

# The Bones of Thomas Paine

by Kenneth E. Nahigian

**Thomas Paine**, first patriot and American hero, died half-forgotten. On June 8, 1809, crippled by stroke, nearly friendless, he died. Six mourners attended his funeral (**Thomas Addis Emmett**, two unnamed African American men, **Margaret de Bonneville**, and her two young sons, **Benjamin de Bonneville** and **Thomas de Bonneville**). An obituary pronounced that “He had lived long, did some good and much harm.”

Eighty-three years later, **Robert Green Ingersoll** wrote the following about Thomas Paine in an article published by the *North American Review* in 1892:

*“Thomas Paine had passed the legendary limit of life. One by one most of his old friends and acquaintances had deserted him. Maligned on every side, execrated, shunned and abhorred — his virtues denounced as vices — his services forgotten — his character blackened, he preserved the poise and balance of his soul. He was a victim of the people, but his convictions remained unshaken. He was still a soldier in the army of freedom, and still tried to enlighten and civilize those who were impatiently waiting for his death. Even those who loved their enemies hated him, their friend — the friend of the whole world — with all their hearts. On the 8th of June 1809, death came — Death, almost his only friend. At his funeral no pomp, no pageantry, no civic procession, no military display. In a carriage, a woman and her son who had lived on the bounty of the dead — on horseback, a Quaker, the humanity of whose heart dominated the creed of his head — and, following on foot, two negroes filled with gratitude — constituted the funeral cortege of Thomas Paine.”*

And yet the Revolutionaries loved Paine. He was their first radical, their propagandist, and their prophet. He inspired the petty colonial rebellion into a war for a new republic, and wrote their dreams into birth. What happened?

Paine’s error, if you may call it that — his fall from grace — was to remain radical. As his proposed ideas moved to the center he continued to seek the edge. A story tells of a dinner party and how **Benjamin Franklin** quipped, “Where liberty is, there is my country,” and Paine cried out, “Where liberty is not, there is my country!”

After the Revolutionary War, Paine went on to press his causes in Britain and France. He defended the French Revolution, then nearly lost his head in France for resisting the leadership of **Robespierre** and the Reign of Terror.

In America he published *The Age of Reason* to try to take down the churches and the clerics. All of these radical thoughts and actions were simply too much.

Radicals can be useful during crises, tiresome after. Most early American citizens were unchurched but kept a kind of ambient, low-key, folk religiosity. Paine embarrassed them. And so by shades he lost their love.

It’s not a new story. The stranger part is what happened to Paine later — after he died.

One of Paine’s critics was **William Cobbett**. He was an English loyalist, a supporter of King George. By 1810, Cobbett had crossed the chasm to become a radical himself. He now revered Paine.

That Paine had died in poverty and obscurity, denied a pension or even a requested plot in a New York Quaker cemetery, shamed him. Paine was buried on his farm, without the simple stone wall around his grave he had wanted. So Cobbett made a bold move. In 1819, without permission, he dug up the body, and took it to London. He was planning a memorial to inspire democracy in England.

Years passed; the memorial never happened. Cobbett died. Paine’s dry corpse, stuffed in a wooden box, fell to Cobbett’s family. This was in 1835. What exactly became of it then is still much a mystery. But, over years, clues have fallen into place.

**James Paul Cobbett**, William’s son, knew the historic value of the remains. He inscribed his name on the skull and some of the larger bones for identification. In January 1836, the family auctioned Cobbett’s effects at his Sussex farm. They did not auction the box of remains, though Cobbett’s publisher requested this. Apparently the estate’s trustee then took possession of the box for nine years. At the end of the receivership, he turned it over to **Benjamin Tilly**, Cobbett’s secretary, who also admired Paine ardently.

Here a gap occurs. In 1849, a writer claimed to see the nomadic bones “in a box in the house of **John Chennell**, a corn merchant in Guildford.” Someone, it was said, had bought it in a public sale, and passed it to the merchant. But the story has discrepancies. Supposedly, Chennell later kept the remains in a porcelain jar, labeled “The Great Paine’s Bones.” It contained “only a very few bones.”

In 1853 or 1854, **Reverend Robert Ainslie** in London claimed to have Paine’s skull and right hand. Much later the Reverend’s daughter reported seeing these relics in the household, but they were lost amid various movings. “I can find no trace of them,” she wrote.

Tilly died in 1860. He was living with a family named **Ginn** (first names unknown) at the time. Amid Tilly’s effects they found the bones, minus skull and right hand, with a wax death mask and other small bits of bones. Cobbett had made a face cast to prove that he was really in possession of Paine’s body.

