

Sources and Interpretations

Paine Detected in Mississippi: Slavery, Print Culture, and the Threat of Deism in the Early Republic

By *Seth Perry*

Paine Detected is a critique of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* printed in Natchez, Mississippi Territory, in 1799. The pamphlet, which survives in one known copy, has never been the subject of close study by scholars. The text both indexes the challenges of creating a print public sphere on the frontier and illustrates the region's active participation in a self-consciously national discourse about the threat of deism to moral and civic order. Moreover, *Paine Detected* takes special interest in deism's challenge to Christian doctrines regarding providence, sin, and suffering, doctrines of local theological concern in the environment of southern slavery. The author—an active participant in the institution of chattel slavery in the territory—argues that the obvious presence of unjust human suffering in this world validates the notion of eternal suffering in the next. *Paine Detected*, that is, inverts the oft-recognized relationship between theological reasoning and slavery: rather than using a theological commitment to validate the existence of the slave system, the author uses the existence of the slave system to validate a theological commitment. The work offers purchase on typically occluded relationships between intellectual theology in the South, anti-deist polemic, and the material realities of enslavement.