

# "FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS PAINE" THINKING ABOUT THE SIGHTS AND THE PEOPLE ON THE TOUR

by Martha Spiegelman

"The sublime part of our Tour continues to envelop us with enthusiasm and a heightened sense of knowledge and connection to those working to publicize Thomas Paine." So states Maurice Bisheff, president of Thomas Paine Friends, in his expression of wonder and gratitude.

Many individuals and groups took part in the week-long Thomas Paine Tour, October 5 to 11, 2014. We had the benefit of meeting, at every stop, generous, friendly hosts who also feel close to Thomas Paine. As the Tour was being developed we were not entirely sure whether we would meet a host at each and every location, but, happily, we were never without an excellent guide. We managed somehow to stay just about on schedule as we journeyed, in this order, to Philadelphia, Bordentown NJ, Morristown NJ, Fort Lee NJ, New Rochelle NY, New York City, and three NJ state parks as well—all in seven days. And, marvelously, the weather cooperated.

Great credit is due to Maurice Bisheff, who, last spring, originated the idea of a Thomas Paine Tour. A committee then fashioned a workable plan. Jennifer Bisheff deserves applause for her tireless work of taping hours and hours of Tour highlights. She is editing the tapes into a DVD version, probably under two hours, that will be available to members.

With the DVD to come, and a picture being worth a thousand words, here I will do just a little narrative of the wheres and whos and an occasional sense of awe.

Ed Dodson and Margaret Downey were excellent guides through parts of historical Philadelphia on Sunday, Oct. 5. Ed Dodson provided a valuable text with pictures, which makes a good self-guided tour. Citing just a few of the places we stopped: Signers Garden; Second Bank of the United States, now the Charles Willson Peale Portrait Museum; City Tavern; Franklin Court, Benjamin Franklin's home; United States Postal Service Museum; Elfreth's Alley, the oldest continuously occupied residential street in the city; Dock Street; the *Common Sense* marker; the American Philosophical Society.

There was time after the planned tour to continue to other stops; some of us went to Independence Hall and some went to the Peale Portrait Gallery. (The Paine portrait was not on display due to repairs to parts of the building and the necessity to put a number of portraits in storage. However, the rangers brought out replicas and books relating to the Paine portrait. It would not be the first time that a ranger or other host went to extra lengths to give us special attentions.)

On Monday, the group had the memorable and very fortunate opportunity to have a special session at the American Philosophical Society. We are grateful to Alaine Lowell of the Thomas Paine Society of Pasadena CA for making the arrangement with Ronald Gordon, Library Director, at the APS. We met in a large, comfortable room where many documents were laid out for our perusal, and we continued with a seminar session led by Maurice Bisheff and Ed Dodson. Mr. Gordon also gave us the rare view of the Gimbel Paine collection stacks, which occupy about half a floor of ceiling-to-floor shelving. The capstone was seeing the Paine bust located in the Director's office. No one seems to know who the sculptor was. Unfortunately, because it is owned by the U.S. Parks Department and not by the APS, it cannot be moved into the public area due to rather obscure (to us) regulations. Visitors to APS will just have to disturb the Director in order to see it.

Tuesday began the two-day trek across New Jersey, with stops in three cities and three state parks. First, Bordentown City, starting at the Paine statue by Lawrence Holofcener, where we were met by Deb Cramer and Patti DeSantis, two members of the Historical Society. They provided a splendid tour of this city where Paine owned a home—which still exists but not really visible now because the original structure has been built upon over and over. The city is replete with fascinating historical structures. One splendid structure in Bordentown is the Historical Society building, more than 200 years old and in fine condition. The president of the local Thomas Paine Society, Doug Palmieri, could not be present as he was out of town on a book-buying mission for his shop of antique books.

Only a few of us were able to make the trip to Washington Crossing State Park at Titusville NJ. It was worth the extra time and miles. The ranger explained that the park museum is dedicated principally to the crossing and re-crossing of the Delaware River in December 1776, and the ensuing patriots' victories at Trenton and Princeton. It is at the crossing that General Washington had *The American Crisis* read to his troops. During the New Jersey movements by Washington's forces through Fort Lee, Morristown and across the Delaware River, Paine was with them and was writing this stirring paper.

Next was Morristown where James Lewis, Director of the Historical and Genealogy Center, had laid out a varied set of papers relating to Paine. Most special was the full-page newspaper account describing the large parade and the dedication in 1955 of the monumental Paine statue, sculpted by Georg Lober. Funds for the statue came from the staunch Paineite and freethinker, Joseph Lewis, who, of course, was present at the installation. James Lewis (no relation to Joseph) gave each of us a copy of the page. Also greeting us there was Kevin Coughlin, editor and writer of the online newspaper, *MorristownGreen.com*. We have him to thank for getting us in touch with our Morristown hosts. He also wrote several articles about Paine, before and after the Paine Tour, in his online newspaper. Then Mr. Lewis and Mr. Coughlin took us to the Paine statue, which is indeed monumental, about 14 feet high and placed on a pedestal of equal height. It is awe-inspiring to walk around it, to feel so small compared to it, and to read the memorable inscriptions on the pedestal.

