

# THOMAS PAINE

FOREMOST  
CONSTRUCTIVE STATESMAN  
OF HIS TIME

AN ADDRESS  
AT THE THOMAS PAINE BIRTHDAY DINNER  
NEW YORK, 1921

BY  
HON. OSCAR S. STRAUS

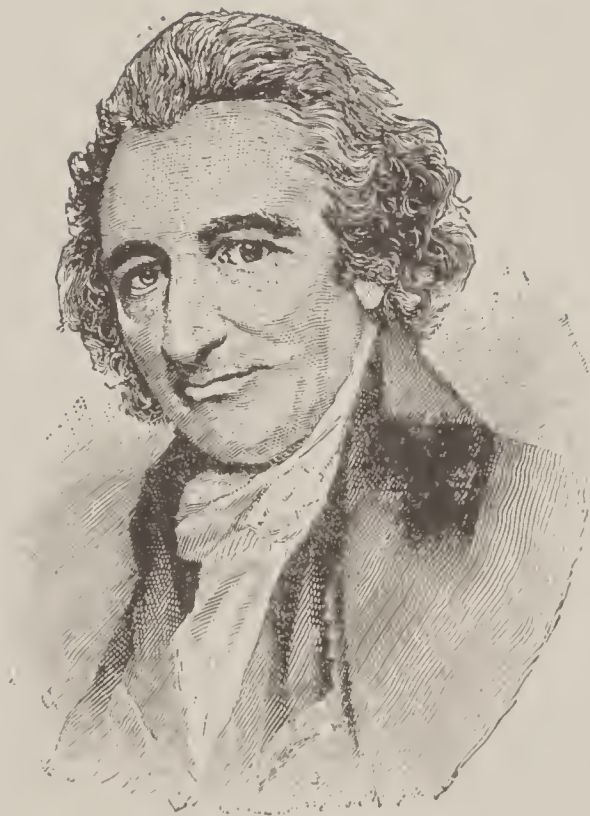
Ex-Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to  
Turkey

Ex-Secretary of U. S. Departments of Commerce and Labor

Author of "Origin of the Republican Form of Government in  
the United States"; "Roger Williams, the Pioneer of Religious  
Liberty"; "The Development of Religious Liberty in the  
United States," etc.

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THOMAS PAINE

1737-1809

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FOREMOST CONSTRUCTIVE STATESMAN  
OF HIS TIME

*An Address by*

HON. OSCAR S. STRAUS

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At the Paine birthday banquet, held in the Cafe Boulevard, New York, Jan. 28, 1921, under the auspices of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, the opening address was made by the Hon. Oscar S. Straus, the former secretary of the U. S. Department of Commerce and Labor, ex-minister to Turkey, and author of numerous books, among them "Roger Williams, the Pioneer of Religious Liberty." Mr. Straus said:

"Governmentally no less than economically, the world is in an anxious period of readjustment and

reconstruction. The tremendous burden of taxation the World War has imposed upon the victorious no less than upon the vanquished nations, has put a strain on all governments. Bolshevism is the extreme form of disintegration which that strain has projected and assumed. The structure of even the most liberal governments has been shaken, and a wise foresight compels a reexamination of the foundations of their governmental system. In this country it is our habit to celebrate the anniversaries of epoch-making events in our national history, and the births of the Fathers and conservers of the Republic. We celebrate our Independence, the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, as well as of Jefferson, Franklin, Jackson and others.

“The Thomas Paine National Historical Association has rendered and is rendering a distinct patriotic service in commemorating the anniversary of the birth of him whose services as the first visioned exponent of Independence, and one of our first, if

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not the first, advocate and expounder of American representative democracy, entitles him to rank alongside of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and Adams as one of the Fathers of the Republic.

“It is not my purpose, in the brief remarks I will make, to dwell even in outline upon the life and services of Thomas Paine. That has been so admirably done by word and pen by Mr. van der Weyde, your president, and by the late Elbert Hubbard, and John E. Remsburg and others. It was my good fortune to know intimately the distinguished biographer of Paine, Moncure D. Conway, who has rendered a great service to the history of our country in writing the life and editing the works of Thomas Paine.

“Paine was of humble origin and, like Franklin, self-educated and therefore all the more a courageous, original and progressive thinker and writer. It was due to Franklin, who recognized Paine’s exceptional qualities, that the latter came to America

at the end of 1774, bearing letters of introduction from Franklin to several of his friends in Philadelphia. I state this fact in view of the great services Paine began immediately to render, as an additional reason of recognition for the manifold contributions, both at home and abroad, that Franklin made to American liberty and democracy.

