Thomas Paine Biography

Inventor, Journalist (1737–1809)

Early Life: England

Thomas Paine was born in England in 1737, to a Quaker father and an Anglican mother. Paine received little formal education, but did learn to read, write and perform arithmetic. At the age of 13, he began working with his father as a corset maker, and he later worked as an officer of the excise, hunting smugglers, and collecting liquor and tobacco taxes. He did not excel at this job, nor at any other early job, and his life in England was, in fact, marked by repeated failures.

To compound his professional hardships, around 1760, Paine's wife and child both died in childbirth, and his business, that of making corsets, went under. In the summer of 1772, Paine published "The Case of the Officers of Excise," a 21-page article in defense of higher pay for excise officers. It was his first political work, and he spent that winter in London, handing out the 4,000 copies of the article to members of Parliament and other citizens. In spring of 1774, Paine was fired from the excise office, and began to see his outlook as bleak. Luckily, he soon met Benjamin Franklin, who advised him to move to America and provided him with letters of introduction to the newly formed nation.

The Move to America

Paine arrived in Philadelphia on November 30, 1774, taking up his first regular employment—helping to edit the Pennsylvania Magazine—in January 1775. At this time, Paine began writing in earnest, publishing
several articles, anonymously or under pseudonyms. One of his early articles was a scathing condemnation of the African slave trade, called "African Slavery in America," which he signed under the name "Justice and Humanity." Paine's propagandist ideas were just coming together, and he couldn't have arrived in America at a better time to advance his general views and thoughts on revolution and injustice.

Paine had arrived in America as the conflict between the colonists and England had reached a fever pitch, although events had not yet become violent. Within five months of Paine's arrival, however, the precipitating event to his most famous work would occur. After the battles of Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775), which were the first military engagements of the American Revolutionary War, Paine argued that America should not simply revolt against taxation, but demand independence from Great Britain entirely. He expanded this idea in a 50-page pamphlet called "Common Sense," which was printed on January 10, 1776.

'Common Sense'

Worded in a way that forces the reader to make an immediate choice, "Common Sense" presented the American colonists, who were generally still undecided, with a cogent argument for full-scale revolt and freedom from British rule. And while it likely had little effect on the actual writing of the Declaration of Independence, "Common Sense" forced the issue on the streets, making the colonists see that a grave issue was upon them and that a public discussion was direly needed. Once it initiated debate, the article offered a solution for Americans who were disgusted and alarmed at the presence of tyranny in their new land, and it was passed around and read aloud often, bolstering enthusiasm for independence and encouraging recruitment for the Continental Army. ("Common Sense" is referred to by one historian as "the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era."

Paine wrote "Common Sense" in an unadorned style, forgoing philosophical ponderings and Latin terms, and relying instead on biblical references to speak to the common man, as would a sermon. Within just a few months, the piece sold more than 500,000 copies. "Common Sense" presents as its chief option a distinctly American political identity and, more so than any other single publication, paved the way for the Declaration of Independence, which was unanimously ratified on July 4, 1776.

'Crisis' Papers

During the ensuing war, Paine served as volunteer personal assistant to General Nathanael Greene, traveling with the Continental Army. While not a natural soldier, Paine contributed to the patriot cause by inspiring the troops with his 16 "Crisis" papers, which appeared between 1776 and 1783. "The American Crisis. Number I" was published on December 19, 1776, and began thusly: "These are the times that try men's souls." Washington's troops were being decimated, and he ordered that the pamphlet be read to all of his troops at Valley Forge, in hopes of inflaming them to victory.