This Day in History… January 10, 1776

Paine's *Common Sense* Published

On January 10, 1776, a short pamphlet quietly appeared in Philadelphia—and helped change the course of history. Published anonymously and written in clear, forceful language, *Common Sense* urged American colonists to do something many still feared to say aloud: break completely from Great Britain. Within weeks, its ideas were being read aloud in taverns, debated in meeting halls, and discussed around kitchen tables, helping turn the dream of independence into a shared conviction.

From the Prominent Americans Series

The author of *Common Sense* was Thomas Paine, an Englishman born on February 9, 1737, in Thetford, Norfolk, England. Paine's early life was marked by hardship and frequent career changes. Over the years, he worked as a stay-maker crafting rope supports for sailing ships, served as a customs and excise officer, ran a small tobacco shop, and worked as a schoolteacher. None of these jobs brought him lasting success, but they gave him firsthand experience with economic struggle and social inequality—ideas that would later shape his writing.

In 1774, Paine traveled to London, where a chance meeting changed his life. A fellow excise officer introduced him to Benjamin Franklin, who quickly recognized Paine's intelligence and sharp writing skills. Franklin encouraged him to move to British North America and provided a letter of recommendation. Paine followed that advice and arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774, just as tensions between the colonies and Britain were rapidly increasing.

Paine later described his first impressions of colonial society, noting that many Americans were still deeply loyal to Britain. He observed that speaking openly against the crown was considered almost treasonous and that most colonists hoped for reconciliation rather than separation. Although people recognized their grievances, they lacked the anger and urgency needed to push for independence. Paine saw this hesitation as dangerous and believed bold ideas were necessary to awaken the public.

1868 Franklin "E" Grill based on a sculpture by Jean Antoine Houdon

In early 1775, Paine became editor of the Pennsylvania Magazine, where he wrote essays on politics, science, and social reform. Later that year, he began working on what would become *Common Sense*, originally titled Plain Truth. At first, Paine planned to publish his arguments as a series of newspaper letters, but the project quickly grew larger and more ambitious. Unsure how to proceed, he sought advice from Dr. Benjamin Rush, a respected physician and patriot. Rush encouraged Paine to publish the work as a pamphlet and introduced him to printer Robert Bell, who agreed to take the risk.

Bell published *Common Sense* on January 10, 1776, and the response was immediate and overwhelming. Unlike many political writings of the time, the pamphlet avoided Latin phrases and complex legal arguments. Instead, Paine used plain language and vivid comparisons that ordinary people could understand. He challenged the idea of monarchy, criticized hereditary rule, and argued that a continent should not be ruled by a distant island. Most importantly, he framed independence not just as a political choice, but as a moral necessity.

The pamphlet spread rapidly throughout the colonies. General George Washington ordered it read aloud to soldiers in Boston, believing it strengthened morale and clarified the purpose of the fight. In towns and cities, copies were shared, borrowed, and read aloud in public spaces. Many colonists who had been undecided were persuaded by Paine's arguments. John Adams later wrote that "without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain."

Issued to salute the roles of printers and pamphleteers who produced the words to unite patriots, keep their courage high, and urge Americans to fight for freedom.

Disagreements soon arose between Paine and Bell over new editions and profits. Bell published additional printings without Paine's revisions, while Paine arranged for expanded editions with other printers. Despite these conflicts, the pamphlet's reach was astonishing. Estimates suggest between 100,000 and 500,000 copies were sold in the first year. With a colonial population of about 2.5 million, *Common Sense* had the largest circulation of any American publication at the time and remains one of the best-selling works in US history.

Paine did not stop with *Common Sense*. He served briefly as a soldier in 1776 and later became secretary to the Congressional Committee of Foreign Affairs. His commitment to liberty took him back to Europe, where he supported reform movements in England and played an active role in the French Revolution. These activities led to charges of treason in Britain and nearly cost him his life in France, where he spent ten months in prison.

The highest denominated stamp issued during the Civil War.

Thomas Paine returned to the United States in 1802 but lived his final years in relative obscurity. He died in New Rochelle, New York, in 1809. Though his later life was troubled, his legacy remains secure. With *Common Sense*, Paine gave ordinary Americans the words—and the courage—to imagine a new nation, helping turn revolutionary ideas into revolutionary action.

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