

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 19, 2007

A FEW WEEKS AGO I had the opportunity to make a short presentation to a group of enthusiastic retirees who had signed up through the Worcester Institute for Senior Education (WISE) to learn about the American Antiquarian Society, many after driving by it for forty-plus years and still being curious about what goes on inside. After going around the room with self-introductions—a long-standing tradition for all seminars at AAS—I asked them each to share any descriptive words or phrases that came to mind at the mention of the Society's name. Having done this with groups many times over the last decade and a half, I was pleased to note a continuing pattern: fewer pejoratives (such as elite, closed, mysterious, not for the public) and more words such as world-class. However, I have come to accept the fact that there will always be at least a few people somewhere who do not fully understand what we are about. In part, of course, it is our name, but rest assured I am not here tonight to announce that we are going to change that. We are proud of our venerable old moniker, but besides if we changed it I would have to forego the telling of one of my best jokes:

Although we have been accused of it, we are not now, nor have we ever been, against farming (that would be not antiquarian, but *anti-agrarian*), against those born under the astrological sign of the Water-bearer (*anti-aquarian*), nor against the practice of keeping fish in tanks or bowls (*anti-aquarium*).

On a more serious note, today the Society is being accused by some in the Worcester community of being anti-something

else—anti-neighborhood, anti-historic preservation, even anti-Worcester—because they oppose our plans to acquire property adjacent to our current buildings. I shall have more to say about these plans at the end of my report, but I wanted to acknowledge the issue up-front, not only because of the yard sign you have seen across the street and the flyers you've been handed which accuse us of *insulting* the neighborhood, but also because the question of how the Society is perceived relates to my presentation to the seniors the other day. Here are some of the points I tried to make to them:

- Some may think of history as boring and dry, but for those of us who are privileged to share in the discoveries and connections that are made here every day, it is heady stuff. A member of our reference staff recently wrote: 'It is a joy to see the enthusiasm of young and old alike when faced with original primary sources. One woman even burst into tears upon seeing a letter from Frederick Douglass. Fortunately, the letter was safely encased in a plastic sleeve!'
- Some may assume that the AAS is 'antique' or 'antiquated,' but we are proud of our reputation as a well-respected leader in the cataloguing, preservation, and digitization of historical materials. We are especially proud of our growing number of partnerships with innovative information companies who are helping us make our collections accessible in amazing new ways to untold numbers of individuals via the Internet.
- To those who think there is little new under the sun, especially when it comes to 'the past,' we point with enthusiasm to the path-breaking program that curator Gigi Barnhill has created and named the Center for Historic American Visual Culture (CHAViC). She has noted that today many art historians feel trapped by disciplinary boundaries and limit their discussion to the aesthetics of popular American art. Historians and literary scholars, on the other hand, often feel that they do not have

the technical or disciplinary training needed to talk and write authoritatively and intelligently about graphic arts materials. Through fellowships, exhibitions, workshops and seminars, conferences, and improved access to AAS graphics collections, CHAViC can serve as a meeting place where scholars on the two sides of this divide interact productively with the shared goal of better understanding the way the history and culture of the nation were shaped by things that Americans saw both in their daily life and in their pursuit of higher culture.

- And, finally, to those who imagine it must be boring to work in a library, I would encourage them to witness the dedication of our great staff and their passion and pride in this institution. It makes a difference, I think, that everyone who works here—from the staff and volunteers to the readers and fellows—is enthusiastic about being at AAS. I always think of AAS as sort of the opposite of some workplaces where *no one*—employees and customers alike—wants to actually be there. At the risk of *insulting* someone who truly is thrilled to spend their days at, say, the Registry of Motor Vehicles, I will forego giving that example. Anyway, I do love my work here at AAS and so I was particularly touched when I read a wrap-up report we received just a few days before my talk to the retirees, from one of our short-term fellows. In fact, the report struck a chord with many of us on the staff because this young scholar, Jennifer Hughes from Emory University, just ‘got it’—she understood so thoroughly and summarized so vividly the essence of what makes this place so special. So I read her letter to the class that day as an ‘inside view’ of this institution, and with Jennifer’s permission, I’m going to read it to you now.