“When Paine arrived and began editing *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, and for some months thereafter, Independence was not thought of even by such leaders as Washington, Franklin and Adams. Even, following the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill, the prevailing thought was one of taxation and the redress of grievances. Paine was the first to take a bold stand for Independence, and by his irresistible argument and plea in his ‘*Common Sense*,’ he stirred up the conscience of the people and won over Washington and several of the foremost leaders to the cause of Independence. Washington immediately recognized the compelling

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value of 'Common Sense' to the cause that he was defending with the sword. 'Common Sense' was highly praised and welcomed by Jefferson, John Adams, Franklin, Madison and all the patriotic statesmen of the time. Washington, in a letter to Joseph Reed shortly after the appearance of 'Common Sense,' said: 'A few more such flaming arguments as were exhibited at Falmouth and Norfolk, added to the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet "Common Sense," will not leave numbers at a loss to decide on the propriety of separation.'

"I wish to call attention to the second chapter of this remarkable politico-philosophical pamphlet, the chapter of 'Common Sense' entitled 'Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.' I desire to do so for two reasons: First, because it goes to the historical foundation of democratic government, and secondly, as an evidence of Paine's appreciation of and familiarity with the Bible, and his understanding of

the politico-religious psychology of the American people, and of their ideals of democracy, as handed down by the Puritan ministers in their 'Election Sermons' from the earliest times until the adoption of the Constitution of the United States.

"Paine's argument on the birth of democracy is drawn from the 'Hebrew Commonwealth.' He says: 'Monarchy is ranked in scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reserve is denounced against them.' 'All anti-monarchical parts of scripture have been very smoothly glossed over in monarchical governments, but they undoubtedly merit the attention of countries which have their governments yet to form,' . . . Paine goes on to the introduction of Saul as king: 'But where, say some, is the king of America? I'll tell you, friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the royal brute of Britain.'

"'Common Sense' had been published anonymously—'Written by An Englishman'—and the au-



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thorship had been ascribed, among others, to Franklin, who was then in England. At a reception in the British capital, Franklin was reproached for the reference to 'the royal brute of Britain.' The diplomat disavowed his authorship and blandly added 'I never could have alluded so disparagingly to the brute creation!'

"Continuing his dissertation on the Hebrew Commonwealth Paine says: 'Yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors, let a day be set apart for proclaiming the charter; let it be brought forth placed on the divine law, the word of God; let a crown be placed thereon by which the world may know that, so far as we approve of monarchy, in America the law is king. The Jews, elated with success, and attributing it to the generalship of Gideon, proposed making him king, saying: 'Rule thou over us, thou and thy son; and thy son's son.' 'I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you.'



THOMAS PAINE

*Portrait by Charles Willson Peale  
Philadelphia, 1777*

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Gideon doth not decline the honor, but denieth the right to give it.' Paine then proceeds to the scriptural narrative concerning the people demanding a king, about one hundred years after this period, under Samuel, and quoting in full Samuel's admonitions, concludes in these words: 'These portions of the scriptures are direct and positive; they admit of no equivocal construction. That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scriptures are false.'

"When first I began independently to study American history and the origin of American democracy, two outstanding contributors who have made not only America, but the world their debtors, aroused my special interest and sympathetic admiration for their moral courage and visioned foresight because of which they were maligned and persecuted in their generation and their transcendent services obscured and belittled for years thereafter. I refer to Roger Williams, the pioneer of religious

liberty, who was the first to found a political community with Church and State separated. The other was Thomas Paine, who was the first to advocate American Independence and our form of representative democracy. Though the period which separated the services of these two great founders of American religious and civil liberty, is more than one hundred and fifty years, the reasons they aroused bitter opposition and incurred malice which obscured their imperishable services were, if not identical, very much akin.

“Paine in his ‘Age of Reason,’ because of his vigorous attack upon priestcraft, was traduced as an Atheist, though his Deism differed but little, if at all, from the religious beliefs of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton and Madison. Roger Williams was, too, a profoundly religious man, who advocated with unswerving consistency and moral courage his conviction that the civil magistrate should have no power over the

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conscience and religious beliefs of the citizen. He founded his community upon the basis of a 'free Church in a free State'—our American system.

"Like Thomas Paine he was condemned by the ecclesiastics of his time and was characterized by them as a stubborn heretic and a disturber of the civil peace. The early historians, Morton, Mather, Hubbard and others wrote against him with a prejudiced pen. The enmities he encountered had such vitality that they were handed down even to our day.

"Paine's 'Common Sense' prepared the public mind for Independence and presented some of the outstanding reasons which were embodied in the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted six months thereafter. And Paine's labors did not end there. The first number of his 'Crisis' which was written by the camp-fires of the Revolution when the little army was hurled from Long Island, drove away despondency and buoyed up the spirits

of the soldiers. His pamphlet, by the order of Washington, was read at the head of each regiment. This number contained the historic and thrilling words: 'These are the times that try men's souls.' Succeeding numbers, thirteen in all, appeared during the trying periods of the war. The last number, which appeared on April 19, 1783, began with the sentence: 'The times that tried men's souls are over.'

