

BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 435: Institute of Thomas Paine Studies "*Common Sense* at 250: The Unfinished Work of Democracy, A Live Conversation"

[00:00:00] Announcer: You're listening to an Airwave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] Liz Covart: *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Clio Digital Media, and this episode was made in partnership with the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona University.

[00:00:13] Leanne O'Boyle: I love his hyperbole. But for me, again that line, "we have it in our power to begin the world over again," hold the mirror up to ourselves. Like he's a starting point. And then it's not move on and move away necessarily, but we've got stuff to be dealing with. It's a kick up the backside.

So for me, his legacy is, or should be, a challenge. What are we going to do with it? It's on us. He's already told us what he thought about his time, and quite clearly it's about us taking responsibility and owning it. So we've got to do better.

[00:00:49] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 435 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host Liz Covart.

What happens after the revolution in *Common Sense*? Thomas Paine made the case that the thirteen British North American colonies should be independent. But Paine himself understood that breaking free from the British Empire was only just the beginning, the harder work, the work that would come to define a nation was figuring out how to create a government without a king.

Now, in our earlier episode with Nora Slonimsky of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona University—that was episode 431—in episode 431, we trace Paine's journey from the streets of England to the printing presses of Philadelphia. We followed the experiences and ideas that shaped Paine's views in one of the most influential pamphlets in American history.

Today we're picking up that story where we left off, not with Thomas Paine the writer, but with his legacy. What did *Common Sense* set in motion? And 250 years later, what do Paine's ideas still demand of us?

To mark the 250th anniversary of *Common Sense*, the Institute for Thomas Paine studies worked with the University of Sussex and the Thomas Paine: Legacy organization to co-host a conference about *Common Sense* at 250.

The conference was held in Lewes, England in early January, 2026 over the 250th anniversary of the first printing of *Common Sense*. Now Lewes is the town where Thomas Paine lived in work before he immigrated to Philadelphia in 1774. Lewes is where he ran a tobacco shop with his second wife, where he honed his debate skills in the Headstrong Club, and where he deeply considered the relationship between citizens and their government.

Now, as part of our partnership, the Institute of Thomas Paine Studies and Iona University wanted to see if there was a way where we could bring you to the conference with us. So they asked Joe and me if we would be willing to experiment and record our very first live podcast episode at their conference. And we agreed.

So what you're about to hear is a live recording. We edited it for clarity as we normally do, but the background noise, the muffled voices of some of the audience question askers, that's a live background from the conference.

And the other cool part of this episode is that we recorded it live in Bull House. That's the building where Thomas Paine and his second wife, Elizabeth Ollive, lived and ran their tobacco shop. This conversation features a panel discussion titled "A Template for Democracy: *Common Sense* and Civic Life." It was chaired by our very own Joe Adelman, co-founder of Clio Digital Media, Professor of History at Framingham State University, and co-host of *Ben Franklin's World*. Joe is our resident expert on all things print culture, including Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*.

Now, Joe guides a conversation among three panelists, Leanne O'Boyle, the founding director of the Thomas Paine: Legacy at Bull House Organization, Nicole Mahoney, Public Historian for the Institute of Thomas Paine Studies, and Jeanne Zaino, Professor of Political Science at Iona University and Democracy Visiting Fellow at the Ash Center at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Now, collectively, they tackled some provocative questions such as, what is democracy's day two problem, or the challenge of sustaining self-government after the revolution ends? Or, how women shaped the world of *Common Sense*, even as Tom Paine's language made them invisible? And what Lewes and the Bull House, the places where Tom Paine lived and worked, can teach us about where democratic ideals actually take root. So with that, let's travel to Lewes, England and turn it over to Joe Adelman and his very capable panel.

[00:04:49] Joseph Adelman: Well, good morning everyone, and welcome to this very first live recording with a studio audience of *Ben Franklin's World*. Liz and I are very excited to be here this week. We're very glad to be part of the *Common Sense* at 250 Conference, working in partnership with Leanne, who I'll introduce in a minute, with Nora Slonimsky and the Institute for Thomas Paine studies at Iona University on this session, and we're looking forward to the conversation, which we've titled "A Template for Democracy: *Common Sense*, and Civic Life."

I'm joined today on stage by three fantastic scholars to talk about how they see the impact of *Common Sense* in today's world. Let me tell you a little bit about each of them as we get started. So on my far right is Leanne O'Boyle, who is the founding director of Thomas Paine: Legacy based in the building we are in at Bull House in Lewes. She's also an elected fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. She's a writer, lecturer, and experienced director in the heritage sector, a trustee of Amberley Museum, an associate of the Society of Authors, and holds an elementary pilot's license in paragliding.

Audience: *laughing*

Audience member: quite a life choice

Joseph Adelman: She's currently writing a book on the British role in American Independence.

To her left, Nicole Mahoney is Public Historian for the Institute for Thomas Paine studies at Iona. She teaches courses there in public history, digital humanities, and the age of revolutions. She's a specialist in Early American history, the history of women in gender, and social and cultural history. A museum professional before joining Iona, Dr. Mahoney also advises student internships at museum and historic sites. And she's currently working on a book about American women who hosted enlightenment style salons in New York and Philadelphia in the early republic.

Then immediately to my right is Jeanne Sheehan Zaino, who's a Professor of Political Science at Iona, and for this academic year is the Democracy Visiting Fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, which is part of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

She's a political contributor with Bloomberg News and the author of several books, including the recently published *American Democracy in Crisis: The Case for Rethinking Madisonian Government Post January 6th*. She's also a playwright whose most recent work is called *Motherland*, a courtroom drama that depicts the real life trial of Madan Lal Dhingra in Great Britain in the early twentieth century.

So welcome to all three of you. Thank you for joining us for this conversation.

Leanne, I want to start with you and since we are here in Bull House, which is run by Thomas Paine: Legacy, this organization that you founded to devote to Paine's memory as a founding father. Lewes is where Paine lived for the six years before he left for Pennsylvania in 1774. Can you tell us about the work that your organization is undertaking to think about Paine and how the work he did here in Lewes connects with his later American writings?

[00:07:39] Leanne O'Boyle: So I founded this organization in August 2024, so it's still rather new. And I moved into this building last December. With a room full of experts in Thomas Paine—I know some of you aren't—but I had never heard of the man until four years ago. And I've since become rather obsessed, which I think you'd need to be to set up your own not-for-profit in an economic crisis, you know, take out a fifteenth-century building.

I felt quite strongly, you know, working in the heritage sector, that anniversaries are a big deal. So I really felt that the time, if ever anything was going to happen with this building, the time was now to tell the story. For me, I didn't just want to set up another historic house to a great man of history. Like in part, it's that, of course, people want to come and visit, walk in his footsteps. But I'm establishing here a museum, but also a center for democracy.

So, picking up some of the themes that we were talking about yesterday about what is sort of, I guess, legacy, what is his impact? I want him to tell his story, but also as a starting point to be encouraging people to hold the mirror up in their own lives. So you'll see the quote

everywhere, including on notebooks in the gift shop, and "we have it in our powers to begin the world over again."

Obviously he didn't write that here in Lewes, but the story I think we can tell here and like that connecting piece is this is the moment just before he sort of steps onto that international global stage and becomes this bigger name.

And so I'm really sort of interested in those sorts of examples. They're really powerful, as ways to enable like the public to connect with otherwise people who are just existing in a history book or they're really famous and an extraordinary writer, how could you possibly like ever achieve that in your own life?

And I'm clearly wanting this organization and this building to play a role where it does play that sort of inspirational, I guess, agitating role where people feel like at whatever level in their own lives, how could they take his inspiration as an active citizen, an extraordinary writer, but also a story of human resilience.

Because I know there's all this new information coming out about what he was already doing over here, but if you look on paper, you know, he is fired from his job, they're selling off the business, and he and his wife legally separate. These are sort of not markers of positive markers in this person's life, usually as if you're going to mark success. But he just keeps putting one foot in front of the other and then, you know, a year later publishes something that changes the world.

