

# *News from* **The Committee to Save the Thomas Paine Memorial Building**

**August 2020**



**“We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”**

**— Thomas Paine**

Early in 2020, a Committee of concerned citizens, in alliance with the Huguenot & New Rochelle Historical Association (HNRHA), formed to advance the legacy of Thomas Paine in New Rochelle and raise funds toward the purchase and preservation of the Thomas Paine Memorial Building on North Avenue. Co-chairs of the Committee are Geraldine Kaplan, a New Rochelle resident, and Suzanne Tanswell, Board member (HNRHA) & Chairperson of Museum Affairs, Thomas Paine Cottage Museum.

The Committee envisions that the Building, dating from 1925, will serve as the anchor structure for a world-class center for public education about Paine and the history of New Rochelle from the Huguenots to the present day. The Thomas Paine Cultural Center in New Rochelle will bring the attractive and expanded space offered by the Memorial Building together with the assets of the Thomas Paine Cottage Museum, which is owned and operated by the Huguenot and New Rochelle Historical Association (HNRHA).

## *On the Origin of Our Committee*

*By Geraldine Kaplan, Co-Chair*

The Committee to Save the Thomas Paine Memorial Building began last fall when my husband and I, who have lived in New Rochelle for 37 years, stopped by at the Memorial Building, which was closed to the public. We were told by the caretaker that it was likely soon to be sold to a private developer. We were shocked that a building, which we always considered central to New Rochelle's history and which we and our children in prior years had visited many times, could potentially be destroyed. *(Continued on page2)*

### **Accomplishments:**

- **The Thomas Paine Memorial Building designated a historic landmark** by the City of New Rochelle on April 21, 2020, with support from City Council member Sara Kaye, publicized in a Committee press release of May 12, 2020.
- **Successful advocacy with the City for initial steps toward restoration of the City-owned Thomas Paine Monument.** The City has invited restorers to submit proposals for an assessment of the current condition of the Monument.
- **Successful publicity in print and social media and a growing base of community support.** See the article by journalist David Proper in the *Journal News*, July 15, 2020: [\*“Common sense? Effort underway in New Rochelle to save Thomas Paine Memorial Building”\*](#)
- **Support from Damon Maher, County Legislator**, in his newsletter of July 21, 2020, stating: “...it seems like “Common Sense” to preserve his memory for future generations.”
- **A partnership with the New Rochelle Art Association, HNRHA & TPNHA** to mount an exhibit of local artists in the Memorial Building in September. (see flyer on page 4)
- **A partnership between the Institute of Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College & the HNRHA** for a lecture in September in conjunction with the Institute's annual conference on Thomas Paine.

## ***You can help!***

- Share this newsletter with your friends and acquaintances.
- Send your contact information to our email address in order to stay informed: [savepaineslegacy@gmail.com](mailto:savepaineslegacy@gmail.com).
- “Like” our Facebook page. [@committeetosavethethomaspainememorialbuilding](https://www.facebook.com/@committeetosavethethomaspainememorialbuilding)
- Send us suggestions about potential funding opportunities from foundations or other private donors who may have special interests in historic preservation, the American Revolution, and Paine’s legacy in New Rochelle.
- Become a member of the Huguenot and New Rochelle Historical Association and arrange an outdoor walking tour of the historical sites on North Avenue centered on the Thomas Paine Cottage Museum and the Memorial Building. [www.DiscoverNewRochelleHistory.org](http://www.DiscoverNewRochelleHistory.org)

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### ***On the Origin of Our Committee, By Geraldine Kaplan***

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As a member of the New Rochelle Preservation Coalition, I was asked shortly thereafter to testify before the New Rochelle Historical and Landmark Review Board (HLRB) in favor of landmarking Leland Castle at the College of New Rochelle. At the hearing, my husband, who was part of our group, also raised the issue of the imminent threat to the Thomas Paine Memorial Building. Subsequently, he raised it again during the open portion of the New Rochelle City Council meeting. No one on the City Council or the Mayor seemed to know that one of the City’s major landmarks was threatened. After that presentation, Councilwoman Sara Kaye (in whose district the Memorial Building is located) sponsored a resolution calling on the HLRB to study the question of the Paine Memorial Building and report back to the Council, and the City Historian prepared the landmark designation application.

