. He speculates that perhaps the church is frustrated because, in the time since the publication of *The Age of Reason*, the world has drifted closer to Paine’s line of thinking than toward that of the church. “There is not now an enlightened minister in the world,” Ingersoll says, “who will seriously contend that Samson’s strength was in his hair, or that the necromancers of Egypt could turn water into blood and pieces of wood into serpents. These follies have passed away, and the only reason that the religious world can now have for disliking Paine is that they have been forced to adopt so many of his opinions.”

In a final eulogy to Paine, Ingersoll concludes: “The world is better for his having lived. For the sake of truth he accepted hatred and reproach for his portion. He ate the bitter bread of sorrow. His friends were untrue to him because he was true to himself, and true to them. He lost the respect of what is called society, but kept his own. His life is what the world calls failure and what history calls success.”

Ingersoll’s speeches in defense of Thomas Paine spawned a veritable cottage industry of published responses. It would be fair to say that Ingersoll suffered even greater attacks by the church than did Thomas Paine, and Clark Braden’s *Ingersoll Unmasked* is a typically merciless assault on the Great Agnostic. Almost entirely a scathing indictment of Ingersoll’s character, and containing numerous libelous claims, Braden’s effort represents the classic ad hominem attack. Braden expresses great concern about the fate of the world if Ingersoll were to convince a community to accept his religious opinions. If that nightmare scenario came to pass, Braden postulates: “all

36 Ibid., 69.
37 Ibid., 82.
hell will be stirred by his coming, and be in an uproar, and the fast, the profane, the
drunken, the lewd, the vicious, the vile, the criminal will flock to grogshops and ends of
vice, infamy and low resorts that will have a perfect carnival, and spew out their vile
crowds into his audience, like buzzards from their roosts, flocking to regale themselves
with carrion.”

Braden also makes several outlandish claims about Ingersoll’s personal life,
relying on stories that appear to have been fabricated out of thin air. A few passages
should illuminate this brightly. Braden tells the tale, via some third-party gossip, of
Ingersoll being directly involved in a violent murder: “Mr. Buskirk, an old and well
known citizen [of Peoria] told Rev. Schwartz that in a drunken row in a brothel Ingersoll
undertook to beat a prostitute and she cut his scalp with a beer mug, and that Ingersoll got
a scar on his scalp in that way. A man was murdered in a drunken row in a grog shop:
and all of the circumstances that could be learned pointed to Ingersoll, who was the most
active assailant of the murdered man, as the one who struck the fatal blow. Ingersoll
usually spent his Sundays in beer gardens, saloons, barrooms and places of low resort.
The profane, the drunken, the vile would flock around him like buzzards around carrion
and roar over the vile blasphemous jokes and yarns that he would belch forth by the
hour.”

Astonishingly, Braden also claims that when Ingersoll ran for congress in 1860,
the extremely intoxicated orator appeared before a crowd to give a speech, barely able to
stand, and “he reeled back and forth, shaking his fist at the crowd, in which there were

39 Ibid., 42-43.
many ladies, and roared out the foulest obscenity and blasphemy. Then he reeled off a few rods, and in plain sight of the crowd attended to one of the calls of nature.”

At the end of a long and blistering screed Braden exclaims: “In closing this chapter on Ingersoll, I will add that for pure and unadulterated villainy, debauchery and prevarication, he has had no equal.”

Reverend L.A. Lambert’s *Notes on Ingersoll* is also noteworthy if for no other reason than the relentlessly vitriolic tone that Lambert strikes. In the book’s preface, written by another reverend, Patrick Cronin, Cronin confidently declares that Lambert’s *Notes* are, “unquestionably, the most crushing reply yet made to that notorious little fraud—Ingersoll—who so loves to pose as a profoundly original thinker; and who lives, moves, and has his being, in the laughter and applause which his fescennine buffoonery provokes.” If only every American could read Lambert’s *Notes*, Cronin avers, they would fully comprehend “how untruthful in statement, illogical in reasoning, dishonest in inference, vile in innuendo, and malevolent in purpose, is the man upon whose every utterance they hung with delight.”

Reverend Lambert argues that Ingersoll has not one original thought, and is simply channeling the rhetoric of men far greater than he, like Paine and Voltaire: “All we can reasonably look for is a revamping of the old and often refuted sophistries of the past. By means of a ready tongue and a grotesque imagination, Mr. Ingersoll succeeds in galvanizing these sapless corpses into a momentary appearance of life, but they will sink,

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40 Ibid., 43-44.
41 Ibid., 74.
43 Ibid., iii.
as they sank before, into oblivion, as the Christian world moves on.”

In 1879, Ingersoll had delivered a particularly controversial speech entitled “Some Mistakes of Moses,” in which he argued, again echoing Paine, that every “enlightened man should publicly declare that all the ignorant, infamous, heartless things recorded in the ‘inspired’ Pentateuch are not the words of God, but simply ‘Some Mistakes of Moses.” Lambert, displaying some false bravado, dismisses his arguments out of hand, asserting that the “character and moral code of Moses are as impervious to his attacks as are the pyramids of Egypt to the javelin of the wandering Arab who strikes their base as he passes and disappears, while they remain the objects of wonder to future generations.” Lambert, like many others critics of both Ingersoll and Paine, have taken this tack, but the question must be asked: if it was inevitable that Ingersoll would be forgotten and his arguments ineffective, then why do men of the church take such great pains trying to refute him? If the bible is as impervious as the great pyramids, then why feel the need to defend it so vigorously?

Lambert rather creatively discredits all of Ingersoll’s arguments by obsessing over a few insignificant and passing comments Ingersoll had made. For instance, when Ingersoll makes the innocuous claim that “Water always runs down hill,” Lambert replies with all seriousness: “How then did it get up the hill? Or is there a perennial spring up there? Water does not always run down hill.” Lambert concludes that Ingersoll, by

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44 Ibid., 6.
making the obviously false claim that water always runs down hill, has proved himself “an incompetent interpreter of nature, and you cannot be relied on when you presume to interpret, criticize, condemn, or deny that which is above nature.”

The Mistakes of Ingersoll and His Answers Complete is another assault on Ingersoll’s writing, if less so of his character, by a group of critics, both religious and secular. This is a more toned-down reply; the men do not hesitate to call out Ingersoll on what they perceive to be his ignorance and grave errors, but they tend to shy away from the kind of blistering personal attacks found in some of the other anti-Ingersoll literature. The assemblage of men, including Judge Jeremiah S. Black (with whom Ingersoll had previously had a debate), Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, and Reverend E.P. Goodwin, take turns barraging Ingersoll’s writings, but one in particular is worth noting, and that is Goodwin’s reply to Ingersoll’s speech on Thomas Paine. It offers a glimpse not only into the world of the Ingersoll critic, but also, by extension, of the Paine critic.

As noted above, Ingersoll gave an impressive speech entitled “Thomas Paine” on January 29, 1871, and Goodwin published a reply, dismissively calling the speech Ingersoll’s “apotheosis” of Paine. Goodwin is fiercely ironic here: he mocks Ingersoll’s characterization that Paine was singularly instrumental in securing independence for the Americans, “without whose word and sword, apparently everything would have come to naught,” and he then feigns outrage that Paine has not been given his due credit: “the whole nation has been reading and re-reading its history, and hardly made mention of his

48 Ibid., 15.
49 Judge Black, J. Munro Gibson, et al Prof Sing, Mistakes of Ingersoll and his Answers Complete (Chicago: Rhodes & McClure Publishing Company), 188.
name! What strange, what base ingratitude is this!”⁵⁰ Ridiculing Ingersoll and Paine further, Goodwin wonders whether we “have not been guilty of like injustice and tyranny in the judgments that have been passed on Jefferson Davis and Benedict Arnold? And who shall be quite sure that not only they may yet be rescued from the infamy that now envelops him, but even Judas Iscariot may not prove to have been calumniated [sic] by this relentless tyranny of a misnamed gospel, and take his place alongside of Arnold and Paine among the stars.”⁵¹

Goodwin dismisses the significance of Paine’s contribution to the cause of Independence, claiming that when *Common Sense* was published, the “conviction [that the separation of the colonies and the establishment of an independent government was inevitable] was the dominant one among a vast majority of the people, and with reason.”⁵² He notes correctly that Lexington and Concord had been fought already; we were at war with England. He concludes with this final dismissal of Paine’s revolutionary words, calling them “opportune and helpful,” and asserting that Paine deserves no more honor in our annals than Crispus Attucks.⁵³

Many, including Paine and Ingersoll themselves, have rightly noted the frequency with which their critics questioned or outright maligned their character rather than simply refuting their arguments and avoiding the nasty personal attacks. Goodwin, as if aware of this polemical weakness, offers an interesting argument in support of questioning the character of a Paine or an Ingersoll. Paine and Ingersoll both repeatedly argued that the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 189.
⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵² Ibid., 191.
⁵³ Ibid., 193.
church was failing utterly to disprove their arguments and rather were simply attacking their character, and wondered aloud why members of the clergy would be so cruel as to attack them personally. Goodwin, as if to justify this tactic, explains that it does not matter whether the inventor of, for instance, electric light is a moral person. The light bulb will be useful either way; his character—or lack of it—will not change that. However, argues Goodwin, “it does matter what the personal character of a teacher of a new scheme of morals is. He comes claiming our acceptance of certain doctrines which, he says, are vital to our welfare. …If He wants us to be truthful, honest, moral, He must be.”

With this premise established, Goodwin compares the character of Jesus Christ to those of Ingersoll and Paine. Naturally, Goodwin believes the character of Jesus to be unassailable, declaring him “the only character of all the ages absolutely without a spot or blemish, and this, as I have said, not as the verdict of partial admirers, but of those who would many of them, be only too glad to prove Him a hypocrite or a cheat.” To prove this point, Goodwin is happy to use men like Paine and Rousseau as character witnesses (since Paine and Rousseau had both said good things of Christ). Goodwin’s argument is spurious to say the least. If infidels like Paine and Rousseau are dishonest through and through, which Goodwin no doubt believes, then why call them forth as character witness? Moments later Goodwin calls Rousseau “utterly vile” and an “habitual liar,” and glibly alleges that Paine late in his life was “addicted to intemperance, given to violence and abusiveness, had disreputable associates, lived with a woman who was not

54 Ibid., 194-95.
55 Ibid., 196.
his wife and left her to whatever remnant of fortune he had.”

As expected, Ingersoll and Paine do not fare quite as well as the Messiah in Goodwin’s character juxtaposition. They are “the representatives of infidelity, the most saintly apostles it has to offer: Men the very best of whom are characterized either by vanity or selfishness, or pride or envy, while some are given to deceit, blasphemy, drunkenness, sensuality.” Despite this, Goodwin continues, the men are held up as “examples and illustrators of this new and better gospel, that is to banish from the world the ‘dogmas of ignorance, prejudice and power.’” So, people are left with a stark choice. On the one hand, “Luther, Calvin, Anselm, Augustine, John, Paul, Jesus Christ.” On the other, the veritable rogues’ gallery of “Bolingbroke, Hobbes, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Thomas Paine.” Goodwin poses a final question: “With which class shall we make surest of truth, virtue, happiness? With which will our wives and little ones be in the safest keeping?” “Such questions answer themselves,” Goodwin concludes.

Lyman Abbott took an opportunity to reply to Ingersoll’s writings as well, appearing in an 1890 issue of The North American Review. His reply is more circumspect. He repeatedly asked the question: is it worth the effort to disabuse people of their faith? Is their faith so injurious to the world that Ingersoll must make it his life’s mission to convince them to reject it? He points out that Ingersoll has numbered himself among the agnostics, not the atheists. If Ingersoll does not know that there is no God, then why does he insist on convincing others of His nonexistence? Abbot writes, why,
“since you do not know, should you endeavor to take from humanity a faith and a hope so illuminating and inspiring?” Abbott defends the church as “a conservator of civilization, an educator of good-will, an almoner of charity, and the school of a noble, though defective, reverence and faith.” Abbott’s piece defies the norm in that it is a strong reply and generally devoid of ugly personal attacks.

Ingersoll also received numerous letters regarding both his own and Thomas Paine’s writings and character. Ingersoll seemed happy to reply to as many as he could, and never missed an opportunity to defend his hero, particularly against the charge that Paine had recanted on his deathbed. In a letter to Joseph Stidham, Ingersoll wrote: “It is not true that Thomas Paine professed religion, or changed his views before his death. He died as he had lived.” Jno. J. Cushing, who had written to Ingersoll accusing him of denying his daughters the opportunity to attend Sunday school, also repeated the claim that Paine had recanted, to which Ingersoll gave this reply in a letter dated October 26th, 1882: “as for Thomas Paine—he died as he had lived—a consistent deist. He was a believer in God and hoped for immortality.”

To a J.B. Cooper of Coleo, Illinois, Ingersoll offered this rejoinder in response to the testimony of a Reverend Talmage that Paine was a filthy drunkard who had recanted on his deathbed: “Ministers like Talmage will keep on repeating falsehoods just as long as there is malice and ignorance and prejudice and credulity in the pews … It is

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62 Ibid., 455.
64 Ibid., 257.
impossible for any minister to tell the truth about the author of ‘Common Sense.’”
Ingersoll concluded that Paine, “not being a drunkard, and not being a filthy beast, but a sensible, honest, patriotic, truth-loving man, he died as he lived—without fear and without asking alms, even of God.”

On June 27th, 1877, Ingersoll gave an epic address (the text spans one hundred and two pages) in San Francisco called “My Reviewers Reviewed,” in which he took on his many critics individually, replied to each of their complaints, and indicted them all for their wickedness. Ingersoll proudly opens his address by acknowledging the size of the crowd that has assembled to hear him speak: “Against the aspersions of the pulpit and the religious press, I offer in evidence this magnificent audience.”

Like Paine in *The Age of Reason*, Ingersoll uses numerous quotations from the Bible to explain why he believes it is not inspired. It is a wide-ranging and magisterial speech, in which Ingersoll displays both his knack for the cudgel and also his skill with ironic understatement. At one point, Ingersoll explains that a Reverend Samuel Robinson had derided him as a “materialistic demon.” Ingersoll remarked: “To say the least, this is not charitable.”

His wit is in full force here as well—witness for example his sharply funny and irreverent observation about God’s ability, or lack thereof, as an authority figure. “God governed the Jews personally for many ages and succeeded in civilizing them to that degree, that they

65 Ibid., 281-282.
67 Ibid., 31.
crucified him the first opportunity they had,” Ingersoll quipped. “Such an administration can hardly be called a success.”

But the salient passage came when Ingersoll, brimming with indignance over the relentless attacks still being made against Thomas Paine, made this bold challenge:

I will give to any clergyman in the city of San Francisco a thousand dollars in gold to substantiate the story that the death of Voltaire was not as peaceful as the coming of the dawn. The same absurd story is told of Thomas Paine. … The men who have enjoyed the benefit of his heroic services repay them with slander and calumny. … Yet these clergymen, whose very right to stand in their pulpits and preach, was secured to them by such men as Thomas Paine, delight in slandering the reputation of that great man. They tell their hearers that he died in fear, --that he died in agony, hearing devils rattle chains, and that the infinite God condescended to frighten a dying man. I will give one thousand dollars in gold to any clergyman in San Francisco who will substantiate the truth of the absurd stories concerning the death of Thomas Paine. There is not one word of truth in these accounts; not one word.

The editor of the Protestant newspaper *The New York Observer* accepted the challenge. Earlier that year, in February of 1877, the *Observer*, which had taken it upon itself to malign Paine at any opportunity, marked the 140th anniversary of Paine’s birth, snickering that the “memory of the wicked rots, and the odor is very offensive, but exceedingly natural.” In August, after learning that the *Observer* had accepted the challenge, an energized Ingersoll sent the first of what would become a series of public letters in which he battled again to defend the memory and legacy of Paine, writing: “I am anxious that these slanders shall cease. I am desirous of seeing justice done, even at

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68 Ibid., 28-29.
69 Ibid., 22-23.
70 *The New York Observer*, Thursday, February 8, 1877.
this late day, to the dead.\textsuperscript{71} In Ingersoll’s opening salvo, he established the terms of the proposition, first by suggesting the establishment of a three-man arbitrating body to render final judgment on the evidence presented by both sides, and offering to deposit one thousand in gold plus another two thousand in the form of a bond, which he would use to cover the expenses of the \textit{Observer}, should he be defeated. “I shall require of you a like bond,” Ingersoll declared, and set the timeline at ninety days for both parties to present evidence to the arbitrator.\textsuperscript{72}

The \textit{Observer}, which had previously and with some bravado written that Ingersoll’s offer of the thousand-dollar prize was “Infidel ‘buncombe’ and nothing more,” suddenly found itself in the very real position of having been publicly caught in Ingersoll’s web, and so published a reply to Ingersoll’s formal offer, effectively saying that they would gladly prove that Paine had “died a drunken, cowardly and beastly death,” but would not agree to the arbitration process.\textsuperscript{73} The \textit{Observer} also appeared to be backing away from the salient charge, that Paine had died in terror as a result of his religious opinions—a retreat upon which Ingersoll was quick to capitalize. “The question was not as to the personal habits of Paine,” Ingersoll wrote. “The real question was and is, whether Paine was filled with fear and horror at the time of his death on account of his religious opinions. That is the question. You avoid this. In effect, you abandon that charge and make others.”\textsuperscript{74} In any case, whether the \textit{Observer} wanted to accuse Paine of having died a whimpering infidel or that he died in a drunken condition, Ingersoll

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 451.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 453.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 455.
demanded the paper must offer its proof, “or all honest men will hold you in abhorrence.”75 The lawyer in Ingersoll is in full splendor here; he seems absolutely to relish the opportunity to assail the Observer for its backtracking, and to martyr himself for the cause. “You have made these charges. The man against whom you make them is dead. He cannot answer you. I can.”76

Ingersoll then delivers his witnesses, all of whom had visited Paine or been with him in his final hours, and all of whom attested to the fact that Paine died peacefully, of sound mind, and never recanted or appeared to regret his religious opinions. These witnesses are the basis of the general historical consensus that Paine held true to his religious convictions till his last breath, and that the claims of the Observer, along with countless other enemies of Paine, were patently false. For example, Ingersoll writes: “Dr. Manley was with him when he spoke his last words. Dr. Manley asked the dying man if he did not wish to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and the dying philosopher answered: ‘I have no wish to believe on that subject.’”77 Ingersoll even presents in full an article that was published in the Beacon on June 5, 1839, in which Gilbert Vale wrote of his conversations with Amasa Woodworth—who was with Paine the two evenings before he died. According to Gale’s account in the Beacon, Woodworth was “present when Dr. Manley asked Mr. Paine ‘if he wished to believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God,’ and he describes Mr. Paine’s answer as animated. He says that lying on his back he used some action and with much emphasis, replied, ‘I have no wish to believe on that subject.’” He lived for some time after this, but was not known to speak, for he died

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 455-56.
77 Ibid., 459.
tranquilly.”

Ingersoll also seizes on a significant detail: a Quaker preacher named Willet Hicks visited with Paine almost daily during his last days, and testified that “Paine died firmly convinced of the truth of the religious opinions he had given to his fellow-men.”