So I'm not sure if I've gone off on a bit of a tangent there in terms of like the work I'm doing, but I'm really wanting to kind of settle people in this idea of him as a human being. And then using that as a starting point to take it somewhere else. Because we're in an extraordinarily challenging time at the moment, I feel personally, and I want to encourage people to think about the impact they can make in their own lives, their own societies. And Thomas Paine for me, is that gateway or that starting point.

[00:10:19] Joseph Adelman: Yeah, that's fantastic. And I want to ask more about his family and his life here in Lewes. But first I want to bring Nicole in and sort of cross the pond a little bit and ask from the US side, working at the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies, which is in New Rochelle, New York, just outside New York City, which is where Paine lived at the end of his life.

You have a much different perspective on how people interact with Paine and with *Common Sense*. So when you work with people in and around New Rochelle and with ITPS on events and other sorts of things, how do you see his legacy playing out for people?

[00:10:53] Nicole Mahoney: Right. So in 1784, New York state awarded Paine a 277-acre farm in New Rochelle, which is about sixteen or seventeen miles north of New York City. And Paine spent the longest continuous stretch of his American life on this farm in New Rochelle.

He built a small cottage. He attempted farming with various levels of success. I don't think it was ever very successful. And for Paine, I think this tract of land, this 277-acre farm was a real retreat for him. And it became a retreat for writing and reflection. And in Paine's time, it would've been a full journey from lower Manhattan into New Rochelle. So it was quite rural for him, but still tied to that intellectual and political world of New York City and the larger Atlantic world.

So in that way, I think that living in New Rochelle became a very strategic choice for Paine in that way he could again reach New York City in a day. But he was also living away from the churn of daily politics, from the social pressures. And I think that gaze and surveillance that followed him increasingly as a more controversial writer in urban centers.

So from New Rochelle, he could be close to power, but not necessarily inside of it. And also compared to New York City in the early republic, New Rochelle had a really distinct culture at the time that I think probably made Paine feel very safe.

New Rochelle was founded by French Huguenots, French Protestant refugees, and it has a long tradition of religious descent and religious tolerance. And as Paine's critiques of organized religion made him more and more unpopular among some crowds, I think that New Rochelle's history perhaps aligned with his ideas about freedom of conscience.

So while it was an official honor for Paine to accept this land in New Rochelle, I think it also allowed him to retreat a little bit, right? And it meant that he didn't have to integrate himself or ingratiate himself with polite society of New York. He entertained at his cottage for sure, but very selectively in New Rochelle.

And I think this land also gave Paine something else that he desperately wanted, which was independence from patronage, right? That now as a landowner, and this was the only land that Paine ever owned in his lifetime, he deeply valued that independence of not having to rely on a patron.

So I think these New Rochelle years are deeply symbolic, and you can visit Paine's cottage in New Rochelle. It's been relocated from its original location to a different spot that has less flooding, but is still on the 277-acre farm. And it is owned and operated by the Huguenot and New Rochelle Historical Association since about 1910. And they offer tours, they offer programs, and they put together small exhibits inside the cottage. So it is still a very lively center for Paine.

And near the cottage, there's a monument to Paine that was erected in 1839. And across the street from Paine's Cottage is the Thomas Paine Historical Association, founded in 1894.

Audience member: 84.

Nicole Mahoney: Thank you. And then just about a mile down the road from Paine's Cottage, of course, is Iona University, where the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies works in the legacy of Paine doing public history initiatives, digital humanities work, and we archive

many relics and material culture and documents related to Paine's life. So New Rochelle has become a true center for studying and understanding Paine's life and his work.

But to make sure that I answer your question, Joe, I think that New Rochelle really does give you a different vantage point on Paine's legacy that most Americans recognize the Paine of *Common Sense*, right? That he's accessible, he's electrifying, he's a loud voice. You know the revolution, the man who helped make American independence thinkable.

Here in New Rochelle—well, in New Rochelle, we're not in New Rochelle now—you know Paine the person, like Leanne was mentioning before, I think you get to see a different version of that.

And the people who I speak to are always sort of struck by the fact, first of all that Paine lived in New Rochelle and that he lived there largely isolated, at the end of his life, from about 1802 to 1806. And that he was deeply controversial and he was unwelcome in certain circles in New York City, even though he was internationally famous at the time.

So I think it really makes people sort of reckon with the gap between how much we want to celebrate revolutionary ideas, liberty, freedom, equality, and then how uneasy or maybe suspicious we can become of those same ideas of those same radical thinkers when the revolution is over.

[00:15:40] Joseph Adelman: And I will add as a note of personal context, I grew up about twenty-five minutes from New Rochelle, and it still strikes me as odd, even as a professional historian, to think of Paine associated with New Rochelle because you think of him basically Philadelphia in the US, right?

Audience: *murmurs agreement*

Joseph Adelman: As a writer and political activist and somebody who's much more active there, and yet there he is a stone's throw from where the high school now is in New Rochelle and Iona. Jeanne, I want to bring you into the conversation and then we will open up.

Obviously we've talked a lot at this conference and I framed Leanne and Nicole to set up and remind everyone that Paine is a transatlantic figure, right. We've talked this weekend about is involvement with British radicalism, his involvement with the French Revolution. One of the key features though of *Common Sense*, maybe the thing that most Americans certainly know the most about *Common Sense,* is that it's a call for American independence. It's part of the national origin story.

So, Jeanne, we'll start with you. How should we reconcile thinking about *Common Sense* as a call for national independence with Paine as a very much transatlantic figure who transcends nation in a lot of ways?

[00:16:46] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: I should say, first of all, I am delighted to be in a town that has a reputation for political radicalism. So thank you. Both during Paine's time here and I understand now, which is lovely.

You know, I think as a political scientist and not, like so many of you, a historian, for me I think of several questions when I think about Thomas Paine. One of them is sort of what I describe as this day two problem. His push to involve people and speak to them in a language they could adopt and adapt and understand about revolution. And then after the revolution, which as Nicole mentioned, to feel let down by what came next.

And as we are on the 250th anniversary of independence, that to me looms very large. We're sitting here today as the United States has decided to invade Venezuela, remove their leader, remove him to the United States, and put him on trial, and so many other things. People in the United States, many people, not all, and people around the world feel very concerned. If you want to talk about "times that try men souls," these are one of them. Women, I should say, we'll forgive Paine for that.

And I often think about was he co-opted by people like John Adams who had nothing good to say, as we know, about the pamphlet. John Adams had nothing good to say about Plato's *Republic*. So he was a critique of almost everybody.

Was he co-opted? Was he used? I think one thing we need to think about, have we contributed to that, as we have allowed this sort of myth of Thomas Paine to continue to resonate with young people in the United States and around the world. This idea that even as he wrote the piece, put it out there, and the revolution occurred, was not at all what was happening. People were not involved in the United States government, all people, at the time of the founding, and quite frankly, they still are not now.

And so, you know, this sort of day two problem, he's critiqued as being an idealist. You know, not pragmatic. Not practical, not knowing a thing about governing, but very good at inciting a revolution. It is very troubling to think to me that we've contributed in some way to this sort of cult and myth of Thomas Paine.

And even talk, as scholars here know, about how widely this material was disseminated through the colonies at the time, which we have now had to reckon with the fact that it was not quite as wide as he might have said, and not quite as wide as many of us throughout the nineteenth and twentieth and now into the twenty-first century have continued to talk about. So there's that sort of aspect of it that I think we do need to reckon with today. This sort of myth or cult of Thomas Paine.

He also is somebody who seems to talk at certain points about sort of deliberative democracy and participatory democracy. And in my field this is something that has long been challenged, although there is thankfully a lot of pushback on that. But this question of is democracy even possible? Are we psychologically, emotionally, socially equipped to engage at all?

I, at one point was a pollster, and I can tell you if you look at the polls, as we frequently put out polls that show that most Americans know nothing about their own government. So you're going to hand them a government that they are going to run, and yet their level of knowledge on who their even representatives and senators are is dismal. And that's not just Americans, by the way. It's people and democracies around the world. There's certainly an argument that I would make against that, by the way. I'm not saying I embrace that.

