

## *Report of the Council*

OCTOBER 17, 2003

THIS AFTERNOON WE ARE GATHERED not only to consider the state of the American Antiquarian Society in this its one-hundred-ninety-first year but also—as you have just heard in the reading of the Council resolution—to honor the man who has contributed so much to all that has been accomplished here over the last decade, our chairman Robert C. Baron.

Working with Bob has been a distinct honor for me. I have learned so much from his example; profited so much from his advice; and will be ever grateful for his steadfast support, encouragement, and friendship over the years. He has never wavered in his belief that the American Antiquarian Society is a truly great institution that has the potential—indeed, the responsibility—to become even better. He inspires others to believe it, too.

I first met Bob in the spring of 1992 when I was interviewed by the AAS presidential search committee. That committee was an impressive group, but Bob stood out even among them, and not only because he was among the tallest and had travelled the farthest to participate in their numerous meetings. I was intrigued to learn of his pioneering role in the world of computers: he served as program manager of on-board space computers on Mariner missions to Venus and Mars, as worldwide systems manager for Honeywell's minicomputer business, and as founder and first president of Prime Computer, then a Fortune 500 company. By the time we met, however, Bob had left New England and the high-tech world behind and was seven years into his new career as founder and president of an innovative, author-centered publishing house. The titles produced by Fulcrum Publishing are

reflective of Bob's own wide range of interests: history, biography, Native American culture, travel, natural history, the environment, and the world of books. On the search committee, Bob seemed to enjoy his role as 'the outsider'—that of businessman—not-scholar and a non-New-Englander.

Within a few months of my coming to Worcester, I was faced with the challenge of responding to an invitation from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to submit a proposal for a multi-year grant that would, in the words of the Wallace staff, 'change the public face of the Society.' Time was short and stakes were high (as in high six figures), so I called an emergency planning meeting of the Council—just to see if they even *wanted* the Society's face redone. Because of a prior commitment, Bob was unable to come to the meeting, but he took the time to write a short essay which outlined—in an interesting and concise fashion—the crux of the issues we were facing and enumerated the very questions upon which we needed to focus attention: Who does the Society serve? What do we have to offer them? And why should the public support us? That was the first time that I witnessed Bob's ability to impose a useful logic model on a complex situation, but it was certainly not the last. Perhaps that's the engineer in him coming out.

It had been made clear to me when I came to the Society that I would be expected to be proactive in the selection of a successor to Jill Conway, who intended to step down as chair of the Council in October 1993. It was with some trepidation, however, that I called Bob to see if he could make time on short notice to see me on 'a matter of some importance.' Two nights later, I was sitting in a Denver restaurant with Bob and his wonderful wife, Charlotte, talking about plans for the future of the Society. Bob said yes: he was willing to make the commitment and was excited about what we might accomplish. A \$750,000 grant from the Wallace Foundation put wind behind our sails, and we were off.

From the very beginning of his tenure, Bob reminded us all that 'without an understanding of our past, we are less equipped

to deal with our present and our future.' To prepare himself for his role as a leader of the Society, he steeped himself in its history, voraciously reading all of Isaiah Thomas's journals and his writings on the founding of the Society, poring over the minutes of all the Society's meetings through its early decades, and analyzing historical lists of members. Thomas's remarkable vision for the Society and his legacy in it clearly resonated with Bob, but our new chairman wasn't only looking back. He also began to encourage us to think in terms of where we wanted the Society to be by the time of our bicentennial in 2012, admonishing us that it was, after all, fewer than twenty years away. He wanted us to have ambitions for the organization, but recognizing that AAS was accustomed to moving at 'a stately pace,' Bob early on in his tenure started emphasizing the need for 'a plan' to get everyone going, preferably in the same direction.

