

## *Report of the Council*

OCTOBER 18, 2002

IN THINKING ABOUT how I might best go about summarizing the extraordinary achievements of the Society since my last report to you, I was humbled by the realization that I would be speaking after the treasurer's report, and that his news would be sobering, at best. Watching the value of our endowment tumble over these past two years, I have often reminded my colleagues on the staff—and myself—that an organization of our stature and maturity has to 'take the long view.' The results of one or two years—good or bad—need to be viewed within the continuum of history. Over the course of our 190 years there have been hard times, but the history of the American Antiquarian Society overall is one marked by solid success and enduring excellence, achieved through the dedicated labors of generations of members, donors, and staff, aided in their efforts by inspiration they have found in the example of our farsighted founder.

Isaiah Thomas looked to the future as much as to the past, and this dual perspective informed his decisions and actions. Were he to be here now and were I to make this report a mere recitation of the highlights of 2001–2002—and there have been many of them—I feel confident that he would query me closely as to why the Society has taken these most recent steps, what path has led us to this point, and in what direction we want the Society to proceed. As time would have it, today marks a unique moment in my own association with the Society that lends itself well to looking both forward and back. Just ten years ago at the AAS annual meeting—my first annual meeting—we were celebrating the tremendous achievements of the McCorison era. From that

day to this, I have been challenged by the example set by Marcus to continuously improve upon the greatness of the Society and its collections and to protect and expand upon its fine reputation. And yet, a mere ten years from now in the year 2012, we will again gather together in this room for an annual meeting. (I plan to be here and hope you do as well.) The meeting will be the culmination of a yearlong celebration of the Society's two-hundredth year. As stewards of Thomas's legacy, it is incumbent upon us on the Council and staff to think clearly about the ambitions we have for the Society as it reaches that important milestone. To that end, we have begun over the past few months to work together on planning the next steps we will take—initially over the next five years, but then rolling the plans out toward 2012, and beyond. Planning groups are looking at every aspect of the organization, articulating projects to be undertaken, strategies to be adopted, traditions to be upheld. Every member of the staff and Council is playing a role, and we are tapping members, readers, fellows, and other constituents for their thoughts and opinions as well. By spring of next year, the list of things that we want to accomplish will be overly long, without doubt, and we will sit together to hammer out priorities, so that by the time of the next members' meeting—on April 11th in New Haven—we will have a clear work plan to set before you and before funders who can help us make these dreams into reality.

Today, however, I want to use our time together to set the accomplishments of the year just past into the continuum of past and future, as Dr. Thomas would have me do. And there is no better place to start than at the beginning—with acquisitions. In the past ten years we have spent more than three million dollars to acquire materials for the AAS collections, and these purchases have been augmented by a generous outpouring of materials which have come to us as gifts from dealers and private collectors and by transfer from other institutions. Recent additions to the collections in our graphic arts, newspapers, and manuscripts departments have been unprecedented, both in quality and

quantity, and Nancy Burkett and her staff in the acquisitions department have worked with dedication to manage complex, multi-year purchases of much-wanted items from the Zinman collection of early American imprints and the Morgan collection of Ohio publications. But even small purchases and gifts are significant to us, as each represents our coming one step closer to our ultimate goal: to have one copy of everything printed in what is now the United States through the year 1876. Nancy has prepared an exhibition of items—large and small, each wonderful in its own way—that have been acquired over just the past few weeks. They are emblematic of the success we continue to enjoy in our acquisitions endeavors. Spending three million dollars in ten years on acquisitions is a notable achievement—it took the great acquirer Marcus thirteen years (1979–92) to accomplish the same feat—but the salient point of the matter is that he got many more items for his three million dollars, moved us many more steps toward our goal of being comprehensive, than Nancy—or anyone in this collecting market—could with hers. In order to keep pace with the market and to compete successfully today against individual and institutional collectors alike, we need to continue to build the resources for acquisitions. We are grateful that thirty-eight individuals and foundations have created or expanded existing acquisitions funds in response to our current NEH challenge grant. We need to raise another \$300,000 in endowments by next summer to meet the terms of that challenge, which will bring a minimum of \$2.25 million in new funds to our coffers. But in our planning efforts—looking out toward our bicentennial horizon—we are challenging ourselves to answer tough questions: How can we accelerate the rate and improve the quality of our acquisitions in all genres? What are the highest priorities for collections building? Are we being sufficiently proactive in our collecting efforts? How do we mobilize the membership at large to help us with acquisitions? How can we continue to work in collaboration with other libraries to ensure that the historic output of the nation's presses

is preserved—if not in Worcester, then at another repository of record (but preferably in Worcester)?