But this is another sort of interesting component of Tom Paine, which is that he seemed to suggest that all people could be involved not only in the revolution, but in the subsequent governing. I'm not sure he had a plan for that. But he did, as he got to France, talk about ways in which we could make these democratic systems more effective for people with things like pensions and other sort of fandangle things in the eighteenth century, which came more into being around the time of the New Deal.

But I think when we think about Thomas Paine, we should also grapple with questions of, is this form of government—which of course he doesn't use the word democracy in *Common Sense*—but is this form of government possible? And if so, and we talk about reimagining it, what is that going to look like? And what should that look like in a government as "basic" as a democracy, and I'll put that in quotes, you know, how do people participate and how can we make that work given human beings as we all are?

So I think there's so much of that to grapple with when we think about Thomas Paine. And you know, of course he is something of a man for all seasons. He has been co-opted by conservatives, liberals, and sort of everyone in between with good reason. But I do think that there is a myth that has grown up around his work and I often wonder how he would've liked that and how he would've responded to that.

But more importantly, I think in today's context, particularly as an American, it really is something that we need to grapple with. And I would just finish this by saying that I also think that he is sort of a Tocqueville-esque quality to Thomas Paine, where it often takes an outsider to come in and tell you what's going on. And I think we're very much in need of that today in the US if I can say. And I don't think we've seen somebody yet, who's come along and been able to fulfill that role. And so I think that's another fascinating aspect of Paine.

[00:22:34] Joseph Adelman: My sneaking suspicion, and I don't, we can ask all the Paine experts in the room, is that he'd probably be pretty happy that we were talking about it of, of the various people. Leanne, I saw you taking some notes about thinking about Paine as this American national figure, but also not?

[00:22:50] Leanne O'Boyle: I'll come back to that. I wanted to jump on just something that Jeanne said about deliberative democracy because on the Center for Democracy, there's working locally like it's falling on fertile ground here in Lewes, and actually a local group of counselors and other local people meet here actually to talk about deliberative democracy.

What does it mean? How here can we engage people locally? Because particularly for what I am actually able to do with the organization, I can't yet do anything like nationally. So we're focusing locally and engaging people here meaningfully, hopefully. And what does that look like? Democracy is really tricky. A lot of them are interested in things like citizens assemblies, people's assemblies, but how do you communicate that in a way that someone on the street will understand and also care about? Like everyone's got their own stuff going on in their own lives.

So I just wanted to, as soon as you mentioned that, it's just again, interesting. So hopefully using this space as a place to have more modern conversations about contemporary issues in

a way that hopefully, not that I need or would want his approval, but just that sort of common thread as to why people would come here. And locally, they like coming here to have these conversations as well. There's something about being in the house where he was, that is drawing people and bringing them together. And I mean, we're seeing it with people in this room. People have come because they want to be here at this moment. So he has a drawing power. Even if they don't necessarily know much about what he wrote or particularly said, they just know he lived here. He did something important in America. And he's something about freedom and liberty. And that's sort of enough to draw people together.

[00:24:15] Joseph Adelman: Can I jump in for just a second and ask you, that's something that Lewes had a long history of, that sort of participatory democracy that was notable within England.

[00:24:24] Leanne O'Boyle: And in Paines day, that's why he was actually able to participate in local government because Lewes didn't have a royal charter.

So if he'd have stayed in Stepford, he couldn't, he couldn't have participated in the town council meetings and court leads, because with a royal charter, there's a very strict local hierarchy. You come to Lewes where there's more dissenting religious faiths, you don't have a royal charter; if you are a, a man of a certain age and you pay your rates, you can participate in local government. And he jumped in with both feet.

And this is government, at a really dull, basic level. You know, walking down the street, St. Michael's, they're talking about the upkeep of the bell tower, which you'll hear periodically through the day, every fifteen minutes marking as to whether we're on time. They were voting on whether you'd allow—and this is my favorite one—whether you allow wheelbarrows to go down the high streets. And they voted no, because it's clearly terrible and wear and tear.

People were talking yesterday about maybe less positive elements of his personality, perhaps vanity and healthy appreciation of his own intelligence. But this is government and whilst it would've increased his standing locally, of course, it's really for people who want to make a difference locally, you're voting on whether local widows get money, orphans. This is for someone who's wanting to make a difference in their community. And my understanding is he attended every single meeting, like not everybody did.

You know, if you're wanting it as a social status thing, you maybe say you'll go a few times, show your face. He went to every single one. So he understood from his time in Lewes that people locally could sort of contribute and run their own communities in a way that was possibly more efficient. Well, men could, a men of a certain income level could.

And interestingly, I'm talking about the possible conflict between nationality and I think of him as a citizen of the world. It just made me think. I mentioned to some people yesterday, the letter he wrote to George Washington after the Battle of Yorktown. Which I think is hysterical because it begins by congratulating Washington, which is like that. And then he just goes on to complaining about how hard done by he's been, how badly he's been treated by America. And if he kind of threatens, like if the world knew, it would harm your

reputation, which is, you know you just kind of think, pick your moments if you're asking for money. Like you know, if you want the outcome you want.

But in there he's talking about coming back to Europe. He is talking about coming to France or Holland, I think it is, because what motivates him is the cause. So that I think is how, in my head I can kind of square that circle. That perhaps they don't conflict. It's just that's how he's tackling this cause, and he's just focusing on America at that point. But then he's just going to continue around the world. He didn't intend to stay, he was going to come back to Europe because of how badly America treated him.

[00:27:05] Joseph Adelman: Which is funny for somebody who, as a writer had usually a good ear for his audience or, or thought carefully about audience to misunderstand.

[00:27:13] Leanne O'Boyle: I mean, I'm really happy that periodically he just doesn't have a filter. It's just very entertaining. Um, I wouldn't like to be on the other end of it, but like 250 years down the line? And then later on I can tell you about the letter he wrote to the neighbors, which was very funny. But anyway, sorry. I'm now getting carried away.

[00:27:29] Joseph Adelman: That's totally fine. I want to try and link together a couple of threads or move in a new direction using a couple of threads, and move into talking about Paine in his personal life and his life here in Lewes by way of thinking about *Common Sense*. And in particular how he talks about, or doesn't talk about women.

There's a very masculine aspect to *Common Sense*. He's building a navy, he's running commerce. He's got the Congress that women don't, at least on the surface level of reading it, play a role at all. So Nicole is a scholar of women's history, how do you think about and talk about the role that women play when we're thinking about *Common Sense* as a pamphlet?

[00:28:05] Nicole Mahoney: Right, and thank you so much for asking that question, Joe. So the first thing that I try to do is to take Paine seriously on his own terms without letting him off the hook. So you're right, Joe. *Common Sense* is a strikingly masculine text, right?

He's talking about congresses, armies and navies and commerce and constitutions. And these are all spaces specifically coded as masculine in the eighteenth century, right? There's no getting around that. And Paine does not directly address women as political actors in the text, or he doesn't address any other marginalized groups of people such as enslaved folks or Indigenous people, children, free people of color. And that absence matters.

And it reminds us that even the most radical, revolutionary thinkers were still radical within limits. And gender was certainly one of those limits for Paine. So as a historian of women and gender, I'm especially interested in how women are present even when they are not named.

And we know that *Common Sense* was designed to circulate widely. And we know that women read it and we know that women discussed it. And we know that women helped disseminate its ideas. And also thinking about too, you know, Paine writes a lot about consent, you know as opposed to hereditary or tradition, as the basis of authority. So even

though he didn't follow all the way through the end of that logic, I imagine that some women readers recognized that tension, right, that they recognized the tension between universal claims to rights and their own status.

So for me, approaching the subject of women and *Common Sense* means reading both what Paine says and what he assumes, and recognizing that the power of the text of *Common Sense* lies not just in Paine's words, but in the demands that it potentially helped make possible even beyond what we think Paine might have imagined.

