

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 1998

BY ALL MEASURES, the 1997–98 year at the American Antiquarian Society has been one for the record books. In fact, I could easily devote the entire time I have this afternoon to reciting details of our many successes—adding further to Nancy Burkett’s account of acquisitions; measuring the prodigious output of our fine cataloguing and conservation staffs; recounting the number of visitors who have enjoyed our public programs and concerts; tallying up the participants in the extensive array of conferences, seminars, workshops, and colloquia we have hosted; *gratefully* summing up the many grants and gifts we have received; and calculating the royalties earned from publications—for records have been set in nearly every one of these categories.

You will be relieved, no doubt, to learn that I have thought better of that number-laden plan and have decided instead to focus on but one statistic: the number of readers served in person here in the Reading Room. Even though this number does not reflect all the queries our staff handled by phone, fax, e-mail, or even old-fashioned letter (yes, we do still get a few), it is generally indicative of the level of use that is being made by the public of the remarkable resources that are assembled and preserved at the Society. All of us who work in the back offices, in the stacks, and in the workrooms of the Society’s nether-reaches, do so with pride in knowing that our efforts *back there* contribute to the success that is demonstrated *up here* in the Reading Room. And that success is demonstrated many times each day as the Reference Services staff puts into the hands of a reader (in a matter of mere minutes after a reader has submitted a request, I might add) the

very item that is needed to solve a riddle, to bolster an essential argument, or to illuminate a hitherto overlooked point in the reader's research. This year, reader visits were at an all-time high. Despite the fact that we were closed to readers for two weeks in February to have the dome interior painted, reader visits in 1997-98 increased by 10 percent over the previous year's record-setting number and 20 percent over the count from two years ago. Perhaps those who had predicted that libraries would be relegated to the relict heap by have underestimated the power of networked information to *whet* one's appetite for knowledge of our past rather than to entirely *satisfy* or *supplant* it.

Who were these 1,181 people who made a total of 5,105 visits to the library during the past year, each calling for four or five volumes on average during each visit? They hailed from forty-four states and fifteen foreign countries. One in eight visits was made by a family-history researcher, a proportion that may increase in the future given that the Antiquarian Society has been designated by the compilers of the new guide, *Americas Best Genealogy Resource Centers*, as one of their 'top 10.' Of course, the library's collections are used most intensively by our fellows. AAS fellows include academics, graduate students, independent scholars, teachers, librarians, and professional artists and writers, who have been awarded research stipends by the Society, because *their* proposed research projects we judged best able to successfully mediate and multiply the results of study in the collections to a wider audience. Fellows work in the Reading Room *all day, every day* during their tenure, be it for a month or for the entire year. In 1997-98, as the AAS fellowship program began its second quarter-century, we named more than thirty new fellows, including our first Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence and our first Post-Dissertation Fellow—both funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—and our first Legacy Fellow, funded by contributions from former fellows themselves. The range of topics they have proposed to pursue is impressive in its breadth, but in saying that I am reminded of a point Phil Gura made at last year's

Twenty-fifth Anniversary Symposium when he cited a panoply of work 'which truly originates here, that could hardly be conceived, let alone written, anywhere else. . . . Our library quite simply pushes researchers into new areas of inquiry, ones they would not have considered without knowing what resources are in this building.' It is true testimony to the strength of Isaiah Thomas's founding vision of the library—and to the perspicacity of those who have shaped and strengthened the institution over the course of 187 years—that the Society is so well positioned to respond to and to shape even the most current trends in historical inquiry. For example, many of our recent fellows have engaged in what is now being called 'microhistory,' the intensive study of a hitherto obscure individual, a single community, or a notable event as a prism for understanding larger cultural and social patterns. And it is within the unmatched collections of the Society that these researchers are best able to reconstruct the rich contextual detail so necessary to make the narrative accounts of their subjects fully accurate and persuasive.