It was Hicks who denied Paine permission to be buried in the Quaker cemetery. This fact, Ingersoll concludes, “settles the question of recantation. If he had recanted, of course there could have been no objection to his body being buried by the side of the best hypocrites on earth.”

It is a stunning appearance before the court of history on display, as Ingersoll offers witness after witness. His manner is so forcible, so stubborn, so relentless, that one can clearly hear the echoes of Paine in every word Ingersoll writes. Ingersoll even presents Paine himself as a witness, or at least Paine’s last will and testament, in which he wrote: “I die in perfect composure and resignation to the will of my creator God.”

The final point Ingersoll makes, and this is a theme that Ingersoll had explored before, is the fact that the church continues to hound Paine to this day, which is the greatest proof of all that Paine had not recanted. “If Thomas Paine recanted,” Ingersoll asks, “why do you pursue him? If he recanted, he died substantially in your belief, for what reason then do you denounce his death as cowardly? If upon his death-bed he renounced the opinions he had published, the business of defaming him should be done

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78 Ibid., 460.
79 Ibid., 462.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 467.
by Infidels, not by Christians.”

Ingersoll, throughout his debate with the Observer, authoritatively “impeached” the few sketchy witnesses that the Observer could proffer. His defense of Paine is exhaustively thorough, and one is left to wonder how Ingersoll had time to do anything else. Ingersoll refutes the claims that Paine was a drunkard as well, but notes wryly that even if Paine were a drunkard, that is no crime: “After all, drinking is not as bad as lying. An honest drunkard is better than a calumniator of the dead. … Drunkenness is one of the beatitudes, compared with editing a religious paper devoted to the defence of slavery upon the ground that it is a divine institution.” As a character witness, Ingersoll produces a letter from none other than George Washington, in which the general enthusiastically invites Paine to come and visit with him, and signs off as “Your sincere friend.” Ingersoll asks the Observer: “Was it to a drunken beast that the following letter was addressed?”

Ingersoll’s rhetorical questions always carry great force, particularly when he questions the use of ad hominem attacks. For instance, Ingersoll pores through the historical record to prove that Paine did not die destitute, but then, after all the effort, asks the obvious series of questions: “But suppose, for the sake of the argument, that he was poor and that he died a beggar, does that tend to show that the Bible is an inspired book and that Calvin did not burn Servetus? Do you really regard poverty as a crime? If Paine had died a millionaire, would you have accepted his religious opinions?”

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82 Ibid., 467-68.
83 Ibid., 479.
84 Ibid., 480.
85 Ibid., 487.
offers this blunt assessment of the attacks against Paine: “You cannot now answer the arguments of a man by pointing at holes in his coat. … The church waited till [Paine] was dead then attacked his reputation and his clothes. Once upon a time a donkey kicked a lion. The lion was dead.”

Needless to say, Ingersoll’s efforts failed to impress the Observer, and the paper issued a reply in November, 1877, in which they apologized to their subscribers—not for lying about Thomas Paine and defaming his memory, but rather for “occupying so much space, or any space, in exhibiting the truth and the proofs in regard to the character of a man who had become so debased by his intemperance, and so vile in his habits, as to be excluded, for many years before and up to the time of his death, from all decent society.” The editor of the Observer explains that he took up the mantle of attacking Paine because a few men, Rev John W. Chadwick and Rev. O.B. Frothingham, had lately been publicly defending Paine’s image. “Then, too,” the editor adds, “we have for months past been receiving from different parts of the country, asking authentic information on the subject and stating that the followers of Paine are making extraordinary efforts to circulate his writings against the Christian religion, and in order to give currency to these writings they are endeavoring to rescue his name from the disgrace into which it sank during the latter years of his life.” Ingersoll’s ubiquitous presence and stentorian voice, along with his offer of a thousand dollars in gold apparently only heightened the urgency for the Observer.

Tellingly, the Observer offers a recantation of a sort, although they would not call

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 493.
88 Ibid., 495-96.
it that. They merely claim they had never made such a charge in the first place: “We have never stated in any form, nor have we ever supposed that Paine actually renounced his Infidelity.”89 This is a rather glaring inconsistency to say the least. Mere sentences later the Observer announced that they had no doubt that “having become a wreck in body and mind through his intemperance, abandoned of God, deserted by his Infidel companions, and dependent up Christian charity for the attentions he received, miserable beyond description in his condition, and seeing nothing to hope for in the future, he was afraid to die, and was ready to call upon God and upon Christ for mercy, and ready perhaps in the next minute to blaspheme.”90

The Observer offers again the same few shoddy witnesses that Ingersoll had already discredited, particularly those who claimed that Paine was a slob and a brute. Apparently, the editor overlooked Ingersoll’s question about why Paine’s personal attire was even germane to the argument. The paper’s reply naturally provoked a response from the lawyer. Ingersoll indignantly writes: “You ought to have goodness to admit that you were mistaken in the charges you made. You ought to have manhood to do what you falsely asserted that Thomas Paine did: —you ought to recant. You ought to admit publicly that you slandered the dead; that you falsified history; that you defamed the defenceless; that you deliberately denied what you had published in your own paper.”91 Finally, Ingersoll uses the editor’s own words against him. Clearly savoring the moment,

89 Ibid., 498.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 517-18.
Ingersoll declares: “From the bottom of my heart I thank myself for having compelled you to admit that Thomas Paine did not recant.”

That may have settled the matter for the moment, but certainly not for all time, and Ingersoll’s passion for defending Paine never ceased. Among his unpublished papers was a rousing speech entitled, “The Great Infidels,” in which Ingersoll rises to Paine’s defense yet again. The animating issue for Ingersoll in this case was the fact that the “church has taken great pains to show that the last moments of all infidels (that Christians did not succeed in burning) were infinitely wretched and despairing. It was alleged that words could not paint the horrors that were endured by a dying infidel.” This has been a persistent theme in Ingersoll’s writing, and he no doubt understood that after he died, the same lies would be uttered about him. The church, according to Ingersoll, seemed to find its true voice when discussing the infidel in his final moments: “Upon the death-bed subject the clergy grow eloquent. When describing the shudderings and shrieks of the dying unbeliever, their eyes glitter with delight. It is a festival. They are no longer men. They become hyenas. They dig open graves. They devour the reputations of the dead.”

Ingersoll notes a few important men whom the church has labeled infidel, including Spinoza, Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, and of course Paine, and observes that “hardly a minister in the United States has attempted to ‘answer’ me without referring to the death of one or more of these men.” In virtually all of these cases, argues Ingersoll,

92 Ibid., 523.
94 Ibid., 342.
95 Ibid., 343.
the church has failed to prove their claims that these men all died in a state of abject terror and misery. Recalling the Observer controversy, Ingersoll declares: “In vain have rewards been offered to any priestly maligner to bring forward the evidence.”\(^9^6\) He first defends all of the aforementioned from the accusations of the church, and lastly he arrives on Paine, placing him in the company of Jefferson and Franklin, whom Ingersoll also characterizes as infidels. But, according to Ingersoll, the church “never has pretended that Jefferson or Franklin died in fear.”\(^9^7\) They went after Paine, not only because he was not as powerful, and that he was a citizen of the world, but also, or so thought the church, because his “arguments were so good that his character was bad.”\(^9^8\)

After the publication of The Age of Reason, “every falsehood that malignity could coin and malice pass was given to the world… Under the very flag he had helped to put in heaven his rights were not respected.”\(^9^9\) And as soon as Paine died, “Christians commenced manufacturing horrors for his death-bed. They had his chamber filled with devils rattling chains, and these ancient lies are annually certified to by the respectable Christians of the present day.”\(^1^0^0\) As a final defense of the Great Deist, Ingersoll repeats what is believed to be the historical record of Paine’s last hours, when two catholic priests called on him as he lay dying and asked him if he wished to acknowledge the divinity of Christ in his last moments. Ingersoll describes the scene: “[Paine’s] physician, who seems to have been a meddling fool, just as the cold hand of death was touching the patriot’s heart, whispered in the dull ear of the dying man: ‘Do you believe,

\(^9^6\) Ibid.
\(^9^7\) Ibid., 383.
\(^9^8\) Ibid.
\(^9^9\) Ibid., 387.
\(^1^0^0\) Ibid., 388.
or do you wish to believe, that Jesus Christ is the son of God?’ And the reply was: ‘I have no wish to believe on that subject.’”\textsuperscript{101}

Robert Ingersoll died on July 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1899. He was at home with family and, by all accounts, had a peaceful passing devoid of devils rattling chains. At the time of his death, he was by no means impoverished and still enormously popular. He was not a lonely pariah. He had not been denied his citizenship or denied the right to vote in his later life. His remains were not desecrated and lost forever. Numerous memorials were held in his honor and luminaries like Clarence Darrow spoke at them.

Of course, rumors circulated that Ingersoll had committed suicide, and that he had recanted as well, or that he had died cowering as an infidel. Either version seemed to suit his enemies, and that was what Ingersoll would have expected. Ingersoll also understood that Thomas Paine had blazed a trail for him, and he surely knew he was in his debt. In his “My Reviewers Reviewed” speech, Ingersoll acknowledged this very fact: “Fifty years ago I would have been imprisoned. Fifty years ago my wife and my children would have been torn from my arms in the name of the most merciful God. Twenty-five years ago I could not have made a living in the United States at the practice of law; but I can now. I would not then have been allowed to express my thought; but I can now, and I will. And when I think about the liberty I now enjoy, the whole horizon is illuminated with glory and the air is filled with wings.”\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
Ingersoll may have been perhaps Thomas Paine’s greatest champion, and in his own time the most famous as well. However, his indefatigable effort to reclaim and revive Paine’s memory in the collective consciousness of Americans was no doubt tempered by his own controversial views, which he never hesitated to shout to the rafters. On the centennial of his birth, a *New York Times* headline read, “Ingersoll’s Thunder Barely Heard Now.”¹⁰³ That Ingersoll is virtually unknown in the modern world is a testament to the fact that unswerving and noisy critics of the status quo are rarely welcomed into the pantheon of “respectable” men. But, fortunately for Thomas Paine, there would be others.

“Paine suffered then, as now he suffers not so much because of what he wrote as from the misinterpretations of others.”

—Thomas Alva Edison
“My conscience,” Thomas Edison once mused, “seems to be oblivious of Sunday. It must be incrusted with a sort of irreligious tartr [sic]. If I was not so deaf I might go to church and get it taken off or at least loosened.” The “tartr” to which Edison referred was evidently just the protection he needed not to be offended by Thomas Paine’s religious writings, which he discovered at around the age of twelve. Early a fan of Paine, Edison became arguably his most famous twentieth-century champion, using his enormous celebrity to help restore Paine’s historical legacy. Edison shared much in common with Paine. Neither of them had much in the way of formal education. As Edison biographer Randall Stross notes, Edison’s mother, “a former schoolteacher, provided the homeschooling that constituted the entirety of his education, other than two brief stints at local schools.” Despite the lack of formal education, or perhaps because of it, Edison was as much the insatiably curious autodidact that Paine was.

Edison also shared with Paine a striking—and in Edison’s case, underrated—writing style: erudite, sharp, humorous, and occasionally whimsical. Edison’s sheer awe of the immutable order of the natural world suggests a reverence for nature that clearly echoes Paine’s. Take, for instance, this passage from Edison’s *Diary and Sundry Observations*: “Saw big field of squashes throwing out their leafy tentacles to the wind, preparing to catch the little fleeting atom for assimutation [sic] into the progeny of the squash gourd. A spider weaves its net to catch an organized whole. How like this is the

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living plant. The leaves and stalk catch the primal free atom. All are then arranged in an organized whole.”

Exploring the natural world was, for Thomas Paine, the only way to know God, and Edison clearly shared this sense of awestruck curiosity. Edison, like Paine, was also not afraid to court controversy by freely expressing his views, particularly on the subject of religion. As Paul Israel notes, Edison considered himself a freethinker, and “followed Paine and Ingersoll in expressing skepticism toward traditional religion and in urging that clerical authority and biblical myths be replaced by the truths of nature uncovered through scientific investigation.”

Edison clearly felt a deep connection with the freethinking Paine and, like Ingersoll, became one of his unswerving and lifelong champions. Edison, like Paine, also had an unusual childhood, along with parents who were similar in their belief systems. Paine’s father was a Quaker, his mother an observant Anglican. Edison’s father was a bit of an unorthodox radical, his mother devoutly religious. Edison once joked that his father introduced him to Thomas Paine, and his mother took him to church.

Edison may well have been Canada’s most famous inventor had it not been for his father’s radical politics. Stross writes: “Two years before Edison was born, his Canadian father, Samuel, an innkeeper by trade and Thomas Paine-like firebrand by temperament, backed an insurrection against the Canadian provincial government. When the uprising failed, Samuel had to flee for his life without his wife and four children and south to the United States. He landed in a canal town, Milan, Ohio, eight miles south of Lake Erie, where his family rejoined him.”

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3 Edison, *Diary and Sundry Observations*, 35.
1847. The family eventually relocated to Port Huron, Michigan, where Edison began to blossom as a prodigious inventor: “A corner of the cellar in the Port Huron house was Thomas A. Edison’s first laboratory. There, after the age of ten, he secluded himself, often all day long, absorbed in his study of simple chemicals and gases and in the design of his first homemade telegraph set.”

Edison’s father, in an effort to draw his son out of the basement, “would sometimes offer Alva the bribe of a penny if he would read some book of serious literature. Thus, when he was twelve the boy read Tom Paine’s Age of Reason, at his father’s suggestion.” Paine’s writings obviously had a profound effect on the young Edison, as he recalled later in life: “I have always been interested in this man. My father had a set of Tom Paine’s books on the shelf at home. I must have opened the covers about the time I was 13. And I can still remember the flash of enlightenment which shone from his pages. It was a revelation, indeed, to encounter his views on political and religious matters, so different from the views of many people around us. Of course I did not understand him very well, but his sincerity and ardor made an impression upon me that nothing has ever served to lessen.”

As a young man, Edison demonstrated his entrepreneurial skills as a would-be newspaper publisher, working “as a newsboy on the Grand Trunk Railway.” It was during this time that Edison claims he suffered from a loss of hearing, explaining: “…it is supposed that the injury which permanently deafened me was caused by my being lifted

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7 Ibid.
8 Edison, Diary and Sundry Observations, 151.
9 Ibid., 44.
by the ears from where I stood upon the ground into the baggage car.”

This story, though dramatic, may be apocryphal; a childhood bout of Scarlet Fever was likely the cause for his degenerative hearing loss. In any case, Edison attributed his voracious appetite for reading, and much of his success, to his being deaf, claiming that he would not have invented the phonograph, nor would he have improved upon Alexander Graham Bell’s early telephone design, had he not been deaf. He also worked for a time as a telegraph operator (Edison once claimed that he had asked his wife to marry him by tapping the proposal on her palm in Morse Code). In 1869, he left telegraphy to pursue his inventions full time, finally making his home in New Jersey.

Inventor of the first viable incandescent light bulb, Edison also pioneered a vote recorder, a motion picture camera called a kinetoscope, an electric pen, and expanded the usefulness and speed of telegraphy by developing a way by which four telegraph signals could pass simultaneously along the same wire (it was originally a one-way street).

Edison ultimately filed for 1,093 patents, built a veritable invention factory at Menlo Park along with his rising financial empire, and became a true legend in his own time. Among his innumerable inventions, Randall Stross credits Edison with “another, no less important, discovery related to celebrity that he made early in his own public life, accidentally: the application of celebrity to business.” Edison’s unprecedented celebrity status would prove to be the most useful asset that he could bring to the cause of Thomas Paine.

Edison, like Paine, could also be a man of disarming and wry humor, evidenced

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10 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 1.
by this observation in his diary of Sunday, July 12, 1885: “Awakened at 8:15 A.M.
Powerful itching of my head, lots of white dry dandruff—what is this d—mnable
material. Perhaps it’s the dust from the dry literary matter I’ve crowded into my noodle
lately. Its [sic] nomadic. Gets all over my coat; must read about it in the
Encyclopedia.”13 Always the curious scientist, Edison drolly hypothesizes about the
causes of dandruff: “It has just occurred to me that the brain may digest certain portions
of food, say the etherial [sic] part, as well as the stomach—perhaps dandruff is the
excreta of the mind—the quantity of this material being directly proportional to the
amount of reading one indulges in.” Edison deduces that a “book on German
metaphysics would thus easily ruin a dress suit.”14

His observations on fishing are the stuff of a stand-up comic’s routine. After a
recent and fruitless fishing expedition, Edison complained that the fish “seem to be rather
conservative around this bay. One seldom catches enough to form the fundamental basis
for a lie. Everybody lost patience at the stupidity of the fish in not coming forward
promptly to be murdered.”15 Edison also displayed a comic irreverence about organized
religion that closely resembled Paine’s. As Matthew Josephson notes, Edison
occasionally made quips about religion that revealed his skepticism and rankled members
of the church: “To a minister’s query as to the value of lightning rods as protection for
his church spire, Edison replied, ‘By all means, as Providence is apt to be absent-
minded.’”16

13 Edison, Diary and Sundry Observations, 4.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 23.
16 Josephson, Edison, 438.
Edison’s unapologetic irreverence in combination with his profoundly massive celebrity occasionally sparked widespread controversy. In 1910, Edison found himself embroiled in a protracted dispute when he publicly declared himself a freethinker: “To the question put to him during an interview, ‘What does God mean to you?’ he replied, ‘A personal God means absolutely nothing to me.’ In short the idea of God, he maintained, was ‘an abstraction.’ Moreover, he declared himself an enemy of all superstition, deplored the fact that most people were ‘incurably religious,’ and pointed out that ‘billions of prayers’ had brought no mitigation of natural catastrophes such as great wars.”

According to Matthew Josephson’s account, “the lay and religious press soon resounded with attacks on Edison, and his mail bag at the Orange post office became so swollen with angry letters from pious folk that, as it was said, he was glad to get away to Europe for a vacation in the summer of 1911.”

To add to the strain, Edison’s business associates “pleaded with him not to destroy the prestige of his great name and injure the Edison Industries by blasphemous utterances.”

Edison had now been tested in the fiery crucible of the public backlash as a result of his religious views, and he now had even more in common with Thomas Paine. Edison learned the bitter lesson that the freethinker was not so very free to speak his mind in America. The experience must have generated even greater sympathy for Paine in Edison’s mind. This may explain why Edison wrote with obvious sadness that Paine “has almost no influence on present-day thinking in the United States because he is unknown to the average citizen. Perhaps I might say right here that this is a national loss.

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17 Ibid., 437.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
and a deplorable lack of understanding concerning the man who first proposed and first wrote those impressive words, ‘the United States of America.’ But it is hardly strange. Paine’s teachings have been debarred from schools everywhere and his views of life misrepresented until his memory is hidden in shadows, or he is looked upon as of unsound mind.”

Edison obviously related to Paine’s religious worldview, but also argued strongly that Paine’s contribution to the cause of Independence was almost unrivaled. “We have never had a sounder intelligence in the Republic,” Edison boldly declared of Paine. “He was the equal of Washington in making American liberty possible.” Edison also argued that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution bore Paine’s indelible fingerprints: “There is no doubt whatever that the two great documents of American liberty reflect the philosophy of Paine.” Edison, himself a potent writer, offers this insightful assessment of Paine’s literary abilities: “Many a person who could not comprehend Rousseau, and would be puzzled by Montesquieu, could understand Paine as an open book. He wrote with a clarity, a sharpness of outline and exactness of speech that even a schoolboy should be able to grasp. There is nothing false, little that is subtle, and an impressive lack of the negative in Paine. He literally cried to his reader for a comprehending hour, and then filled that hour with such sagacious reasoning as we find surpassed nowhere else in American letters—seldom in any school of writing.”