"Time does not permit me to dwell upon the great services Paine rendered to liberty and humanity, and the marvelous influence of his convincing logic clothed in flaming words. His humanitarianism never shone brighter than, after aiding in battering down kingship in France, he heroically came forward, as a member of the Assembly, to defend the life of the king, Louis XVI, for which he was thrown into prison and narrowly escaped death by the guillotine. I cannot conclude my remarks more appropriately than by quoting Monroe's estimate

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of Paine's services as set forth in his letter to Paine of September 18, 1794, referring to his efforts to secure his release from prison in the Luxembourg: 'It is not necessary for me to tell you how much all your countrymen—I speak of the great mass of the people—are interested in your welfare. . . . You are considered by them as not only having rendered important services in our own Revolution, but as being, on a more extensive scale, the friend of human rights and a distinguished and able advocate in favor of public liberty. To the welfare of Thomas Paine the Americans are not, nor can they be, indifferent.'

“The Thomas Paine National Historical Association is rendering no small patriotic service in paying just tribute to the memory of the first—and most—convincing advocate of our country's independence and the soul-stirring apostle of Democracy, Liberty and Humanity in France, England and America.”

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The old Paine house on Bleeker Street—still standing—where Thomas Paine lived during the last year of his life.



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*The following report of the dinner in commemoration of the 184th anniversary of Paine's birth, at which Mr. Straus delivered the foregoing address, is from the columns of THE TRUTH SEEKER (N. Y.).*

With sufficient reasons the Thomas Paine National Historical Association may regard this year's Paine dinner as the most successful that society has ever held in the city of New York. As many guests as could be seated in the capacious dining-room of the Café Boulevard, where the Sunrise Club meets, were present; and it was a gathering that might be called brilliant. For the principal speaker, there was a diplomat, who had been ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary at a European capital, as well as member of a President's cabinet. The Hon. Oscar S. Straus was followed by Mrs. William Vanamee, secretary and acting director of the Hall of Fame, whose vote would have put Paine in that distinguished company could

it have been effectively cast; and by the successor to that eminent Unitarian minister, the late John White Chadwick, the Rev. Charles H. Lyttle of the Second Unitarian church of Brooklyn, from whose pulpit the name and fame of Paine have been announced since the year 1870. Mr. Straus in the course of his address recalled that some years ago, when he spoke before a historical society in Brooklyn, and cited the tributes of the Fathers of the Republic to the foremost constructive statesman of their day, several local clergymen arose to protest that they had not come there to listen to a laudation of Thomas Paine. Mr. Lyttle stated that his predecessor, Dr. Chadwick, could not have been one of those ministers. Mrs. Vanamee, whose associations and antecedents are perhaps not so liberal as those of Mr. Lyttle, said nevertheless that Paine was the Apostle of Freedom and the prophet of the great free-hearted America of today that is feeding the world from its bounty. President van der

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Weyde in his felicitous remarks from the chair spoke of the pleasure it gave him to note that among the guests was a grandson of Gilbert Vale, the first authentic biographer of Paine in America. The name of this grandson was not disclosed, but he is a resident of Brooklyn, and his mother was Gilbert Vale's daughter. Greetings from George Seibel and the Pittsburgh celebrants were read, with a cablegram from a Spanish editor, who addressed the President of the Paine Association as Señor Don van der Weyde. It was perhaps the most memorable gathering in the name of the author of the "Age of Reason" since the guns roared at New Rochelle when the monument there was delivered over to the custody of that town and accepted by the mayor. It was an occasion for congratulation on the success of the Painites, the Freethinkers, who have rescued Paine's name from the obloquy and oblivion to which orthodoxy assigned it and given it over to the applause of so representative, even

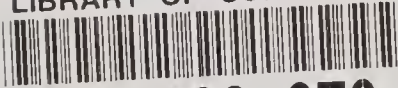


distinguished, a group of citizens of the Republic that the Author-Hero of the Revolution did so much to create.

The annual meeting of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association was held at the Cafe Boulevard an hour before the dinner. President van der Weyde occupied the chair. The following officers were unanimously re-elected:

<i>President</i> .....	WILLIAM M. VAN DER WEYDE
<i>1st Vice-Pres't</i> .....	WOOLSEY TELLER
<i>2nd Vice-Pres't</i> .....	MARSHALL J. GAUVIN
<i>Treasurer</i> .....	WILLIAM H. HARVEY
<i>Recording Sec'y</i> .....	WILLIAM BRENNER
<i>Corresponding Sec'y</i> .....	DR. T. J. BOWLES

**A**CORDIAL invitation is extended to all persons interested in Thomas Paine and his great labors for the benefit of humanity to become members of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, an organization incorporated under the laws of the State of New York for the purpose of increasing the public's knowledge and appreciation of Paine and his works. The Association has opened a Thomas Paine National Museum at the Paine house in New Rochelle on the farm that was presented to Paine by the State of New York in recognition of his services before and during the Revolutionary War. A dinner in honor of Paine is given each year upon each anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine. All persons interested in the objects of this Association should communicate with the Secretary, Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 62 Vesey Street, New York. There are no initiation fees, and the dues are only one dollar a year.



“Nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as a declaration for independence. . . . ‘The UNITED STATES OF AMERICA’ will sound as pompously in the world and in history as ‘the kingdom of Great Britain.’ ”—THOMAS PAINE.