

## *Report of the Council*

OCTOBER 19, 1994

TWO YEARS AGO TODAY, as I prepared to take up my post as AAS president, Marcus McCorison had me stand beside him here at the podium, and he presented me with two keys. One was the key to Antiquarian Hall, clearly symbolic of the dual responsibility which all of us who work at AAS accept—not only to unlock these remarkable collections for use and understanding, but also to secure them against destruction and loss. The second key was that to the tomb of Isaiah Thomas, a richly evocative symbol which Marcus handed to me with a clear word of caution: ‘The key to the spirit of Isaiah Thomas’s legacy is not to be found in his tomb,’ he told me, ‘but in your determination and will to sustain the still lively purposes of our foundation.’ As I have contemplated the challenges of leading this great library along the path from its glorious past into the future—with all our hopes and cautious fears attached thereto—the image of those two symbolic keys has remained a powerful one for me.

In thinking about how to paint for you today a word-picture of where we presently find ourselves along that continuing path, I was taken by the notion that I too might make effective symbolic use of a token or emblem, as Marcus had done. As I reviewed the year just past, however, taking stock of the many significant accomplishments of the staff, I grew concerned that no one symbol could convey all that I wanted to get across to you in these few short minutes that I have. It has been an immensely rewarding year, and a very busy one.

When I stood before you at last year’s annual meeting I announced the impending receipt of a \$750,000 grant from the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund. This three-year grant we had

sought and secured to strengthen our ongoing efforts toward two critical goals: first, to broaden public awareness, appreciation, and support of the Society, its collections and programs; and second, to enhance our ability to discharge the dual responsibility of making our collections accessible and useful to a growing audience, while preserving them for future generations. One year ago, I was all talk. Tonight there is much action to report—and a construction site just out the front door for you to negotiate. The process of making this beautiful Hall not only fully accessible to all readers and visitors, but equally welcoming to them has begun. Along the way, our ambitious plans for a new visitor orientation center (where the exhibition room now stands) and for improvements in the lobby, have expanded to include enhancements to make this reading room and the microform reading room more hospitable to today's library reader who comes with laptop computer in hand. These projects are being executed under the vigilant watch of Donald Strader, our indispensable head of buildings and grounds, and are scheduled for completion by winter's end.

Last year I also outlined our plans to broaden our definition of AAS fellow. Since the inception of the fellowship program in 1972, we have welcomed more than 350 individuals into the community of learning that thrives here under the 'generous dome' of AAS. Traditionally they have been academics, graduate students, and independent scholars. Wallace funding has afforded the opportunity for us to add new fellowships open to classroom teachers and librarians, as well as to writers of historical fiction, filmmakers, journalists, playwrights, and others whose work is meant for a general-public audience. This summer we welcomed our first four teacher-fellows to the library, and what a great addition they have been to the yeasty mix of ideas and research perspectives here. An art history teacher from suburban Boston, a history teacher from California who uses historical music to inform and enliven her teaching, a fourth-grade teacher from the Wolf Point Indian Reservation in Montana, and a history teacher from Vermont who wrote of his fellowship, '. . . everyone I dealt with, from the staff

of readers' services to the curators, provided me the highest degree of professional and collegial support. I was greeted each day with new ideas, new titles, and a genuine curiosity about how my work was proceeding. . . . In the past, I have observed a sense of dis-juncture between academics and secondary teachers at such professional development events. . . . I am immensely pleased to report that I never detected this type of attitude among any of the academic fellows [at AAS].'

And this interaction was similarly important to the academic fellows as well. As one graduate student pointed out to us: 'I think it was invaluable for all of the University-level fellows to hear from the secondary school teachers about what is happening in those very schools which are providing us with our students. University faculty like to complain about what they see as their students' lack of preparation. The forum that AAS provided for a dialogue across this boundary resulted not only in a degree of empathy for the . . . battles being waged in the secondary schools, but in shared ideas about the teaching of history and literature which inspired all involved.'

The mutually beneficial interaction between classroom teachers and academics was underscored in our Institute in Early American History, which took place in late September, with nineteen area teachers, seven college and university teachers, and several senior AAS staff members participating. The academics were all former Ph.D. students of Alden Vaughan's at Columbia University. The institute was their form of *festschrift* for their mentor. Besides this honorific intent, the institute succeeded in providing the school teachers with an account of the present state of interpretation about early American history, putting them in contact with AAS collections for their potential as source material, and addressing—collaboratively—pedagogical problems shared by teachers laboring on both sides of what Alden referred to as the 'sheepskin curtain.' These teachers are the multipliers of historical understanding. If we help them teach more effectively, we will—in effect—have taught a generation. For the continued success of our

fellowship, publication, and education programs, along with that of our growing roster of public programs, credit is due to my indefatigable colleague John Hench and his fine staff. And John now has in hand some eighty applications for the artists and writers fellowships, which will be announced in December, thus augmenting even further the rich mixture of fellows at AAS.