Despite Paine’s enormous service to the cause of liberty, his thoughts on the

20 Edison, *Diary and Sundry Observations*, 151.
21 Ibid., 152.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 155.
subject of religion made him an object of scorn in his adoptive homeland. Edison lamented that, upon his return from France to the United States in 1802, many “of his old companions in the struggle for liberty avoided him, and he was publicly condemned by the unthinking.”

Edison supposed that if Paine “had ceased his writings with ‘The Rights of Man’ he would have been hailed today as one of the two or three outstanding figures of the revolution. But ‘The Age of Reason’ cost him glory at the hands of his countrymen—a greater loss to them than to Tom Paine.”

Having himself felt the sting of persecution for expressing his views on religion, Edison clearly understood the great tragedy of the attacks against Paine. “That those attacks have continued down to our day,” Edison wrote, “with scarcely an abatement, is an indication of how strong prejudice, when once aroused, may become. It has been a custom in some quarters to hold up Paine as an example of everything bad.”

The claim that Paine was an atheist still rang true for many, even in the early twentieth century, and Edison did his best to disabuse the public of this belief, writing that Paine had “been called an atheist, but atheist he was not. Paine believed in a supreme intelligence, as representing the idea which other men often express by the name of deity.” Edison also chided Theodore Roosevelt for having spread the great lie that Paine was an unbeliever: “When Theodore Roosevelt termed Paine a dirty little atheist he surely spoke from lack of understanding. It was a stricture, an inaccurate charge of the

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24 Ibid., 157.
25 Ibid., 158.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 157.
sort that has dimmed the greatness of this eminent American.”

Despite the mountain of prejudice that had accumulated atop Thomas Paine’s legacy, Edison was optimistic about Paine’s redemption in America’s historical consciousness. Writing late in his life, Edison prophesied that Paine and his significance would outlive all of the scurrilous attacks against him. “No man who helped to lay the foundations of our liberty—who stepped forth as the champion of so difficult a cause—can be permanently obscured by such attacks,” Edison declared.

In addition to the forceful words that he wrote in Paine’s defense, Edison was also willing to lend his name, reputation, and fortune to furthering the Paine cause. As Stross noted, Edison shrewdly capitalized on his own celebrity in order to expand his business empire, and as a lifelong admirer of Thomas Paine, he surely comprehended the significance of attaching his name to an organization that, since its founding in 1884, had tirelessly devoted itself to promoting and defending Paine and his writings: the Thomas Paine National Historical Association. By lending his name and prestige to the TPNHA, Edison was effectively offering a celebrity endorsement. The TPNHA, also aware of the significance of Edison’s celebrity, conspicuously gave Edison the title of First Vice-President of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, a position that was not entirely ceremonial. Edison became a patron of the Association; for example, on splendid letterhead reading “From the Laboratory of Thomas A. Edison, Orange, N.J.,” Edison’s assistant, W.H. Meadowcroft, wrote to then-TPNHA president William van der Weyde: “Just a line to let you know that Mr. Edison authorizes you to buy the two

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
volumes of the Pennsylvania Magazine for the Paine Museum for ninety dollars. He has instructed our cashier to send you a check.”

And earlier that year, in advance of an important upcoming auction, Meadowcroft sent this message: “I have received a telegram from Mr. Edison today asking to send you a check for $100 right-away. You will find this inclosed [sic] and I am sending this letter by special delivery so that there will be no delay.” The next day van der Weyde replied, thanking Edison for the one hundred dollars and also—clearly hoping to encourage Edison to send more money—noting with some urgency that a few particularly precious Paine letters were up for auction. One letter of significant interest was from Paine to his friend Joel Barlow, in which Paine complained about being denied the vote in New Rochelle in 1804. Van der Weyde worried that the letter could fetch a price over one hundred dollars—too exorbitant for the Association’s budget. “We will, in that case, have to let it go,” van der Weyde wrote with a melodramatic flourish, “much as we’d like to capture it, and anchor it for all time.”

The letter from Paine to Barlow is not in the van der Weyde Collection, so evidently Edison was not forthcoming with the extra money in this instance, and another buyer acquired it. A few months later, Edison wrote personally to van der Weyde: “I have received your letter of May 23d in regard to the project for the erection of a Thomas Paine Memorial Building. Let me say in reply that the Association may call on me at any time for $300.00.” Edison was generous with his

30 Letter from Mr. Meadowcroft, Assistant to Thomas Edison, to William van der Weyde, President of the TPNHA, December 16, 1924.
31 Letter from Meadowcroft to van der Weyde, March 6, 1924.
32 Letter from William van der Weyde to Thomas Edison, March 7, 1924.
money, to a limit, and with his time when it came to restoring the legacy of Thomas
Paine, and did not hesitate to lend his celebrity to the Association’s plans to construct a
memorial building and museum in Paine’s honor—a project that would take years to
realize.

The plan to erect a Thomas Paine Memorial Building in New Rochelle, just north
of the Thomas Paine Cottage, was long in the works. As early as 1913, there is talk in the
TPNHA newsletters about the building of a Paine museum, but there were no financial
means to make that happen. However, in 1923, thanks to a significant influx of cash
from a late member of the Association, John H. Ludwig, the Association could finally
begin drawing up plans for the long-awaited groundbreaking. Six years earlier, the
money was left to the TPNHA in Ludwig’s will, but had yet to be transferred to them.
During the Association’s January, 1923, meeting, President van der Weyde “suggested
that the time had come for an attorney to look into the matter.”34 Apparently lawyers did
look into the matter, because during a special meeting on May 1, 1923, the Association
made a motion to “authorize the execution of a receipt for $10,000 to be received under
the will of John H. Ludwig, deceased.”35 The total amount was $25,000, in the form of
two bequests, one for $15,000 and the other for $10,000, and the first installment of
$10,000 was set to arrive soon. With the promise of an injection of cash pending, the
Association excitedly established a Building Committee for the purposes of erecting a
Thomas Paine Memorial Building and museum—and they believed that Edison would
play a key role in seeing their dream become a reality.

In December 1923, the Association announced that it had “purchased a plot of

34 TPNHA Annual Meeting Minutes, January 1923.
35 TPNHA Special Meeting Minutes, May 1, 1923.
about an acre on North Avenue at the entrance of Wykagyl Park, New Rochelle, as a site for a memorial building to be used as a museum.”

Upon hearing the news, the *New York World* opined that Paine had been “shamefully neglected,” and predicted that the purchase of the land “will meet with a more sympathetic reception now than in other days when men who questioned the infallibility of the Bible were not considered respectable.” The *World* declared that Paine, with sheer brilliance, had “fought the reactionaries of his time—and he has never been forgiven.”

The positive reaction of the *New York World* seemed to bode well for the Association’s plans. The TPNHA, thanks to Ludwig’s endowment, was able to purchase the land for the sum of seven thousand dollars.

When the Association met again, an obviously proud van der Weyde “recounted the achievements of a remarkable year in the affairs of the Association—the payments to the organization of two bequests under the will of the late John H. Ludwig, one of $10,000 and the other of $15,000, the purchase of a small portion of the farm land presented to Thomas Paine during the Revolutionary War period, …and the plans of the Association’s Building committee for the erection on this land of a memorial building in honor of Thomas Paine.”

Despite the good news, funding problems continuously dogged the Association, and they were forced to raise the lifetime TPNHA membership fee from fifty to one hundred dollars, and the annual fee from two dollars to four, during a special meeting convened on July 10, 1924.

Van der Weyde wrote to Edison in November of 1924, apprising him of the

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38 Letter from William van der Weyde to James M. Smith, May 23, 1924.
39 TPNHA Annual Meeting Minutes, January 29, 1924.
details surrounding the construction of the Paine memorial building. Unfortunately, there was not very much good news to report. “You will recall,” van der Weyde wrote, “that this past Spring we sent out a letter to all members of the Association (about 500), telling them of our purchasing the land, of the funds we already have in hand for the building, etc. We said in that letter that we needed about $25,000. before we could commence any building operation, and we invited members to contribute to a Building Fund.”

Despite their fundraising efforts, the financial situation was embarrassingly dire. “It seems almost incredible,” an exasperated van der Weyde wrote, “but we received only $702. in contributions from members for this purpose! You were so generous as to send us $300., which was almost one-half of the total amount we received!”

Van der Weyde, understanding the significance of Edison’s celebrity, and believing that the Association had not significantly exploited the potential media attention and fund-raising benefits that may have come from using Edison’s name in conjunction with the Association, asks Edison if he can employ this strategy more explicitly. Edison had written to van der Weyde back in 1921, and closed his letter with these words: “The truth sometimes takes centuries to come forth, but it always does come forth. Paine was one of the greatest men of all time.” Van der Weyde had not forgotten those words, and thought perhaps it was time for Edison to make a similar, and much more public, endorsement of Thomas Paine. Van der Weyde suggests that a letter from Edison, showing his support for the construction of the Memorial building, may help greatly in raising funds, and explains that he—van der Weyde—had already written such

40 Letter from William van der Weyde to Thomas Edison, November 14, 1924.
41 Ibid.
42 Letter from Thomas Edison to William van der Weyde, November 16, 1921. Retrieved from the TAE Papers Project.
a letter in the hopes that Edison would pretend that he himself had written it. “Feeling pretty certain that being entirely in sympathy with our plan the Thomas Paine memorial building,” van der Weyde wrote, “you will be willing to let us have such a letter from you, I have taken the liberty of drafting such a communication, addressed to me, which we would greatly appreciate if you’d have typewritten on your Edison Laboratory letterhead, and sign, and mail to me.” Van der Weyde concludes by making clear how important he believes Edison, and his celebrity, are to the cause they share in common: “Your name is so famous and so esteemed that I am sure that such a letter would be a very great help in this matter.” Van der Weyde included a copy of the letter, which he hoped Edison would pretend to author, which reads:

“Dear Mr. Van der Weyde:

I am glad to hear of progress in the plans for the Thomas Paine Memorial building which the Association intends to erect on the land which it has purchased just north of the Paine Monument in New Rochelle.

I most heartily favor the idea of such a memorial to the man who first proposed American Independence, and to whom we are so much indebted for its accomplishment. It is high time that such a memorial to Paine was erected.

Thomas Paine was one of the greatest men of all time.

Sincerely yours,

First Vice President

T.P.N.H.A.”

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43 Van der Weyde to Edison, November 14, 1924.
44 Ibid.
Edison gave the letter his blessing and claimed it as his own, and ultimately lent his personal celebrity to the project yet again by agreeing to appear at the groundbreaking ceremonies to turn the first shovel of earth. As van der Weyde knew, Edison’s presence at the groundbreaking ceremony would transform it into an enormous media event. If the name Thomas Paine was not enough to excite the attention of the press, particularly the local press, which was often ambivalent and occasionally hostile, the name Thomas Alva Edison surely would. A delighted van der Weyde wrote to Edison: “We are simply overjoyed with your letter of the 13th, saying that you will come up to New Rochelle on Memorial Day—Saturday, May 30—to turn over the first spade full of earth for the construction of the Thomas Paine Memorial building.” One of the expenditures for the TPNHA for the month of February was a telegram “of congratulations from Ass’n to Mr. Edison on 78th birthday, 2/11/’25,” at a cost of sixty cents. Edison would make the trip to New Rochelle just a few months later, so the telegram was apparently a worthwhile expense.

As the date of the official groundbreaking approached, funding barely trickled in, with members contributing two dollars here and ten dollars there. The Association became so desperate for cash that they began hounding members whose dues had gone unpaid for any length of time. An increasingly frustrated van der Weyde occasionally lost his patience with some of the wayward Association members, particularly one Olin J. Ross, an attorney from Columbus, Ohio, who had offered copies of speeches he had

45 William van der Weyde to Thomas Edison, May 15, 1925.
46 I sifted through hundreds of letters in the van der Weyde collection housed at the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies. Some members gave as little as a dollar to the cause, some gave nothing but their best wishes, while others were more charitable, offering twenty-five dollars or more to the effort.
given about Thomas Paine in place of paying dues. Van der Weyde was decidedly uninterested in anything but real money, as a miffed Ross noted in a letter to the Association president: “As to not wishing to exchange copies of my speeches for dues, it seems to me that you fairly screamed the word ‘no,’ since it is written twice in capitals.” 47 The obviously wounded Ross added, “If you want to do any propaganda work for Thomas Paine it seems to me that you should circulate literature. If you do not you will be largely a dead organization.” 48 Ross complained that van der Weyde’s letter had “a sort of sneering tone,” and added: “I would further criticise [sic] your letter by saying that unless you learn how to write a polite letter in answer to polite ones, instead of sneering ones, you should get some one else to do your correspondence, or if that cannot be done, then you should vacate the office till you do learn how.” 49

Disgruntled Association members and a perpetual lack of money notwithstanding, on May 30, 1925, Thomas Edison was standing under “a soft spring sky” on a hilltop in New Rochelle, spade in hand, before a throng of reporters and a crowd of three thousand spectators. 50 Edison’s presence at the groundbreaking would make the event an extraordinarily well-attended event and a great success, but it would also reveal an unsettling truth: Paine was not the star of the show. The headline The New York Times ran on the day of the groundbreaking is revealing in its emphasis: “EDISON TO SPEAK ON PAINE, Will Break Ground for Memorial at New Rochelle Today.” 51 It is clear that,

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47 Letter from Olin J. Ross to William van der Weyde, February 28, 1925.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 The Standard-Star, May 31, 1925. Note: the spade that Edison used on that day was listed among the TPNHA’s June expenses at a cost of $1.50.
as far as the *Times* was concerned, the story was about Edison, not Thomas Paine. Paine had been completely upstaged. The local New Rochelle newspaper, *The Standard-Star*, was no less dismissive of the significance of the Paine Memorial Building, almost obsessively covering Edison’s every move on the day of the groundbreaking, and noting with obvious fondness that his role in the “the ceremonies was brief, but during the addresses he sat patiently and seemingly happily amid the crowd, waiting for the close of the speeches he could not hear, for Mr. Edison is extremely deaf.”

When it came time for Edison to break ground, he “performed his brief activities expeditiously and vigorously—so expeditiously, in fact, that the dozen photographers and ‘movie’ men present had to ask him to dig up another spadeful of earth so that they could snap his picture. This he did gladly and posed as frequently and as pleasantly as he was asked to, after which he resumed his chair until the ceremonies had ended.” A number of speakers gave addresses, including Norman Thomas, the Presbyterian minister, Socialist, and presidential also-ran, who offered this insightful critique of America in the 1920s: “The Tennessee law is but one of many evidences that the greatest men can not hand down freedom to the future. Each generation must struggle for its own.” The Tennessee law to which Thomas refers is undoubtedly the anti-evolution law that would embroil John Scopes, William Jennings Bryan, and Clarence Darrow in a national controversy, and is certainly a stark reminder of the zeitgeist amid which the Paine building was being constructed.

Van der Weyde, whom the *Star* mistakenly called “Van De Weyde,” not knowing

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52 *The Standard-Star*, May 31, 1925.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
that the press coverage would be so pathetically dismissive of the significance of the Paine Building, and clearly relishing the moment, brought the day to a close with these overly optimistic words: “This is indeed a ‘red-letter day’ for the admirers of Thomas Paine, a day that will go down in Paine history as marking a notable step in the world’s fast-growing appreciation of that great man who was not only the real father of this country, but in a more general way the friend of all human rights, of the liberty of all countries.”

Van Der Weyde then read the contrived Edison letter to the assembled crowd, saying first: “I think you will be interested in a letter I received a few months ago from one of the world’s most eminent men and if you will permit me, I should be glad to read it to you.” Edison looked on and smiled approvingly while van der Weyde read, although it is unlikely he heard a word of it.

Again revealing who the true star attraction of the day was, *The Standard-Star* reported that after van der Weyde had formally announced to the crowd that the ceremonies were complete,

an informal and unanticipated reception to Thomas Edison took place. The crowds closed in around him, to shake his hand and perhaps exchange a few words with the great man. But it was the children who came closest and first, and the bystanders saw Mr. Edison shake a score of anxious little hands and smile kindly at the sea of little faces turned eagerly up to him. He had time and courtesy for all who approached him and when he set off down the hill…the crowds flocked after him and with him and gathered around his motor, which awaited under police escort at the foot of the hill. Mrs. Edison was with her husband.

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55 Ibid.


57 *The Standard-Star*, May 31, 1925.
The Star also noted pitifully that, after Edison and his wife had departed the scene, “the chief attraction of the day had vanished, and as rain was again threatening, the folks assembled in the hilly meadow dispersed, the chairs were gathered up, the cameras were put away, and the only proof left at the end of the day of its happenings remained in the square of rich brown earth showing up against the green of the meadow as the first actual move in the erection of the building to the memory of Thomas Paine.”58 Adding insult to injury, and again downplaying the significance of the actual event, the next day The New York Times coverage of the event began with this headline: “Edison Opens Work on Paine Memorial; Inventor, as Vice President of Historical Society, Breaks Ground on Museum.”59 Again, the story was largely about Edison and not Paine.

At least one publication saw the significance of the Paine Memorial Building, however. The Truthseeker, a freethought magazine, was on hand at the ceremonies as well, and although they did take the time to cover the spectacle that Edison’s presence generated, remarking that when Edison turned the shovel of earth over, “there immediately flashed something like a score of cameras, including that of the movie man taking pictures for a News Reel,” they also offered some insightful thoughts about the efforts of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association and their struggle to restore Paine to his proper place in America’s historical consciousness.60 The great conundrum for admirers of Thomas Paine has always been how to promote Paine and his writings without calling undue attention to the controversy that led to his exile in the first place. The Truthseeker clearly understood this inherent conflict, writing that the TPNHA,

58 Ibid.
60 The Truthseeker, June 13, 1925, vol. 52, no. 24, 372.
“turning the historical side of Paine to the light, rather than the side viewed unfavorably by religious people, selects its speakers from men who tolerate the Infidel, in view of his patriotic services, rather than praise him for showing up the nature of the Bible and of the religion assumed to be founded upon it. This policy has somewhat changed the character of Paine celebrations.”61

Being a freethinking publication, *The Truthseeker* found the lack of attention given to Paine’s monumental religious work a bit of a disappointment. The obvious hope was that *The Age of Reason* would be at the heart of any efforts to defend the legacy of Thomas Paine. Despite the downplaying of Paine’s religious writings, *The Truthseeker* notes with some guarded optimism that “the ‘Age of Reason’ often receives honorable mention (albeit one of the speakers at this occasion called the book the Appeal to Reason), so that no one need depart ignorant of the fact that Paine wrote such a book, and some may thereby be led to read it.”62 And despite the fact that most events to honor Paine are largely devoted to celebrating Paine the patriot and author of *Common Sense*, which leaves many with an incomplete understanding of the man in full, “no honors to Paine are misdirected. They all contribute to building up his reputation as an author whose chief work was the unanswerable indictment of the Christian religion and its ‘inspired’ book.”63 Despite that The Truthseeker is undeniably an ally of the Paine cause, they, like so many others, understand *The Age of Reason* to be an assault on Christianity. Ultimately, *The Truthseeker* concludes that it is a hopeful sign and a positive trend that “Paine meetings that used to be held in small halls by little knots of Freethinkers have

61 Ibid., 372-73.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
expanded into such brilliant gatherings as this most successful one at New Rochelle in the year 1925—an event that links together the names of two great men of their respective eras—Paine and Edison.”