[00:30:04] Joseph Adelman: And Leanne, I want to circle back to you again to add to the Lewes side of the story, Paine was married twice. And his first wife died in childbirth, as did their child. And then he was married again, and here in Lewes to a woman named Elizabeth Ollive, from whom he legally separated before he left for America. So can you tell us about how those personal experiences with his family may have shaped his political thinking?

[00:30:27] Leanne O'Boyle: It's an interesting point, and even just to start, we talk about this being Tom Paine's house, this wasn't Tom Paine's house, this was his mother-in-law's house. Well, initially it was Samuel Ollives, and then when he died and Paine went on to marry the daughter, he was thirteen years younger, it became his mother-in-law's house.

You mentioned his first wife who was a servant. I believe she was an orphan. When she dies rather tragically in childbirth, my understanding is her father had been an excise officer, which makes what he chooses to do next very interesting. because he chooses to enter the excise service.

So I think that is something that, you know, you read a book and it tends to get skirted over, oh, he was married before and then, oh, then he suddenly decides to be an excise officer. But again, trying to inhabit, why would he have gone from being a corset maker to choosing that. Soon as you get a sense of, well, possibly her father was an excise officer, possibly begin to flesh out that relationship. They were sitting around maybe contemplating their future together. To me, it's really striking that that is what he chooses to do next.

He never writes about her, and when he comes here and he marries Elizabeth, he lists himself as a bachelor. He was a widower. Did he ever talk about her again? And here in Lewes, Elizabeth and her family were absolutely crucial to him really being accepted into the community. They gave him a home, Samuel Ollive, as well as being a sort of respected local businessman running the tobacconist and the green grocers, was strongly connected through his father with the Westgate Chapel next door.

His father had been a minister there. And the month that Paine arrives in, Lewes, if you wrote this as a story, you wouldn't sort of believe it. He arrives in the middle of a hotly contested election, the March 1768 election, when Wilkes is looming large and the Duke of Newcastle's power is waning kind of for the first time. And this is the first election where his preferred candidate doesn't get in.

So what you've got there with Elizabeth and the connections that family makes, it really eases Paine's root into the community here in Lewes. And I think she's a fascinating person. I'm

trying not to sort of go too much into it because of what's going to be presented later, but she's advertising her services as a teacher. She's clearly educated, she's a lot younger. Not that that was necessarily a rare thing in those days, but I imagine he was probably quite difficult to live with; off doing terribly important things, debating in the White Heart, coming back, feeling very pleased with himself.

And you know, there's accounts that when they do separate, she never says a bad word about him. She'll leave the room when people criticize him. You just think about people's previous partners, it'd be very easy to jump on the bandwagon when half the country hate that person. So kind of complain about your ex. And so for her not to, I don't know, I just think she's a fascinating person that we don't know enough about. And it's easy just to include her as a footnote to this man's journey.

But just to remember that when they separate, he has all these opportunities and look what he goes on to do. Her path is far more contained as a woman. And I think it's just really important to sort of remember that she's sort of left. She does okay, I believe, but it's a completely different path to both of them. And he picked a partner there with Mary. They seem to get married quite quickly with child. Elizabeth, they're never supposed to have consummated the marriage. They've known each other for a couple of years, had initially gone into business together, and then married, and then within a couple of years they're separated.

So just that relationship, it just poses interesting questions, I think, as to what that relationship was. Was it more a partnership? But she undoubtedly, her and her family's connections, opened doors for him here locally, gave him a home in a rather large building.

[00:34:07] Joseph Adelman: Very large building. And it always strikes me as fascinating that men of that time, men of this time, can live in a world where they're on a practical day-to-day level; she's a shopkeeper, she's fully involved and invested in life in every which way, but voting. And yet that step of political participation seems to evade the men who were debating at the White Heart as part of the inclusivity of things.

[00:34:31] Leanne O'Boyle: And the law meant he owned her. Like that's the other thing, you know, the divorce meant she could live as a femme sole, an independent woman. The separation, not divorce.

But again, just that reminder that women were not on an equal standing by any stretch of the imagination. By getting married it maybe afforded her a degree of protection and a place in the world, but legally he owned her and everything that came with her.

[00:34:53] Joseph Adelman: I want to shift in another direction and come back to Jeanne. So thinking about what Americans take in our civic life as *Common Sense* is "declare independence." But there is, as we've talked about yesterday, there's many sections to *Common Sense*, and one of the most significant is Paine thinking through how to reconstitute a new government, and how to reform a government once independence is affected.

And I know you've written, there's an essay you published last November, where you said it's patriotic to revisit, reconsider and revise the work of the founders. So what do you mean by reconstitution? Because I know that's a phrase that's important for your work. And what can we take away from Paine on this question of recreating a government and how he's thinking through what the government should look like?

[00:35:38] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: Yeah, I mean that idea of reconstitution is something that, it was a debate at the founding. It is still a debate today. And I would just give some context to that quote because while I do think it's important to talk about reconstitution and amendment as patriotic. I also think that there is tendency among, particularly the left in the United States to celebrate the notion of the Constitution as a living document.

And I think that is something that I'm working on now that we also need to rethink. Because if it is living, it is not doing such a great job at living.

And when we talk about it is patriotic to change, absolutely. But that change has got to be fundamental and in the direction of justice and liberty and not sort of tinkering around the edges.

So I think when we talk about Thomas Paine, he was, I think on the right side of the reconstitution debate. You had sort of a James Madison, let's put this process in that even Antonin Scalia described as "unworkable." He said it should be hard, but not that hard to change the Constitution because of course less than 1% of the US population can push back on those changes, as we've seen with the ERA and other proposed amendments.

So you had James Madison, then you had Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, and others on the other side talking about periodic reconstitution. And so I think they were on the right side of that debate. There's a very famous quote by Thomas Jefferson where he's talking about this sort of dead hand idea, and he gives an analogy, "you can't ask a man to wear the coat he wore as a boy." And that's similar to what we do with the Constitution today. We are all living in a Constitution that has not changed with the times.

So you have Tom Paine, I think on the right side of that. I think it is also problematic that he did not in *Common Sense* or otherwise, fully realize what the answer to this problem was. He grappled with it, certainly. I don't think any of us have done better. But I think there is also the criticism to make that it is the least compelling aspect to me of *Common Sense* is the portion where he is talking about the next day problem, this day two problem as I talk about.

And you know, when we're talking about the issue of women or the Indigenous people, the so many people at the time who didn't have rights and many of whom still don't have rights today, or at least are not fully realized in the United States. Where was Tom Paine on that issue? He was largely absent on that issue. So I think that's something we have to talk about.

Again, he's often celebrated as speaking, you know, the plain truth as he talked about, or *Common Sense*. Saying the quiet part out loud. But whose quiet part was he saying out loud? He was saying the quiet part for himself and other people. But there are so many other

narratives, like the narratives of the women at the time that we in the United States have not elevated or celebrated or even looked into.

You know, there's one part where he talks about, I think it's in the preface to *Common Sense* for like the second or third publication, where he talks about *Common Sense* as not being particularly common today, which was to me, a recognition that he was politicking. He was pushing for something he wanted to see. But this idea that we talk about today as this reflecting a notion of "common men" at the time? I think he himself recognized that that's not the case.

And I think there's also sort of a, what I call sort of a Frank Fukuyama aspect to Tom Paine, this sort of end of history notion, which has clouded so much of the late part of the twentieth century in the West. And you know, this idea that these quotes, like "the cause of America is in great measure, the cause of all mankind. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. We have every opportunity," you know, there's this very sort of end of history Fukuyama-ish kind of idea with Tom Paine. And I think we have to grapple with that.

There is sort of this naivete in that, but I don't think it was naive at all. I think it was purposeful. There is an optimism, sort of a Pollyannish quality to it, but I don't think it was that at all. So I think those are some of the things we have to grapple with.

So on the reconstitution, I think he's on the right side of that as anybody has been. But I don't think any of us have been on the right side of that because we do not have a process for which we can reconstitute today. I think fourteen states in the United States have periodic reconstitution. I live in New York. That is one of the states with periodic generational reconstitution. That amounts to not much.

