

*The Fellow's Experience: The American
Antiquarian Society as Research Spa*

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I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the abbreviation 'A.A.S.' in a way that historians of the book would find all too fitting: as marginalia. In 1989 my advisor returned my dissertation prospectus with very few comments—except for those mysterious initials penciled on the front page. He had to explain to this uninitiated graduate student what those letters stood for, and that the institution they denoted might possess the sorts of materials I needed to study biography in nineteenth-century America. When I think back upon my years in graduate school, I believe that finding my way to AAS was among the two or three best pieces of advice I received. I was privileged to receive a Kate B. and Hall J. Peterson Fellowship for two months the following year, in the fall of 1990. I ended up staying at the Society for four months, for reasons that will soon become clear. In my post-fellowship report and to anyone who asked about my fellowship experience, I characterized the American Antiquarian Society as 'a research spa—an intellectually rigorous but relaxing and nurturing environment that enables the scholar to accomplish enormous amounts of research and to rekindle his enthusiasm.' Numerous other fellows' reports echo these words: 'When people ask me where I've been for the past month, I tell them "Research Heaven."¹' A 1992 National Endowment for the Humanities site visitor compared fellows' ad-

I would like to thank the former AAS fellows who have permitted me to quote from their post-fellowship reports and from our conversations about AAS fellowships.

1. Rosemarie Zagarri (AAS-ASECS 96-97), George Mason University.

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miration for the Society to 'evangelical fervor'—a description that prompted one fellow (a scholar of nineteenth-century American religion) to write, 'I have indeed become a "convert" to the American Antiquarian Society.'²

What do we former fellows mean when we sing the Society's praises in utter unanimity? Put another way, what has the fellowship experience meant to fellows? I begin with a simple definition. The AAS fellowship is a total experience, not simply an opportunity to conduct research in one of the world's great libraries. When we think of total experiences, we might think of Disney World, where we pay for everything in Disney Dollars and happily forget there's a real world outside. As one fellow describes it, 'for those two months, I greatly appreciated the distillation of my life to the monastic requirements of my books, my computer, my vittles, and good company at mealtimes.'³ Other libraries' fellowships help defray the costs of scholars' research—certainly an invaluable support, given that we scholars in the humanities and the arts bear many of our own research expenses. But AAS fellowships go far beyond financial assistance.

As fellow's report after fellow's report explains, the hallmark of fellowship here is the community among the fellows and the staff. Nearly every former fellow discusses the intellectual camaraderie among fellows, the conversations with other fellows that assisted their own research, the 'welcome reassurance that archival research is not necessarily a solitary endeavor.'⁴ The conversations often occur in the Goddard-Daniels House, where most of us live during our fellowships. Certainly the house provokes the lion's share of suggestions for improving the fellowship experience: if every fellow at this research spa had his or her way, the Goddard-Daniels House would be Club Med, complete with exercise

2. Catherine A. Brekus (Hiatt 91-92 as a Ph.D. candidate in American studies at Yale), now University of Chicago.

3. Lucy Rinehart (Hiatt 91-92 as a Ph.D. candidate in English and comparative literature, Columbia University), now DePaul University.

4. Rachel M. Wheeler (Peterson 96-97 as a Ph.D. candidate in history at Yale), now Lewis and Clark College.

room, every cable-TV channel known to humankind, and regular shuttle service to Shaw's supermarket. (It is worth noting that the Society listens to its fellows' suggestions: cable television and loaner bicycles are now among the amenities.) At the same time, the house brings fellows together before and after hours, nurturing friendships and collegial discussions of work. Lunchtime and dinnertime witness a rotating cast of researchers, usually sharing citations or describing discoveries. Fellows invariably also laud the staff at AAS, from reference services to the women and men in the academic and public programs office across the street. 'Almost all members of the staff are themselves scholars,' writes one former fellow, 'and one gets to work quite mutually with them as well as with other Fellows.'⁵ He and others are saying that at AAS the staff also become our colleagues: sharing our excitement of discovery or offering research advice gained from vastly more experience than we will ever have.

I shall return to the centrality of community in a few moments, but I think it's worth emphasizing from the outset that *fellowship*—in the complete sense of the word, not simply the financial one—is itself the linchpin of AAS's fellowships program, and that this characteristic sets it apart from comparable programs elsewhere. This fellowship gives residence at the Society intellectual vigor *and* rigor: in short, energy. Not unlike its physical analogue, the energy here might be represented mathematically. But to describe the role that the American Antiquarian Society has played in the lives of its fellows, I would like to add an extra *m* and an extra *c*, thus rendering this century's most famous equation $E = m^2c^3$. (For the mathematically challenged among our humanities community, I assure you that this will get no more complicated.) My revised equation captures five strands that emerge from fellows' reports and from my own experience as a fellow seven years ago: materials, methods, community, confidence, and careers.