Traditionally at AAS, newly acquired items have received the lion's share of attention from our conservation department. More recently, however, our conservators have been giving increased time and effort to large-scale projects to ensure that fragile items in the collections are properly housed in protective boxes and folders. This work is 'resource intensive'—the supplies are costly and much human labor is required, but the investment has proven to be worthwhile. During the course of the eighteen months of our construction project, for instance, almost every item in the entire library was moved at least once. And those items that were not moved to a new location or shifted around in an old one had to be handled for a much-needed dusting. All of this work was undertaken—by staff and outside movers—under the watchful eye of our conservators, who made certain that not a single volume was lost or damaged. Construction projects are notorious for wreaking accidental floods, fires, and other disasters on adjacent spaces. Our conservators trained us thoroughly in how to protect and salvage the collections in case of such mishaps, but there were none. All that made for quite a year for the conservation department. The collections are now safely housed in near-ideal storage conditions—low temperature, low humidity, no light, and no crowded shelves or drawers—but the conservators' work is hardly done. There are complicated new environmental systems to understand and monitor. The Society's preservation plan needs to be reviewed and updated, as does the disaster response plan. And while much progress has been made in rehousing the collections, there is always more to be done, and we must still turn our attention once again to the labor-intensive work of item-by-item treatments, not only of new acquisitions but also of existing holdings. It's a huge job for a small staff working in cramped quarters, and thus the need for adequate conservation resources is slated for careful consideration in our planning efforts.

Also at a critical crossroads is our cataloguing department, which has been funded for more than twenty-five years largely by project grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The work of AAS cataloguers has long been recognized—not only by the NEH, but also by our readers and colleagues from other libraries—as simply the best in the rare-book library field. We have prided ourselves on being the standard bearer, producing item-level records that are marvels of information about each person who played a role in the production of the book in question—from author and illustrator to publisher, bookseller, and former owner—but we have known for some time that we are falling behind in the race to keep up with the flow of incoming collections and to adequately address the backlog of unprocessed materials. This weighs heavily upon us.

This year has been a landmark year for the cataloguing department, but one that saw its attention devoted more to computers and to collection moves than to the creation of cataloguing records. After years of planning and months of intensive work behind the scenes, in July we ‘went live’ with our new on-line catalogue, which we lovingly call ISALAH: Internet Sources for Access to Information on American History. More than 350,000 cataloguing records were successfully transferred from our old software program to the new and, as predicted, the readers are thrilled at the ease and speed with which the catalogue can be searched. Researchers can use simple keyword searches and pull-down menus familiar to all users of the web, consult on-screen help for searching tips, and e-mail the results of their searches back to themselves. Much of that was possible in our old system, too, but it required a level of effort that few in the attention-deficient world today were willing to exert. In addition to the on-line catalogue function, the new program will allow us to be more efficient in tracking acquisitions, managing periodicals, and serving readers.

But even as we are still exploring the capacity of the new system, we are asking ourselves important questions: Is it better

to have at least a brief record for each item in the collection, or should we maintain our commitment to cataloguing at the highest level of detail practical, even if it means that the records are coming into the system at a slower pace? Our old system was powerful, but *sui generis* in the world of libraries; the new one is used by leading research libraries around the country. Thus we are afforded opportunities for collaborative projects and joint problem-solving that we may wish to embrace. The question of how we should coordinate cataloguing efforts among departments within our own organization is also begged. These are timely questions, indeed.