Mere days after the groundbreaking, Thomas Edison was commanding headlines again, discoursing on Paine at length with a reporter for the *Times*. The sprawling piece began with the headline: “Edison Speaks for Tom Paine; Praises Revolutionary Patriot Whose Name Was Long Under a Cloud.” The reporter sets the scene: “Sitting in the broad library of his plant in Orange, N.J., the inventor, now in his seventy-ninth year, discussed Paine as a familiar companion of his reading hours. He has taken a sympathetic interest in the erection of a memorial in New Rochelle, near Paine’s old home, and the efforts under way to render honors so long withheld or grudgingly extended.” During the course of the extensive interview, Edison again proved himself to be a tireless champion of Paine.

Despite Edison’s efforts to keep the name Thomas Paine relevant and in the news, near-constant funding problems still haunted the Association. However, the building project continued to limp along. On June 8, 1925, Laurence M. Loeb, the architect who had been hired for the project wrote to the Association: “I am proceeding with the preparations of working drawings, and specifications, ready for estimating, of the Paine Museum to be erected on North Avenue, New Rochelle.” In an effort to offset the lack of funds, the Association raised their annual membership fees yet again, and stopped

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64 Ibid.
66 Letter from Laurence M. Loeb to TPNHA, June 8, 1925.
holding their Annual Dinners. This decision may have done more harm than good, evidenced by the following letter sent by an angry Association member: “Herewith is my check for my dues, which you raised to four dollars, without my consent. I am afraid this action and the elimination of the Annual Dinner will result in a smaller membership and less revenue instead of increase, which was no doubt the intention of the few who voted for the advance, and which binds the many to either pay or get out. Perhaps you have already learnt it from the response to the dues notices.”

The lack of money flowing in forced the Association to send increasingly pleading newsletters, which opened with this admonition: “My dear Fellow-Member: We had hoped to hear from you in reply to our letter of last January, calling your attention to the fact that membership dues were then payable. Please permit us to again remind you of it.”

The stress of organizing the groundbreaking and the deplorable lack of money took its toll on van der Weyde. The July TPNHA expenses note that two hundred dollars was authorized “to the president for a vacation to recuperate.”

Despite taking a well-deserved vacation to rest and recuperate, van der Weyde suffered an attack of appendicitis in early January of 1926, an attack from which he would never fully recover, and so the Association’s annual meeting was postponed until February. When they reconvened, it was reported that the building’s construction was nearing completion, and also that, in late December of 1925, the “ten-volume set of the ‘Life and Works of Thomas Paine’” had been published “under the imprint of the T.P.N.H.A.” This multi-volume collection, along with van der Weyde’s careful annotation, became the standard source for Paine’s writings for decades. It had also been

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67 Letter from A. Lewis to TPNHA, March 16, 1925.
68 TPNHA Newsletter, July 1925.
arranged with the publisher that a dollar from the sale of every set would go to the Association and “would no doubt aid materially in paying for the building under construction in New Rochelle.”

In April, 1926, van der Weyde wrote to Edison, updating him on the news that the Paine Building, “for which you ‘broke ground’ last Memorial Day, is now very nearly completed, and is really a very fine-looking structure, and a worthy memorial to the great man who first proposed American Independence.” However, lack of money remained a serious issue, and van der Weyde was once again calling on the Wizard of Menlo Park for help. “Our funds are practically exhausted,” a desperate van der Weyde wrote. “We need about $5000 more to finish. Perhaps you would be willing to help us in this matter.” Van der Weyde tried an emotional appeal to Edison, playing up his appendicitis as a way to garner sympathy—and money: “I believe that the gradual unfolding of the Paine Memorial Building, to the point where it is now practically reaching completion, helped a great deal in my recovery.” There is no evidence in the records to indicate whether Edison was compelled by van der Weyde’s emotional ploy for more financial support.

The Thomas Paine Memorial Building and Museum finally opened its doors to the public in the summer of 1926, to considerably less fanfare than the groundbreaking ceremonies had generated the previous year. And despite its auspicious beginnings, the life of the building—as will be revealed in the following chapter—has had a bit of a tragic arc, not unlike the man for whom the building was named, and to whose life and works it was dedicated. When the flash of camera bulbs faded in the immediate

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69 TPNHA Annual Meeting Minutes, February 1926.
70 Letter from William van der Weyde to Thomas Edison, April 14, 1926.
aftermath of the groundbreaking, and Edison was no longer around to draw the attention of the media, the building soon became obscured by shadow and, at various points, literally overgrown by ivy and dangerously decrepit.

Thomas Edison, champion of Thomas Paine, the man whose gargantuan celebrity helped to draw three thousand spectators to a hillside in New Rochelle in the spring of 1925, died on October 18, 1931. The next day, the Times ran a story with a headline that clearly reflected the public bond that had been forged between the Wizard of Menlo Park and Thomas Paine: “Edison Revered Paine as a World Leader; Helped Build Memorial to Him in New Rochelle.” The article notes that the “inventor was a frequent visitor to the shrine, to the fund for which he contributed.” As evidence of Edison’s true admiration for Thomas Paine, the article quotes in full the contrived Edison letter. And although the majority of the letter was actually written by van der Weyde, the last and most important sentence was entirely Edison’s own: “Thomas Paine was one of the greatest men of all time.”

Although Edison’s enormous celebrity often overshadowed Paine himself, he certainly performed an important role in defending and promoting the legacy of Thomas Paine. But Edison, although a firm believer in the cause, was not involved in the business of Thomas Paine on a daily basis. He had his own empire to nurture. Although he may have been Paine’s most famous fan, he was certainly not the most tirelessly devoted. The more quotidian, occasionally Sisyphean, but by no means less exhausting

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71 The New York Times, October 19, 1931. Note: To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time it has been revealed that Edison did not himself write the letter that was so often and so publicly attributed to him.
or important work of keeping Paine’s name in the popular consciousness truly belonged to the TPNHA, to whose struggles I will now turn.
“It so often happens that men live to forfeit the reputation at one time they gained at another.”

—Thomas Paine
Chapter 5: The TPNHA

Nothing ever came easy for the Thomas Paine National Historical Association. Despite some extraordinary leadership, auspicious beginnings, and the support of men like Thomas Edison and Robert Ingersoll—whose celebrity status helped to expose the TPNHA to a wider national audience—enormous funding problems and public resistance to many of their efforts to promote Paine were nearly constant obstacles for the Association. Paine's unsavory reputation was above all the greatest obstacle for the TPNHA. As they would learn through bitter experience, even something as seemingly innocuous as erecting a sign reading “The Thomas Paine Cottage” in front of the house that Paine had once occupied in New Rochelle became a frustrating and overly protracted struggle. Nevertheless, the TPNHA is inarguably the single-most enduring and important group to fight for Thomas Paine’s memory in our collective consciousness, and their day-to-day struggles are the focus of this chapter.

1 Funding problems would unfortunately be a nearly crippling problem for the TPNHA; to this day they have been the single largest issue facing the Association, due in no small measure to the controversy the name Thomas Paine seems always to ignite. A 1989 newsletter from the Huguenot-Thomas Paine Historical Association announced that a tag and bake sale from that year had raised $2,500 to support upkeep on the Paine Cottage. One wonders if Mount Vernon or Monticello ever needed to hold a bake sale. Occasionally, the financial troubles of the Association descended into the realm of the comically absurd. In 1979, Con Edison sent a notice to the Paine Museum, the text of which read: “Dear Mr. Paine: We have received your check but must return it because the signature is missing…. Please send us a new check at your earliest convenience so that we may properly credit your account.” Association Vice-President Robert Stitt noted sadly: “It’s surprising and unfortunate how many people still don’t know who Tom Paine was. Paine was an honorable man. Even though he has been dead for 170 years, we didn’t want him accused of not paying his bills.” Source: Huguenot-Thomas Paine Historical Association Newsletter, 1979.
While much of their story is by necessity woven into the fabric of other chapters of this dissertation, some episodes of their history bear telling in their own right, particularly the Association’s creation, and their battles with another historical group headquartered in New Rochelle, the Huguenot Society. The Huguenots founded the city of New Rochelle in 1689, and they have been a bulwark of local history and an institution in New Rochelle in their own right since their descendants founded a formal historical association in 1886. The Huguenots were by dint of their history and religious values destined to clash with the TPNHA, and a brief sketch of that conflict, and their eventual and extraordinarily odd marriage, will be outlined in the pages that follow.

“The Thomas Paine National Historical Association was organized on January 29, 1884, the 147th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine, at a meeting held in the rooms of the Manhattan Liberal Club, 220 East 15th Street, New York City,” according to the group’s very first recorded minutes. Thaddeus Wakeman, who would eventually become president of the TPNHA during its formative years, “addressed the gathering on the subject of a Paine association, pointing out the need of such an organization to perpetuate the memory and works of Thomas Paine, to obtain and disseminate accurate information about him, to refute the various slanders and fables that have been circulated concerning him, and to hold in perpetuity the Paine monument at New Rochelle and the piece of land upon which the marble shaft stands.” Sensing an obvious void when it came to any organized efforts to promote the legacy of Paine, the group began holding annual meetings in and around New York City, attracting Paine supporters and many

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2 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 29, 1884.
3 Ibid.
eminent freethinkers of the age. As Gary Berton, secretary of the TPNHA and coordinator of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, explains, the “formation of the TPNHA was part of the developing struggle to educate the people about issues of free speech, labor rights, women’s rights, education, prison reform and freethought. Thomas Paine was the uniting figure in American history that all these organizations had in common. The re-establishment of Thomas Paine as a preeminent founding father was part of this education movement.”

Robert Ingersoll would seem an obvious choice for a founding member of the TPNHA considering his lifelong advocacy of Paine, but he never formally joined the association. Ingersoll and the TPNHA had a disagreement over how to respond to the controversial Comstock Act of 1873. According to Berton, “Ingersoll broke with many of the people who founded TPNHA over their militancy in opposition to the Act, and he advocated a legal campaign as opposed to those who wanted a social, mass movement fight as well. … This mild split in the movement kept Ingersoll at arm’s length to the Paine group until 1892 when he addressed TPNHA at the Manhattan Liberal Club.”

When the Association met in 1892, Ingersoll offered some reliably pithy remarks to the group and brilliantly encapsulated Paine’s religious writings, arguing that Paine’s “idea was to get rid of the middleman in religion.”

Ingersoll was back again in 1894 along with a throng of over four hundred spectators gathered at the Association’s annual celebration at the Paine monument in

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5 Ibid., 18-19
6 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 29, 1892.
New Rochelle. Despite his disagreements with the TPNHA and his lack of membership in the Association, his presence at some of the earliest Association events no doubt was a draw for press and spectator alike. And the press garnered by some of the early Paine celebrations seemed to be paying significant dividends. A newspaper only referred to in meeting minutes as the “Sun” (most likely the New York paper which began publishing in 1833) had recently written an article about the dedication of the Paine monument in New Rochelle, declaring: “The world is making up its mind anew about Thomas Paine.” The TPNHA was glad to note that the Sun was “showing a different attitude on the part of the papers from what it was only two or three years previous.” The Association members were obviously feeling as though they had been successful in beginning to redeem Paine’s reputation, and that their work over the years since the Association’s founding had done some considerable good.

Despite their early successes, the years would prove not to be as kind to the TPNHA, and much of the difficulty lie not just in the near-constant controversy stirred up by the Association’s namesake, but also in their doomed relationship with the Huguenot Society. Initially seen as an auspicious development, but foreshadowing a prolonged battle to come, the TPNHA had “secured from the Huguenot Society of New Rochelle, through Henry M. Lester, President of that society, permission to use as long as the Paine Assn. wished, one room in the old Paine house at New Rochelle, erected by Paine for his dwelling in the early years of the nineteenth century, for the display of a collection of Paine relics, etc. rent free.” In 1825, the property on which Paine’s cottage sat had been purchased by one Simeon Lester, and in 1909 the cottage, now owned by Henry Lester,

7 Ibid., June 30, 1894.
8 Ibid., January, 1910.
was relocated to a different spot on the property, nearby a stream that was, unfortunately, prone to flooding.\textsuperscript{9} On July 14, 1910, the cottage “was formally opened as a museum and as the headquarters of the Huguenot Association of New Rochelle.”\textsuperscript{10} Lacking a formal headquarters of their own, the TPNHA was happy to have such an historic site in which to house some of their Paine artifacts. A plan was also set in motion that a “suitable signboard, calling attention to the Paine house, and visible from the road, would be erected by the Huguenot Society.”\textsuperscript{11}

The Huguenot Association did eventually erect a sign, but, in an obviously calculated move by the Huguenots, it made no mention of Paine. Instead, the sign read: “Deveaux Cottage.”\textsuperscript{12} Frederick Devoe had been a Tory who owned the property before the American Revolution. He fled to Canada after the War to escape prison, his property seized by the state of New York, and a portion of that land given to Paine in expression of gratitude for Paine’s services to the Revolution. The cottage, in which Paine lived for a time, sat on a parcel of that land. Rankled by the Huguenots’ slight to the memory of Paine, the TPNHA began pressuring the Huguenots to change the sign to reflect that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{9} John Thomas Scharf, \textit{History of Westchester County}, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: L.E. Preston & Co., 1886), 269. \textit{Note}: The rising waters of the brook adjacent to the Paine Cottage occasionally submerged the basement completely, reaching as high as six inches above the first floor and always threatening the artifacts housed there. In August 1979 a federal grant provided the funds to raise the cottage up from the threatening waters, but that did nothing to stop water from seeping in through a leaking roof. Source: \textit{The Standard-Star}, January 1979.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Henry T. Smith, \textit{Manual of Westchester County Past and Present; Civil List to Date 1898}, Vol. 3, 162.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} TPNHA Meeting Minutes, 1910.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} \textit{Note}: Devoe—which is how it is spelled in the original decree of land to Paine by the State of New York—is spelled alternatively in various places (including the original sign in front of the Paine Cottage) as Devaux, DeVaux, De Vaux, etc. I also saw it as DeVau in an undated \textit{Times} article about the cottage. An explanation for why the Huguenots chose the spelling “Devaux” instead of the correct “Devoe” for the cottage sign can be found in the pages below.
\end{itemize}
Paine had once live there.

The historical record strongly supported the Association’s case that the cottage should bear Paine’s name, and in a letter from TPNHA treasurer E.B. Foote to TPNHA president Wakeman, Foote explained that he had been poring over the history of the cottage, most notably the Conway biography of Paine, along with Paine’s own writings, and determined that Devoe could not possibly have owned the cottage, that Devoe’s original stone house and barn were completely destroyed by a fire after he had fled justice to Canada, and that the small cottage in question was built by Paine after Devoe lost possession of the property. Therefore it was historically inaccurate, and an insult to the memory of Paine, to call the cottage the Devaux House. Although it is true that Devoe most likely never set foot in the cottage, it is also likely true that Paine did not build the cottage, as has often been claimed.

The best evidence that Paine did not build the cottage comes from Paine’s own writing, particularly letters he exchanged with President Jefferson after Paine had settled in New Rochelle. At the end of a frustrating year in Washington, D.C. after his return from France in 1803, Paine retreated north by way of a circuitous path to the cottage in New Rochelle that the once-grateful United States had given him. On his way, he stopped off in Bordentown, New Jersey, to visit with an old friend, Colonel Joseph Kirkbride. As noted elsewhere, Paine’s return to the United States was greeted in many quarters with open hostility and, adding further insult to injury, stagecoach drivers refused Paine passage to New York City from Bordentown on the grounds that he was

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13 Letter from E.B. Foote to Thaddeus Wakeman, August 19th, 1910.
“an infidel or deist.”  When at last he arrived at his diminutive cottage, he wrote his friend, the president:

I am settled down on my farm at New Rochelle, twenty miles from N[ew] York. It is a pleasant and healthy situation commanding a prospect always green and agreeable as New Rochelle produces a great deal of grass and hay. The farm contains three hundred acres, about one hundred of which is meadow land, one hundred grazing and tillage land, and the remainder wood land. It is an oblong about a mile and a half in length. I have sold off sixty one acres and an [sic] half for four thousand and twenty dollars. With this money I shall improve the other part, and build an addition 34 feet by 32 to the present dwelling house which is small.  

Paine described to Jefferson all of the improvements he planned to make, including the construction of a screened-in observatory, in which he intended to spend his time during the summer months, so as to “be as retired in the open air as I please.”  Paine also included for Jefferson’s consideration a drawing of an arched roof he planned to build over the “decaying” kitchen, which would make the space more “commodious within, and support itself better than a straight raftered roof.”

Paine’s letter strongly suggests that he did not build the cottage himself. It would seem highly unlikely that the kitchen would have been “decaying” if Paine had very recently built it, nor would he be looking to make so many immediate improvements to a dwelling that he had just constructed. In any case, it was not long before Paine was quitting his home in New Rochelle for lodgings in New York City. Still, New Rochelle

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16 Ibid., 1058.
17 Ibid., 1058-59.
left an impression on Paine, and, as the record indicates, Paine clearly left an impression on New Rochelle.

The local histories of New Rochelle include many references to Paine, the majority of them less than favorable. Henry T. Smith’s *Manual of Westchester County Past and Present* characterizes Paine as “an author famous for his connection with the American and French Revolutions, and for his advocacy of infidel opinions.”¹⁸ John Thomas Scharf’s voluminous and breathtakingly detailed history of New Rochelle, which exceeds sixteen hundred pages, treats Paine with typical scorn; Scharf opens his sketch by describing Paine as “the noted political and atheistic writer….”¹⁹ Scharf offers this decidedly unflattering portrait of Paine as an out-of-control drunkard, relying on accounts from a Reverend Lewis J. Coutant’s *Reminiscences*: “During his abode here he was accustomed to make frequent excursions into the surrounding country, calling on the principal families and farmers of the neighborhoods of New Rochelle and East Chester, whose cellars in those days were well supplied with hogsheads of good old cider, which they never failed to serve up in bountiful libations to the great pleasure of their distinguished visitor.”²⁰ Scharf also offers the testimony of a “late resident of New Rochelle [who] stated that his grandfather once called on Mr. Paine to serve him with

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¹⁹ John Thomas Scharf, *History of Westchester County*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: L.E. Preston & Co., 1886), 602. *Note*: Scharf was not originally from New Rochelle; he was born in Maryland and served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. One is left to speculate whether Paine’s progressivism, including an essay against slavery published in Philadelphia in March 1775 that has long been attributed to Paine—and which inspired the creation of the first anti-slavery society in America— influenced Scharf’s attitude toward Paine. *Source*: Elizabeth Green Fuller, *Index of Personal Names in J. Thomas Scharf's History of Westchester County* (New York: Westchester County Historical Society, 1988), 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 691.
some legal paper or process. Upon discovering the nature of it, he was greeted with a perfect shower of imprecations from the aged bleary-eyed, little old man. But his wrath soon spent itself, and the visitor was invited in.” It had become de rigueur among critics of Paine to accuse him of being neglectful of his hygiene and appearance, and Scharf lodges the same complaint, describing Paine as having been seen around New Rochelle “clad in a most extraordinary-looking outer garment, being nothing less than a dressing-gown made out of an old army blanket.”

