



The letter that changed the world
By Lady Reid

In September 1774, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter of introduction for Thomas Paine to take with him to America, where he hoped to start a new life. Born in Thetford in Norfolk, England, Paine had had a very chequered career up to that point. He was a Quaker by birth, became a Methodist preacher, had two wives, been fired twice as an excise officer, and also had a spell as a crewman on a privateer. He arrived in London in August 1757 just a week or two after Franklin began his long residence in Craven Street. From that year, their paths were to cross until Franklin's death.

Franklin's letter was somewhat cautious, assessing Paine as though he did not know him then very well, and recommending him for work as a clerk, tutor or assistance surveyor. It was this letter that rescued a weakened Paine from being left to die on a typhus-infested ship on arrival in the New World. Instead he was brought onshore and nursed to recovery.

When Paine wrote his passionate pamphlet "Plain Truth" in late 1775, he showed it to Franklin for comment. It burst on the American bookstalls as "Common Sense" and was briefly thought to have been written by Franklin. It was instrumental in stirring up colonial courage to declare independence from the Crown in July 1776. Paine's next and equally popular work, "The American Crisis," was used to bolster morale in the American troops when defeat and distress were sapping their effectiveness.

When Franklin went to Paris, Paine found his one 'proper' job in America, as Secretary to the Committee of Foreign Affairs, which involved drafting letters to Franklin, thus giving him access to confidential papers. The post led to an exchange of personal letters with Franklin in which he espoused a new project, an account of the "Revolution in America". Paine managed to accompany Colonial statesman Henry Laurens to France, quite unofficially, and loitered in Passy when peace negotiations got underway. His open letter to Lord Sherborne condemning the British Government at such a sensitive moment, irritated Franklin and his colleagues.

Undaunted, Paine returned to America and began years of obsession with bridge building. He conceived single span wooden and wrought iron bridges over various American rivers, and sent his models to Franklin in 1786 for comment. It proved a catalyst for renewed friendship, and Paine would often arrive for dinner and scientific discussion over too much rum. Though Franklin was over eighty years old by this time, he wrote a second letter of introduction for Paine to contacts in France – where he journeyed in 1787 into the maelstrom of the French Revolution. Paine

ended up both as a member of the French National Convention and an inmate of the Luxembourg Prison, spared only by claiming he was an American citizen. A new pamphlet, "The Rights of Man" had already inspired thousand of revolutionary citoyens, and though Paine died in America a near Pauper, exhausting his remaining friends, he had written three best selling books of the 18th century. Franklin must have shaken his head at the impetuous and unpredictable lifestyle of his protégé, but nothing Franklin wrote was able to out influence Paine's revolutionary pamphlets – except perhaps, his two letters of introduction.