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Editors' Introduction to Thomas Paine's Correspondence

"THANK GOD nobody can publish my letters after I am dead for I write none and in the present uncertainty of conveyance I feel determined to write none."[1] Writing to Nathanael Greene in 1780, Thomas Paine expresses his own ambivalent attitude toward his correspondence and his implicit belief that his public works, such as *Common Sense* or the *Crisis* papers, would be more enduring than his personal letters to many of the most important and influential people in eighteenth-century history, including this one to the noted American Revolutionary general. Happily, history has transcended Paine's ambivalence. His correspondence reveals his deep and impressive immersion within numerous Enlightenment networks and his knowledge of topics ranging from politics, science, and religion to marriage and the duties of being a son. Whether engaging with the young daughters of his friends or becoming the first whistle-blower in American history and defending his actions to the Continental Congress, Paine's correspondence reveals new aspects about his choices, his character, and his opinions on the events that, in his own words, began the world anew. Whether the subject was the American Revolution, the French Revolution, or New York City politics at the start of the nineteenth century, Paine's correspondence reveals opinions and facts that were unknown to his biographers or ignored because they did not accord with their preconceptions about him. The short biographical note on Paine in

1. This vol., 150.

the online *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* is typical: "Returned to America (1802). Lived in impoverished and lonely circumstances until his death."[2] The nearly seventy letters Paine wrote between 1802 and his death in 1809 contest such a characterization and shed new light on his ideas and activities.

Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the other Founding Fathers left thousands of letters and other documents reflecting their private and public roles in U.S. history. Of this group, Paine's correspondence is the least extensive. He served only as secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs from 1777 to 1778 and as clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly from 1779 to 1780, and in neither of those roles did he produce official correspondence. The fate of what letters remain from other sources is also unfortunate.

Paine befriended the Bonneville family in France during the French Revolution. When he returned to America in 1802, Marguerite Bonneville and her sons accompanied Paine and stayed with him until his death. Bonneville became Paine's de facto literary executor, having inherited most of his estate (see Paine's will, this ed., 3:938). On 13 March 1813, she wrote to Thomas Jefferson: "From the time I inherited of T. Paine's manuscripts, papers &c. &c. my intention was to have the honor to write to you concerning your most valuable letters to him. The troublesome and dissagreeable affairs which have been suscited to me since his death: If not an excuse to negligence was the cause of my delay."[3] Jefferson's reply was polite, but pointed: "I thank you for your polite attention on the subject of my letters to the late mr Paine. while he lived, I thought it a duty, as well as a test of my own political principles to support him against the persecutions of an unprincipled faction. my letters to him therefore expressed the sincere effusions of my heart. old now, and retired from the world, and anxious for tranquility, it is my wish that they should not be published during my life, as they might draw on me renewed molestations from the irreconcilable enemies of republican government. I would rather enjoy the remainder of life without disturbance from their buzzing."[4] Jefferson's aversion to having his own correspondence to Paine published and Bonneville's need to return to France delayed any project of printing Paine's letters. Bonneville ended up moving with her family to Saint Louis, but a fire

2. Papers of Benjamin Franklin, browsing by name, "Paine, Thomas (1737–1809)," https://franklinpapers.org/framedNames.jsp.

3. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, 20 vols. to date (Princeton University Press, 2002–23), 6:8.

4. *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, 6:47.

there destroyed the largest single collection of Paine's letters and papers. What now remains of Paine's correspondence has been spread across two continents and three nations.

The result is that Paine's letters have been collected and edited previously in what can most charitably be described as a sincere but piecemeal fashion. George Evans, a New York labor leader and newspaper editor, in his *Theological, Miscellaneous, and Poetical Works of Thomas Paine* (1844), published some letters found in the collections of fellow New Yorkers to whom Paine had written, such as John Fellows. Paine's great nineteenth-century editor, Moncure Daniel Conway, treated his subject's letters as worthy of no better than an appendix, and as mere resources for his two-part biography. Philip S. Foner's edition of *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* was somewhat less complete than the title indicates. Foner's work nearly doubled any previous collection of letters, yet scholarly, editorial, and archival precision is often lacking. Some letters are edited (without notes indicating this) to exclude important passages. Editorial interventions are not noted or marked, there is sparse footnoting, and few archival locations of letters are indicated. Still, it has been the standard edition of Paine's works for the last eighty years and the work on which that period of scholarship on Paine has been built. The editors of the current volumes warmly acknowledge Foner's contribution, but hope that this edition will improve upon his and give readers, students, and scholars a more robust and complete presentation of Paine's letters.