A few local histories were more kind. J.O. Dykman’s *The Biographical History of New Rochelle*, published thirteen years after Scharf, uses virtually the entire Scharf sketch of Paine’s life word for word, but makes one significant change, calling Paine “the noted political and *philosophical* writer….” As if to correct some of Scharf’s mistakes, Dykman adds an addendum to the sketch of Paine: “Be reason of his philosophical writings, which were interpreted grossly as ‘infidel,’ Paine’s memory has been greatly maligned in the past, but it is gratifying to note that in later years a more just estimate is being held of ‘the author hero of the Revolution.’”

Herbert Nichols’s *Historic New Rochelle* offers a quite favorable view of Paine the patriot. When describing the indignity Paine suffered by being denied the right to vote in New Rochelle during the 1806 elections, Nichols laments: “Thus Paine was treated as a man without a country. How ungrateful was the country to a man who had done so much to bring about its very

21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
existence as a nation.”

Despite the city’s historical ambivalence about Paine and the TPNHA’s pressure to alter the sign in front of the cottage—or perhaps because of these reasons—Henry Lester, president of the Huguenot Association, argued that he saw “no reason why a change should be made.” In another letter to Wakeman, Foote pleaded with him to take more initiative in persuading the Huguenot Association to change the sign, then added: “You may agree with me that it is time to put into [Lester’s] hand the evidence…[in] the hope that this great error, from the point of view of historical fact and American patriotism might be corrected….” Wakeman responded to Foote’s call to action, writing Lester on August 27th, and concluding with this reasoned appeal: “Because we believe that your Association is like minded with ours in these regards, we hope at some early day to learn that the untrue ‘DeVeaux’ sign & Directory has been replaced by one in which ‘Paine’ or ‘Huguenot’ may precede the word ‘house’ according to the facts which historical veracity requires us all to respect….”

A 1910 letter from Wakeman to the Mayor of New Rochelle suggests that the dispute had become a widening controversy. Wakeman complained that the mayor, and

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24 Herbert B. Nichols, *Historic New Rochelle* (New Rochelle: The Board of Education, 1938). A note on Paine being denied the right to vote in New Rochelle: In 1946, the TPNHA published an exhaustively researched rebuttal of the claims that Paine was not a citizen of the United States and therefore justifiably denied the right to vote when he went to the polling station in New Rochelle in 1806. A lawyer named Thomas D. Scoble submitted his research to the association, and Henry Lester introduced the pamphlet, writing: “the association is indebted to [Scoble] for this service to a great American patriot.” Nobody in New Rochelle seemed particularly impressed, however, because Paine did not have his citizenship restored until 1976. See Thomas D. Scoble, Jr., *Thomas Paine’s Citizenship Record*, Thomas Paine National Historical Association, New Rochelle, New York, 1946.

25 Letter from E.B. Foote to Thaddeus Wakeman, August 19th, 1910.

26 Letter from Thaddeus Wakeman to Henry M. Lester, August 27th, 1910.
many others in the city, seemed to be letting either their Huguenot or Tory ancestry affect their attitude about the cottage that Paine had once inhabited, and urged the Mayor to take action and resolve the sign controversy. “On July 14th the house was publicly opened and dedicated,” Wakeman wrote, “to historical, patriotic and public purposes. Therefore the corporation of New Rochelle and indeed any citizen may fairly demand that it be administered fairly and truly on a patriotic basis.”

It is unclear whether the mayor ever got personally involved in the scrum between the two historical associations.

The debate over the sign dragged on for years. When the TPNHA reconvened for their annual meeting in January 1911, President Wakeman told the attendees of “efforts made by the Association to induce the present owners of the house built by Paine on his New Rochelle farm…to restore it to its proper name—‘The Thomas Paine House’.”

Wakeman also reiterated that Devoe had likely never even seen the cottage “which is now afflicted with his name,” because Paine had built it himself after his return from France and after Devoe had long since departed the property. As mentioned above, it is presumed that Paine did not build the little cottage; it was either a workers’ quarters or it was built by a third party after the main house burned down. In either case, it seems a strange thing indeed to name it the Deveaux Cottage as the Huguenots insisted on doing, since, incontrovertibly, Devoe had been a Tory, was considered a traitor to his country, and had been forced to flee to Canada in order to escape imprisonment. For the TPNHA, it was not just that they believed Paine’s name should be on the sign, but also that Devoe’s name should not be. The TPNHA resolved to send yet another letter to the Huguenot Association, “requesting that the misinformation contained in the sign be

27 Letter from Thaddeus Wakeman to Mayor Colwell, September 7th, 1910.
The issue was not resolved by the next year, however, and Wakeman was again telling the Association “of efforts to induce the present owners of the property...to correct the wording of the signboard, which at present misleads and misinforms all visitors.” Interestingly, the TPNHA had finally gotten an explanation for why the Huguenot Association stubbornly opposed the change. Huguenot Association president Lester informed Wakeman that, largely for business reasons, “DeVeaux was thought to sound more romantic, and to have a Huguenot flavor besides, than the plain, unvarnished name Thomas Paine.” According to Wakeman, the Huguenot Association had also “frenchified” the name Devoe by spelling it “DeVeaux.”

Undoubtedly, although it is not explicit in the exchange of letters, the Huguenots’ real reluctance to put Paine’s name on the sign was his noisy and persistent deism.

In May it was reported that the “Huguenot Ass. Would not consent to the proposition that the house be named ‘Thomas Paine House’, despite proof that it was built and occupied by Paine, but agreed to remove the name ‘De Veaux House’, and was willing to compromise the matter by calling it ‘Huguenot house’, since it was owned by the Huguenot. Assn.” Below the larger heading “Huguenot House,” the sign would read “Formerly Owned and Occupied by Thomas Paine.” After the sign was posted, all in the TPNHA “agreed that it was ‘at least an improvement.’”

Even the small park on the property that contained Paine’s original gravesite was a sticking point, since the Huguenot Association insisted on calling it “Devaux Park.”

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28 All quotations in paragraph from TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 1911.
29 All quotations in paragraph from TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 29th, 1912.
30 All quotations in paragraph from TPNHA Meeting Minutes, May 1912.
This infuriated the TPNHA. Foote angrily wrote that the Huguenot Association’s “worst offense is calling that little park which contains Paine’s grave the ‘Devaux park.’ Let them understand that the members of the Paine association regard that as distinctly unpatriotic, and insulting to the fathers of the state who years ago took the property away from Devaux and gave it to Paine.” Foote also decried the Huguenot Association’s effort to glorify Devoe as a “sort of treason”—a clear indication that the two groups were worlds apart on the issue.31

Despite the “improvement” to the sign, more trouble was brewing. The TPNHA lost President Wakeman and their treasurer, E.B. Foote, who both died in 1913, and the Association struggled to find new leadership for several months. But in 1914 William van der Weyde was elected president. He would prove to be a titan for the TPNHA, and for Paine as well. By the time van der Weyde assumed the presidency, the TPNHA was already engaged in a new battle with the Huguenot Association, this time over the artifacts that the TPNHA had been keeping in the Paine cottage. The Huguenot Association had lately been claiming that the artifacts belonged to them, or, at the very least, that actual ownership of the artifacts was a matter of debate. The TPNHA with some urgency voted to create a committee to “secure documentary proof of the Association’s title in the exhibits it has placed on view in the Paine room, or Museum, at the house in New Rochelle…”32

In 1914, the ownership of the artifacts in the cottage came up again, and van der Weyde, “as chairman of the committee [to secure proof of ownership of the artifacts], stated that he had received a letter from the President of the Huguenot Assn., owner of

31 Letter from E.B. Foote to Thaddeus Wakeman, January 18, 1912.
32 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 1913.
the Huguenot House, clearly stating the Huguenot Association’s understanding that all the property placed there by the Paine association was owned by the Paine Association.”

Huguenot Association president Henry Lester had in fact written such a letter in 1913, in which he expressed his happiness in being the caretaker of the artifacts in the cottage, and made clear that he “never considered that they belonged to our Huguenot Association in any way.”

Despite van der Weyde’s reassuring letter from Lester, which was clear proof that the artifacts belonged to the TPNHA, the artifacts would remain in a state of limbo until the TPNHA finally launched formal plans to build the museum in which to house them. They had long desired to build a Paine museum, which would also serve as a formal headquarters for the TPNHA, but lacked the funds until, as noted in another chapter, John H. Ludwig, a long-time member, bequeathed the substantial sum of twenty-five thousand dollars the Association.

When construction on the Paine building was completed and the TPNHA went to reclaim their artifacts—which they planned to move from the cottage up to the new building—the hostility between the two associations escalated dramatically. Tensions had already begun to mount as soon as the TPNHA announced their plans to construct the building. In 1925, the TPNHA reached out to the Huguenot Association in an effort to reclaim the artifacts, but the Huguenots were no longer eager to give them up, knowing that, despite their personal disdain for Thomas Paine, the cottage would be considerably less of a tourist attraction (and revenue generator) if all the Paine artifacts were moved up the hill to the Paine museum. A letter to the TPNHA from the Huguenot Association

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33 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 1914.
34 Letter from Henry M. Lester to William van der Weyde, December 13th, 1913.
suggests their foot dragging was already underway: “The changing personnel and officers and committees of this Association compels us to adopt careful accounting methods as to objects received exhibited or returned. In keeping with this policy we respectfully ask you to submit to us an itemized list of the articles now claimed by you, together with such reasonable proof of ownership as may be available.”

With construction on the Paine building completed by May of 1926 and the space available for use, it lingered as a structure virtually empty, awaiting the arrival of artifacts which the Huguenots refused to surrender. The TPNHA Board of Directors convened “to consider the refusal of the Huguenot Association of New Rochelle to permit the removal to the new Thomas Paine Memorial House of the T.P.N.H.A.’s property in the old Paine house, called by the Huguenot Association ‘Huguenot House.’” The Board of Directors authorized President van der Weyde “to employ a firm of lawyers in New Rochelle to take such measures to obtain possession of the articles in the Paine room…in a friendly way and without legal proceedings if speedily practicable; or failing so, by legal proceedings; all as in their judgment shall seem meet.”

Despite that it obviously irked van der Weyde that the Huguenot Association was challenging his claim of ownership, and that he felt he had no reason to produce proof of ownership of the artifacts—many of which he himself had personally purchased, he consulted an attorney on the matter. After over a year of inaction passed, attorney Sidney V. Lowell advised van der Weyde: “The request [to provide a list of artifacts claimed by the TPNHA], while cagey, has to be met. I see no escape from making the fullest list as

35 Letter from Huguenot Association Secretary W.S. Hadaway to the TPNHA, May 7, 1925.
36 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, May 1926.
37 Ibid.
you can. State in it that you have been refused access to the room to refresh your memory upon which you could confidently designate the Paine’s association’s articles.”

The TPNHA produced a list on the advice of their attorney, including the following items: “Life-size wax figure of Thomas Paine, seated. Chair in which Paine used to sit at the home of his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Badeau, son of the foregoing. The Thomas Paine gravestone, in case. Death-mask of Paine, by John Wesley Jarvis, in glass case.”

Escalating the tension even further, an artifact in the cottage had gone missing earlier in the year, raising concerns that the artifacts were in peril. The TPNHA demanded the immediate return of the remaining items; but “William Hadaway, secretary of the Huguenot Association, had prevented the removal of the T.P.N.H.A.’s property, even going so far as to bring two policemen to complete the retention by force.”

The TPNHA met again in early June, this time to “to determine if legal action should be commenced without further delay.” The group decided to hold off on any legal proceedings, but voted that van der Weyde should come to New Rochelle and temporarily reside in the Memorial Building both to “get the exhibits and library in condition for display,” and, from the close proximity to the Huguenot House, be better positioned to “handle the matter of the trouble with the Huguenot association.” Van der Weyde and his wife agreed, and moved up to New Rochelle from New York City and took up residence in the upstairs apartment of the Paine Memorial Building. In June the Huguenot Association announced that they were wiling to surrender the artifacts, with the

38 Letter from Sidney V. Lowell to William van der Weyde, May 11th, 1926.
39 Inventory of artifacts claimed by the TPNHA, undated but presumed 1926.
40 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, February 15th, 1926.
41 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, June 7th, 1926.
42 Ibid.
exception of the Badeau chair and the wax figure. Just three days later, though, claiming they believed that some items were in there logical place being in the Paine cottage, they balked: “we hereby withdraw our permission for the removal of the collection in the Paine room until we are in receipt of more information.”

In an intriguing development, John F. Lambden, attorney for the Huguenot Association, wrote to the Huguenot’s secretary, William Hadaway, informing him that he had met with TPNHA attorney Joseph Mancusi, and had learned about the letter from Lester to van der Weyde, which proved that van der Weyde was the owner of the artifacts in dispute: “I also met Mr. Mancusi on Saturday morning at the National City Bank, and he told me he had in his possession a letter from Henry M. Lester admitting the ownership of said property, and I told him that I would like to see the letter.”

Despite the Huguenot Association’s knowledge of the letter, they still refused to return the artifacts. In an effort to settle the dispute once and for all, van der Weyde offered a sworn deposition as further proof of his ownership:

In the year 1910 the owner of the cottage built by Paine in New Rochelle presented the frame dwelling to the Huguenot Association of New Rochelle, and Henry M. Lester, the President of that organization offered to Dr. E. B. Foot, Jr., and myself, the use of one room in the cottage for an exhibition of Paine books, relics, portraits, etc. These we placed in the room with a clear understanding that the collection should remain exclusively and permanently the property of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, removable at any time the Paine Association so desired.

The TPNHA also decided to ratchet up their legal case. Writing to Mancusi, the TPNHA

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43 Letter from the Huguenot Association to the TPNHA, June 25, 1926.
44 Letter from John F. Lambden to W.S. Hadaway, October 4th, 1926.
45 Sworn Court Deposition, Unpublished, November 10th, 1926.
urged him to take action: “…if we cannot obtain possession of our property by next Tuesday we want you, as our attorney, to use every legal manner and means possible to restore it to us.”

Under the weight of the overwhelming preponderance of evidence and the mounting threat of legal action, the Huguenots finally buckled. In December, Mancusi wrote the Huguenot Association to clarify the reports he had been receiving, asking Secretary Hadaway to confirm that “at the last meeting of the executive committee of your Association, authority was granted for the return of certain articles claimed by the Paine National Historical Association, insofar as the same could be found and identified, with the exception of three items.”

Defeated, the president of the Huguenot Association informed the TPNHA that they had “been advised by the attorneys for this Association that in the act of placing the Paine relics in the Museum they were first put in the care of the Paine Association. Under this interpretation of the case we have no proper recourse excepting to surrender them when demanded. Accordingly the contents of the Paine Museum were delivered to the Paine Association yesterday and we consider the matter closed.”

When the TPNHA met again in January of the following year, it was noted in the minutes that in late December the previous year “the Huguenot association permitted us to have our property.”

Although the controversy was at last resolved, the artifacts retrieved and finally placed in the Paine Museum, new financial troubles loomed large. Attorney Mancusi

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46 Letter from Horace W. Corey to Joseph J. Mancusi, November 11, 1926.
47 Letter from Joseph J. Mancusi to W.S. Hadaway, December 8, 1926.
48 Letter from Henry M. Lester to the TPNHA, December 16th, 1926.
49 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 29th, 1927.
billed the Association one hundred and seventy-five dollars for his services, which the Association “deemed excessive,” and there were also some two thousand dollars in unpaid expenses related to the construction of the Paine Museum.\textsuperscript{50} The TPNHA Board voted to take a mortgage of three thousand dollars on the Paine Museum in order to cover the unpaid bills. Mercifully, just a few years later a lifetime member, Edward Tuck, expressed concern that the “Association should be hampered by a mortgage on the property,” and donated four thousand dollars to the Association so they could pay it off.\textsuperscript{51}

The Huguenots and the TPNHA were destined to clash from the very start, but in an odd historical twist, and despite the clear conflict between them, the TPNHA and the Huguenot Association would eventually find themselves partnered in a turbulent marriage for decades. The associations became more deeply intertwined during the 1940s and 1950s, and TPNHA president Henry Lester was largely responsible for the informal merging, due in part, no doubt, to his previous leadership position as president of the Huguenot Association before stepping in as president of the TPNHA. The loss of William van der Weyde as the TPNHA president also contributed the ultimate merger of the two groups. As Gary Berton notes, “when Van der Weyde took ill soon after the Memorial Building was completed, and eventually died at the onset of the Great Depression, the fortunes of the Thomas Paine Historical Association suddenly declined. The resources and past leaders had died or faded away, and eventually the TPNHA

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., January 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1929.
turned toward the local historical group in New Rochelle to provide leadership.” Lists of directors from the time period reveal that all were entirely local, and the national aspect of the Association had been completely lost. A newsletter from October 1949 explains, “In years past, these were two quite separate organizations, but recently there has been a closer cooperation and for the most part the same persons are directors and officers of both.”

Soon enough the boards of the two groups became nearly identical, and as the influential national figures who had been vocal Paine supporters died off or lost their commitment to the TPNHA, the focus of the now-fused organizations drifted from promoting the life and works of Thomas Paine to promoting local history nearly entirely. The merger officially happened in 1973, but the meeting minutes were reflecting the change earlier; they were calling themselves the Huguenot and Thomas Paine Historical Association by 1971, and holding combined Board Meetings. A letter to members of both groups from the presidents of the two associations reveals that the move to unite the groups was gaining momentum: “It would be difficult to imagine two historical groups with closer interests and contacts,” the presidents wrote. “The Huguenot society owns and cares for the Thomas Paine Cottage and grounds. … Many persons belong to both societies. A number of us, the writers included, are officers or directors of both. Both boards meet at the Museum often on the same night.” It was becoming increasingly apparent that the two groups were on convergent paths, and soon the boards were

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53 TPNHA Newsletter, October 1949.

54 Letter to TPNHA and Huguenot Association members from Thomas A. Hoctor, Huguenot president, and Robert S. Stitt, TPNHA president, October 21, 1971.
recommending a merger, suggesting that they “become one group in the practical, if not technical, sense and conduct future activities including membership drives under the name of the Huguenot-Thomas Paine National Historical Association.” The two groups made their dubious relationship official in late 1973, and began issuing newsletters under the somewhat verbose, if not clumsy, new banner.

There was an inherent conflict built into the merger of the two groups, as the TPNHA had always aspired to have a national presence with a focus on promoting Thomas Paine to America and the world, and the Huguenot Association was much more interested in promoting local history. It is also true that the Huguenots never cared much for Paine anyway, and saw the Paine Cottage as nothing more than a third-rate tourist attraction (showing great reluctance even to affix Paine’s name to a sign in front of it) and Paine himself as nothing more than a third-tier historical figure not worthy of much attention beyond the fact that he was the author of *Common Sense*. Somehow the two associations lumbered along as one for decades, but tensions appeared always under the surface. Philosophical disagreements began to mount in 1990 when the Huguenot-Thomas Paine Historical Association began offering ‘The Thomas Paine Award’ to journalists “whose work reflects Thomas Paine’s commitment to free speech.”