This year has also been one of change and transition for the readers' services department. Over the course of the past ten years, we have worked to find ways to serve an increasingly broad audience of those who have need for research in the library's collections. Beginning in 1994, a multi-year grant from the Lila Wallace Foundation helped us to enhance the public face of AAS, to welcome to the library as readers artists and creative writers, as well as K-12 teachers and their students. The position of research librarian was created to give assistance not only to fellows but also to other special readers, and over the years we created opportunity for more and more library staff to gain experience in managing the reading room. This breadth of experience has made it possible for staff from various departments to take turns at working on Wednesday nights, when we now keep the reading room open until 8:00 P.M., to afford increased access for those who have travelled great distances to work in the library and to those whose own work hours preclude access during our traditional 9-to-5 schedule.

And while innovations such as these are being well received, we continue to ask ourselves whether we are doing all we can to meet our readers' needs. Without sounding too boastful, I can say in all honesty that we know from what readers tell us that we are the best research library anywhere, but even being better than the rest doesn't mean there is no room for further improvement.

Thus, in our planning process, we are seeking to compare our policies and procedures with sister institutions, to listen to feedback from those that we presently serve, and to explore ways in which we might reach unserved audiences as well.

Reaching new audiences, expanding awareness and appreciation of the Society, sharing the richness of our collections with the general public: these have been among the goals of the outreach department since it was created in 1994. The department includes only two and one-half staff members and yet does the work handled by three or more departments at other institutions: they plan and produce our public programs, handle all publicity and media relations, manage special events and library tours, direct the fellowship program for artists and writers, and coordinate our K-12 teacher enrichment programs. They also serve as our in-house experts on the cleaning and styling of powdered wigs, since they work most closely with the actor who portrays Isaiah Thomas before school and civic groups. Earlier this year the Society was recognized for the contributions that it makes to the Worcester community when it received the Cultural Enrichment Award presented by the Worcester *Telegram & Gazette*. And while hometown approbation is appreciated, as we prepare for the decade leading up to the Society's bicentennial celebrations, the outreach department is exploring ways that we might effectively find recognition in the national cultural arena. How do we reach and cultivate a broader constituency? How do we address the challenge of constituent diversity? How do we overcome the fact that the reason we were sited in Worcester in 1812—so that we would be safely inland, out of range of the British fleet—keeps us, even today, out of range of much coveted public attention as well?

Within the world of early American historians, however, Worcester is Mecca, and in recent years we have enjoyed a steady flow of pilgrims from every corner of the country. Competition for our fellowships remains strong, and thus we continue to attract bright young graduate students and leading senior scholars

alike. Our summer seminar in the history of the book counts among its alumni the leading lights of the field, many of whom joined forces under the editorial direction of AAS members Scott Casper, Joanne Chaison, and Jeffrey Groves to produce *Perspectives in American Book History*, the first textbook in the field, which appeared earlier this year under the co-sponsorship of the Society. And, of course, work on the five-volume *History of the Book in America* continues as we speak. This past year, we have also seen the flourishing of the on-line journal at [Common-place.org](http://Common-place.org), which the Society sponsors in partnership with the Gilder Lehrman Institute. In the most recent nine-month period, the site recorded two million hits (about ten thousand per day). More than six hundred links have been established on other websites, referring readers to ours (one from Czech Republic lists *Common-place* along with other 'with it' publications and several hangover cures). More than 2,700 individuals and organizations (from every state and from several foreign countries, from universities and libraries, and from private parties ranging from Colonial Williamsburg to Martha Stewart) have signed up to receive notification each time a new edition of the journal is posted on-line. And just yesterday we used the web as a 'pre-publication' vehicle, posting an on-line exhibition of our historical portraits from Worcester as part of a city-wide cultural initiative focusing on the theme of 'Portraits!' The entries are slated for traditional publication as part of a catalogue of our entire portrait collection, which will appear in the next year or so.

