

THOMAS PAINE PARK

Foley Square

This park in the heart of New York City's civic center is named for patriot, author, humanitarian and political visionary Thomas Paine (1737-1809). Paine was an Englishman from Thetford in County Norfolk. He spent his early years committed to justice in Britain, speaking out for social equity and lobbying for higher wages. In 1774, at the urging of Benjamin Franklin, then colonial ambassador to Britain, Paine immigrated to Philadelphia. He continued to fight for justice on this side of the ocean, becoming a close associate of Franklin, the other founding fathers, and the Marquis de Lafayette. His writings profoundly influenced the course of the American Revolution and the creation of the United States government.

Paine published the unsigned pamphlet *Common Sense* on January 10, 1776. It advocated rising up in arms against Britain, and many of its ideas are echoed in the Declaration of Independence. His description of representative government became the basis for modern democracy anchored by a written constitution. Paine's sixteen *American Crisis* essays boosted morale during the darkest days of the Revolutionary War. The *American Crisis I* opens with these immortal lines: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country, but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." For his service to the fledgling nation, New York State later gave Paine a 277-acre farm in New Rochelle, New York.

After the Revolution in America, he became a major force in the one brewing in France. Part One of his *Rights of Man* (1791) defended the French rebels against the unfair attack by British statesman Edmund Burke. Part Two (1792) outlined a government "social safety net" for all citizens, to be financed by a tax on wealth. In 1792 he moved to France, where he was elected to the French National Convention and served on the committee to compose a constitution. He was an outspoken opponent of the execution of the King, and the death penalty in general. He was himself a victim of the Reign of Terror, serving an 11-month imprisonment that severely compromised his health.

Many of Paine's ideas were strikingly far sighted. He advocated for equal rights for all, for the abolition of slavery, defended freedom of thought and expression, and proposed an association of nations to avert the spread of conflicts. He was also a Deist who founded his own society of Theophilanthropy.

In 1802, Paine returned to America, where he was the guest of President Jefferson, to whom he recommended the Louisiana Purchase. Paine tried to settle down on his farm, but his declining health led him to move to Manhattan in 1804. He died in Greenwich Village on June 8, 1809. His remains were buried on his New Rochelle farm. It was not until several years after his death that dedicated friends and biographers began to remind the public of Paine's contributions to American freedom and democracy.

During Paine's time in New York, the land that is now Thomas Paine Park was a part of a freshwater swamp surrounded, ironically, by three former British prisons for revolutionaries. One of them was The Bridewell, the infamous detention center where many inmates died from wind and cold exposure while awaiting sentencing. After the war, the area went through more hard times. In the 19th century it was part of one of the most notorious slums in the country, Five Points, a community of predominantly Irish immigrants. After calls for reform, the City acquired and condemned most of the unsafe buildings here between 1887 and 1894.

The City acquired this site, located between Pearl, Worth, and Centre streets within what is now called Foley Square, on August 5, 1913, and transferred title to Parks on March 19, 1930. Before this acquisition, it was known simply as the "Courthouse Plot" because of its proximity to several State and Federal court buildings. In 1977, through the initiative of City Council President Paul O'Dwyer, the Council renamed the parcel at New York's modern center of law and justice Thomas Paine Park. It is the only site in the city named for the patriot. In 2000 \$12 million was allocated to eliminate several adjacent streets and unite the parcels that make up Foley Square. Following this renovation, Thomas Paine Park was officially integrated into Foley Square and rededicated.

"My country is the world, and my religion is to do good."
Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* Part Two (1792)

City of New York
Parks & Recreation



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