Throughout our planning and execution of these programs for new audiences, we have kept one thought paramount: AAS is a research library. Its strength is in its collections, and what we do best is to make these collections available to those best qualified to interpret and teach from them. To this end, the library staff has this year processed more than 2,200 new acquisitions, catalogued more than 8,000 items, and completed more than 2,000 conservation repairs and treatments. (I call your attention to the fascinating new-acquisitions exhibit that our ever-acquisitive librarian Nancy Burkett and the acquisitions department staff have prepared for us today, from which you can also gain some insight into the current state of computer cataloguing for research libraries.) Moreover, the staff has pulled more than 25,000 items from the stacks for the 1,200 readers we served, who made more than 4,000 visits to the library over the course of this year, to say nothing of the 1,700 who were helped by telephone, the 1,800 with whom we corresponded, and the growing (but as yet uncounted) number of researchers who are finding their way to AAS by cruising the Internet, the electronic information superhighway, into which AAS has this year been wired.

What symbol or icon do I choose, then, to serve as a milepost for this productive year just past? What marker in our institutional history to stand for at least some of what was accomplished in 1993-94 and to demonstrate the operating strategies at work at AAS in its 182nd year? The phenomenal success of the American Antiquarian Society as a great research institution, it seems to me, can be traced—year in and year out—to four institutional tenets:

1. Make no small plans. The responsibility we have for the acquisition and description of the entire printed archive of

- our nation through 1876 requires a view as deep as it is broad.
2. In pursuing a project, take the route by which accuracy and thoroughness lie, though it may rarely be the shortest course. Patience is not only a virtue but a necessity here.
  3. Be open to innovation, though wary of transient novelty; and,
  4. Above all, be at once both generous and entrepreneurial with the fruits of institutional labors.

The milestone I have chosen for your consideration is this CD-ROM that was produced this past year, after many years of planning, as a joint commercial publication with Readex, a division of NewsBank, Inc. The label reads: *Catalogue of Early American Imprints, 1640-1800*. By popping this little piece of plastic into a computer, one can have at one's fingertips detailed information about nearly 40,000 books, pamphlets, and broadsides printed in this country in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; one can search them not only by author, title, subject, but also by printer, publisher, or distributor, by place of publication, and by date. Access is also provided by language of the work, by the type of illustrations, and by genre headings that place works in particular categories such as almanacs, sermons, advertisements. Indexes can be searched individually or in powerful combinations, and the results of one's search can be sorted, printed, or downloaded into one's own computer files.

In many ways, this disk is the product of generations of labor at AAS—of those, beginning with Isaiah Thomas, who had the vision and dedication to collect every early American imprint they could locate, of those who saw to their care and preservation, and of those who researched the history of printing and book distribution in this country so that the evidence apparent in each volume could be correctly interpreted. It is based directly on the pioneering work of bibliographer Charles Evans, whose *American Bibliography* began to be published in 1903. The computer catalogue entries compressed into this nickel's worth of plastic were painstakingly constructed over the course of twenty years by AAS cataloguers, supported by an unprecedented string of grants from the National

Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education, which were matched by generous foundations and individuals. These catalogue entries serve—among other things—as an index to the microform reproductions of the books themselves, produced by AAS beginning in the 1950s in partnership with Readex and now available in college and university libraries around the world. (And to answer the question that may have jumped to your mind, we are also planning on how to get the texts of the books themselves from the microfiche into computer readable form.)

I mentioned earlier that it is an AAS goal to be both generous and entrepreneurial. While these computer records for pre-1801 imprints have been contributed to national and international databases of bibliographical records such as the ESTC and RLIN, they are also mounted—along with 130,000 other records of later imprints that we have produced to date—in our own on-line catalogue, which will soon be fully (and freely) searchable via the Internet. But Yankee ingenuity has led us to realize that there is considerable profit—or should I say, cost-recovery—to be had in our producing computer tapes for other libraries who hold the microform set of the Early American Imprints and want to add records for the individual publications on the set to their own on-line library catalogues. To date, we have filled more than forty such tape orders, at a cost that represents a cataloguing bargain to the purchasing library and a financial windfall to AAS.

But lest you get the impression that we are thinking of this CD-ROM as the culmination of all this microfilming, cataloguing, and computer technology, let me show you one more thing: this little pamphlet by one Elisha Andrews (born 1768, died 1840) entitled 'Remarks upon the writings of a committee of the Associate Reformed Synod' and printed by George Hough, for the author, in Concord, New Hampshire, 1794. Not recorded in Evans's bibliography, not included in the microform set, not catalogued on the CD-ROM, but acquired by AAS in January of this year. This happens several times a year here, and brings to us great

joy. For ours is an institution that sees in the antiquarian pursuits of collecting and preserving, the great privilege of discovering and sharing.

To all of you who make the ongoing work of the Society possible, through your dedicated labors, through your stewardship and generous support, through your advocacy, and through your enthusiasm, I offer hearty thanks.

Ellen S. Dunlap

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