So even if it was in the Constitution, it probably wouldn't amount to much, which leaves us back to the sort of day two problem. You're going to push for a revolution, that revolution is going to be violent. It was violent. And what happens then? I'm not sure he was able to give us much direction on that. So that remains an enormous problem today.

[00:41:05] Joseph Adelman: And can I ask you, just for people in the room, and especially for our listeners, can you give a like a one sentence version of what the end of history Fukuyama argument is that you're referring to?

[00:41:13] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: Oh, yeah. I wish I had the quotes because as I look back at the first article that he wrote that became his book, they're incredible to read many years later. But this is late 1980, early 1990s. Yeah. Sort of at the end of the Cold War is this idea that liberal democracy is the be all and end all of the world. That it is natural. That there is no other options for forms of government. That we have reached the end and the world will be free.

Of course, as we look at that now, that is not something that we have reached. And he pushed back because he just had, I think the 25th anniversary or one of the anniversaries of the book. He has pushed back and said he was misunderstood, that he never claimed that. And I think it was overread. I think he's right that there was a tendency to overread on that.

But I also think that that's what societies do. And we held up this notion that we had reached the end and the rest of the world was going to come along. And we sit here now in 2026, and that's not where we are.

And you know, just when I'm comparing Tom Paine, you read some of the quotes and it is this very sort of over the top, optimistic "we can change the world." I hope we can change the world. I think we can. But this notion to impart that on the colonies at that point, given slavery and everything else going on there that he wasn't grappling with, I think is important also to underscore

[00:42:44] Joseph Adelman: "The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth." One thing that actually we haven't talked about this weekend even, as much, is violence. And thinking about—so one thing I know I've written about, and many have written about that protestors during the revolutionary era, we see it today as well, that people when they are protesting they perform non-violence as part of their sort of argument for the righteousness of their cause. That doesn't seem to be where Paine is as much. So it's open to anybody to start. Nicole, you're nodding if you want. Nope, Nicole doesn't want to.

[00:43:16] Nicole Mahoney: Leanne, I can feel you.

[00:43:19] Leanne O'Boyle: He's trying to rile them up. I mean, I do think if you're reading *Common Sense* and not periodically feeling uncomfortable, I feel you're reading it wrong.

Like particularly given recent history, someone's stirring up hatred, anger, telling them where they should be directing their anger. He is being overtly, you know, encouraging to a degree violence or at least saying it's going to happen. And I feel that should be an uncomfortable reader. It's a dangerous game riling a mob, you know, what are you supposed to do to then control that? I know he thinks he can. By then bringing it back to the law is king.

But again, that's rather optimistic and rather arrogant. It's interesting you asked that like in Bull House at the moment, so apologies for listeners, but there's this photography exhibition that places Paine in his British context with social struggles across the centuries. And there's some images which I very nearly didn't put on display showing quite graphic violence. And because they're photos rather than a painting, they film more gratuitous. But I decided in the end to put them on a display, because I think it's important actually to remind people that this abstract concept is pretty horrific actually and what that meant so.

Just up in Bull House out of the way. If people don't want to see it, there's the Peterloo Massacre—which is shortly after Paine dies—in Manchester where the troops on horseback ride into a crowd of people. And you've got people kind of cut open and children crying and it's, it should be upsetting to look at it, but I also think it's important not to forget that.

So, yeah, I mean, it's in his writing, it's what adds a degree of life and urgency because it's like this is coming. You can't just sit back and expect everything's going to be all right. But I read those passages and I don't like the fact he's riling a mob and stirring at hatred and anger. I think that's a really dangerous game to be playing personally.

[00:44:56] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: I think it gets to a question that we struggle with all the time, which is that is change possible in the absence of violence? And I don't know that we have a lot of examples in American history of fundamental change without violence.

And he certainly can be accused of stirring up that violence. And I think that's part of the uncomfortableness you feel from people like John Adams. I mean, there's this interesting critique of Paine that occurs between the royalists, the loyalists, and the patriots. Many of whom accuse him, not just of idealism, but of stirring up the masses.

And I think Tom Paine can rightly push back and say, "how else are we going to get any fundamental change? If you folks keep speaking in this sort of elevated language about the British Constitution, how else are you going to move us to change? And that fundamental change is needed."

Now, I do wish that in his call for fundamental change, it was not just a sort of top-level change that elicited what it did, which was a constitution, I believe in the interests of land-owning white men, and it's a constitution we very much live with today. So I wish that the call had been more fundamental. I wish it had been broader.

But again, I don't know that he was capable of seeing, and I don't know if we are today that sort of call for change in the absence of violence. Do I hope that's the case? Absolutely. But I don't think that he offered any sort of direction there. And I think we can also say that that's an important critique of Thomas Paine. That he did not figure out a way to push for that change in the absence of violence. And we lived through that and we are still living with that today I would argue.

[00:46:42] Joseph Adelman: I don't know if it's a defense of him, but just to remind that there were already armies in the field when he wrote *Common Sense*. So the question of violence is a little different in January 76 than it might have been earlier.

[00:46:53] Leanne O'Boyle: And given obviously with my perspective as to how do I take what he writes and like all of these concepts and do it into something that's going to inspire people, obviously not encouraging violence. So there's someone speaking on a panel at the end of the day, she's the last speaker before Danielle's keynote, on how art and culture can be used to bring communities in to talk about these more contemporary issues.

Because the talk of violence, how we bring about change in our communities today, it's been an important driving force periodically if people don't want to change. But if we want change today, that can put a lot of people off. So how can you bring about change? How can we take it to that next step where people don't have to bring arms? How can we bring change in other ways?

And they can take longer perhaps, but the call for violence can put people off and therefore perhaps disempower them from getting involved if they feel, what difference am I going to make? And so I guess the role I'm trying to play is even at a small level, and I know it's an idealistic one, but it's trying to do something at a small level to focus on communities,

cognizant that these bigger sweeping change periodically have, the only way they were going to happen, was with violence.

Audience member: Down with violence.

[00:47:58] Liz Covart: Before Joe dives into his next question, let's just take a moment and let some of these ideas settle in. Plus it also gives me a quick moment to share with you how you can help support this podcast. Now you're listening to something we've never done before, a live recorded episode of *Ben Franklin's World*.

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[00:49:23] Dynamic Ad Break: Audio varies and may shift timestamps in the second half of this episode by 1-2 minutes. Thank you for supporting *Ben Franklin's World*.

[00:49:25] Joseph Adelman: Since we're now on the topic of contemporary protests, and I realize that I'm the one who brought it up, so it's my own segue. One of the things that's been fascinating to watch in the United States in the past year or so is Paine's resurgence in the "No Kings protests" that are going on in the past year, and quotes from *Common Sense*, actually short snippets from two consecutive sentences have been on many protest signs.

So I want to read the full two sentences just so we have the context, and then ask you all to comment on it. So he wrote "yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors let a day be solemnly 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, that in America the law is King. For as an absolute government the king is law, so in free countries, the law ought to be King and there ought be no other."

There's two phrases, "in America the law is King," and then "in free countries the law ought to be king." And there's a whole fascinating grammar discussion about why people pick

either the declarative version or the, I guess it's the subjunctive or the, the hopeful version of it, ought to be true. But this idea of the law is king as a quotation, is drawing out a piece of Paine.

Does it surprise you that that's been the one piece that's picked up? What do you make of people being attracted to those two phrases? And if you want to comment on the grammar and syntax, that's fine as well.

[00:50:56] Nicole Mahoney: I'll say a few things and I think this helps Joe to sometimes think about whether or not we can read *Common Sense* as a form of nationalism, right? Like yes, obviously *Common Sense* is a call for American independence, but it's also extremely nationalist in its goals, right, that it is calling for Americans to imagine themselves as a nation.

But I think Paine does that, he embeds that nation with universal rights, with sovereignty and legitimate power. So it, it's not a nationalism based on blood or ancestry or an exclusion. And I think that's what can make *Common Sense*, a foundational American text and also a deeply transatlantic one that Leanne was talking about before.