A quantitative sketch of Paine's letters reveals some interesting data points. The over four hundred published in these volumes represent a nearly 50 percent increase in known and published Paine letters. Starting in 1765 and ending in 1808, Paine corresponded with 116 distinct individuals, including seventeen unknown recipients. Thomas Jefferson was his most frequent correspondent, with fifty-one letters in various forms between Paine and the third American president. Over fifty individuals, ranging from the Anglo-Irish playwright Oliver Goldsmith to the American sculptor Peter Maverick, received only a single letter from Paine. The year 1779 is represented by the greatest number of extant letters. There are none from between 1767 and 1771.

A qualitative sketch of Paine's letters reveals some interesting patterns and clusters that will be of note and interest to students and scholars. The first revolves around Paine's 1796 *Letter to George Washington* (this ed., 3:250). Well known as Paine's incisive criticism of Washington as a man and a revolutionary leader, the document would come as a deep surprise to those reading the men's correspondence, which began in 1778

and ended in 1795, a year before the *Letter to George Washington* was published. Respectful, cordial, and friendly, these letters, including invitations for oysters and stays at each others' homes, reveal a professional relationship that had the sense of genuine open friendship—enough so that Paine was trusted with the key to the Bastille that eventually made its way, through John Rutledge Jr., to Washington and Mount Vernon, his Virginia home. It was, of course, Paine's imprisonment in France during 1794 and the failure of the administration to acknowledge his U.S. citizenship and help free him that turned Paine against Washington, but the letters between them show that the turn was neither sudden nor cavalier. Paine felt this to be a deeply personal betrayal by Washington, whom he saw as unwilling to save him from the perils of prison life.

Paine's commitment to truth (evident in these letters to Washington and his feelings about the president's perfidy), and the honest functioning of government are at work in his letters to Congress regarding the Deane Affair from 1778 to 1779. These letters should be read alongside Paine's articles, attacks, and defenses against Silas Deane and his allies in volume 1 of this edition. They help to give a fuller account of Paine's actions and motivations in becoming the first government whistle-blower in American history. In his belief that Deane was trying to receive payment for what was technically a gift, Paine saw Deane's ill-fated attempt to defend his actions in a late 1778 publication as indefensible, and the information afforded him by his position as secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs allowed him to expose what he saw as the graft and corruption of a fledgling government trying to win a revolution. Paine's letters during that time, especially to Congress, which had censured him, reveal a proud and defiant man working to support his revelations, showing moral courage in the face of criticism, and defending himself for the sake of the new country as much as himself. When in 1783 Paine was recommended for the position of historiographer of the continent, his letters to Congress suggest a man clearly vindicated by the invitation.

An equally important cluster of letters between 1786 and 1790 involves Paine's design, engineering, and construction of a bridge, his primary focus in the years between the American and French Revolutions. Letters to some of the greatest minds of his time—Benjamin Franklin (a longtime friend and mentor), Sir George Staunton, and Sir Joseph Banks—reveal Paine as a detail-oriented technical thinker trying to make his place in the long history of bridge building. His letters to Thomas Walker of the Walker Iron works of Rotherham, Yorkshire, tie Paine to one of the greatest industrialists in England in the late eighteenth century, yet still show

a deeply personal side, as they make clear that he chose the Walkers not simply for their expertise and innovation, but also because they were a close-knit family business.

The private, personal side of Paine, rarely considered by his biographers, much less his critics, and so difficult to detail, is revealed in some of his most extraordinary letters. Some are well-known, such as Paine's missive to Catherine "Kitty" Nicholson Few, daughter of Commodore James Nicholson. Paine clearly had a deep, somewhat paternal affection for Kitty and her sister Hannah, both of whom married prominent men: William Few of Georgia and Albert Gallatin, respectively. Some may want to see in his letter a man revealing what little he did about his own two marriages, but Paine's ability to weave genuine hope for the newly married Nicholson with a patriotic affection for the United States, from which he had been distant for some time, is an excellent example of eighteenth-century epistolary writing, transforming a tender reflection on marriage into a serious reckoning about the new nation and its future. A particular concern for his past is displayed in a never-before-published letter from Paine to his parents, Joseph and Frances Paine, in 1785. Not quite as tender as the letter to Kitty Few, it nonetheless reveals Paine sharing his American successes with parents who already knew their son had made a mark and shows his efforts to reconcile with his wider family on returning to England after the Revolutionary War.

From England, Paine journeyed to France. As early as 12 July 1789, writing to John Hustler, Paine indicated that once his bridge was completed he wanted to go to France. A mere two days later came the storming of the Bastille. A few months later, Paine wrote to George Washington: "In the mean time I am going over to France—a share in two revolutions is living to some purpose" (16 October 1789). The letters Paine wrote from France, some published here for the first time, show him as a vital and active actor in the French Revolution. Building on Marc Belissa, Yannick Bosc, and Carine Lounissi's revelations concerning Paine's decisive and divisive role in the French Revolution, these letters demonstrate Paine's relationships to major figures and his attempts to gain favor from Americans and others sympathetic to revolutionary causes.