I think Bob initially must have felt as if he were herding ducks, when some staff and Council members frequently wandered off in the endless maze of possibilities and others of us fretted overly much over planning methodologies. He always had the ability, however, to bring us back together. For me, the moment of clarity came when he said with characteristic concision: 'Look, we are going to raise a major amount of money for something; let's just decide what the most important thing to spend it on is!' That first planning effort laid the foundation for the 'Building, Collecting, Connecting' campaign we launched in 1999, which has already surpassed its goal, having raised more than twelve-and-one-quarter-million dollars.

Last year we celebrated the completion of our state-of-the-art stack addition and our success in meeting the \$800,000 Kresge Challenge to cap off the building fund drive. Looking back at early drafts of our planning documents, some written on paper cocktail napkins, I think I am safe in saying that Bob had no idea when he started us on the planning road that we would end up building an addition of this size, with such sophisticated environmental and security systems, nor that we would raise the amount

of money that we did. It is a testimony to his courage and his leadership ability that both were accomplished, but as Bob himself wrote in our plan: 'We must do all we possibly can to protect our collections, period.'

On the next line after that, he wrote: 'We must increase the funding available to add to the collections. This can best be accomplished by increasing endowment.' Today I am pleased to announce that we have surpassed our goal for the acquisitions portion of our campaign, as well. John Keenum just certified to the National Endowment for the Humanities that we have raised more than \$1.8 million in private contributions for endowed acquisitions funds, to which can now be added \$450,000 in federal challenge funds. All told, almost fifty new book funds have been created in the course of the campaign, thus adding tremendously to our capacity to continue to buy collections to fill up our new, empty but well-protected shelves. As chairman of the capital campaign, Bob, you have done so much to help ensure the success of this important endeavor. Thank you for all your hard work and for your many, many contributions.

Of course, even as we began meeting the milestone goals in the campaign, Bob was already talking with me about the need to revisit the first plan we developed and to articulate new goals to bring us forward in our positioning of the Society for 2012. Working together, the staff and Council began preparing the new plan in 2002 and presented the final draft in April 2003. Organized under six broad themes that cover the gamut of the Society's operations, the plan sets forth thirty-four separate goals for improvement and articulates one hundred twenty-five strategies for achieving them. The June 2003 meeting was only the second or third time in more than ten years that Bob had been unable to make the trip to an AAS Council meeting. It was also the meeting at which the Council, because of the three-year decline in our investments, had to approve a rather barebones budget for the 2003-2004 fiscal year. When it became apparent that there would be little money in the operating budget for extras, even

those given priority in the new five-year plan, a scheme was hatched among Bob's current Council colleagues to challenge each other to contribute to a special fund in his honor that would permit some of the critical cataloguing goals to be addressed without further delay. Not only did it honor Bob, but this scheme kept the 'plan implementation' ball rolling, a tribute to Bob's leadership, in and of itself.

As I look back through the old planning files from the mid-1990s, I am reminded how surprised I was at the time to hear Bob express the need for caution in our adoption of new computer technologies, or what he termed 'the technical breakthrough of the century du jour.' Whenever I would get all excited about the potential the Internet seemed to hold, Bob would calm me down with one of his funny quips. He was especially fond of quoting Dave Barry, who once wrote, 'the Information Superhighway is just CB radio, only with more typing.' Bob's big concern, of course, was that AAS 'does not have the resources or the ability to influence the technical direction of information services. We are participants in a world that we can't control. We must, therefore, select wisely where to invest our technical dollars.' Thus, Bob has kept us safely back from the bleeding edge. But now that hardware and software standards have emerged, I think no one has been more excited to see AAS embrace technology—not as an end unto itself, but as a means of sharing our collections with a wider audience. Although still a 'work in progress,' more and more cataloguing information about our holdings is available each day via the Internet. We are within days of launching a major online archive of images from our collection, beginning with the Farber gravestone collection. The online journal that we help to sponsor at [www.common-place.org](http://www.common-place.org) continues to attract tens of thousands of readers and to garner acclaim. And Bob has watched with fiduciary interest as we have ventured into partnerships to make our collections available digitally on a commercial subscription basis to other research libraries. Early on, Bob wisely pointed out that technology companies 'come and go with the

