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MEL EVANS / Associated Press

Mae Silver carries a likeness of Thomas Paine on Farnsworth Avenue in Bordentown. The town is promoting the essayist, who lived in Bordentown and whose writing helped inspire the Declaration of Independence, as part of an effort to increase tourism.

A celebration of the "Common Sense" author, age 269.

Ben who? In Bordentown, it's Paine

By Bonnie Pfister
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Officials in Bordentown want visitors to come wish Thomas Paine a happy birthday this weekend.

You are invited to stay for a cup of tea, check out the antique shops, and — if organizers of the annual event get their wish — put Bordentown on the map of tourist stops more commonly associated with Lambertville and New Hope farther north along the river.

The efforts are keying on the 269th birthday of Paine — best known as the author of *Common Sense* — who called Bordentown home for a time.

Mae Silver, president and founder of the Thomas Paine Society of Bordentown, has been working to bring attention to Paine, whose most famous writing served as a blueprint for the Declaration of Independence.

While many colonists were interested only in a tax revolt, the ever-rebellious Paine argued convincingly for a clean break from his native Britain.

"He was a very important person," said Silver, who Friday toted a life-size cardboard image of Paine down the main street of the town of 4,000.

"We're doing whatever we can to let people know more about him."

Noting the kind of cottage industry that historical tourism has become for Philadelphia, Silver is focusing on Paine's friendship with Benjamin Franklin, whose birth 300 years ago has prompted yearlong festivities across the Delaware.

Bordentown's events include a lecture and video presentation today at the Old Book Shop. Katie's Cafe will host a "Colonial Tea" in the afternoon. A ceremonial wreath-laying ceremony at a bronze statue of Paine is scheduled for Sunday.

The town's celebrations also will note some other important former residents, including Red Cross founder Clara Barton and exiled Napoleon sibling Joseph Bonaparte.

"We really rely on volunteers who have expertise and have been willing to share, some of them passionately and with hours and hours of time, to help the city do what it has to do," Mayor John Collom said.

Joseph Borden founded his "towne," originally settled by English Quakers in 1682, around 1724. It was home to Declaration of Independence signatory Francis Hopkinson

and Century magazine editor Richard Gilder. In 1816, Bonaparte, the former king of Naples and Spain, built an estate on 200 acres on the town's east side. In 1852, Barton established the first tax-funded public school in the Americas here.

Paine, who also lived on a New Rochelle, N.Y., farm, purchased a cottage and seven acres here, where he lived on and off from 1777 to 1803. In a 1789 letter, Paine noted: "I'd rather see my horse Button ... eating the grass of Bordentown, than see all the pomp and show of Europe."

For a century and a half, Bordentown grew as a center for schools, shops, and places of worship for the region's farmers. With Trenton's emergence as an industrial powerhouse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became home to families who worked in the capital city's factories or John Roebling's steel furnaces in nearby Florence.

But the loss of industrial jobs by the century's end led to an edgy few decades when Bordentown was known for dark, somewhat seedy bars on nearly every block.

Revival has come in part from young professionals look-

ing to live in mini-city settings, and with the money and desire to renovate historic homes, Collom said. Bordentown has long had a hardware store, pharmacy and grocery all reachable by foot. It's also home to about a dozen restaurants and cafes, as well as four shops specializing in used and rare books.

And since the opening two years ago of NJ Transit's River Line connecting Trenton to Camden, Collom and merchants say, the number of weekend visitors popping into Farnsworth Avenue's antique shops has increased dramatically.

For those still wedded to their cars, Bordentown sits near the intersection of Interstates 195 and 295 and the New Jersey Turnpike, as well as Routes 130 and 206.

Mike Scotto's family has run restaurants across South Jersey and in Philadelphia for a generation. After motoring past Bordentown for years, in 2001 he opened his own restaurant and bar, Jester's, in a building that has been a tavern since the early 1700s. He said his property's value has tripled since he's been here.

"It's like Rome, you know?" Scotto said. "All roads lead here."