The materials at the American Antiquarian Society are the stuff

5. Barry O'Connell (AAS-NEH 95-96), Amherst College.

of legend. When fellows come here, we may think we know what we're looking for: newspapers of the early republic, obscure plays from the Jacksonian era, or in my case campaign biographies of presidential candidates. And we usually find *those*. The joy of this place, however, lies in finding all sorts of things we had never expected, indeed had never known existed. These serendipitous discoveries lead to publications as surely as our planned ones do. On other occasions, the range of materials here changes the project a scholar *thought* he or she was undertaking. After working with 'sheet music covers, stereographs, and game cards' in the Graphic Arts collection, one fellow reconceived her project in terms of 'American Art and Culture,' not just 'American Painting.'⁶ Whole genres, not just new works of familiar types, open before us. Equally significant, the juxtaposition of materials makes all the difference: being able to examine all sorts of texts in one place, often on the same day, provokes insights and discoveries. For an article on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Life of Franklin Pierce*—a publication that resulted from unexpected discoveries at AAS—I used not just the campaign biographies themselves (paperback and hardcover copies of Hawthorne's, plus its rival by David Bartlett) but also advertisements in a publishers' magazine and reviews in newspapers from Arkansas to New Hampshire. All were in the AAS collections, and all were at my fingertips in minutes. Projects assume new dimensions, and new projects emerge, thanks to the depth of materials here.

Beyond finding the unexpected, fellows learn new approaches to the materials: new methodologies. Partly this stems from the interdisciplinary interests of the fellows and staff. A look at the list of past fellows shows variety every year. The 1997–98 fellows, for instance, include thirteen historians and seven scholars in English (always the most common fields), but also professors of law and art, Ph.D. candidates in architecture and music, a librarian, a marine geologist, and the editor of publications for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. Fellows often

6. Janice Simon (Peterson, 93–94, research associate, 95–96), University of Georgia.

describe how fellows in other fields suggest new ways of looking at material, familiar or unfamiliar. This is particularly true of literary scholars accustomed to analyzing texts, many of whom find themselves thinking more historically. One puts it this way: 'My grasp of what can be discovered by broad-based archival research has deepened considerably and my standard for what constitutes historical evidence has gone up commensurably. . . . the "learning process" I have undergone has led me to urge my students in the direction of greater archival work and the use of far greater caution when making generalizations.'⁷

Specifically, many fellows become initiated into the methods of the history of the book, because AAS is the foremost institutional home for book history in America. As we look at books published 150 years ago, many of us start asking who produced these works and how—not just the author, but also the publishing process. And as we find writings in the margins or inside the covers, we start thinking about who read them, and why. This process is not spontaneous: the staff and other fellows encourage us to ask these sorts of questions. Book history is in the air at AAS—or, in keeping with my spa metaphor, maybe it's in the water. As a result, projects that came to the Society without a drop of book history imbibe it. A graduate student who came to the Society to work on race and benevolence came to conceive of 'print culture as the third central term in my dissertation.'⁸ An established scholar, studying an eighteenth-century Jamaican diarist, 'had not anticipated that my work . . . would focus quite so heavily on his reading practices. But the more I researched, and the more exposed I became to History of the Book approaches, which are such a vital issue at the American Antiquarian Society, so I increasingly saw the value and necessity of exploring Thistlewood's reading habits in great detail.'⁹

7. Paula B. Bennett (AAS-NEH 96-97), University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale.

8. Susan M. Ryan (Peterson 97-98), Ph.D. candidate in English, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

9. Philip D. Morgan (AAS-NEH 96-97), Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

Here a bit of autobiography is in order, because I give the American Antiquarian Society full credit for introducing me to the history of the book. Within a fellow's first weeks in residence, she or he delivers a brief talk to the staff and the other fellows about her or his project. The benefits of this talk begin immediately: members of the staff suggest potentially useful materials in the collections from that moment on. When I began my fellowship in August 1990, I wanted to explore the cultural work of nineteenth-century American biography, the stories that biographies told and the cultural purposes they sought to achieve. As I concluded my talk, then head of readers' services, now research librarian, Joanne Chaison asked whether I knew about the Society's collection of library catalogues: printed catalogues of nineteenth-century libraries all over the United States, ranging from ladies' lending libraries to prison libraries. Of course, my answer was no — but not for long. Within a week, Joanne and Marie Lamoureux (now assistant director of reference services) were bringing me stacks of library catalogues. I started figuring out which biographies appeared most frequently, what the ratio of American-written to European-written biographies was, and so on. It wasn't long before someone mentioned that AAS also possessed the circulation records of several libraries: one in rural New York, one in Worcester. Now I was figuring out who checked out which books. I was hooked, and my dissertation was transformed. Similarly, when I thought about Hawthorne's life of Pierce before AAS, I thought in terms of campaign biography. How typical of the genre was it? How far did Hawthorne follow or depart from the terms campaign biographers always used? The multiple editions and the publisher's magazine sent me toward the history of the book: what was the status of this book within the multiple worlds of literary and political publishing, and what did its publishing history reveal about it that we hadn't known before? In short, I was coming at the history of the book from both ends: production and reception, publishing and reading. During my fellowship, Bill Gilmore was here on an AAS-NEH fellowship, and he encour-