But it is my intention today to focus not on the fellows or even on the many other academics who come to Worcester without stipendiary support. Instead, I want to call attention to those who, for lack of a better term, I'll call 'the general public,' folks who come to the library out of strong *personal* interest in and passion for history and who make a vital connection with the past here under the generous dome. It has been the policy of the Society to make its resources available to all who can articulate a need for access and who possess the basic knowledge of their subject prerequisite for the study of primary materials. (Although there are occasional instances where the most appropriate help we can offer a visitor is a photocopied page from an encyclopedia and the directions to the public library, no visitor ever leaves the Reading Room unassisted or empty-handed.) The range of drop-in visitors that we do successfully serve, however, is so broad and diverse that it would be difficult for me to describe them collectively. Perhaps if I were to turn to 'microhistory,' you would be able to

extrapolate from the complete story of one reader the picture of the whole I mean to convey. But which one story would I tell?

It might be Jean Strauss, whom many of you here in Worcester came to know when her husband, Jon, was president of WPI. In 1994, Jean published *Birthright: The Guide to Search and Reunion for Adoptees, Birthparents, and Adoptive Parents* in which she used the story of her own search for her birth mother to effectively underscore the complex issues faced by all in adoptive relationships. As it turned out, Jean's birth mother too had been adopted. After their reunion, Jean helped her find her own birth mother, and in the process of restoring these links in the family chain, Jean made another discovery that transformed her own sense of identity. Listen as Jean explains:

When I used to live up the street, I would drive past the AAS and feel, There's nothing in there for me. I knew the library was filled with history, but because I did not know my own history I felt the AAS was a locked sanctum where I didn't belong. I stood on the outside peering in. In 1995, when I was helping my birthmother try to find her own birthmother, the search led to a first cousin who had some information on our family tree. It was just a thread, but it gave me some clues. By then I lived in Maryland, but I knew exactly where I needed to go. I drove the 400 miles to Worcester.

I'll always remember how helpful everyone was to me. Here I'd viewed the library from a distance, almost afraid to enter, and yet when I knocked on the door, it swung wide open. That first day in the AAS reading room was life-changing. I flipped through one book after another. And suddenly I came across the name of one of my ancestors, and next to her name was a little 'M' symbol. I knew what that meant: Mayflower passenger. I literally gasped out loud.

For nine years I lived up the street, not realizing how much New England and Worcester County were a part of my own past. At AAS I learned that my ancestors have been in America since 1620. My tenth generation grandfather, Richard Beers, was one of the first people to map Worcester in the 1660s. John Prescott, another great grand ancestor, founded Lancaster. Others helped found Sterling and Concord and Taunton and Rehoboth and Swansea and Dartmouth and Providence and, well it just goes on and on.

Within the walls of the library, a miracle happened which changed

me. My visits made me feel I belong to the family of humankind in a way I hadn't before. Any person I meet, I now realize, is a distant cousin. It's only a matter of generations. It's not if, but when. Every time I visit AAS there's something new that I learn. Far from being a locked door, AAS is the key.

Or I could choose Barbara Merritt, pastor of the First Unitarian Church in Worcester. She recently hosted a national conference on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the Cambridge Platform, a document that not only established the forms of church government in Massachusetts, but also provided the civil courts with a basis for enforcing doctrine. Thus the Cambridge Platform is recognized as a founding document in American government as well. What a special attraction Barbara and the other conference organizers were able to add to their program when they learned—through the efforts of a member of their committee, Susan Anderson of the Society's manuscript department—that we held not only the rare first edition of the Platform but many of the manuscript drafts which preceded that printing as well. Their 'pilgrimage' to see the documents was the highlight for many conference participants. As an aside, I would like to note that the chief author of the Cambridge Platform was Richard Mather, whose likeness is currently appearing on a U.S. postage stamp. The stamp is based on the 1670 printed portrait of Mather by John Foster, of which AAS has one of the few copies. The Mather portrait is featured as the earliest American portrait in the 'Four Centuries of American Art' stamp series. Its neighbor on the sheet of stamps is 'Mrs. Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary,' reproduced from the oil portrait in the Worcester Art Museum. Which brings me, in a rather contrived way, to another group of recent Reading Room visitors I'd like to tell you about.