The events and press coverage surrounding the awards were a publicity boon to the Association, and many high-profile journalists and media figures accepted the award and appeared at gala events in New Rochelle in their honor. Mike Wallace was a recipient of the award, as were Gary Trudeau, Gwen Ifil, Fred Friendly, Robert MacNeil, and long-time White House correspondent Helen Thomas. The acceptance speeches are

of themselves noteworthy, if for no other reason than that many of the award recipients were all to happy to speak for Paine and offer their thoughts on what Paine would think about life in the 20th century. For example, Gary Trudeau claimed that Paine would “be miffed to see his defense of free speech used as a shield for Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Geraldo Rivera, Snoop Doggy Dogg and Trudeau himself.”57 And when New York Times columnist and free-speech advocate Anthony Lewis received the award in 1993, Lewis claimed that Paine “would be pleased by the chaos, and the influence of public opinion. I think he would be appalled by the amount of government power.”58 Mike Wallace was on hand to accept the award in 1996, and Christine Magrin, president of the Association, introduced him by declaring that “If Tom Paine were around today, he would join us in toasting Mike Wallace.”59

The Huguenots and the TPNHA rarely saw eye-to-eye when it came to who should receive the award, or on most other issues for that matter, and discontent was brewing among the Paine faction in the Association. By 1996, there was open revolt in the ranks, and some members of the board were talking of separating the two groups again. The Huguenots were in many ways too conservative a group ever to embrace Thomas Paine fully, and the partnership between them and the TPNHA had become increasingly untenable. In a 1997 memo from the Board of Trustees of the Huguenot-Thomas Paine Historical Association to its members, during the final days before the two groups severed their ties, the Board articulated the salient problem: “While people in the organizations appreciate Paine’s massive contributions in America’s struggle for

59 Ibid., June 23, 1996.
independence, many are uneasy about Paine’s precepts regarding government and religion. His deist beliefs are inimicable [sic] to Huguenot [sic] faith for which Huguenots have sacrificed their lives and fortunes.” As a result, the Board explained, “the current situation is that the Associations have come to an irreparable schism regarding their futures.” By late 1997, the Paine faction had successfully maneuvered to formally separate the two associations, with the newly reborn and independent TPNHA Board convening for the first time on January 29, 1998—the two hundred and sixty-first birthday of Thomas Paine.  

Despite the severing of ties between the two associations, the tensions between the two groups still remain at a low simmer, and in 2010, in what appeared to be an obvious swipe at the TPNHA, the Huguenot Association offered an “In the Spirit of Thomas Paine Award” to conservative lightning rod and Fox News pundit Dick Morris—making it even more starkly plain the basic ideological differences between the Huguenots and the TPNHA, and even more inexplicable that the two groups ever merged in the first place. The TPNHA of course found the idea of Dick Morris being associated in any way with the name and legacy of Thomas Paine to be an outrage, and publicly decried the Huguenots’ decision. The Journal News of New Rochelle covered the row between the two groups over the merits of Morris receiving the award, and offered a salient assessment of Paine that makes a fitting and worthy close to this chapter: “For

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60 TPNHA Newsletter, January 29th, 1998.
more than two centuries,” the *Journal* writer averred, “Paine has been a political
Rorschach test. He almost defies objectivity.”  

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“I am confident that this statue will become one of the great historical landmarks of our Republic.”

—Joseph Lewis, at the dedication of the Thomas Paine Statue at Morristown, New Jersey, July 4th, 1950
Chapter 6: Paine in Memoriam

January 5, 1937: The vessel, a French liner called the Champlain, nosed east, steaming out of New York harbor and into the icy black waters of the Atlantic. There was precious cargo on board the ship, above and beyond the roughly one thousand souls she could carry. A bronze statue of Thomas Paine, sculpted by Gutzon Borglum (of Mount Rushmore fame), lay tucked away in the cargo hold, bound for a triumphant unveiling in Paris to coincide with the two hundredth anniversary of Paine’s birth. The man chaperoning the statue across the ocean, Joseph Lewis, could barely contain his excitement as the Champlain left the New York City skyline shrinking in its wake. The ship was cruising toward a continent that would soon be consumed by the greatest conflagration in world history—the Champlain herself would be one of the first casualties of the Second World War, laid low by a German mine—but Joseph Lewis was unconcerned about the distant future; this was a moment to savor. Thomas Paine, the man to whom Lewis would devote much of his life and fortune, was soon to be immortalized in the City of Light, and Lewis could proudly claim that he was responsible for making it happen.¹ A year earlier, Lewis had announced to a gathering of Paine admirers in his Gramercy Park home that he planned to raise funds for a Paine statue in Paris, and now his plans were coming to fruition.²

The Paine statue, having made safe passage to Europe, lay in a foundry awaiting its public unveiling, but by then Lewis had begun to sense ominous portents. On January 31, the Times noted that the unveiling of the Paine statue would be delayed until April,

² Ibid., May 22, 1936.
citing political problems.\(^3\) French concerns about Germany’s increasingly aggressive posture made the unveiling of a Paine statue an extremely low priority. When Hitler’s army launched its devastating blitz in May of 1940, the unveiling was indefinitely delayed, and the statue lay hidden and largely forgotten, its fate uncertain. But the Paine statue lived on, miraculously surviving the scourge of war, and was finally unveiled in Paris in February, 1948, over ten years after Lewis had first lovingly escorted it across the Atlantic. The statue has a remarkable survival story of its own that parallels one of Paine’s own hair’s-breadth escapes from death. While the Nazis scourged the foundries of France searching for scrap metal to use in the war effort, Paine’s statue lay fortuitously obscured behind a door: “For some strange reason, the Nazi occupant, always searching for metal, completely overlooked the now dusty statue lying behind a forsaken door at the foundry: it had just escaped sure melting!”\(^4\) Paine’s life had been spared by an open door in the Luxembourg prison, and through a similar stroke of luck, the bronze statue had also escaped a certain death sentence. It would have been a supreme irony if the Paine statue had been melted down to make bullets for the Nazis.

Joseph Lewis, a prominent atheist, author and publisher of over twenty books—who also claimed credit for the Paine statue that now stands in Paine’s birthplace of Thetford, England—was unsurprisingly not a man without controversy. Lewis once published a book claiming that Paine had actually written the Declaration of Independence; he fought to have the words “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance, railed against the construction of chapels of any denomination at JFK

\(^3\) Ibid., January 31, 1937.
\(^4\) Huguenot-Thomas Paine Historical Association Newsletter, 1992-93.
Airport, and campaigned for “25 years against chaplains in the armed forced, the police department, and the fire department, as well as in the Houses of Congress.”\(^5\) In 1929, Lewis sent an angry note to president Herbert Hoover, complaining that Hoover’s “first act after taking the oath of office as President in kissing the Bible was a most unbecoming…stupid act.”\(^6\) Lewis had earned a small fortune during his career, along with a reputation as a forceful and shameless self-promoter, more akin to P.T. Barnum than Thomas Paine. Lewis’s efforts to bolster Paine’s place in Americans’ collective memory were also not always very carefully thought out. He once made available free copies of *The Age of Reason*, promoting the offer in full-page advertisements in numerous newspapers and magazines, including *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times*. Unsurprisingly, Lewis opened his letter to members of the Thomas Paine Foundation one month later with this urgent declaration: “Our Campaign to distribute copies of Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* has been so successful that we find ourselves in financial difficulties!”\(^7\)

Lewis’s seemingly boundless enthusiasm would be at the heart of many of the efforts to have Paine immortalized publicly. Founder of the Thomas Paine Monument Association, which numbered Jane Addams, Clarence Darrow, Albert Einstein, George Creel, Margaret Sanger, and Thomas Edison among its honorary vice-presidents, Lewis, along with the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, worked tirelessly, sometimes in harmony, occasionally at odds, and always at great expense, to ensure that Paine’s life and works would be secured in American memory. The story of their

\(^6\) Ibid.  
\(^7\) Thomas Paine Foundation Newsletter, March 1952.
successes and failures, and what they reveal about Thomas Paine and his controversial place in America’s consciousness, is the subject of this chapter.

In the aftermath of the American war for independence, Paine—by contributing *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* to the revolutionary cause—had earned himself a place in the pantheon of the founding generation, and today he likely would be immortalized on the National Mall alongside Jefferson and Washington. However, Paine felt compelled to offer to the world his thoughts on the subject of religion, and after the publication of *The Age of Reason*, controversy stalked Paine at every turn, even in death. Shunned by the country he had helped found, he was effectively cast out. Down to the present day, Paine’s supporters are forced to reckon with the furor that his monumental religious work sparked.

Efforts to have Paine publicly immortalized were often frustrating and overly protracted processes, exacerbated by the fact that the Paine memorial campaigns took place amid the backdrop of a long history of iconoclasm, dating back to the ancient Greeks, when “Pericles claimed that the most distinguished monument was ‘planted in the heart rather than graven on stone.’”\(^8\) In America that iconoclastic tradition continued throughout its history, finding roots, according to Kirk Savage, from “a variety of sources: the Revolutionary critique of monarch, the Puritan hostility toward graven images, and the Renaissance belief, seemingly verified by the ruins of antiquity, that

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words always outlived the grandest handiworks of sculpture and architecture.”\textsuperscript{9} For example, when the Washington Monument was dedicated in 1885, Walt Whitman offered a critique in the form of a poem, in which he argued that the true historical significance of George Washington lay not in “this marble dead and cold,” but rather wherever true liberty existed in the world.\textsuperscript{10} The combination of a general aversion to public memorials and a specific aversion to all things Paine created an enormous obstacle of reactionary prejudice for Paine supporters to overcome. If many Americans objected to the immortalization of the greatest of the Founding generation, like Washington and Jefferson, then those objections must be multiplied by several orders of magnitude for a far more imperfect and controversial historical figure like Thomas Paine. Thus, the controversy surrounding the Paine memorial campaigns offers us a unique—if distorted—glimpse of Paine in America’s collective historical consciousness. For example, a proposal by Lewis to place a statue in a Philadelphia park was denied by the city’s park commission on the grounds that Paine’s writings “indicated that he was an atheist.”\textsuperscript{11} Philadelphia did finally warm to the idea of a Paine bust within the walls of Independence Hall, although it took three decades. A marble bust was first presented to the city in 1876, a year of obvious historical significance, but it was rejected as too controversial. Its presence in Independence Hall was finally approved on July 5, 1905, although it is not currently on display.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{10} Whitman quoted in Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{11} “Bar Statue of Tom Paine—Philadelphians Say Writings of Hero Point to Atheism.” \textit{The New York Times}, June 12, 1942.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The New York Times}, September 12, 1905.
Lewis also pushed for the erection of a Paine statue in Providence, Rhode Island, but the request was denied. According to the mayor of the city, Walter H. Reynolds, the idea was “out of the question, because Paine was and remains so controversial a character.”

Lewis was quick to note the irony that Providence would shrink from controversy, considering Roger Williams founded the city: “Every man worth his salt has been a controversial figure,” Lewis exclaimed. “Who could have been more controversial than Roger Williams himself?”

On news of the snubbing by the city, The Standard-Star of New Rochelle ran with the headline: “What’s Good Enough Here Ain’t ‘Good’ For Providence,” and claimed that Paine was “apparently to hot for the staid Rhode Island capital to handle.”

The American Civil Liberties Union stepped into the fray to protest the city’s rejection of the Paine statue, issuing a statement decrying Mayor Reynolds’s decision, and asking rhetorically: “If such an historical figure as Thomas Paine can be attacked for being ‘controversial,’ will other great leaders of our nation who also engage in ‘controversy,’ even Washington and Lincoln, be attacked?” According to the Times, Paine’s theological writings were to blame for Providence’s decision to snub Paine: “what fairly blew the wigs off many of the colonial fathers was [Paine’s] ‘The Age of Reason.’ It created wide indignation because of its ridicule of what Paine considered religious superstition and its espousal of eighteenth century deism and a morality based on a nonritualistic religion. It was this aspect of Paine’s writing that was understood to

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13 Ibid., September, 1955.
account for the Providence reaction.”\textsuperscript{17} The ACLU’s involvement prompted the mayor to fire off a telegram in reply, in which he explained that he “considered some of Paine’s writing ‘anti-Christian.’”\textsuperscript{18} Mayor Reynolds also explained that he did not “think it wise to let the sponsors start a project of ‘doubtful value’ to the city.”\textsuperscript{19} Finally, Reynolds clarified that “his use of the word ‘controversial’ was not directed toward Paine’s person, character or philosophy, but rather toward the varying opinions of him held by others.”\textsuperscript{20} When Lewis offered to actually buy the site and fund the statue entirely on his own at no cost to the city, on the condition that the city maintain the site as a public park, Reynolds at first seemed open to the idea, but later changed his mind. A perplexed and annoyed Lewis declared: “I think it’s an outrage and a shame that anyone should reject a statue of this great American. I simply can’t understand the mayor’s action.”\textsuperscript{21}

Another frustrating and fruitless effort for Lewis came in 1961 when the Secretary of the Interior, Joseph Udall, publicly bemoaned the lack of a Thomas Paine statue in Washington, D.C. Lewis jumped at the opportunity to satisfy Udall’s wish, and made Udall an offer to provide a Paine statue for the capital at no cost to the city. Udall did not respond to Lewis’s offer, and nothing ever came of the idea.\textsuperscript{22}

The effort to establish a Paine monument in Washington continues unabated, and without success. In 1990 a bill was introduced into congress proposing the construction of a Thomas Paine monument in Washington, D.C. The bill’s co-sponsors were, \textsuperscript{17} Ibid. \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., September 25, 1955. \textsuperscript{19} Ibid. \textsuperscript{20} Ibid. \textsuperscript{21} The Washington Post, October 11, 1955. \textsuperscript{22} The Standard-Star, November 29, 1961, and The New York Herald Tribune, November 29, 1961.
interestingly, Republican senator Steve Symms from Idaho and Democratic congresswoman Nita Lowey from New York, suggesting at least some level of bi-partisan support for the idea. Nothing came of the bill, but the next year, Lowey reintroduced it. The president of the Paine Association, Douglas Cooper, offered an award to Lowey—a copy of *Common Sense*—to express his gratitude for her advocacy. Cooper thanked Lowey for her support, lamenting: “In this day, no less than 200 years after the Bill of Rights, Paine needs all the friends he can get.” Paine apparently had almost no friends in Washington, and movement on the Paine monument stalled. In 1992, congresswoman Lowey brought the bill forth again, and wrote proudly in a letter to the *New York Times* that Americans “may soon see a fitting tribute to this largely forgotten American patriot in our nation’s capital.” Exciting news reached Paine supporters two years later when it was announced that the “National Memorials Commission voted unanimously to authorize a statue.”

A 1995 *Times* headline blared: “Paine Monument Approval Expected in the Fall.” By that time, the “National Capital Memorial Commission, the Secretary of the Interior, Congress and President Clinton have endorsed the monument,” but decisions on both the design and the location of the memorial had yet to be made. Lack of organization, funding problems, and a dearth of true Paine supporters in the nation’s capital only delayed the plans further, and ultimately the project never came to pass. Lowey reintroduced the bill again as recently as 2003, but the renewed plans for the statue failed. Years of effort by the TPNHA to see the project through, even coming as far as having a

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site chosen for the monument—which would have placed the monument near the current site of the World War Two Memorial—have been fruitless, and there is still no statue of Paine anywhere in the city of Washington, D.C.

More recently, an Arkansas legislator proposed the establishment of a Thomas Paine Day, but it was rejected by a vote of 46 to 20. According to The Arkansas Times, “the legislature refused to honor Thomas Paine, one of the founders of the American republic and among the most important of them. Evidently legislators felt that Paine's great services to his country, and to the cause of freedom everywhere, didn't offset his unorthodox religious views.”

Paine did get his Day in Oregon, according to the Statesman Journal. But the bill’s sponsor, Republican state senator Brian Boquist, quoting Paine’s famous line, “That government is best, which governs least,” suggests that Boquist mistakes Paine for a conservative, and also is further evidence that Paine is occasionally cited by conservatives who prop Paine up as a classic anti-government hero, and who do not fully understand the true meaning of Paine’s writings.

Despite numerous obstacles, supporters of Paine have met with some success. The Thomas Paine Monument that still stands in the city of New Rochelle is the fruit of the first public effort to immortalize Paine. As detailed in the previous chapter, New Rochelle was Paine’s home for a time after he returned from Europe in 1802. His relationship with the city has always been rocky, and it is clear from the local newspaper accounts that New Rochellans were and remain unsure whether and how much to celebrate Paine and the controversy that stalked him; this uncertainty may in part be

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because that part of New York State was the home to many Tory families, including the
family whose land was seized and given to Paine after the war. Despite that Paine did not
live in New Rochelle for very long (he in fact died in New York City), his body was
interred on a corner of his farm. Although his remains were later removed, New
Rochelle seemed a fitting place to build the first public monument in his honor. Sculptor
John Frazee designed the New Rochelle monument, a white marble obelisk with passages
from Paine’s writings carved into its four sides. The monument faces North Avenue and
stands roughly between the Thomas Paine Cottage to the south and the Paine Memorial
Building and Museum to the north.

Gilbert Vale, the prominent freethinker, editor of *The Beacon*, and well-known
biographer and admirer of Paine, organized a fundraising effort to generate the funds for
the obelisk, which was unveiled in 1839. Some citizens of New Rochelle were unhappy
with the presence of a Paine monument in their city, and it was repeatedly vandalized.
After the damage was repaired it was rededicated on May 30, 1881. On the day of its
rededication, the *Times* reported that the monument, since the time of its original
dedication, had “gradually become the prey of relic-hunters,” and “having been recut and
somewhat remodeled, was yesterday afternoon rededicated in the presence of a large
assemblage of spectators.” A *Times* article bearing the headline, “Not Proud of Tom
Paine; The Place Which Holds His Home and Monument; New-Rochelle’s Half Apology
for its Connection With the Deist and Neglect of His Memorial,” reveals the obviously
difficult relationship that the city of New Rochelle has had with its most famous resident.
The writer ponders how a resident of New Rochelle might talk about the Paine monument

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to a visiting stranger, imagining that the resident would speak of it in “the sense that the
scar of an abscess [sic] belongs to a man and is shown with some degree of satisfaction by
him, not for the beauty of the scar, but as an evidence of what he has suffered. It is
exactly in this light that a majority of the people of New-Rochelle regard the remaining
evidences of Thomas Paine’s residence in their township.”

Foreshadowing the feud that would eventually erupt between the Huguenot
Association and the TPNHA, the Times notes that many residents of New Rochelle were
descendants of the Huguenots, and their “Huguenot blood did not take kindly to Paine in
the time of the revolution, and the subsequent years have not changed that feeling.” For
decades since Paine was given the piece of land on which to settle, generations of New
Rochellans had heard the story of his having lived there, but “all that was good in Paine
has been omitted, and all that was bad in him has been exaggerated.” The Times also
claims that among the people “who live near his monument he is regarded as one who
was an evil and vicious man.” The Times finally concludes that it is “not strange that in
such a community the monument erected to Paine’s memory in 1839 was so neglected
that it had to be revived and rededicated in 1881. Nor is it strange that the revived and
rededicated shaft now shows symptoms of the same neglect.”