aged my new endeavors at every turn. Other scholars interested in book history, particularly Michael Winship, came for short periods that year; each asked questions I hadn't considered before. In short, the fellowship changed how I do history.

I have already spoken of the community that fellows find—and make—here. For many of us, our AAS fellowship is our first experience as full-fledged members of an intellectual community. This is true for the Lila Wallace Teacher Fellows, including one from Washington state who writes, 'I feel I have become part of a truly academic community with contacts now all over the United States.'¹⁰ It is especially true for graduate-student fellows who find AAS a radical departure from the liminal world of graduate study, suspended between apprenticeship and professional life. By my rough estimate, graduate students (mostly Ph.D. candidates) have received 45 percent of the Society's short-term fellowships over the past quarter-century. This high number indicates the Society's commitment to nurturing rising generations of scholars, as well as more established researchers. One of these Ph.D. candidates speaks for many more: 'I feel like I underwent a socialization, an initiation into a larger community of scholars. This experience was buoying, affirming, and particularly so at this lonely stage of the dissertation process, when I am working outside the classroom, neither student nor teacher.'¹¹ The intellectual community of the fellowship is equally rewarding for established academics who lack such communities at their home institutions. After all, many of us are *the* early Americanist in a history department, or *the* specialist in nineteenth-century American literature in an English department. No less admirable than its commitment to rising scholars has been the Society's commitment to bringing fellows from institutions large and small across the nation. During my fellowship, other fellows included an English professor from the University of Idaho and a lecturer from the

10. Mark W. Gale (Lila Wallace Teacher Fellow, 97), Coupeville High School, Coupeville, Wash.

11. Lucy Rinehart.

University of Sydney in Australia. These fellows certainly found a community at AAS that they did not have at home. And this community endures. I remain in touch with several of the fellows in my cohort; we reunite at conferences, propose conference panels together, and read each other's work. This is fellowship at its best: we are not reduced to reminiscing about the good old days in the Goddard-Daniels House (winter evenings when we turned on the Christmas-tree lights, or the night a bat somehow got into a bedroom), but remain engaged with each other's ongoing work.

For many of these fellows, unexpected materials, new methodologies, and the Society's intellectual community build intellectual confidence: a sense that our projects matter and a sense of ourselves as members of something larger. One graduate student reports that her advisors found a new 'depth, density, and authority' in her work after the fellowship. A new Ph.D. writes that, 'for a scholar just entering the profession like myself, being in residence at the [Goddard-Daniels] House was important for understanding myself as a professional and connecting with scholars at other stages in their careers.'¹² A member of my fellowship cohort describes it this way: the fellowship 'helped me clarify what my research interests were—and that they were important.' She works in American literature, where the majority of scholars still take little interest in how books were published or who read them. She came to AAS with a project about readers in the antebellum South, based on archival resources at her home institution. But, as she puts it, that institution offered little training in how to use those records. She came to AAS much as I did, thinking of it as a specialized library where she could look at resources (in her case, the books and newspapers that her Southern readers were reading; in mine, lots of biographies). She quickly discovered more: people who helped her figure out what to make of those archival records; 'a community of friends and like-minded scholars I didn't have in grad school'; confidence that her work mattered.¹³

12. John Evelev (Botein 96–97), University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

13. Amy M. Thomas (Botein 90–91 as a Ph.D. candidate in English at Duke), now Montana State University, Bozeman.

In a sense, here's what happens during an AAS fellowship: one explains one's work incessantly. It all starts in the fellowship application. Then at the staff talk early on. And in a lunchtime colloquium where fellows present their work, or a portion thereof. And over breakfasts, lunches, and dinners in the Goddard-Daniels House—since new researchers are constantly coming and going, and we explain our projects to virtually every one of them. The Goddard-Daniels House may incubate mosquitoes every summer, but it incubates research year-round: the nine-to-five library hours mark neither the beginning nor the end of our academic days here. Every time we tell it, our spiel sounds a little different, because of whatever we've discovered lately. And every time, it becomes more assured: we learn to talk about our work, we become confident enough to describe it to others, we connect what we're learning to what other fellows are discovering.