On July 8, we were visited by a delegation of Massachusetts teachers—John Delorey of Shrewsbury, Lisa Sakata of Belmont, and Jennifer Staub of Milton. All were spending a month this summer, working in partnership with David Brigham, curator of American Art at the Worcester Art Museum, on an innovative

catalogue of fifty important early American paintings in the permanent collection, including 'the Freakes.' These three were charged with documenting the cultural world—images, music, sermons, and narratives—in which each of the paintings was created and in helping to structure curriculum units which would encourage students to explore the historical context of each of these visual masterpieces, to ask questions about who these people in the portraits were, about their station in society, about their likely attitudes concerning life, religion, and death, all to be presented—in time and with the help of a Luce foundation grant—in a web and CD product. Delorey, for instance, explored the extensive collection of period music at AAS and found a number of little-known eighteenth-century hymns and psalms which he is now having recorded for the Art Museum project. 'I was so impressed with the wealth of materials and the amazing resources that were made available to us at the museum and at the American Antiquarian Society,' he wrote in his report. 'And what a pleasure these teachers were to work with,' our staff would have readily replied.

But now I cannot pass up the opportunity to tell you about another recent incident at AAS that also has a connection to a postage stamp. Last year, the post office issued a stamp honoring Padre Felix Varela, social reformer, who is currently subject of an intense canonization campaign both in Cuba—where he was a voice for independence from Spain in the early 1800s—and in New York City—where as an exile in the 1820s and 1830s he ministered selflessly among poor Irish and other immigrants. Among his many accomplishments there was the establishment of the first Spanish language newspaper in America. When the Pope visited Cuba in September 1997, Castro is reported to have lobbied for the cause and took John Paul to pray at Varelas's tomb. And within a few months of that visit, an official commission was appointed by John Cardinal O'Connor, archbishop of New York, to prepare the dossier in support of his possible beatification. Of course, the locating and certifying of the relevant objects of ven-

eration are among the steps to be completed by the commission, and where did they turn to find the most readily accessible and complete run of Varelas's newspaper, *The Catholic Observer*? Why, to the newspaper files of the American Antiquarian Society, of course! Assistant Curator Dennis Laurie was instructed to write a statement of our holdings out on a piece of stationery, to affix our organizational seal to the document, and then—in what is surely a modern step in the beatification process—to 'Fed Ex' the certificate using the Archbishop's account number!

And, of course, I could go on and on with more examples of interesting projects, nice readers, and helpful, expert staff. But in the minutes I have left, it is on that staff, in particular, that I want to focus. Again, however, I am plagued by the same problem—so many to recognize that I am forced to choose but one or two to represent the whole. Luckily, in this my choice is easy. Among this entire remarkable staff there are two individuals who have done—and continue to do—more than all others to make this institution great. Were this a hierarchy, I would tell you how proud I am to call them my two chief lieutenants; instead, I must say how honored I am to be their colleague, and I would be especially honored if John Hench and Nancy Burkett would join me at this time. As they come forward, observe their youthful aspect, their animated demeanor, their eager countenances, and marvel with me to consider that, as far as I can determine, this is exactly how they have been each and every day since their arrival at the Society—within days of each other—twenty-five years ago. But believe me when I tell you what lies beneath these surface smiles: huge hearts and even bigger brains. When we honored them recently at the annual staff recognition party with the presentation of AAS chairs, they shared the spotlight with Georgia Barnhill, who—having gotten her twenty-five-year chair five years ago—was presented with a cushion for it. As our distinguished senior curator, our able ambassador, and our great friend, Gigi has also earned the respect and affection of the entire AAS community.

But I have already told you that the choice of John and Nancy

as exemplars among the staff was an easy one to make. They represent—both individually and together as a terrific team—the very best that this institution has to offer: they are tireless in their continuous efforts to improve our collections, our programs and services, and our usefulness to this and future generations of researchers; they are genuine and generous in their dealings with all; and they are *humble*. I therefore know that it would be their wish that I point out that John's work as vice-president for academic and public programs and Nancy's as the Marcus A. McCorison Librarian, would be much less rewarding and certainly less fun, without the partnership they have forged with each other and with the staff with whom they work so effectively. They would also want it said that the work that they do would not even be possible at all without the generous support that the Society receives from you, our members, readers, and friends. As Nancy and John join me in thanking you, please join me in saluting them on their *first* twenty-five-year stints. Here's to many more years of a great partnership.

Ellen S. Dunlap

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.