Given the delays that have long plagued our monograph and journal publishing program at the Society, electronic publishing is tantalizing to many of us. But what about the responsibility that the Society has always shouldered of being the publisher of record for bibliographical reference works? Should these not be available to sit solidly, in bound format, on library reference shelves? Does ready accessibility of digital reference works outweigh their ephemerality? And how can we best support the dissemination of research projects undertaken by our staff and fellows, such as the



compilation of electoral data from early United States elections, compiled over a lifetime by our colleague Phil Lampi? These questions and many others are before our publications planning group.

Clearly, technology has been a tremendous agent of change at the Society in the past decade, as it has been in almost every other corner of our culture. With generous outside funding, we were able two years ago to install all-new, networked computer systems for the Society, and this has largely transformed the way we conduct our business—both internally and with the outside world. In the past year, not only have we added a new on-line catalogue feature to our website, but also we have mounted a new on-line collections guidebook. The text, with many digital bells and whistles added to it, is based on a guidebook that first appeared in 1987 as a '175th-Anniversary Guide' and was revised ten years ago by the staff in honor of Marcus's retirement. This third version, which we call *Under Its Generous Dome, Version 3.0*, will continue to be updated and enhanced, and thus will never be out-of-date or out of print. This year also has marked our first foray into the world of digitizing collections. A pair of summer interns, supported in part by a grant from the Research Libraries Group, catalogued, scanned, and submitted a large group of trade cards and pamphlets from the 1876 centennial exhibition in Philadelphia, depicting mechanical equipment of every shape and size. These images are now accessible through the Research Libraries Group's cultural materials database, along with hundreds of thousands of images from libraries and museums around the globe. Meanwhile, the scanners have been humming in the workrooms of our publishing partners at Newsbank/Readex where page images of books printed before 1801—which we first published in microcard format and later converted to microfiche—are being turned into digital surrogates for once-rare volumes. By next summer, more than 2.4 million page images of 'Digital Evans' imprints will be accessible on campuses through subscribing university libraries and, on a pay-per-view basis, to individuals. Long anticipated by early

Americanists, this project is creating the kind of 'buzz' that our sales force loves to hear, especially in these times of budgetary belt-tightening for libraries everywhere.

But how digital or virtual should AAS go? Should not our first responsibility be to the preservation of historical materials in their original format? Can an organization such as ours afford to keep abreast of the latest technological trends? Can we afford not to? Or, as one of the questions posed to our technology task force puts it so well, 'How can we ensure that technology is put to the service of our staff and constituents and not the other way around?'

In touching on the Society's accomplishments for the year, I have but three topics yet to cover: buildings and grounds, finance, and fundraising. There's good news to report for the year under each of these headings, but I'll start with the most obvious: our vault addition and the improvements to the existing library building were completed this summer, on schedule and under budget. I may never have a chance to say this about another construction project in my life, so please excuse me while I repeat myself: 'on schedule and under budget.' Not only have we accomplished what we set out to do—to provide the capacity to almost double our collection holdings; to house the collections in more ideal environments to assure their long-term survival and safety; and to enhance the work areas for many of our staff, chiefly those in the graphic arts, manuscripts, newspapers, and cataloguing departments—but also have we been able to afford a number of enhancements that were not included in the original scope of the project—most notably, the improvement in the lighting here in the reading room (much appreciated during our new evening hours), the addition of a service and delivery area off Regent Street, and the enhancement of the building's exterior with new lighting, trims, and a good scrubbing to remove years of accumulated grime. The building is working very well for us, and the prospect of having unused shelves to fill for decades and decades to come is quite exciting to us all. But this building project was

never meant to provide the space we need to house our staff and burgeoning programs over the same time horizon. Therefore—before the final invoice for this project has even been rendered—our space planning committee is already at work on issues that need to be addressed in the next five-year plan. Are we making optimum use of the facilities we currently own—Antiquarian Hall, Goddard-Daniels House, Montvale Cottage, and 9 Regent Street? What changes or improvements are required? And should we acquire additional facilities?