Adding to the sad fact of Paine’s tortured relationship with New Rochelle,
TPNHA president van der Weyde wrote to the Times in a later, unrelated, letter,
correcting some errors the paper had made—the first error being the Times’ claim that the
city of New Rochelle had been responsible for erecting the Paine monument, the second
being the Times’ judgment that Paine’s writings were “appallingly dull.” Van der Weyde

29 Ibid., November 13, 1887.
30 All quotations in above paragraph from Ibid.
clarifies that the city of New Rochelle had nothing to do with the monument; it had been funded by a subscription started by Gilbert Vale, and “in the list of subscribers I do not find the name of a single resident of New Rochelle.”

Despite the occasionally icy reception of the monument’s host city, supporters of Paine remained undeterred. Annual gatherings and wreath-laying ceremonies were held at the monument on Memorial Day, with friends of Paine assembling and a multitude of speakers giving addresses celebrating Paine’s life and writings. At one celebration in 1895, it was proposed by the TPNHA that a “bronze bust of Paine be placed on the monument,” which a man named Wilson MacDonald—who happened to be a sculptor and had given an address earlier that day—offered to sculpt, as well as to solicit “sufficient funds to pay its cost. About $200.00 was there and then subscribed toward the fund. In aid of the bronze bust fund, Col. Ingersoll delivered a lecture in this year, which netted $300.”

With plans underway to crown the monument with a bust of Paine, a new problem emerged that threatened his immortalization. The New Rochelle Pioneer announced that plans were afoot to widen North Street (as it was then called), and there was concern that the Paine monument would have to be destroyed to make room for the road improvements. After some debate, the monument was allowed to remain, and an iron fence was constructed around it. However, Paine’s actual gravesite, which was nearby the obelisk, would not escape the rumblings of modernity. It is now entombed underneath the asphalt. The gravesite remained unmarked and largely forgotten for a half

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31 Ibid., January 5, 1912.
32 TPNHA Meeting Minutes, June 30, 1895.
33 New Rochelle Pioneer, March 13, 1897.
century until a grave marker was dedicated, on the side of North Avenue in front of the Paine Cottage, on June 8, 1953. The peripatetic Joseph Lewis was on hand at the dedication and addressed the group, applauding the dedication of the grave marker, but issuing this challenge to the assembled crowd: “the recognition of Paine’s service to the cause of America freedom will not be complete until there stands in the nation’s capital a memorial giving full expression to both our debt and our gratitude to him.”\(^{34}\)

The 1899 TPNHA meeting minutes report that “Sufficient money having been subscribed the year previous to proceed with the casting of the bronze bust, and the design submitted by the sculptor having been accepted, the Henry Bonnard Co.’s bronze foundry was commissioned to mould the bust, and in 1899, under the auspices of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, it was placed on the monument, and unveiled before a large gathering of the friends of Paine.”\(^{35}\) The Times covered the unveiling, noting that Robert Ingersoll was on hand for the festivities, and offered a dismissive appraisal of Ingersoll’s speech: “Colonel Ingersoll’s address was largely a repetition of his well-known lecture on Paine, written several years ago, and was replete with keen epigram and flaming metaphor. He reviewed Paine’s work in the cause of American independence; his efforts in French politics, and lastly, his onslaught upon the Christian church, as made in his book, ‘The Age of Reason,’ which the speaker characterized with a smile as ‘the man’s only crime—in the eyes of fools and hypocrites.’”\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) *The Standard-Star*, June 9, 1953.

\(^{35}\) TPNHA Meeting Minutes, 1899.

Further widening of North Avenue in the spring of 1905 finally forced the long-threatened relocation of the monument. It was moved to its current location and rededicated on October 14th, 1905, and given over to the care of the city of New Rochelle. As yet another indication of the city’s ambivalence about the monument, the original date of the rededication was set for July 4th, “but at the last moment opposition developed among the taxpayers, particularly those who are church members.” In the article discussing the controversy surrounding the rededication, Paine is again referred to as an atheist, an inaccurate knock against Paine that the Times seemingly found irresistible.37 When the day of the rededication finally arrived, the Times ran with the headline: “The Paine Monument At Last Finds A Home; Accepted by New Rochelle with a Preacher’s Benediction; Town Refuses to Decorate.” The mayor and the alderman of New Rochelle had requested that the citizens of New Rochelle “decorate their houses in honor of the rededication of the monument to the free thinking. Here and there was a flag, but there were not very many, for New Rochelle is a city of churchgoers.”38 The irony of the ceremony including a preacher’s Benediction is obvious. The monument at New Rochelle still has yet to receive a comfortable welcome from the city. The vandalism of the monument continues to the present day, and even now it still bears the scars: the relief of Paine’s face on the obelisk is missing its nose, the result of a carefully hurled stone, according to local lore.

Joseph Lewis, who was not very much involved in the Paine Memorial in New Rochelle, was deeply involved in the establishment of a monument in Morristown, New

37 Ibid., July 5, 1905.
38 Ibid., October 15, 1905.
Jersey, a site chosen for its significance in the American Revolution. In 1949, The Standard-Star of New Rochelle announced that a statue of Paine was planned for Morristown, and noted that the famed sculptor George Lober had already completed the model, depicting Paine writing the first lines of The Crisis on the head of a snare drum, and calling him “The Father of the Revolution.”\(^{39}\) The life-sized bronze statue would stand “on a 5 foot marble pedestal in Burnham Park, only a stone’s throw from the log hut used as headquarters by George Washington after his retreat across the Delaware river.”\(^{40}\) In an undated—though presumably early 1949—Thomas Paine Memorial Committee Newsletter, Lewis announced the details of the sculpture to his subscribers, and predicted that Lober’s sculpture would become a huge tourist attraction. But for Lewis, as with the TPNHA, funding problems were constant. Americans seemed quite reluctant to donate money to memorials honoring Paine, and the number of actual Paine supporters—that is to say, dues-paying members of organizations dedicated to promoting the life of Paine—was pitifully small. Lewis sent an urgent letter to his subscribers in April, 1950, announcing that a staggering sum of $18,500 was still required to carry the unveiling forward, writing: “Will you show your appreciation for Thomas Paine’s invaluable services to the cause of American freedom by sending me as large a contribution as you possibly can, and \textit{as quickly as you can}?”\(^{41}\)

Despite the lack of funding, the press continued to cover the progress of the sculpture. A \textit{Times} article reported that Lewis was overwhelmed as he inspected the statue at the foundry shortly before its public unveiling. It was “even more impressive

\(^{40}\) \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, July 5, 1949.
\(^{41}\) Thomas Paine Memorial Committee Newsletter, April 10, 1950.
than I believed it could be,” Lewis beamed.\textsuperscript{42} The dedication of the monument went ahead as scheduled on July 4, 1950, despite the fact that Lober had still not been paid for his work, and the event drew perhaps the largest crowd for any Paine-related event in recent history; some three thousand spectators were on hand for the unveiling. It appears that residents of Morristown had some room in their hearts for Paine the Father of the Revolution, but not much interest in helping to foot the bill for the statue.\textsuperscript{43} Although an endorsement of the statue by a sitting president did not help Lewis and his organization materially, it must have been heartening to receive a letter from President Harry Truman, who offered his personal support for the unveiling of the statue.\textsuperscript{44}

As the excitement of the ceremony faded, the financial reality continued to haunt Lewis. Lewis sent another pleading letter to the members of The Thomas Paine Foundation, asking for more money because Georg Lober had still not been paid for the sculpture. “As we said before,” Lewis wrote, “Mr. Lober has been extremely patient, but he now feels that his bill should be paid.”\textsuperscript{45} It is unknown whether the money eventually materialized from donors, or whether Lewis himself had to produce the funds.

Other successes in memorializing Thomas Paine would materialize, but always at great expense, with an abundance of controversy, and often requiring years of struggle. On July 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1944, New York University—-from its original location, which is now Bronx Community College—issued a press release, announcing that nominations were open for

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., July 5, 1950.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., May 30, 1950.
\textsuperscript{45} Undated letter to members of The Thomas Paine Foundation.
“the tenth quinquennial (every five years) election to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans on the campus of New York University.”

Since Paine had already received 50 votes in 1940, he was automatically on the ballot in 1945, but not assured of a victory. Nor was it likely that the funds would materialize to finance a bust even if he did achieve the 60 to 65 votes needed to win a place in the famed colonnade, but this was truly a fantastic opportunity for supporters to see Paine immortalized among such prestigious company as Franklin, Washington, and Lincoln. The TPNHA set to work.

The TPNHA had been trying to get Paine into the Hall of Fame for twenty-five years, sparked by a fortuitous change in the Hall’s election rules. Luckily for Paine’s supporters, in 1915 the Hall of Fame eliminated the rule that only American-born candidates could be elected, and this change gave the TPNHA the opportunity to push for Paine’s election; just five years later Paine’s name was on the ballot. Paine was in an interesting class in 1920, up for election with other eminent authors such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, William Lloyd Garrison, and Noah Webster. Despite that Paine did not win the election in 1920, the TPNHA was determined to try again until he earned his place in the colonnade.

Twenty-five years after Paine’s name first appeared on the ballot, he was up for election again. The next major task for the backers of the Paine bust lay ahead of them: to lobby the illustrious Hall of Fame electors for their vote. The TPNHA began an exhaustive effort to win them over, a job that would fall largely to Henry Lester, the Association president. Lester, who had in the past had been at odds with the TPNHA

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46 New York University—Bureau of Public Information Press Release, July 1, 1944.
47 From the canvas of ballots sent by Mrs. William Vanamee, Director of the Hall of Fame, to William van der Weyde, June 24th, 1920.
when he was the Huguenot Association’s president, had always been an admirer of Paine, and acquitted himself well when he assumed the role of president of the TPNHA.

Lester wrote an elector named J. Henry Smythe, in which he noted that Paine’s name had come up for a vote in 1940 but that, sadly, he did not win. This time Lester was pushing hard to earn Paine his spot: “I really think, of course, that he should be elected,” Lester declared, “as most of the old predjudices [sic] have gone, and he really did a job in 1776.”

Lester, and the Association’s secretary, Alfred Lindsey, sent dozens of letters out to the electors, petitioning them to vote for Paine. The responses from the electors were generally cordial but noncommittal. Take, for example, a reply from an elector named Hamilton Holt, president of Rollins College: “I have your letter urging the name of Thomas Paine for inclusion in the Hall of Fame. I can make no promises at this time but if the name of Thomas Paine appears on the official list, you may be sure I will give it most careful consideration.” Or this reply from another elector, W.F.G. Swann: “Dear Mr. Lindsay: I wish to thank you for your letter of March 22 giving me information regarding Thomas Paine. The chronology which you have supplied will be most helpful in supplementing such other information as I may secure to enable me to exercise my best judgment when the time comes for the Electors to make their final recommendations.”

In another letter to Lindsay, Cyrus S. Eaton, an elector from Cleveland, Ohio, wrote: “Thank you for your letter of the 22nd and the accompanying

48 Lester to Smythe, April 16, 1945.
49 Holt to Lindsey, April 12, 1945.
50 Swann to Lindsey, March 20, 1945.
folder concerning Thomas Paine. You may be sure that I shall give careful consideration to the great patriot’s qualifications, in making the Hall of Fame selections.”

As the election of 1945 grew near, Paine’s name was again in the news. Having not always been kind to Paine, *The Standard-Star* issued a surprising op-ed, folding the then still-raging Second World War into their argument for why Paine should be in the Hall of Fame: “The time is appropriate, without a doubt, for such recognition, for the nation whose founding Paine helped to inspire with his pen is fighting the biggest war in history right now in behalf of the cause of freedom which Paine so effectively espoused.” One can speculate that Paine was the perfect hero for the *Star* at this moment in time. *With fascism darkening Europe and progressivism on the march at home, Paine—the preeminent defender and promoter of freedom—seemed a much more likely hero.* In a *New York Times* letter to the editor, Louis K. Anspacher wrote: “The time is again drawing near for another election to the Hall of Fame. Let me most

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51 *Eaton to Lindsey, March 30, 1945.* It appears that Cyrus Eaton was among the electors who cast his vote for Paine; as the date of the unveiling ceremonies approached, Eaton wrote to Lester: “As an Elector of the Hall of Fame, I am looking forward to meeting you at the ceremonies for Thomas Paine on Sunday, May 18. At 7:45 that evening, I am having a little dinner in my rooms at the Biltmore for Dr. Sockman and the distinguished participants in the ceremonies. I am hoping that you and Mrs. Lester will be able to join the group for dinner.” Eaton to Lester, May 15, 1952.

52 *The Standard-Star, April 9, 1945.* There were other occasions when *The Standard-Star* was kind to Paine. For example, on January 10, 1976, *The New York Times* reported that the city council president, Paul O’Dwyer, had “introduced a bill to enthrone Paine in glory at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street. He wants to change the name of that busy area, now only obscurely recognized as Grand Army Plaza, to Common Sense Plaza.” Upon hearing news of the change in the park’s name, *The Standard-Star* proudly beamed that New Rochelle’s “Top Citizen” had been honored by New York City. Bicentennial fever was likely the inspiration for the *Star’s* change of heart.
urgently present the honored name of Thomas Paine for most thoughtful consideration on
that occasion.”

To the great delight and, no doubt, relief, of the TPNHA, Paine won the election in 1945, along with Booker T. Washington, Walter Reed, and Sidney Lanier. Not all were pleased, though. Announcing the winners of the election, *The New York Herald Tribune* blasted Paine as a “derelict” who was “befuddled by rum,” and claimed that he died “embittered and angry…as he had lived.” Some had kinder words about the news of Paine’s election. *The San Francisco Chronicle* declared: “The election of Thomas Paine to the Hall of Fame represents another triumph over blind intolerance, in his case one that has taken nearly a century and a half to achieve.” The election, though an exciting victory for Paine’s most ardent supporters, merely presented a new and daunting challenge: raising the funds to commission the bust.

After the election, the Hall of Fame issued a pamphlet explaining the election process, and the details are noteworthy: “New York University, through its senate, administers the affairs of the Hall of Fame, but only in the capacity of trustee for the nation. No one connected with the university has a voice in the elections, the choices being entirely in the hands of the Electoral College, which is made up of eminent men and women, from every state in the union and from every field of endeavor, who give their services to the university.” Curator Bertha Lyons also noted that, once the

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55 *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 1945.
nominations are announced, many in the public might choose to lobby for the election of a particular nominee by writing letters to the various electors, which the TPNHA of course tirelessly did. But Lyons cautioned that this might not be particularly helpful:

What effect these [lobbying efforts] have had upon the electors, those who administer the elections of course have no means of knowing. An interesting case in point, however, was the candidacy of Thomas Paine in 1945. Through the years, Paine received the following votes: In 1920, when he was first considered, 32 votes; in 1925 his name was not on the ballot. In 1930, he was again proposed, and received 36 votes; in 1935 his popularity diminished to the point of only 15 votes; in 1940 he received 50 votes, and in 1945, the year of his election, he received 51. In 1945, while his name was being considered, a well-financed campaign was organized for his election.57

Despite the well-organized campaign of lobbying by the TPNHA, Paine still only received one more vote in 1945 than he did in 1940. And Lyons also notes that, if not for an alteration in the election rules, which changed the votes needed for victory from a three-fifths majority to a simple majority, Paine would not have been elected.

Aside from their relentless lobbying on Paine’s behalf—which may have been of minimal benefit—Lester and Lindsay also exchanged countless letters with the Hall of Fame’s curator, discussing every detail of the proceedings, from the cost, which rose from $7500 to $8000 during the preparations (because the musicians who were performing at the ceremony demanded to be paid for their efforts), to the inscription on the Paine bust. Lester eventually chose the following poignant passage from Paine’s works: “Those who expect to reap the blessings of Freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it.” Lester finally settled on this passage because, he wrote with

57 Ibid.
obvious empathy, “Paine knew what it meant to undergo the fatigues of supporting freedom.”

Joseph Lewis clearly wanted to be a part of the Hall of Fame process and seems to have shoehorned his way into it at least somewhat, although the TPNHA appeared to have been keeping him at arm’s length. Lewis first appears in the TPNHA meeting minutes in 1920, when he asked for and was given the floor, “that he might announce a prize of Paine’s writings he wished to donate for competition among High School pupils of Manhattan.” Lewis offered up six sets of Paine’s collected works, “in order to stimulate interest in Thomas Paine and his writings, and to encourage High School pupils to study the works and career of the great patriot and philosopher.” The collection would be given to the student who had written the best essay on Paine. Interestingly, during the meeting it was taken into consideration “the probable hostility of the Board of Education of the Borough of Manhattan toward the plan;” and, in that event, Lewis proposed to “make the same offer to the pupils of the High Schools in the other boroughs.” This detail adds still further weight to the idea that Paine supporters, amid any efforts to promote and defend their hero, faced near-constant prejudice against Paine and his writings, or at least had come to expect it.

Although Lewis was well known to TPNHA members, and despite their clear common interest in promoting the legacy of Thomas Paine, Lewis and the TPNHA never formally joined forces, but that did not stop Lewis from trying. Lewis wrote Lester in 1945, inviting him to become a member of the Thomas Paine Memorial Committee, and claiming that his group was responsible for “the election of Thomas Paine to the Hall of Fame.”

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58 Lester to Lyons, March 25, 1952.
59 All quotations in paragraph from TPNHA Meeting Minutes, January 29, 1920.
The latter claim seems at variance with the facts, and might explain why the TPNHA chose to keep Lewis at a distance during the process. Undeterred, Lewis wrote another member of the Association, urging, “Now that Thomas Paine has been elected to the Hall of Fame, I think it would be advisable that you and other members of the Thomas Paine historical Society would meet with members of our committee to decide upon what procedure to follow in view of his election to the Hall of fame.”

Lewis wrote Lester again in May 1946, after learning that NYU had chosen Malvina Hoffman to sculpt the Paine bust, telling Lester, “I have an appointment with Miss Hoffman for tomorrow noon, and I would like to make a detailed report to you and your associates.”

Despite Lewis’s efforts to be involved, it appears the lion’s share of the work was done by the TPNHA, although the funds to pay for the bust were utterly scarce. In 1951, when Lewis wrote Lester inquiring how the fundraising effort was going, Lester replied with obvious disappointment: “I have only succeeded in raising a few hundred dollars.”

With funds barely trickling in and time passing (unfortunately, an all-too-familiar scenario for the TPNHA), the Association voted “an appropriation for the employment of a full-time director to conduct a national campaign to raise funds to finance a bust of Thomas Paine in the Hall of Fame at New York University.” For the year 1951-52, the TPNHA put together a public relations program, the details of which are available in an unpublished document. The purpose of the program was: “1. To stimulate interest in the

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60 Lewis to Lester, February 3, 1945.
61 Lewis to C.E. Kene, November 26, 1945.
62 Lewis to Lester, May 13, 1946.
63 Lester to Lewis, July 3, 1951.
64 TPNHA Newsletter, October 1951.
life and letters of Thomas Paine. 2. To provide a background for fund raising to foster
the program of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association.”