same frequency that automobile manufacturers did at the beginning of this century.' He can now take comfort in knowing that the partner with which we are working in this new venture is the same partner with which we pioneered micro-opaque cards beginning in 1955, Readex/Newsbank, Inc. As we speak, our micro-filmed images of Early American Imprints (Series I and II) are being digitized at the rate of ten thousand frames per month, and that production rate will increase substantially now that we have signed agreements for the conversion of our Early American Newspapers as well. Bob's advice that we wait until the technology settled and the commercial market grew was spot on.

Bob's been right about so many other things that I hardly know where to begin the list. Since his earliest involvement with the Society, rather than bemoan the fact that AAS is 'a hidden treasure,' he's devoted himself to getting it better known. He took the lead in helping to develop a 'dog-and-pony show' about AAS that could be taken to libraries and book-collecting groups around the country, and when I couldn't manage to go with him to make our duo presentation, Bob went alone. Outreach and visibility have been his mantras. But Bob has also recognized that we need to learn from others as much as they need to learn about us. He has encouraged AAS staff to work in partnership with sister institutions around the country, and for many years now, Bob and Charlotte have generously maintained a little pot of money at the Society to make it possible for even junior staff to attend professional meetings, to take courses, and to travel to other libraries. This interest that the Barons have shown in the professional development of individuals who work at the Society, both on the front lines and behind the scenes, has been much appreciated by all.

Now lest you think I'm going to give Bob credit for everything good that has happened at AAS in the past ten years, I'd better throw in something that he hasn't yet managed to accomplish. The only one I can think of, however, is one for which he can hardly be faulted for lack of trying. Bob, I promise you that we'll

continue to work to improve our newsletters and journals with the goals you have set for us in mind. Like you, we want them to be timely, to be attractive, to be informative, and—most importantly—to be read! You've given us great suggestions. You've shown us sterling examples. Now it's up to us to get it done. Watch your mailbox and let us know when we finally get it right, will you?

For a demonstration of a Baron-supported innovation that started achieving high marks from its very inception, however, we need wait only until tomorrow morning at 9:30 when six artists and writers who have held fellowships will be back in the reading room, not for more research in the collections, but to share with us some of the poetry, dance, prose, graphic arts, and web creations that have resulted from their fellowships at the Society. The fellowship program to encourage use of the collections by those whose work was intended for a general audience—which would also include musicians, filmmakers, playwrights, journalists, children's book authors, and many more—was launched and developed with the one-time grant from the Wallace Foundation. But through the generous endowment gifts made by the Barons and others, we'll have the chance to bring these lively and talented people to AAS for years to come, and more importantly, their work will be informing, provoking, and delighting future generations well beyond our own.

In addition to helping open the doors of the Society to 'non-traditional readers,' Bob has encouraged us to be assiduous in seeking out a diverse cadre of members for the Society and to be welcoming of those who join our ranks for the first time. Inspired by Isaiah Thomas's founding goals for the Society as a truly national organization, Bob has encouraged the nomination of members from every corner of the nation, as well as from foreign countries. To help us keep in touch with this far-flung membership, Bob has convened semiannual meetings of the Society in London, and in a number of interesting American cities such as Charlottesville, Santa Fe, New Orleans, and Denver, as well as in

bigger cities on both coasts. These travels together have afforded an opportunity for those who know and support AAS to learn of the many other interests that they have in common, thus furthering that sense of community that makes the world of AAS so special. Bob and Charlotte, you have been great hosts and great travelling companions on these many trips, and we look forward to seeing you on many more to come. Mark your calendars now for Pittsburgh in April 2004.