Such questions beg others under the heading of finances, since more property would surely mean higher operating costs. Over the past ten years, much attention has been successfully paid to making certain that AAS is living within its means. Under the guidance of the Mellon Foundation in the early 1990s, steps were taken to improve the management of our endowment by adopting a total return and a spending-rate policy, by embracing modern asset allocation models and by disciplining ourselves to maintain a long-term investment strategy (easier done when the market was going up than it has been on the downhill slide). After a two-year transition during which we brought the Society's operations into conformity with a prudent 5 percent spending rule, we have maintained balanced budgets now for eight consecutive years. That's the good news. The reality is that spending rules like ours are based upon the trailing-average of market values taken over twelve quarters. The value of our endowment—which stood at twenty-one million dollars ten years ago—peaked at fifty-two million dollars in 2000 and, as you know from our treasurer's reports, has been declining since. While that 'peak' in the market is there to help in calculating available income for the 2003 and 2004 budgets, it will be more than twelve quarters past by the time we calculate the 2005 budget. If you can say with any certainty what will happen to the stock market in future quarters, please see me after the meeting. But absent such insight, we are committed to sticking by the principles that brought us this far: staying invested in a well-diversified portfolio, maintaining

prudent spending policies, watching spending carefully, and seeking whenever possible to capitalize on earned income opportunities, such as the licensing of the Digital Evans to research libraries.

The planning committee charged with considering 'revenue and resources' is currently looking carefully at the finances of the Society, analyzing the streams of income upon which we rely, and considering ways in which they can be most effectively enhanced, so that the Society will arrive at its two hundredth year in a stronger financial position than ever before. A colleague of mine on the bicentennial planning committee asked at our first meeting if we couldn't please just have a celebration without making it part of a capital campaign. The reality, I had to confess, is that institutions such as AAS can never be out of fundraising mode. It is often said that organizations start planning one campaign before the last one is completed, and lest I be found guilty of that, let me turn our attention to the capital fund drive that we announced in April 1999 with a goal of twelve million dollars. As of this date, we have raised \$11,440,000 in cash and pledges. Most notably, on August 31 of this year we finished the Kresge Challenge Grant—eighty-seven donors over the target of 430 gifts and \$125,000 over the \$3,765,000 required to be raised in the eighteen months of the campaign. The Kresge check for \$800,000 will be arriving in the first week of November and is much anticipated. As I mentioned earlier in my report, we will next be turning our attention—and yours—to the continuing need for endowed book funds at the Society and also to the possibility of creating dedicated revenue sources to support our very important outreach activities. In the past, we have created endowed funds for every one of our core activities, and over the past ten years it has surely been proven just how essential outreach activities are to the carrying out of the Society's mission.

I would be remiss if I did not end this report on fundraising without a word of thanks to all who have contributed, not only to our capital campaign, but also to our annual fund. Even in these difficult financial times, the support of our members and donors

has remained rock solid, and for that support we are most grateful indeed. All of us who work at the Society—as staff and as volunteers, on boards and committees—care deeply about this institution. It is especially rewarding to know that so many other people do as well. Thank you to all who have contributed so generously.

Giving public thanks is not always possible, however, to those who support the Society through their estate plans. In order to recognize these special donors (and to encourage others to consider the same), the Council has authorized the creation of the Esther Forbes Society, named in honor of the noted author who was the first woman to be elected to AAS membership. In writing her will, she was advised by her nephew Attorney Linwood Eskin to leave the copyrights of her various books—including *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* and *Johnny Tremain*—to an organization, rather than leave them in her estate. We are so grateful that she named AAS as the beneficiary of those assets and we are grateful too for the fact that her books remain in print, widely read, and a tremendous producer of royalties even today. It is our hope that the example of Esther Forbes and that of the thirty-two others who have signed up as charter members of the Forbes Society will serve as inspiration to others. There are many ways to support the American Antiquarian Society, both in this life and beyond. Isaiah Thomas was very fond of rewriting his will—we have many drafts to prove as much, and we are pleased to note that he included the Society in each of them. Were he here, as I noted earlier, I think he would approve of the creation of the Forbes Society and encourage each of us to join. The gifts that members of this group are making to AAS will not be transferred for decades and decades to come, but the plans that we are developing now will ensure that they are put to the highest possible use in furthering the mission of this great institution.

Ellen S. Dunlap

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