But at the same time, I think those nationalistic ideas from *Common Sense* can get picked up and then transformed and used for political purposes other than perhaps what Paine was thinking about. I know, Jeanne, you have ideas about this too.

[00:51:55] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: The fact that it's picked up, I don't think is particularly surprising. I think he's been picked up in many ways on all sides of the aisle throughout history. So I don't think it's surprising, even as you're rereading the quote, Joe, I'm sitting here thinking, damn straight. You know, like as you know, as we sit here, and I mentioned Venezuela, you know, by any measure, international law, the US Constitution, US Law treaties, UN Charter, violated all of them.

And so I don't think it's a surprise that people participating in the "No Kings protest" would pick that up. I also think that there is sort of an irony to the fact that part of what has allowed, not just Donald Trump, other modern presidents. Or I shouldn't say allowed, but what has set sort of an environment in which these things can occur, is interestingly how difficult the framers found it grappling with Article Two coming out of this monarchy, you know, excepting the Articles of Confederation.

It is a profoundly underwhelming aspect of our Constitution. They had so much difficulty at the convention grappling with it that they pushed it off to the Brearly Committee at the very end, pushed it through. We got fandangled things like the Electoral College, which makes little sense in a democracy, and nobody was quite satisfied, nor should they be with what happened with Article Two.

And you had people like Alexander Hamilton and so many others saying, you know, we know the thing is flawed, got to just ratify and move forward and amend it. And of course they didn't leave a process that was workable to do that. And when you have an Article Two that creates an executive, like was created, there are not the guardrails in place.

Governments exercise power, that's what they do. And so we are going to get these enormous exercises of power, periodically, throughout American history. We've seen them and we're seeing them right now. So part of that is the structure of the system that needs to be reconsidered, reexamined, and quite frankly, restructured.

And until, and unless that's done, as much as people at the protest, and I've been part of them, as much as we want to talk about Donald Trump and No Kings and blah, blah, blah, the hard work that needs to be redone is restructuring this constitution. Where are we on that? And that's something I think we as an American public deeply own, is the fact that there are great groups trying to work on this.

We have seen no concerted push to do that. We just celebrated January 6th and periodically as we have had crises in the United States, as we get through them, we just had the fifth anniversary of that, and mark my words, what do you hear the system held. Things are okay. You know, and I'll tell you, the last protest I spoke at, I said to people, "if Donald Trump had not been reelected, would you be here?" And the answer is no, 99% of them.

That's a problem. Because the system that gave birth to a Trump and everybody else whose exercise is power is still in place. And we, and I include myself, have done nothing on that. So yeah. I'm listening to you going, yeah, darn it, that's great. But what have we done to address this issue? I think that's where we sort of own where we are at this point, or should, and I include myself in that. And I include, by the way, political scientists. We've done a deplorable job in this aspect. So I'll say that.

[00:55:34] Leanne O'Boyle: I'll just say something short. I mean, in terms of why it's being used, I'm not surprised. It's a great line.

Audience: *Murmured agreement*. It is.

I mean, he is, he is a genius marketer. Like,

Joseph Adelman: and it fits well on a poster.

Leanne O'Boyle: It fits well on a poster. So if you're trying to, if you're going to write a phrase, you, you know, you could do three words. And one of them is, is.

He can take a concept and distill it, which is actually very hard to do in a way that is moving and impactful. Like he is a writing genius. So I'm not surprised it's been used because it's a great phrase.

[00:56:01] Joseph Adelman: And as you point out, reducing things is always difficult. And in the eighteenth century I usually like to say that people, the way they thought about writing was if you can say something in ten words, why wouldn't you say it in a hundred?

Audience member: Exactly.

Joseph Adelman: Yeah. So on the *Ben Franklin's World Podcast*, if you're not a listener, we have a feature that we call "1776 in Context." Obviously this whole conversation, even the

whole conference, is very much about that description, that idea. But I'd like to use that to frame my last question, which is, I realize actually very difficult.

If you could sum up your view of Thomas Paine's legacy for 2026 in one sentence, what would it be? Jeanne, we'll start with you.

[00:56:39] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: Oh boy. I would say ahead of his time and very much of our time.

[00:56:47] Nicole Mahoney: So Joe, I told you that I wrote four different versions of this answer and then tried to combine it into one sentence, and I'm not sure that I can even do that, but.

I think for me, Tom Paine's legacy, it's about words and it's about language, and it's about giving ordinary folks the confidence or the ideas to think boldly for themselves; to question authority and to imagine a more equal world. And Tom Paine gave people the actual words to do that

[00:57:20] Leanne O'Boyle: For me, he challenges us to do better.

I love his hyperbole, but for me as again that line, "we have it in our power to begin the world over again," hold the mirror up to ourselves. Like he's a starting point, and then it's not move on and move away necessarily, but we've got stuff to be dealing with. It's a kick up the backside. So for me, his legacy is or should be a challenge. What are we going to do with it? It's on us. He's already told us what he thought about his time, and quite clearly it's about us taking responsibility and owning it. So we've got to do better.

[00:57:51] Nicole Mahoney: That was more than one sentence.

Audience and Panelists: *Laughing*

[00:57:53] Leanne O'Boyle: I know, but I said it started with, he challenges us to do better and then I thought I'd explain.

[00:57:59] Nicole Mahoney: okay, we can take challenge, you could bring it down to one word if you wanted to.

[00:58:01] Joseph Adelman: That is fine. Everyone kept it to less than a paragraph, which is really what I was hoping for when I asked the question for one sentence.

We're happy to now take some questions, comments from the audience. We do not have an additional microphone to circulate, but if you speak clearly and if, if there's a question directed a particular person, if you could frame the question as you're speaking. Nora

[00:58:20] Nora Slonimsky: Great. Hi. Thank you all so much. Such a wonderful panel and something that I think kind of came up in everybody's comments or at least was gestured to was, at least in my own journey through learning about Paine, there's a lot of conversation

about him as a revolutionary, as a philosopher, and sort of the his radicalism, but he's also a civil servant, right?

Like his work in Lewes, while he lived here, he is also an excise agent, during a revolution he sort of serves in kind of civic or bureaucratic roles within the government. And that's a more, especially what Jeanne was saying, right? That is kind of a more everyday type of work.

As we think about the broad theme of the conference and legacies of democracy, as well as in our current moment, how there is this kind of crisis of faith in institutions, some of which is very understandable. Other are perhaps the product of perhaps bad faith actors.

What do you think about Paine's view on civics? What do you think are Paine's role as sort of like after the revolution, after the war, in trying to create moments of stability that is more inclusive, that is more expansive, communities that are left out. What do you think about his work, how that might resonate today, that that aspect of his life and contribution?

[00:59:34] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: I can take a shot at that. I'm so glad you asked that because I think his work after the revolution doesn't get, obviously as much focus, but I think particularly *Agrarian Justice* is a really, really, I think, one of the most important things that he wrote. And this is when I said he's ahead of his time in thinking about both civic life and thinking about social justice.

And just him as a role model. I think the way in which he pushed himself not to sort of, if any of us wrote *Common Sense*, we could sort of be complacent, right? Say, well, I, I've done that enough. Let's go to sleep. But he goes to France, he writes *Agrarian Justice*, and it's really focused on ending poverty, making these burgeoning democratic states entitlements for people, sort of a welfare component that becomes a mythical idea.

And at the time he is writing by the, you know, mid-twentieth century becomes something that we now all benefit from. And he is talking about things like pension programs. So I think that that is a really, really important component. I think maybe one of the most important components and contributions in terms of the actual impact on people on the ground today that he makes. And so I don't think he gets enough credit for that.

And when we talk about him as an individual, I think that that's such a beautiful component of who he was. The fact that he wasn't going to just sort of rest on his laurels, that he was going to go out and say really unpopular things, difficult truths, particularly in *Agrarian Justice.* So much so that by his funeral, he has what, less than a dozen people there.

