

Statement of Congressman Jamie Raskin
Meeting to Review H.R. 6720
National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission
July 27, 2022

“The time hath found us.” – Thomas Paine

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission, for inviting me to testify today on H.R. 6720, a bill to authorize the Thomas Paine Memorial Association to establish a commemorative work in the District of Columbia and its environs, and for other purposes.

The Commission serves an important role in evaluating proposals for new commemorative works on federal land in our nation’s capital, and I appreciate your consideration of H.R. 6720. This centuries-overdue legislation would authorize the Thomas Paine Memorial Association to establish a memorial on federal land in or around Washington, D.C. to honor Thomas Paine, America’s greatest founding democracy patriot. The memorial’s costs will be covered by private funds, 100% of which has already been raised or pledged.

Tom Paine was undoubtedly a figure of lasting significance in our nation’s history. He served an essential role in the American Revolution, galvanizing the population with his beautiful writings and speeches. Just six months before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Paine published his passionate and electrifying pamphlet *Common Sense*, which delivered a rousing call for independence from Great Britain and laid the conceptual framework for our nation’s democratic public philosophy.

With its plain language and bracing democratic ideas, *Common Sense* became an instant sensation. It captured the imagination of the American people, particularly working people. Readings in public venues became a popular pastime throughout the colonies. It sold more than a half-million copies during the Revolution, equivalent to 62 million copies today. It was the most influential pamphlet of the American Revolution and remains one of the best-selling titles in our history.

Paine’s legacy extends beyond *Common Sense* to other great works, including *The Crisis*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*. While serving in the Continental Army, Paine wrote his first installment of *The Crisis*, which began, “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” (Paine was an early feminist).

George Washington was so inspired by Paine’s writings that he ordered them read out loud to his troops before they crossed the Delaware River, defeated British forces at Trenton, and regained momentum in the war effort. Paine’s sixteen installments of *The Crisis* circulated widely throughout the Revolution and continued to motivate soldiers and commanders alike.

Paine was a thinker far ahead of his time. He was a hero to Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and all small-d democrats. He called for democratic representation over monarchy, aristocracy or theocracy. He urged a litany of reforms, including a league of democratic nations, universal public education for men and women, relief for the poor, old-age pensions and civil rights for all, to help set our fledgling nation on a path towards becoming more compassionate, rational and enlightened. And unlike many other Founders, Paine steadfastly objected to slavery. He also made significant contributions to science and technology, helping to engineer an iron bridge and the steam engine.

Paine was a true luminary patriot of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. He inspired people in the colonies not only to overthrow the tyranny of faraway kings, but to launch a nation founded on principles of democratic self-governance, the rights of men and women, equality and human dignity, and reason and science. Despite Paine's catalytic role in founding our constitutional republic, he remains overlooked in our nation's capital due to the enemies his prolific pen earned him.

It is long past time to grant Paine the central place of respect and honor that he deserves in our nation's capital. I urge your support for this important legislation, which recognizes Paine's profound contributions and historical significance to our nation. This overdue memorial will be a powerful and unifying addition to the symbolic life of Washington, D.C. that the Commission strives to preserve. H.R. 6720 can be a unifying thing in a divided time. As Paine said, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." Thank you again for your time and consideration.