Before I conclude my remarks today, Bob, I want to give you credit for yet another positive change at the Society that you have inspired: the reinvention, if you will, of the annual meeting. You were among a chorus of out-of-town members who chimed in with useful suggestions as to how we might make the occasion of the annual meeting more of a draw for members to come to Worcester. Thus we have experimented by moving the meeting from mid-week to week-end; developing the collectors' round-table; inviting as speakers members such as David McCullough, Ken Burns, and Clay Jenkinson (who will be portraying Meriwether Lewis here tomorrow night); and creating opportunities for members to interact with staff and fellows as well as with one another. We've arranged special tours of nearby historical sites and presented plays and concerts based on our holdings. You even inspired us to have all the leaves painted pretty colors for the third week of October . . . oh, no, wait, that wasn't your idea!

As a capstone to the annual meeting, there has been one other feature that we on the staff have wanted to include that would be of interest to our academic and non-academic members alike. Among our membership there are at least fifty individuals who have won major prizes for their writings, including Pulitzers, Bancrofts, and National Book Awards. While these authors are in much demand as speakers, especially when their awards are still in the headlines, it isn't often they are invited to reconsider their prize-winning works with the benefit of hindsight, say some five or more years after publication. Any number of questions might be asked: What was important about the subject of the book at



the time you wrote it? What is the enduring theme of the book now? If you were writing it in 2004 instead of 1974 or 1984, what would you do differently? How has subsequent scholarship treated the subject? How did writing this book shape your own subsequent thoughts about history and/or influence your scholarly career? Reciting these questions I sound a bit like Brian Lamb interviewing a guest on Booknotes, but that's something of the idea—to have a noted author talk about one of his or her most noted works in terms that would be of interest to general readers as well as scholars, teachers, and students. In other words, an outreach event that would draw an audience from every part of the AAS constituency and beyond.

Bob, to help make this notion of ours a reality, we turned to a great friend—a friend of yours and of the Society Hal Miller, former CEO of Houghton Mifflin and former member of the AAS Council. Not only did Hal 'get it,' but he also agreed that raising an endowment for the lecture in your honor would be a fitting tribute to your years of service to AAS and to your dedication to the publishing and the reading of history. In an attempt to keep this under wraps, we solicited only those folks who had served with you in the past on the Council or had travelled with you on semiannual meeting sojourns. The response was terrific, and most generous—so generous, in fact, that the goals for endowing the lectureship were surpassed and we have salted away funds to endow our general outreach program as well. Thus, I am pleased to announce that at next year's annual meeting we will have the pleasure of introducing the first Robert C. Baron lecturer, Professor Bernard Bailyn of Harvard. As you know, Bud Bailyn—who served with you and Hal Miller on the presidential search committee—has won many major prizes for his writings, and so we left it to him to pick the one he wanted to 'reconsider.'

For purposes of making the presentation of 'the lectureship' to you today, John Keenum prepared this small portfolio acknowledging those who contributed to this cause, but along with this folder I wanted to give you something a bit more tangible to mark

the occasion, and a book of history seemed only appropriate. Knowing how much you admire your fellow publisher Isaiah Thomas, we picked this two-volume set that he published in 1795, when he was at the height of his business career (controlling five bookstores, three newspapers, and the best magazine in the country, and employing in Worcester alone one hundred fifty people). Given the amount of teasing that you give me about the weather and the drivers in Massachusetts, Bob, I thought it only fitting that the title we selected be a history of the Commonwealth: *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay* by Governor Thomas Hutchinson. But we are giving you these volumes not only so you can study up on why we are such bad drivers, but also so you can get a head start in reading up on next year's Baron Lecture. The title Professor Bailyn has chosen to reconsider as his topic is his 1975 National Book Award-winning biography of the governor himself, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*.

Bob, the book, the endowed lectureship, the cataloguing funds, these are all mere tokens of the esteem in which you are held by all of us here at the American Antiquarian Society. You have left us not only with the challenge to continue your dedication to forward-thinking action, but also a legacy of believing that if we work together, guided by the ideals that Isaiah Thomas left for us, we can continue to accomplish truly great things. For the challenge and the legacy, I give you my most heartfelt thanks.

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.