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On the following morning, Wednesday, we met with Rich Rosenthal, Director of the Revolutionary Round Table, at the historic Morristown Green. He was a thorough guide, pointing out many important sites and regaling us with information as well as humor. This city is often called the City of America's Revolution--it is where Washington's troops made an encampment during winter of 1779-80. Mr. Rosenthal took us to the nearby museum that was the mansion that served as Washington's headquarters. The troops, however, were not housed in mansions. They constructed and lived in small wood huts outside town in a place called Jockey Hollow, which we visited later on. Mr. Rosenthal took several of us on a tour in his auto, a marvelous favor that we never expected. He showed us many of the locations that we would not have seen in any walking tour. We ended at Jockey Hollow State Park, where rangers awaited to acquaint us with that brutal winter, said by the people of that time to be the coldest and snowiest in memory.

Bidding adieu to Morristown, we headed to Fort Lee NJ, on the Hudson River and in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge. We had a little time at the Fort Lee Historic Park and were pleased to note that Paine was allotted a good portion of museum space, which was true also at the other parks we had already visited. Definitely the highlight in Fort Lee was our meeting with Tom Meyers at the Fort Lee Historic Museum, a small bluestone building that houses a large quantity of memorabilia about film-making in this city and the film and stage stars (especially the Barrymore family) of the early film industry. There is a display case for Paine, of course. In the park around the Museum is a stunning statue of the American patriot. It is very large and mounted on a high pedestal. Several of the inscriptions are quotes from Paine's writings. In this park, the Fort Lee Common Sense Society and the city's Cultural and Heritage Commission will install the Thomas Paine statue, sculpted by David Frech. The dedication is slated for November 2015. TPF plans to be present. Tom Meyers has also agreed to request his state legislators to introduce a permanent annual Thomas Paine Day every January 29th. Meyers is an energetic, well-informed person who is the spark-plug for the statue project and for the Paine birthday celebrations every year, not to mention his other work in history, genealogy, and local archeology.

Thursday morning found us at New Rochelle NY, hosted by John Wright, Curator at Thomas Paine Cottage, which is owned by the Huguenot and Historical Society of New Rochelle. There is one room containing Paine artifacts, plus a nearly life-size wax figure of a seated Paine. We proceeded to the Paine Monument, now in the custody of the city. Nearby is the gravesite marker, although Paine's remains were illegally removed in 1819. All of these structures are at the western edge of what had been Paine's farm of 277 acres given to him by New York State in gratitude and esteem for his services during the Revolution. Gary Berton, of the Thomas Paine Institute at Iona College and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, escorted the group to the Thomas Paine building, owned by TPNHA, where we viewed some articles displayed inside, most notably an oil portrait of Paine. Following these moments close to Paine, we moved to an auditorium at Iona College where a large audience of students awaited. The paper written by Frances Chiu of TPF was read by an Iona faculty member and it was warmly received (Frances Chiu could not be present). Later, in the library, we viewed several items from the Paine collection that is now in the care of Iona College (formerly was held by TPNHA).

On Friday afternoon, Mariam Touba, TPF member and research librarian at the New-York Historical Society, conducted a walking tour, Thomas Paine's Greenwich Village. There are many reminiscences of Paine throughout the area where he lived his last few years. Ms. Touba distributed several pieces that she had made: an account of the nearby Jefferson Market Library and a map of the area as it was around the time of Paine. She enlivened the tour with remembrances by Paine's contemporaries which she has read. We ended at Marie's Crisis Café on Grove Street, which was built in the 1840s or '50s close to the site where Paine died. Our host there was Michael Vecchio, and he also had some Paine stories, but said they are "tradition" not documented. Upstairs in the Café is a remarkable art work, a wooden bas relief of three figures identified as Danton, Paine, Robespierre, with several phrases in French inscribed on it as well. No one has ever been able to say, so far, who made the sculpture or why or how it came to be at this Café—"audacite, encore audacite, toujours audacite". Also, behind the bar on the ground floor there is a glass engraving of marching figures in the French Revolution; again "tradition" says that the one carrying paper and pen, rather than weapons, is Paine. However, there is no information about the creator of this work or why it is here either. Our tour came to its end with intriguing questions and theories.

The Saturday walking tour, also led by Mariam Touba, went farther downtown, to the "old New York" of the Revolution. I was unable to attend this walking tour, but I am sure that Fraunces Tavern, where Washington bid farewell to his troops after the war, and Thomas Paine Park, across from the courts, were included.

The Paine Tour was an enlightening, inspiring, enjoyable experience, and was only a taste of "In the Footsteps of Thomas Paine." I believe that some of us will try to return to some of these locations to learn more about Paine's times.

TPF members who were present at one or more of the Paine Tour sites: Jennifer Bisheff, Maurice Bisheff, Margret Brady, Martin Brod, Frances Chiu (her paper), Deb Dodson, Edward Dodson, Victor Madeson, Christiane Munkholm, Richard Robyn, John Shrawder, Irwin Spiegelman, Martha Spiegelman, Mariam Touba. Others: Kevin Coughlin, Margaret Downey, Anna, Patrick, and several whose names we regret that we forgot to write down. We are indebted to the generous, attentive hosts, named above, and to the several un-named rangers.