At a time in which, you know, everybody is sort of posting on social media and, well, I'm not truthing, but truthing and all of these things. You know, the idea that he was willing to say difficult things publicly and out loud in the interests of so many of us who are coming later, I think is a really important contribution that he makes. And I think it's something that we should celebrate more or as much as we do the work in *Common Sense*.

[01:01:53] Leanne O'Boyle: Yeah, I mean, it's sort of the, it is just, again, the idea of doing something is better than doing nothing and working with systems, they may not be perfect,

but if it's all you've got, that's sort of what I take from it too. Just it can be easy to become really disillusioned and sort of think, "what's the point." But yeah, he worked arguably as a civil servant. He was working with systems and he just made a contribution on whatever level, whether he is here in Lewes sat over the road in that church and the court vestry voting about a bell, through to forming nations. That's extraordinary.

He wasn't just up here. He was the full gamut. And I think that is inspiring. Whatever level anyone can get involved in, if you're talking about engaging people in civics and the role they can play.

[01:02:32] Joseph Adelman: Yeah, and as you pointed out earlier, he went to the meetings.

[01:02:36] Leanne O'Boyle: He actually went, he actually went, yeah.

[01:02:40] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: And can I also just say like when he was working in the excise component that he writes his first pamphlet, you know, asking for better working conditions for himself and his fellow civil servants. I think that's another remarkable example that's prior to *Common Sense*. So

[01:02:56] Leanne O'Boyle: It's the first example of national unionized action in the world, you know, and admitting it's corrupt. I also love that element of it. It's like, yep, totally corrupt but pay us properly. And again, interesting opponent. The money goes to the king, like the money is to fund George III, which is a fun fact.

[01:03:11] Joseph Adelman: Danielle,

[01:03:12] Danielle Allen: I just wanted to thank everybody for your passionate and engagement and for bringing together the historical and the contemporary. I also wanted to raise questions about some of the conceptualization around issues of gender and slavery, actually, because I don't think that, in fact the world of radicals and the world of Paine represented the conventional commitments to patriarchy, enslavement and the like. And I think it's important that that full picture beyond the table circle of people Paine was a part of, helped build something called the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture, and Commerce in 1750s; it still exists, Society for Arts now.

And they had a one person, one vote rule for how they ran the society and women were members. And similarly, the work of people included William Wilberforce, who becomes the father of abolition. France in the Revolution obviously drives hard towards gender equality, and also equality for people of different races. Obviously that's shut down quickly, but it is there in the beginning. It's part of what they're doing.

Paine was a part of that whole world. It's true that he didn't write as much about that. On the other hand, his works are not marred by the kinds of supremacist formulations that are quite common otherwise in the period. So I just wanted to share all of that so that we have, I think the sort of full sense of what the world of political thought was really like at that time. It was actually quite extraordinary.

[01:04:40] Joseph Adelman: Does anyone want to respond?

Leanne O'Boyle: No, just yeah, thank you. That was great.

Nicole Mahoney: Thank you. That was beautiful

Joseph Adelman: Emma.

[01:04:46] Emma Hart: Thank you first of all for a fantastic panel and discussion. Yesterday and also this morning a bit, I think we've talked about, or you've talked about, how Thomas Paine was a complicated individual in many ways. And so his legacy is that of a, a difficult man who wrote brilliant things.

And I'm wondering if in your capacity as public historians, you can reflect a little bit on how, on whether you want to communicate that to the public, and what we can do with it. Because it seems to me it's an opportunity to make black and white things gray. And that's always something that to me as a historian, it's useful to do.

So do you think that's useful as a public historian, how does that sort of come into your communication plan?

[01:05:34] Nicole Mahoney: So this is something that Leanne and I have chatted about a little bit in talking to general audiences about Paine. And what I found to be sort of the most effective approach, and I think Leanne would agree with me, is that one thing that really gets people excited is when you can, so to speak, sort of lift up the hood, right? And show people, general people how historians work and how we think.

And giving them the letter that Paine wrote to Washington and showing them, you know, the house, and being really honest and transparent about what we don't know, I think helps people to better understand what we do as public historians and the narratives and the curation that we do. But also I think, makes them feel something, right. And if you can make people feel something and really sort of understand the humanity behind Paine, you know, and his first wife dying and his child, and telling those really, really sad complex, but also heartbreaking and sort of emotive stories, but then also explaining what we don't know.

And I think that sort of just honest transparency, for me, has been the best way as both a public historian and a teacher to really get people engaged in the stories that we're trying to tell.

[01:06:47] Leanne O'Boyle: Yeah, no, I agree. It's really important. And in terms of like how you manifest that in a building, obviously you can't. It's layered communication in terms of panels on the wall and you know, you've got to have a simpler message on the wall. But then other things can come out through guided tours and when you're actually speaking to people.

And those conversations, I mean, I do get the chance to speak with Paul, one of our amazing volunteers who sat behind you by the door. He leads tours every week and it's those

conversations with people that really get them excited and you can see the light going on in their eyes because they're not just in receiving mode of, these are the facts you need to learn before you leave this building. It's sort of like they suddenly realize that the gray areas are sort of where the magic happens. It's where you can see we're never going to fully know. These are the things we sort of understand. How do you color that in in a way that makes sense? And resonates with people. And it is, I think the feeling element is really important.

There's a joke in heritage that people when they leave a building will largely only remember the toilets and the cake in the shop. Which here, I don't let the public use the loo and we don't have a cafe.

Audience: *Laughing*

Leanne O'Boyle: So, but it's the point. The point being the point being—it's just a blank when they leave—the, the point being though that it's their experience, they remember how does it make them feel? That's not a particularly academic way of looking at learning outcomes. But I'm not using this building as a test or an end of term paper.

It's what do you want people to leave feeling? Hopefully they'll return, hopefully then they may choose to engage further. And that's what I'm seeing actually. Visitors, people have gone off and read about him. You know, they come back and they want to continue the conversation because they've had interesting conversations here that mean something to them.

So it's possible at the moment, given the scale of the operation and how you scale the up is another matter. But from my perspective, that's the most important part. Those gray areas are where it's really interesting and juicy because people can relate.

[01:08:36] Joseph Adelman: Other thoughts?

Audience Member: Just very quickly, Leanne mentioned, uh, a letter to the neighbors earlier. I was just curious.

[01:08:42] Joseph Adelman: Oh yes. The question is, can you tell us about the letter to the neighbors?

[01:08:45] Leanne O'Boyle: Yes. So the neighbors next door, the building is connected, which on the tour I'll explain, it's still part of the same structure, is the Westgate Chapel. So the trustees of the Westgate Chapel were complaining because they'd done an extension to the building. This is like, so like normal. This is a conversation that happens, has for centuries.

It's just so enjoyable to read his response. Which I just choose to read that he's written it with a twinkle in his eye. My reading of it is he doesn't really like them and they've complained to him, I can only imagine because he's the man of the house, complaining about this door being bricked up or something. And he's got a separate agreement with them because an extension has caused, when it rains, water to fall on their building. So he already gives them a little bit of money to kind of say sorry.

And he writes them two letters on the same day. One is about that and is quite respectful. And then the other one is responding to this complaint they've made about the bricking up of a wall. And his response is, well, as you know, I'm just a tenant here. It's his mother-in-law. It's not that hard to have a conversation with someone he's sort of related to now. But he doesn't even offer to help. He just sort of acts as if it's got completely nothing to do with him.

And then the way he signs off again—I'm just, for me it just, it's like he's being really obsequious in a way that's kind of sarcastic. It's hard to pin anything on it that you're being a bit rude here. But it's just, he's just not being helpful, but he is being terribly over polite, "but I couldn't possibly help you because I'm just a tenant." And I just, yeah, I just find that quite entertaining. The two communications and like I said, I can only imagine it's because they wrote to him as the man of the building.

[01:10:17] Joseph Adelman: Tom.

[01:10:18] Tom Cutterham: I like that anecdote about him being totally normal and the kind of things he's interested in being totally normal, because I think that the conversations we're having are a little bit at risk of making Paine really exceptional. An amazing visionary, forward thinker who kind of was massively ahead of his time.