In February 13, 1952, the publicizing efforts of the TPNHA yielded them an
above-the-fold headline in the *New York Times*: “PAINE CLAN SEEKS FUND IN HIS
HONOR.” Residents of the New Rochelle community, who where actually living on
parts of the 300-acre plot that Paine was given by the city, began to push for funds for the
Paine bust to adorn the NYU Colonnade of Immortals. Calling themselves “Paine
Farmers,” they announced that they were aiming for a fund-raising goal of $10,000. The
Cold War was by then raging, and the “Paine Farmers” saw an opportunity to appeal to
Americans’ memory of Paine the patriot and defender of freedom, which they
incorporated into their pleas for money: “The Paine clan see current significance in his
ringing pleas to the American Colonists, ‘These are the times that try men’s souls,’ and
‘Freedom has been hunted round the globe, received the fugitive and prepare in time an
asylum for mankind.’” Even these efforts, and the remarkable level of publicity the
TPNHA generated was not enough to raise enough funds for the bust.

The unveiling of the bust finally took place seven years after Paine had been
elected to the Hall of Fame—and thirty-two years after Paine’s name first appeared on a
ballot—on Sunday, May 18, 1952. The editorial page of *The Asheville Times* had some
kind words for Paine as the unveiling ceremony at NYU approached: “Of all the truly
great men of his day Paine is perhaps the last to be given the honor and place in history
that he so justly deserved. Every American today who treasures his political and

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65 Public Relations Program to Promote Thomas Paine, 1951.
religious freedom owes a debt to Thomas Paine.” The ceremony earned a sizable and fairly positive piece in the *Times*, which referred to Paine as the “author-hero of Revolutionary days, who made his home in New Rochelle during his latter years….”

During the ceremonies, Wesley Frank Craven, professor of history at Princeton University, gave an address, in which he extolled the great contribution that Paine had made to the revolution, but then noted with sadness that after *The Age of Reason* was published Paine was hounded relentlessly by his critics, and not “even in death did Paine receive forgiveness. Indeed, popular sentiment took its chief revenge on him by the wide circulation it gave a completely unsympathetic account of his death in this city in 1809.”

Despite all of the desperate fundraising efforts, the money failed to materialize. The July 1952 TPNHA newsletter reported that, since contributions “to the fund for the bust were disappointingly few, it was necessary to practically exhaust the funds on hand to bring about the culmination of this project. The Board had voted that money available in the treasury be used for the purpose, for Paine had been elected to the Hall of Fame in 1945 and it was their feeling that there should be no further delay in having the bust placed in its allotted niche in the Colonnades.” It was worth the trouble. An April 1953 newsletter proudly and earnestly announced: “A visit to this historic shrine is well worth while, but if you cannot get there, the accompanying photograph will give you and idea of what it is like.”

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69 From a typed transcript of Craven’s Speech, TPNHA Records.
70 TPNHA Newsletter, July, 1952.
In early 1953, the financial situation was still exceedingly dire, and the gap between the amount of money the Association had raised and the total expenses was startling: “The presentation of the bust of Paine to the Hall of Fame by the Thomas Paine National Historical Association was distinctly worth while, but left our treasury sorely depleted. The expenses were $8,000 and less than $2,000 was raised—leaving a deficit of over $6,000.” For the Association, it was now no longer a matter of raising money for Paine-related projects; it was about having enough money simply for the TPNHA to survive. As the Association fought desperately to prevent its own extinction, it still managed to muster the energy for another Paine memorial, this time in the form of a United States Postage Stamp.

The TPNHA had long dreamed of getting Paine on a postage stamp. As with everything else associated with the name Thomas Paine, it would not be an easy task, taking decades to accomplish. Paine admirers had for years been pushing for a postage stamp, and Joseph Lewis was among them. Lewis wrote a letter to the Times in 1936, complaining that Paine had been snubbed yet again: “In a Washington dispatch to The New York Times referring to the proposed issuance of memorial stamps for American war heroes, I notice that the name of Thomas Paine was not included.” Despite that Paine had not been given his due, Lewis argued that a perfect opportunity had arisen with which to honor Paine. “Since Jan. 29, 1937, will be the 200th anniversary of the birth of this author-hero,” Lewis wrote, “I think that the issuance of a memorial stamp on this occasion would be a most appropriate gesture toward the recognition of his invaluable

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71 TPNHA Newsletter, January 1953.
services to “these United States of America, which term, by the way, he was the first to use.” 72 In 1941, Irving Levy wrote the *Times* with the following recommendation: “It is appropriate to note as the anniversary of Thomas Paine’s birthday on Jan. 29 approaches that a long overdue distinction to which this outstanding Revolutionary patriot is entitled is the issuance of a stamp in his honor.” 73 The United States Postal Service was aware of these efforts for some time, but remained noncommittal. The third assistant postmaster general, Joseph Lawler, wrote to the TPNHA in 1948 that the name “Thomas Paine is included with those on file in the Department qualifying for commemorative postal recognition but thus far action toward the provision of such an issue has not been possible.” 74

In 1951, Lester sent a letter to the vice-president of the United States, Alben Barkley, who had recently given a speech in which he praised Paine for his role in the founding of the nation. Barkley had mentioned Paine during an address given on April 15, 1950, “at the formal opening of the 7-month celebration commemorating the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the seat of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia.” 75 Lester thought that perhaps he had a new ally in Washington, D.C., and informed the vice-president that, for several years “requests have been made that a commemorative stamp be issued in honor of Paine but without results. Letters have been written to the Hon. Osborne A. Pearson, assistant postmaster general, and I know a stamp is being considered. Because of your obvious interest in Paine, I believe that if you favor

73 Ibid., January 26, 1941.
74 Lawler to Joseph McCoy, TPNHA Treasurer, October 6, 1948.
75 TPNHA Newsletter, October 1950.
this a word from you would carry more weight than a letter from me.”  

Barkley replied, writing: “I have no jurisdiction over the issuance of such stamps, but I shall be glad to bring the suggestion to the attention of the Postmaster General and urge that it be given every possible consideration.”  

Apparently Barkley had followed up on the matter, writing to the postmaster general, Jesse Donaldson, who replied to the vice president, the letter which Barkley then forwarded to Lester. In disappointing news for the TPNHA, Donaldson wrote: “not much encouragement can be offered” as far as a Paine stamp was concerned.  

Despite the lukewarm response, Lester took the opening to write Donaldson directly, noting that Paine had recently been elected to the Hall of Fame at NYU, “proving that some of the prejudices that may have existed in the past are gradually and rightly being overcome.”  

Nothing came to pass with the outgoing administration, but The Standard-Star reported that, with the election of Dwight Eisenhower, the “Association is reviving its efforts to secure a special stamp” for Paine.  

An increasingly desperate Lester wrote to New York State Comptroller J. Raymond R. McGovern, asking if he could do anything to expedite the issuing of a Paine stamp. McGovern wrote back: “I am deeply flattered by your letter of April 29th, as you greatly over-estimate my influence.”  

Despite his lack of authority on such an issue, McGovern pledged that he would do what he could. Kent Stiles, the Stamp Editor of The

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76 Lester to Barkley, January 3, 1951.  
77 Barkley to Lester, January 8, 1951.  
78 Donaldson to Barkley, January 12, 1951.  
79 Lester to Donaldson, February 7, 1951.  
80 The Standard-Star, February 14, 1953.  
81 McGovern to Lester, Date Unknown.
New York Times became involved as well. Lester reached out to Stiles in early 1951, and reported to the TPNHA at their annual meeting that Stiles had lent his energy and connections to the effort. With still no movement on the Paine stamp, and the Post Office continuing to offer its increasingly tiresome reply that the suggestion of a Paine Stamp had been “put on file,” Lester sent another letter to the Assistant Postmaster General Pearson, politely suggesting that the upcoming 175th anniversary of the writing of Common Sense might be the perfect occasion with which to commemorate Paine. This failed to sell the Assistant Postmaster General on the idea.

In yet another disappointing turn, Kent Stiles wrote to Lester, reporting that regretfully, although not unexpectedly, controversy still stalked the Paine stamp: “From a local source pretty close to the Post Office Department,” Stiles revealed, “I am told that in the past at least the major factor against Paine’s admission to the American philatelic gallery is the fact that Paine was an aetheist [sic] and that Catholic ‘anti’ pressure was exerted. How much truth in the story there is, I do not know. I pass it on to you for what it may be worth. If it is true, possibly the same situation prevails today.”

Lester also reached out to Franklin R. Bruns of the Smithsonian Institution’s Division of Philately, who at first responded positively to the idea of a Paine Stamp,

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82 Lester to Pearson, January 3, 1951.
83 Stiles to Lester, February 1, 1951. Note: It is interesting that the Post Office during the Truman administration had not moved on a Paine stamp when, at least judging by Truman’s endorsement of the Paine statue in Morristown, there appeared to be some support for Paine coming from the highest levels of government. By this time, however, the Soviets had the Bomb, the Cold War was raging, the Congress was soon to insert the words “Under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance, and Paine had once again became a pariah—a few years earlier, in 1947, the Board of Superintendents of New York City voted to remove Howard Fast’s novel, Citizen Paine, from all public school libraries. Although the Board was quick to deny allegations that the decision had anything to do with Fast’s “reputed affiliation with the Communist Party or with Thomas Paine’s religious views.” Source: The New York Times, February 5, 1947.
indicating that he would “endeavor to discuss this matter with the proper postal officials.”

A few days later, Bruns promoted the idea of a Paine stamp in a *Washington Post* article, noting that Paine was “famed for his writings in the Revolutionary War period.”

Lester followed up with Bruns a few months later, and Bruns replied that he had not yet discussed the matter with the “proper” officials. Apparently hedging a bit, Bruns explained that a “new Assistant Postmaster General was appointed and I felt he should become adjusted to his work before I visited him on this topic.”

That appeared to end the matter for Bruns.

Being honored with a postage stamp is no easy task, even if the candidate is a far less controversial figure than Thomas Paine. Kent Stiles reported in an article in the *Times* article that roughly “140 bills asking for special postage stamps died in committees when the Eighty-first Congress adjourned last Tuesday.”

Do-nothing congresses aside, the TPNHA had concerns about other roadblocks, particularly from religious leaders, although some of these concerns proved to be unfounded.

Worried about the potential backlash from the religious community in the event of the release of a Paine stamp, Lester wrote to Dr. Joseph Dwyer, the chair of the Division of Arts at Iona College (a Catholic institution), asking whether he believed there would be opposition from the religious community. Lester informed Dwyer that the TPNHA had been trying and failing for years to get a stamp, and “it has been implied that one reason for the failure to have a stamp issued has been the fear that to do so, might offend

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84 Bruns to Lester, February 12, 1953.
86 Bruns to Lester, May 5, 1953.
some members of the clergy, particularly members of the Roman Catholic Church.” He asked Dwyer if he thought such opposition would materialize. Dwyer replied that “whole hearted support for all of Paine’s ideas is most unlikely to come from any Christian clergyman,” but did reassure Lester, noting that, in the past, there “have been many great men in history admired for their splendid achievements in some fields, even though complete acceptance of all their principles would be most unlikely. It does seem to me that Paine falls into this category. Speaking only as an individual I find it difficult to believe that the opposition or ‘offence’ you refer to would become a serious reality.”

It would be another sixteen years of struggle before Paine finally appeared on a postage stamp. On October, 18, 1967, The Standard-Star reported that a “40-cent Thomas Paine stamp will be the first of the ‘Prominent Americans’ series to be issued in 1968, according to Postmaster John F. Fosina.” Announcing the news, the Times declared that the Paine stamp “pays homage to the fiery pamphleteer, whose ‘Common Sense’ in 1776 urged the establishment of an American republic.” Unsurprisingly, the Times article details the course of Paine’s life with great specificity, describing his writing of The Crisis, his return to England, the writing of Rights of Man, his move to France, his imprisonment and eventual release with the help of James Monroe, and his return home to the United States and his eventual death in 1809. But nowhere in the article is The Age of Reason mentioned. It also erroneously reports that he is buried in

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88 Lester to Dwyer, May 18, 1955.
89 Dwyer to Lester, May 25, 1955.
90 The Standard-Star, October 18, 1967.
91 The New York Times, January 7, 1968.  Note:
New Rochelle, even though it is well known that Paine’s remains, save for a fragment of his brain stem and some hair, were removed from his gravesite by William Cobbett and have been lost.

Of course the ubiquitous Joseph Lewis played a controversial role in the unveiling of the stamp. The ceremony marking the event, held at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, was interrupted when Lewis stormed out in protest. According to the *Times*, “Joseph Lewis, who identified himself as founder of the Thomas Paine Foundation” walked out of the gathering of 125 Paine supporters, “after objecting to the reading of an invocation and benediction and the singing of the National Anthem.” As a final insult, the *Times* once again notes that Paine was “accused in his time of being an atheist,” but does nothing to correct the record.

Some Paine supporters interpreted the issuance of the stamp, with its exorbitant price tag of forty cents, as, at best, a backhanded compliment to Paine. Morgan Seacord complained indignantly to *The Standard-Star* that the price of the stamp rendered it of no practical use and called it “a direct insult.” This was typical, Seacord added, and to be expected, “for few men in public life have been so insulted; abused, lied about, threatened; his house burned, his citizenship challenged by Tory local officials, ridiculed by clergymen of the Christian faith so called; denied Christian burial, and his body stolen from his grave by a grave robber.” Adroitly encapsulating the controversy that has plagued virtually every effort to memorialize Paine, Seacord concluded that the “abuse of Paine still goes on even with his [New Rochelle] monument, and the continued mutilation of his bust on its top, (by church-going young men). So now the issue of a more or less

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postage stamp in his honor is only one more blow, so even now he is disfranchised by a postage stamp issued by the Government of the country he gave his all to help found.”93

“Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

—Thomas Paine, from *The Crisis*
Conclusion

In this dissertation I have accomplished two tasks: First, I have offered a new and, I hope, useful interpretation of Thomas Paine’s great theological tract, *The Age of Reason*. Second, I have shed new light on the contest over Paine’s memory by detailing the struggles of Paine supporters to reclaim and promote Paine’s life and works to a wary American audience.

In order to set the stage for this dissertation, I established the ways in which Paine’s theological writings have been maligned and misunderstood by surveying the many histories and biographies of Paine, as well as offering a sampling of some of the responses to *The Age of Reason* by members of the clergy. I also detailed the very public controversy surrounding Theodore Roosevelt’s claim that Paine was a “filthy little atheist,” a claim that may have done more harm than virtually any other epithet hurled at Paine during his lifetime or after. In laying out the ways in which Paine’s life and works have been maligned, I established both a historical context and also a background against which Paine supporters have fought to redeem his reputation in the eyes of largely skeptical Americans.

With historical context established, I offered a much-needed and entirely new interpretation of Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, an interpretation that I submit to the historical record in the hopes that it will generate a new discussion about the true meaning and significance of Paine’s thoughts on God. If the mountain of prejudice that stands between Americans and a more complete understanding of Paine’s life and works can be moved at all, then I hope that this new interpretation of *The Age of Reason* will
help to speed that process.

I also put forward original research in the field of Paine studies by detailing the influence of Thomas Paine’s writings on Robert Ingersoll, as well as Ingersoll’s relentless efforts to save Paine from infamy—efforts for which Ingersoll suffered scathing public criticism and a historical ostracism that closely mirrored Paine’s own experience.

I shed new light on the relationship between Paine’s most famous supporter, Thomas Edison, and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, and their effort to establish a Paine memorial building in New Rochelle, New York. Edison and the TPNHA shared a common goal, which was the elevation of Paine to his proper place in American history. But, as Edison and the TPNHA would learn, the fight in behalf of Paine would be costly, exhausting, and rife with controversy.

I provided a brief but intimate sketch of the daily trials of the TPNHA, who for decades routinely fought nearly existential battles against American misperceptions about Paine and his reputation. These battles were costly and regularly depleted the treasury of the Association, occasionally created full-blown debt crises which threatened to scuttle their efforts permanently, and taxed the energy and resolve of its leadership constantly. I also detailed for the first time the odd and largely detrimental union of the TPNHA with the Huguenots of New Rochelle, who thought of Paine’s religious writings as onerous and offensive to their religious values, and did not see the significance of Paine in the same light as the TPNHA, if the Huguenots saw Paine as significant at all.

Finally, I discussed some of the specific ways in which Paine supporters, namely Joseph Lewis and the TPNHA, worked to have Paine memorialized through the establishment of Paine statues in New Rochelle, New York, Morristown, New Jersey, and
among the Colonnade of American Immortals at the old New York University campus. I also chronicled the decades-long struggle to see Paine’s image adorn a United States postage stamp. While in their own way each of the preceding chapters has illustrated how controversial a figure Paine was and remains in America’s historical consciousness, the Paine memorial campaigns and the extraordinary resistance to them serve as the most salient examples of Paine’s continually and highly contested memory.

While the life of Thomas Paine has been a subject explored in considerable depth, his afterlife remains a rich topic for further research. So too, is the study of Paine as a truly international historical figure. Two recent conferences in Manchester, England in November 2013 and in Paris, France in September 2014, which saw presenters gathering from around the globe to discuss Paine’s international influence and the significance of his writings, are a testament to the continued interest in one of history’s most important thinkers. The work of a revitalized Thomas Paine National Historical Association and the establishment in 2011 of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, point to Paine’s continued relevance.

As I look toward future research, I hope to reach back into the historical record and dig more deeply into the contest over Paine’s memory, by focusing on some bigger questions that I have touched on generally in this dissertation—like, for instance, whether the bicentennial fever that swept the United States in 1976 had any significant impact on the reputation or relevance of Paine at the time. It is certainly no coincidence that Paine’s citizenship was restored in the year 1976, and I hope to find in newspaper accounts and
congressional records whether Americans were generally more forgiving of Paine’s religious views at a time of such great American nostalgia for the Founding generation.

I also hope to explore more deeply whether other historical eras affected Americans’ opinions of Paine, for example, whether and to what degree Paine was given more favorable attention during the Progressive Era than during the Consensus Era of the Cold-War 1950s. At the end of Eisenhower’s presidency, he felt comfortable enough to declare to a group of students touring the White House that he admired Thomas Paine more than any other member of the Founding generation, and claimed that Paine “did more for the United States than any other leader, with the exception of George Washington.”¹ But his proclamations came at a time when the TPNHA was still struggling mightily to overcome the prejudice against Paine, exacerbated by the specter of Communism; and the Eisenhower administration, despite the president’s admiration for Paine, did nothing to help the Paine stamp become a reality. Moments such as these certainly demand further research, so that we can get a fuller understanding of how Americans have vacillated over the significance of Paine and his writings over time.

Thomas Paine was a remarkable man who lived an utterly fascinating and important life. It can also be fairly said of Paine that, whatever his faults, he lived an honest life devoted to great principles from which he never wavered, even when to waver might have saved him from enormous suffering at the hands of his critics. It is indeed tragic, as Thomas Edison, Robert Ingersoll, Joseph Lewis, William van der Weyde, and the many other members of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association believed,

that Paine has languished in the shadowy corners of our history for so long. I share the hope, along with a small but growing band of Paine admirers, that in time this will change.
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