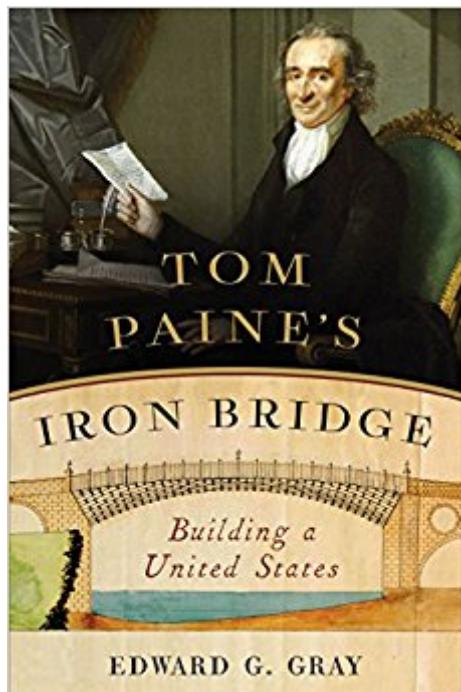


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# Tom Paine's Iron Bridge: Building A United States



## Synopsis

The little-known story of the architectural project that lay at the heart of Tom Paine's political blueprint for the United States. In a letter to his wife Abigail, John Adams judged the author of *Common Sense* as having "a better hand at pulling down than building." Adams's dismissive remark has helped shape the prevailing view of Tom Paine ever since. But, as Edward G. Gray shows in this fresh, illuminating work, Paine was a builder. He had a clear vision of success for his adopted country. It was embodied in an architectural project that he spent a decade planning: an iron bridge to span the Schuylkill River at Philadelphia. When Paine arrived in Philadelphia from England in 1774, the city was thriving as America's largest port. But the seasonal dangers of the rivers dividing the region were becoming an obstacle to the city's continued growth. Philadelphia needed a practical connection between the rich grain of Pennsylvania's backcountry farms and its port on the Delaware. The iron bridge was Paine's solution. The bridge was part of Paine's answer to the central political challenge of the new nation: how to sustain a republic as large and as geographically fragmented as the United States. The iron construction was Paine's brilliant response to the age-old challenge of bridge technology: how to build a structure strong enough to withstand the constant battering of water, ice, and wind. The convergence of political and technological design in Paine's plan was Enlightenment genius. And Paine drew other giants of the period as patrons: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and for a time his great ideological opponent, Edmund Burke. Paine's dream ultimately was a casualty of the vicious political crosscurrents of revolution and the American penchant for bridges of cheap, plentiful wood. But his innovative iron design became the model for bridge construction in Britain as it led the world into the industrial revolution.

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## **Customer Reviews**

Thomas Paine had great talents as a writer who could put into words the fortunes of his adopted country but he also had dire failings when it came to taking care of his own needs. A gifted but tragic figure. The book expresses all this in a very readable structure.

BY THE TITLE, THIS BOOK IS ALMOST AN ASIDE TO HISTORY. INSTEAD, IT OFFERS MANY OF THE KEYS TO THE EVENTS AND DRIVING FORCES OF AT THE TIME OF THE REVOLUTION. ON TOP OF THAT, IT IS DAMNED WELL WRITTEN. THANKS MR. GRAY

A different and unexpected view of Tom Paine. For all of his notoriety and the impact of his early pamphlets his later cause of building bridges made him an outcast and pariah leading to an ignominious end in poverty and illness.

A good short read. I discovered many things about T. Paine that I didn't know before reading this book. I bought the Kindle version. I didn't discover the photos and illustrations until the end of the book.

It was ok. Learned a lot about Paine I didn't know but book sort of droned on

must read book and wonderful shape

Great book!

Common Sense, of course, is the name of the 1776 pamphlet for which Thomas Paine is remembered. In what could be a testament to the big dream, Paine wrote in Common Sense that “we have it in our power to begin the world over again.” Although Paine had the desire, ironically, he lacked common sense in how he conducted himself. Which helps explain why his other big dream – an iron bridge that would span the Schuylkill River at Philadelphia – came to naught in his lifetime. He died destitute and despised. In Tom Paine’s Iron Bridge: Building a United States, Florida State University history professor Edward G. Gray attempts to rehabilitate a man who became known as something of a failure. “Like so many radical visionaries, Paine often seems more the man of ideas than of action, more the dreamer than the doer,” Gray writes. Certainly, Paine was better known for his radical politics, against which the tide of his time eventually turned, than for his architectural work. But Gray “came to see that his political thought and his architecture were of a piece.” Paine was committed to the idea of free societies, and free societies “would work only insofar as their citizens could communicate with one another.” Thus, his idea of a bridge, which would “transform the Pennsylvania countryside and, ultimately, the whole of the United States from a welter of natural obstacles and commercial interruptions into a unified empire of liberty,” was in its time as grand as Iridium. The eastern seaboard of the U.S., where the population was concentrated, was riven by streams, creeks, bays, and mighty rivers – which made commerce and communication incredibly difficult. And there wasn’t a perfect material for bridge construction. Stone was inflexible, and wood was breakable. But Paine realized that iron could be strong enough to withstand the assault of water, ice, and wind. Like putting satellites in the sky and maybe even like serving perfect hot dogs, building an iron bridge would take a near miracle of art, science, and execution. Paine’s bridge was composed of hundreds of cast-iron bars fastened together to form a series of five parallel arches.... The structure loomed above the ground like a whale, arched back situated between two wooden platforms, writes Gray, who also notes that “in order to build a practical single- arch bridge, Paine, who wasn’t an architect, had to overturn centuries of architectural wisdom.” Paine’s bridge design was counterintuitive, even revolutionary. Some of his peers got it. Paris’s Royal Academy declared in 1787

that Paine's concept was "a design of supreme genius" with "an astonishing lightness and elegance of form." And yet, although Paine's design became the inspiration for other iron bridges in England and Spain, it was never built in the United States. Why? Instead of making friends, Paine made enemies through his incendiary writing. He became an untouchable thanks to his support of the French Revolution. An ill-advised attack on George Washington didn't help his cause. "Unlike so many of his equally well-known contemporaries, he never seemed to grasp the fundamental social truth of his age, namely that to gain the good graces of the powerful, it was necessary to flatter their sense of propriety and social superiority," Gray writes. Eventually, his enemies made the situation such that "no serious promoter of public works dared acknowledge a debt to Paine." Gray writes that Paine "continued to believe that invention would triumph over politics and personal attack." Perhaps a sorry lesson of these highly readable books is that it rarely does. Dan Colussy was able to save Iridium in part because he was smart enough to find government officials who were on his side; a U.S. government contract was a critical linchpin in launching Iridium out of bankruptcy. But Paine, like the initial backers of Iridium, also got unlucky in the sense that there were readily available, if inferior, alternatives to his big dream. Iron may have been superior to wood, but Paine's country had a lot of the latter. In the U.S., "the abundance of old growth forests made the country no place for a builder of iron bridges," writes Gray. There are dreamers and doers. Sometimes, as in the case of Thomas Paine, dreamers can't cross the bridge to becoming doers. Sometimes dreamers, like the initial backers of Iridium, fail because they assume everyone else will see the value of their idea, and it takes a doer to come in and align the stars. And sometimes, on the rare occasion when the dreamer is also a doer and common sense prevails, you can have your hot dog and eat it too. At least for one generation.

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