

Battle of Brooklyn Commemoration
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The Green-Wood Cemetery
Brooklyn, New York

Keynote Address
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Revolutions in Commemoration: How We Remember
the American Revolution, Past, Present, and Future

One week before Christmas 1776, patriot writer and war correspondent Thomas Paine packed his latest dispatch in a leather pouch and shoved it into his saddle bag and hit the road, bound towards his Philadelphia publisher from the Continental Army camp near Trenton, New Jersey. After helping to ignite public opinion in favor of American independence in his explosively popular pamphlet *Common Sense* in January 1776, Paine spent autumn and winter traveling with the Continental army, joining it at Fort Lee, New Jersey shortly after the battle we are commemorating today. Paine observed first-hand the aftermath of the Battles of Brooklyn, White Plains, and Washington Heights—the early nadir of the drive towards independence, when a military victory against the powerful British Empire seemed remote. Paine spent his days consulting with Continental officers, and his evenings circulating among the shivering and demoralized Continental troops, men fresh with memories of the sacrifices made here by soldiers like the “Maryland 400” at the Old Stone House.

The first lines of the late December dispatch were an expression of hope and determination in a time of despair, composed by campfire on a drumhead: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service to his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and

woman.” Paine intended these words, the first sentences of what would become a thirteen-part series called the *American Crisis*, to offer reassurance to the flagging spirits of patriot men and women, soldiers and civilians alike, at the close of a year that began with the publication of *Common Sense*, peaked with the Declaration of Independence in July, a year drawing to a violently uncertain conclusion. But after the famous opening I just quoted—familiar to many of us today, and so much a part the national fabric that often twenty-first Americans know the first line even if they don’t know who wrote it, or its immediate context—Paine supplied readers with a brief history of the political and military events of 1776, spun to reinforce the righteousness of the American cause. In other words, one might say that Paine offered the very first commemoration of the “Spirit of ’76,” written from the tumult of an uncertain moment, confronting an unknowable future.

Commemoration of the American Revolution, and the crucial role of the Battle of Brooklyn in the early stages of the war, is what brings us together today in this beautiful, spiritual, and hallowed space. But what exactly does it mean to commemorate? Its meaning goes beyond celebration of past events and the heroic but fallible men and women that shaped them, even further than recognizing and respecting the past. While commemoration is the act of remembering and celebrating, it is much more than that—the practice of commemorating seminal events like the Battle of Brooklyn and the American War for Independence reveals how we collectively understand the present. History as commemoration is a lens through which we make sense of the often chaotic and contested modern America—but crucially, the practice of commemoration, in forms like today’s solemn but uplifting event, also reminds us that how we shape our past is simultaneously how we shape our future. And nowhere is this truer than how the American Revolution commemorations, in the past, present, and in the future.

Beginning with Thomas Paine, the most famous civilian apostle of the American Revolution, the act of declaring, fighting for, and securing independence meant different things to different people. Paine admitted as much in 1782—before the war formally concluded—in a work he initially intended to be the first full history of the American Revolution. But, “it is yet too soon to write the history of the Revolution,” Paine conceded, “and whoever attempts it... will unavoidably mistake characters and circumstances, and involve himself in error and difficulty. Things, like men, are seldom understood rightly at first sight.” But that didn’t stop subsequent generations of Americans from trying to craft their own story of the Revolution. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the first political parties in American history opposed each other precisely because they interpreted the nation the war created in different terms. The dynamics of partisanship in this period grappled with many of the same questions we continue to debate today—about the role of government in everyday life, about economic policy, about foreign relations, about citizenship and national belonging. The only difference? Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson didn’t battle it out on Twitter!

In the antebellum period, the decades before the Civil War, commemorating the American Revolution pivoted on the most important conflict in American history—slavery vs. freedom. Though they often disagreed, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass both interpreted the American Revolution the same way: if the Declaration of Independence stated that all men are created equal, that should apply to all men—regardless of their racial or ethnic background. Lincoln’s way of commemorating the founding generation was to emphasize what he believed was their core belief, that “truth, justice... and mercy might not be extinguished from the land.” Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who became a powerful and influential orator and journalist, thundered that the “Fourth of July is yours, not mine; you may rejoice, and I must

mourn,” until the abolition of slavery was accomplished. Douglass lived to see that day, though it came at the terrible cost of one million lives during the Civil War. Just as importantly, American women had their own thoughts on how to commemorate the Revolution. In 1848, at a convention at Seneca Falls, New York (with Douglass in attendance, I might add), women’s rights activists adapted the exact language of the Declaration to make a powerful argument: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Men and women like Lincoln, Douglass, and the Seneca Falls activists understood freedom and liberty as the central principles of the American Revolution—ideas fundamental to American national identity, even if there has never been a consensus about their precise application. Freedom and liberty—the inalienable rights on the minds of the Patriot soldiers who fought here two-hundred and forty-three years ago—have always been contested principles.

As the 19th century progressed and the 20th century loomed, the United States developed into the Western Hemisphere’s most powerful nation-state and Revolution commemorations sharpened in their focus on patriotism and America’s growing technological might. This was true of the 1876 centennial celebrations, in which more than ten million visitors attended the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and gazed in wonder at the modern technological marvels of the day: telephones and sewing machines. In the first half of the twentieth century, the nation underwent convulsive change—from the Progressive Era, when social reformers sought to refashion American identity in response to rapid industrialization and skyrocketing rates of immigration, through World War I, into the prosperity of the 1920s and then the depression of the 1930s, and finally the American-led Allied triumph in World War II. Commemorations of the American Revolution shifted in tandem, from emphasizing patriotism and technological

advancement, to viewing the Revolution as the first stage in the development of human history's most-powerful military and economic nation-state (a prediction, I might add, suggested by Paine in *Common Sense* all the way back in 1776). By the Civil Rights era, and following through the turn of the century, however, commemorations of the American Revolution began to suggest that the Revolution was not as glorious as suggested by previous generations. In the half-century since the apogee of the Civil Rights Era, both within the ranks of professional historians and in the popular imagination, it is fair to say that the American Revolution has become understood in more complicated terms. The ultimately successful War for Independence led to the founding of a powerful nation rooted in the uplifting principles of freedom and liberty—but did not create a truly egalitarian society, a utopia devoid of internal conflict. But more complex, complicated understandings of the American Revolution are a good thing! Rather than thinking about the American Revolution as a war fought by fake heroes like Mel Gibson in his truly ahistorical 2000 film *The Patriot*, we now conceive of the founding generation in the rhymes and cadences of *Hamilton*.

We can't know how future generations will commemorate the American Revolution, but we do have it in our power to make the interpretation anew again, to adapt a line from Thomas Paine. Revolutions in commemoration, as I suggested earlier, say far more about people living in the present than the historical actors of the past. I offer this idea on a positive note—how we remember the American founding moment, how it is celebrated, and *indeed who* is remembered, why, and for what, is within our power.