At a hearing on February 12th before the HLRB, representatives of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, the owners of the Memorial Building opposed landmark status.

They argued they had reluctantly come to the conclusion that the best way to fulfill their mission of promoting Thomas Paine was to sell the building and use the proceeds for other Paine-related projects, such as preparing a definitive catalogue of Paine’s works. They stated that in the last fifteen years the City of New Rochelle and its various institutions had not shown very much interest in Thomas Paine or their activities, and that maintaining the building was a significant economic drain on their organization. My husband and I spoke in opposition to this view and urged the Board to support landmarking. Our argument was that the Building was a central New Rochelle landmark of priceless value, and that if there had in recent years been insufficient appreciation of Thomas Paine and the Memorial Building, that could and should be reversed. The Memorial Building has been an important part of New Rochelle for almost 100 years and the citizens of New Rochelle and its public institutions have an obligation to our children to protect the City’s history.

The Board voted unanimously to send the proposal to the City Council for landmark status for the Building. At a virtual City Council hearing on April 21, more than fifteen people submitted written testimony in favor of the proposal (thus belying the claim that no one in New Rochelle was interested in the Paine Memorial Building.) No one submitted any opposition. The proposal to have the Building receive landmark status was passed unanimously by the New Rochelle City Council, which will ensure that any owner must seek City approval for changes in the original exterior of the Building or for its demolition.

The landmark designation, while an important step, is just the beginning of the struggle to save the Thomas Paine Memorial Building. Money must be raised for its acquisition and renovation, so that it can be reopened and integrated with the Thomas Paine Cottage Museum and the other Paine-related sites in New Rochelle. Toward that end our Committee, which consists of an active group of core volunteers, and the HNRHA is reaching out to community leaders and potential donors.

### ***On the Origin of Our Committee, continued***

*by Suzanne Tanswell, co-chair*

Times are changing. Our lives are turning more and more into virtual online everything. In December 2018 when the Thomas Paine National Historical Association (TPNHA) informed Gary Bush, President of the Huguenot & New Rochelle Historical Association (HNRHA) and me of their plans to take

the TPNHA totally online, we understood. What did surprise us were their plans to sell the Thomas Paine Memorial Building, as they no longer felt that they needed a central meeting location.

Gary and I knew that while this plan made perfect sense for the TPNHA, sale of the Building would create a great loss to the New Rochelle community. The summer came and the preservation of Leland Castle took the forefront. Meetings were held about the Castle at the Thomas Paine Cottage, owned by the HNRHA, but never far from our thoughts was how to save the Memorial Building. When Leland Castle became landmarked by the City in November, it was clearly time to take action on the Paine Memorial Building. After several meetings with Jim and Geraldine Kaplan, the four of us knew we had to take this issue to the City and our community. The Committee to Save the Thomas Paine Memorial Building was formed.

New Rochelle has always been a City full of action-minded individuals. When word got out that support was needed for landmarking the Memorial Building, our numbers grew. Geraldine and Jim spoke passionately at the February HLRB meeting, also attended by members of the HNRHA, New Rochelle citizens and our City Historian, Barbara Davis who completed and filed the paperwork for landmark designation.

With landmark status now in place, we have moved on to our fundraising efforts. Seeing the tremendous value the Community places on the Building, the TPNHA, led by their President Gary Berton, has supported our efforts. They have agreed to allow for a limited extension of time to secure funds for the Building and have given permission to the HNRHA to hold educational events and programming.

This effort, which started with only four like-minded individuals, has grown into a dedicated group of core members and volunteers. But time is limited, and we need assistance to meet our goals. A project such as this “takes a village”.

We hope you will join us as the TPNHA, HNRHA and the New Rochelle Arts Association sponsors an Art Exhibit at the Memorial Building from September 2-12, 2-6 pm (except closed Labor Day).

<https://www.facebook.com/newrochelleart/>

Come see what we are trying to achieve for New Rochelle, as we strive towards the Thomas Paine Cultural Center in New Rochelle.

My deepest thanks to my co-chair, Geraldine Kaplan, and our hardworking and enthusiastic core members: Gary Bush, Judith Clark, Barbara Crane, Alan Farnham, Jim Kaplan, Peter Korn, Wendy Phelps, and Dinorah Pezzotti.