Paine's network of correspondents includes some of the most important actors during the French Revolution. In the first period, from 1789 to his flight from England in late 1792, Paine played the role of an intermediate or go-between for British reformers and friends such as Thomas Christie, Thomas Walker, and even, for a while, Edmund Burke, and key French figures such as the marquis de Lafayette. He served as well as a source of

information for Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Rush, John Rutledge Jr., and his other American friends.

Paine wrote to very few French correspondents in this first period (only a single letter to the duc de La Rochefoucauld d'Enville exists, from August 1790), perhaps because he had opportunities to see these figures in person when he traveled back and forth from London. But his descriptions of discussions with figures such as Lafayette or Minister of the Navy La Luzerne fill his letters. Paine defended the French Revolution against the English press and their accusations that it was being driven and sustained by mobs. He also took deep interest in the consequences of the Nootka Crisis involving England, Spain, and France in 1790.

After his flight to France in September 1792, Paine had more opportunities to write to his Continental correspondents. Most of them were involved in European and international politics, as Paine himself was with his American, English, and Irish friends and acquaintances. His correspondents at this time included General Dumouriez, French ministers of foreign affairs Pierre Lebrun and François-Louis Deforgues, diplomat Louis-Guillaume Otto (who was married to Michel-Guillaume-Saint-Jean Crèvecœur's daughter), and also the minister of war, Jean-Baptiste Bouchotte. Paine helped Irishmen hoping to revolutionize their island. He also intervened to support Edmond Genêt's nomination as minister to the United States. The correspondence contains almost nothing to Paine's supposed Girondin friends except a brief note to Jacques-Pierre Brissot, though Danton and Barère are correspondents. Paine continued to write while in detention in the Luxembourg Prison. Published here for the first time is a letter he sent to the mayor of Paris, Jean-Nicolas Pache, in March 1794.

His letters to James Monroe seeking his liberation as an American citizen help to reveal Paine's understanding of and commitment to the French Revolution. These prison letters point to his complaints about Gouverneur Morris's failure to intervene and his astonishment that the nation he had helped to create with his writings had abandoned him to the dark recesses of the Luxembourg Prison. On reading them, one cannot help but see the pain and anguish of a man forsaken by a country he loved and desperate for a justice he often extended to others.

His important letter to Pelet (de la Lozère) dated 15 January 1795 nevertheless shows his involvement in the constitutional debates of year III. And during the period of the Directory (1795–99) Paine was even more committed to the success of the French armies, as he hoped that a descent on England or Ireland could revolutionize the British isles and create an Irish or British Republic. One can see this hope in his correspondence

with directors Paul Barras, Louis-Marie de La Révellière-Lépeaux, and Philippe-Antoine Merlin de Douai. He also intervened on behalf of his British and American friends by sending letters to the minister of the interior and the minister of police, Jean-Marie Sotin. He supported Talleyrand and the Directory during the XYZ affair and saw fit to exhort the American Commissioners for the purpose of their mission.

Although immersed in the French Revolution and its aftermath, Paine still followed English and U.S. politics. He backed up the Republican opposition to the Washington and John Adams administrations, especially after the signing of Jay's Treaty, which he saw as a betrayal of the cause of France and of the rights of man all over the world. He was eager to continue publishing his major works (including *The Age of Reason*, Parts I and II, and his *Letter to George Washington*) in England and in the United States, as indicated by his letters to Benjamin Franklin Bache, editor of the *Aurora*, an anti-Federalist Philadelphia newspaper.

After Napoleon Bonaparte's Brumaire coup (9 November 1799), Paine's French correspondence largely disappears, save one letter to Dominique Joseph Garat dated 27 December 1800. Did Bonaparte's police surveillance play a role? Perhaps, but nonetheless, Paine seemed anxious to quit Bonaparte's France as soon as possible.

The private letters after returning to America forcibly rewrite the traditional (and false) narrative of Paine's poverty and loneliness in his final years. They bear witness to a man growing older and dealing with the issues of age, but they are nonetheless vibrant letters that show Paine immersing himself almost immediately in national affairs and even more energetically in New York City politics, and the emergence of New York as a city to rival Philadelphia in its importance to national issues. When read with Paine's newspaper articles from the same period (volumes 3 and 6 in this edition), a portrait emerges of a man reviving his American Revolution intensity for the future of New York City. Paine's correspondents also include the most prominent deist activists in New York, and he continued to think about the nature and errors of Christianity. His letters during this period ultimately show a man hoping to cement his legacy and assess a near lifetime of working for the United States to which he had returned. Whether or not it was the one he had helped to create is a question addressed in varying ways by his letters to Thomas Jefferson, Joel Barlow, and DeWitt Clinton. Never far from the powerful, the creative, or the innovative, Paine was both a creature and creator of an eighteenth-century epistolary world that developed, shaped, and grew the interconnected relationships that constituted his comprehensive enlightenment network.