The Ginn daughter mentioned this to the family’s minister, who was immediately interested. The Ginn mother later claimed she had sold the bones to a rag-and-bone man for a paltry sum, not knowing they were human. She



Pictured above is the Thomas Paine wax death mask commissioned by William Cobbett.

may have sold them more profitably, in fact, but nobody actually knows for sure. Remaining were a brain stem fragment and lock of hair, which Tilly had secretly abstracted in 1833; the death mask; and some papers. The minister purchased the brain piece and papers, and resold them later. The trail then fades again.

In 1890, **Moncure Daniel Conway** located Paine's brain stem. Conway was an author who spent the 1880s and 90s researching and publishing a four-volume *Writings of Thomas Paine* and a two-volume *Life of Thomas Paine*. To complete the project, Conway spent time in England and France. During that time, he bought and sent back Paine artifacts, including the brain stem. Conway donated the artifacts at some point before 1900 to the Thomas Paine National Historic Association (TPNHA) The Association decided to inter the brain piece under a Paine monument in 1905 when the monument was given to the city of New Rochelle, New York. Conway became president the next year of TPNHA, but he died shortly thereafter.

In May 1914, **William van der Weyde**, the President of TPNHA located a lock of hair and Paine's death mask. Those items were displayed at the Thomas Paine Memorial Museum for many years.

But what of the rest? Part of Paine's body may still be in England, likely as buttons made from his bones. A man in France claimed to own one of his ribs. At one time an English Bishop was said to have Paine's right hand and skull on his mantelpiece. A man in Australia, who claims descent, says he

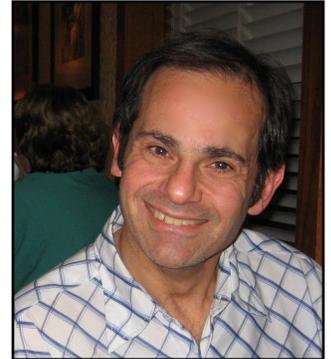
now has the skull. An English woman said she had his jawbone. Rumors and myths abound, mostly untraceable.

The full story is much more complex, of course; the historic whirlpool around those peripatetic bones has drawn in many researchers, touched many remarkable lives, and inspired books and a folk song. The Citizen Paine Restoration Initiative is still trying to track down bits and pieces.

"It's poetic," said **Gary Berton**, Coordinator of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College and Secretary of the TPNHA, "the fact that his body is scattered to the four corners of the Earth. This is the man who said 'The world is my country.'"

So it is for old Thomas Paine: his bones and dry sinews now blown and dusted through the world, lost as plankton, lost as thistledown, while his ideas have tintured our thought, and yet stand like mountains.

**Ken Nahigian** is the treasurer and the deputy webmaster for [Atheists & Other Freethinkers](#), (a 501(c)3 humanist organization). He lives happily in Sacramento, California. Nahigian is a Bright, freethinker, and "apatheist," hoping that everyone can just "get along."



Below are the lyrics to the song *Tom Paine's Bones* by **Dick Gaughan**, a Scottish musician, folk singer and songwriter. Gaughan's music reflects the traditions and culture of the Gaels, both Scots and Irish, and he is a great admirer of Thomas Paine's work and life legacy.

As I dreamed out one evening  
By a river of discontent  
I bumped straight into old Tom Paine  
As running down the road he went  
He said, "I can't stop right now, child,  
King George is after me  
He'd have a rope around my throat  
And hang me on the Liberty Tree"

And I will dance to Tom Paine's bones  
Dance to Tom Paine's bones  
Dance in the oldest boots I own  
To the rhythm of Tom Paine's bones  
I will dance to Tom Paine's bones  
Dance to Tom Paine's bones  
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I only talked about freedom  
And justice for everyone  
But since the very first word I spoke  
I've been looking down the barrel of a gun  
They say I preached revolution  
Let me say in my defense  
That all I did wherever I went  
Was to talk a lot of common sense

## *Recommended Reading for Thomas Paine Enthusiasts*

*The Trouble with Tom:  
The Strange Afterlife and Times of Thomas Paine*  
by **Paul Collins**

*Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*  
by **Jack Fruchtman, Jr**

*Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man:"  
A Biography*  
by **Christopher Hitchens**

*Thomas Paine and the French Revolution*  
by **Carine Lounissi**

*Thomas Paine and the Dangerous Word*  
by **Sarah Jane Marsh**

*Thomas Paine: Crusader for Liberty:  
How One Man's Ideas Helped Form a New Nation*  
by **Albert Marrin**

*Thomas Paine: His Life, Work, and Times*  
by **Audrey Williamson**

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