There are historians who would completely say otherwise. So the person I'm thinking of here is a guy called Jonathan Clark, J.C.D. Clark, an English historian who worked in the US for a long time. He wrote a book a little while ago, basically about how Paine was just always engaging in the arguments of yesterday.

He was a backward-looking thinker who was interested in the kind of dynastic struggle between the Hanoverians and the Stuarts, and was interested in arguments over religious freedom that people were mainly having fifty years before his time. So I kind of want to ask you about how forward looking you really think Paine was, and maybe a different way of thinking about the kind of political implications of that.

Because I, I would suggest that it always happens this way. Intellectuals are always having the fights of yesterday, but at the same time, they're engaging with the actual movements that are happening around them. And that's what's moving things up.

You know, Paine arrives in Philadelphia, he doesn't suddenly turn it into a hotbed of radical revolution. He arrives into that atmosphere. It's the people, it's the organized mechanics and artisans and workers who are already creating revolution that transform Paine's, backward-looking political thought into this magical vision of a new world.

And I think Danielle's comment kind of led us a little bit in that direction, but I think we might want to put Paine a little bit back in the box of his own context, rather than making this kind of magical leader.

[01:11:51] Jeanne Sheehan Zaino: Well, since I said he was, what was my quote? That he was a man of his time and of our time or something, or ahead of his time.

I do think there are ways in which he is a man ahead of his time. And I think Danielle pointed to his work with some of those groups, I think about the *Agrarian Justice* component. So I think in those ways, he is a man ahead of his time.

And I think the end part of what you said is really important. Anytime any of us are speaking in a public facing manner, we tend to be fighting the battles of the present and the past. And so I think there is a component of him that's not, I would say particularly celebrated or understood that is very forward-looking, I would say. And the part of him that we know more about, is very much of the present or the past.

So I think there's sort of this dichotomous view, and when I said, you know, the cult or the myth of Thomas Paine, I am talking about exactly what you talked about. But I do think in fairness to Tom Paine, there is a very much forward-looking part of him, working with those radical groups. And unfortunately, as you think, we're talking about public history, that's not the kind of thing that is really as enticing and sexy and exciting for people to grapple onto.

And so we get this myth of Thomas Paine that's easy to put on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt, and that's the big picture. And so I agree that we do need a much richer picture of who this man was, and the people that he was working with before, during, and after the part of him that we knew of.

And that's when I said I give him so much credit for what he did after the revolution, because that's the unheralded part, I think, of who he is. And what he did prior to the revolution, It's sort of, he's become this mythical figure that we think about as sort of having this—and he did—have a huge role in moving us towards independence. But that's not the be all and end all. And I don't think it's the most interesting or important aspect of who he was or should be to us today.

I would just add on the public history component, and it's part and parcel, I think of this conversation. History is so much under fire and underfunded around the world, and particularly in the United States today, that the work that Leanne is doing, all of the work of the people here is so incredibly important. And without funding, we can't do it. And so I think to think about how it is under fire, and that I think helps create this problem that at least I'm talking about.

Because on the one hand, to attract people and attract funding, you've got to say things that attract them. And on the other hand, the parts of him that I think are really important don't get as much support. But how can you focus on that when it's not going to get you the funding you need to do the work.

So however we get out of that morass, I have no great ideas, but I think it's incredibly important conversation to have. So I think your point is very well taken, but I think, again, I always feel like we own some of that.

You know, I do a lot of work in the media and producers will often tell you, yeah, I would put that stuff on the air, except there's problem we all need jobs and nobody is going to watch it. And it's the same thing for us in the academy in some ways, especially those of us at liberal

arts institutions in the US without huge endowments, that we are very much at the mercy of this funding. So I think that's another part to grapple with. And I think Thomas Paine's legacy is a good example of that.

[01:15:22] Joseph Adelman: Nicole and then Leanne, we'll give you the final.

[01:15:25] Nicole Mahoney: Thanks. I just want to jump in quickly and respond to Tom. I'm not sure that I quite agree with you, that Paine is in some sense backward-looking, right? That I think his attacks on old established institutions, monarchy, hereditary power, is in a sense that he's looking at those older institutions.

But I think that his ideas and his critiques are all coming from this really rich, transatlantic radical tradition that Danielle brought up earlier too. And he's really shaped by the Enlightenment thought, all of these circulation of ideas that are coming back and forth across the Atlantic. And he takes those ideas that were being debated here at the White Heart in Lewes, right?

And he's taking the ideas that are being debated in coffee houses and clubs and pamphlets, and he just reworks those ideas and I think rearranges them and puts them in an American colonial context, right. He's reworking them for an American colonial conditions. So I think that it's a style that feels powerfully American and immediately American. But it's also deeply embedded in this like larger transatlantic radical tradition that I don't think is quite as backwards facing as you might have suggested

[01:16:31] Joseph Adelman: We are at about time. Leanne, can I give you the final word,

Nicole Mahoney: one sentence, Leanne? Um,

[01:16:38] Leanne O'Boyle: About the forward looking element, because most British audiences—I maybe should have started with this—most people in over here have no idea who he is. So probably should say that. Lewes, his name is everywhere. So people coming in are largely a self-selecting audience, but they don't know much about him. And so when you start to talk about these other elements and *Agrarian Justice* and some of the things he said, you see them going the phrase you used a man ahead of his time.

And I mean, I kind of joke, it's definitely too liberally used as a phrase, but it kind of is relevant here. And then when you start talking about the separation with Elizabeth and the separation document and all of these clauses are about protecting her. And I'm not sure how standard all of those are, but he promises not to touch any of her money, which is legally his because he owns everything. Is that my choice of like a progressive Thomas Paine? Because he's going, do you know what? You have it all. She gives him forty-one quid year salary; off he goes.

It's that sort of the surprising element. They can hang it off of the American Revolution, they get that. But then when all these other elements come in, that's when everyone gets excited and feel like that's something they can relate to. "And my gosh, I never knew anything about this and it's right here."

So yeah, I would sort of agree with what both of you have said and that those elements are sort of what really helped to bring him to life and excite people today. In terms of the visitors who are coming here to Bull House. For me again, as I've kept saying, that's sort of what it's all about, it's him as a starting point. But then what do we want people to leave feeling? What do I want them then maybe to go on and, and hopefully do something with it so that history is alive and this isn't just a relic building; that it's alive with his ideas and the sense of him. But that has to mean something different today.

[01:18:11] Joseph Adelman: Thank you. Can we thank our panel?

Audience: *Clapping*

[01:18:20] Liz Covart: What a conversation. One of the things that struck me most about this discussion is the idea that *Common Sense* was never really about rejecting a king. It was really about imagining what came after you rejected a king. As Jeanne Zaino put it, the real challenge of democracy is the day two problem, not the thrill of revolution, but the long unglamorous work of building and sustaining systems of self-governance.

It's an idea that feels especially urgent 250 years later because the questions that Thomas Paine raised about the relationship between citizens, their government, and each other, remain very much alive in our own time.

I was also struck by how the panel made sure that we understand Thomas Paine as a full human being, not just as an icon of American liberty. But as a man who lived in Lewes, loved a woman named Elizabeth Ollive, ran a tobacco shop to make ends meet, and participated in local civic life long before he ever set foot in Philadelphia.

Now, he also really appreciated Nicole Mahoney's reminder that women were present in and shaped the world of *Common Sense*, even when Thomas Paine's own language excluded them. This is exactly the kind of deeper, more honest engagement with history that helps us really see the past more clearly. And perhaps most fitting of all this conversation took place inside the Bull House, a fifteenth century building that is not some museum frozen in time, but that serves as an active center for democratic engagement in civic life.

Now, as I mentioned at the start of this episode, this was our very first live recording, our very first attempt to take you inside a history conference where historians gather to share and work out ideas and arguments. So what do you think of the format? Is this something that you'd really like to hear more of? Please let me know, liz@benfranklinsworld.com.

Okay, you can find more information about our guests, the Institute for Thomas Paine, studies at Iona University, and the Thomas Paine: Legacy at Bull House Organization, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/435.

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