As a socializing experience, an initiation into an academic community, a font of confidence, the AAS fellowship experience ultimately helps launch careers. After all, the very thing one does morning, noon, and night (literally!) at AAS is precisely what one must do to get a job: explain one's work to interested people who know little or nothing about it. This experience was invaluable to me. By the time I went job-hunting, I had the confidence to explain my work to people I didn't know, not just my advisors and fellow graduate students. And I had a sense of myself as part of the academic world, not an apprentice but an already-launched professional. Another statistic about AAS's fellows is worth noting: nearly three quarters of the graduate-student fellows before 1996 now hold academic positions, according to the Fellows' Directory. This is a stunningly high number in the horrendous academic job market of the past twenty-five years. Certainly, the people who win AAS fellowships may already be marked for some success in the profession: they already know how to explain their work in a fellowship application. However, I imagine that the high incidence of AAS graduate-student fellows ending up with academic jobs is more than mere correlation. The level of research that fellows can do at AAS is highly appealing to potential employers.

AAS fellows have had access to a range of sources that many other young scholars simply haven't: 'My work at the Society provided me with such a remarkable head start that I wonder how other students gain the same kind of cumulative knowledge of their topic without a month at the Antiquarian Society.'¹⁴ Moreover, if potential employers are looking for scholars with fresh insights and new methodologies, AAS fellows have a leg up. One member of my cohort focused her job talk on her history-of-the-book approaches, and she credits getting her job to those approaches. My job talk in Nevada centered on the different ways we can get to know biography: by looking at lots of examples of a single sort of biography (like campaign biography), or by looking at the circulation records of libraries and at readers' diaries. All of this came from my fellowship experience at AAS.

The AAS fellowship program doesn't simply launch careers; it sustains them, renews them, and sends them on new courses. Look at a conference program for the American Studies Association, the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, or the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture, and you will surely find one or more panels composed of people who met as fellows here. Look at the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, and you will see dozens of fellows returning to the nest—even if the nest moves from New York to Edinburgh. Most important, look at the Society's own reading room in any given week, and you'll probably find a former fellow working on a new project. As one former fellow promised John Hench, 'I plan to return (which I'm sure doesn't surprise anyone since you all know the place is addictive).'¹⁵ Former fellows aren't just the Society's greatest cheerleaders, an evangelical congregation of true believers; we're also probably the Society's most frequent repeat users. The seeds of my next project were sown during my fellowship as I looked at

14. Carolyn Eastman (Peterson 97-98), Ph.D. candidate in history, Johns Hopkins University.

15. Laura Kennelly (Peterson 94-95 as adjunct professor of English, University of North Texas), now independent scholar, Berea, Ohio.

campaign newspapers from the 1840s. Dale Cockrell, a professor of musicology at Vanderbilt who has held two AAS-NEH fellowships, has taken his career in entirely new directions at AAS. In his first fellowship in 1983–84 he examined the journals of the Hutchinson Family, a troupe of abolitionist singers in antebellum America. In his second, eleven years later, he launched a whole new project on the world of blackface minstrels—about which he wrote, ‘I have said before, and I say it here again, that I could not have done the work I did at any other research center in the United States.’¹⁶ I suspect that virtually every other former fellow has thought or said the same thing.

Intellectual community, research heaven, ‘the scholarly life as it should be lived,’ research spa: for a quarter century of fellows, the American Antiquarian Society has meant all of these. On behalf of those fellows, the AAS’s alumni association, I would like to extend thanks: to the Society for making these opportunities possible to a wide-ranging, ever-growing community of scholars, teachers, and artists; to the staff, who often deserve as much credit for ‘our’ discoveries as we fellows do; to John Hench, for (in the words of more than one fellow) administering this complex program so efficiently and humanely and making it all seem effortless; and to the generous donors who have endowed these fellowships since 1972. We fellows come here not knowing what we will find; we discover more than we could ever have dreamed; we return for more. Many of us arrive as isolated scholars from far-flung institutions or as initiates into the profession; we join a community for what seems an all-too-brief few months; we find that the community survives long after our tenure here ends. Perhaps when colleagues ask me why I’m always returning to Worcester, I should stick to my own metaphor and echo Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*: I come for the waters. (Now that I live in Nevada’s high desert, that metaphor has a whole new—and literal—meaning for me.) Unlike Bogie, though, I never feel as though I’ve been misinformed.

16. Dale Cockrell (AAS-NEH 83-84, 94-95), Vanderbilt University.

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