Looking back upon the month which I spent at the American Antiquarian Society probing the archives ‘under the generous dome,’ being guided by the gracious staff with their intimate knowledge of the collections, and sharing research and living space with bright and innovative fellows, I am not surprised by just

how much one month's experiences have made an impact upon me as an aspiring scholar. Before my short tenure at the AAS, I had developed a narrative skeleton for the first chapters of my dissertation project, 'Telling Laughter: A Cultural History of American Humor, 1830-1900,' based upon the handful of primary materials that I could access from Emory, nearby institutions, and electronic databases. That skeleton, now, is due for a fleshing-out; I returned to Emory with over one hundred pages of notes on pamphlets, almanacs, racy newspapers, children's books, insane asylum records, private diaries, comic magazines, lithographs, gift books, etc. What was a proposal has become an argument, based upon compelling evidence. I am excited to incorporate the cultural traces of nineteenth-century ideas about laughter which I found in such items as a first-person account of a laughing gas exhibition from the diary of a young Worcester man, children's books which dogmatically instruct children when they may or may not laugh, and dozens of images of hilarity culled from advertisements, frontispieces, and beautiful color lithographs. Some materials, too, took me by surprise and have changed assumptions that I had brought to my research. The AAS owns copies of an antebellum Spanish-language humor magazine, *La Risa*, published out of Madrid specifically for readers in New Orleans. These magazines not only contain rare instances of bilingual humor, but also fascinating prefaces that jokingly collapse ethnicity, nationality, and linguistic identity with badinage teasing American English-speakers—people with British ancestry—for having a weak sense of humor compared to Americans of Spanish ancestry. The publication of *La Risa* disrupts monolithic notions of American humor and helps to imagine a more linguistically and humorously diverse nation. Each day I would walk over to the archives from the Goddard-Daniels House, looking forward to these sorts of ideology-altering finds.

Not before having the privilege of such deep immersion into materials from the decades which form the parameters of my study, my time at the AAS has made me newly aware of relations and continuities within the era. Furthermore, I feel I know better how to situate and use primary materials now. I do not believe this could have happened anywhere else but at the American Antiquarian Society. Online databases are wonderful in their accessibility and searchability, but they do not provide the unity of experience that one gets upon flipping through several years of a newspaper and

seeing, for example, panacea ads cropping up next to articles providing statistics of death by cholera. Nor do online databases capture the excitement of materiality. Even several cups of coffee cannot create the same level of alert enthusiasm as that which one gets when perusing two little crookedly-cut joke books, printed on an 1870s toy printing press by two young boys. Likewise, nothing can simulate the thrill of turning the pages of William Lloyd Garrison's own copy of the *Liberator*; one reads with seemingly impossible energy when one feels the uniqueness of such documents.

The AAS staff introduced me to a world of material that I had not considered, or known to exist—material which will be integral to my dissertation. Conversations with members of the staff . . . helped me both in researching and coping with the evolution of my project. It was like having a dissertation advisory committee away from home. These conversations also improved my ability to articulate my project. The opportunity to give a talk both to the staff and to the fellows, and then to be able to continue discussions at lunch, in the archives, and at home was an unexpected boon. I have begun to feel both more confident and more professional. In the past, when questioned about my work, I have been timid and (rather comically) prone to slips and spoonerisms in my nervousness. However, near the end of my visit, I found myself introducing my project to [a] fellow [researcher] with a degree of ease that I could not have imagined before my weeks at the Society. This soon-to-go-on-the-market graduate student is deeply grateful for the critical expertise which surrounded and supported her while at the Society.

The collegiality and academic purpose established by the staff of the AAS is contagious among the fellows. I have never before found myself in an environment where academics discussed their work so openly, in such depth, with such frequency. The fellows became so interested in one another's projects as to become one another's research assistants. I would receive e-mails from Stacey Robertson containing long transcriptions of oratories containing parenthetical transcriptions of laughter which she had come across while researching women's abolition movements in the Midwest. I found a Centennial joke book which made a number of jabs at Philadelphia suburbs—something which I pulled Maura D'Amore [AAS Drawn to Art Fellow and Ph. D. candidate in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill] aside to examine. The dinner table or an after-hours excursion would frequently be a time where we would bounce ideas off of, or work out problems with, other fellows. In my department at Emory, I am the only student in my stage of the program who works in nineteenth-century American literature, and while I am lucky to have an accommodating and expert advisory committee, I certainly do not discuss my project with them on a daily basis. Having the chance both to live and work with fellows who share an interest in closely related historical periods, I reveled in being able to assume shared knowledge and to engage in challenging discussions around method and materials. One realizes that the futures of the fields are likely to be influenced by debates held over coffee mugs in the Goddard-Daniels kitchen.

I have returned to Atlanta from Worcester with more primary material than I could possibly discuss in one dissertation, a dramatically-improved sense of my historical period, new and rich academic relationships with people in my field, and a stronger sense of myself as a scholar. I am thankful for the Kate B. and Hall J. Peterson fellowship that took me to the American Antiquarian Society for this excellent experience and look forward to a return visit to the 'generous dome' as soon as possible.

In recent years, the number of individuals coming to AAS as fellows has more than doubled. Thanks to new fellowships funded by the American Historical Print Collectors Society, the German American Studies Association, the Northeast Modern Language Association, the Hearst Foundation, AAS members Bob Baron, Diana Korzenik, Jay Last, and Bill Reese, the friends and family of the late Joyce Tracy, and all the past fellows who contributed endowment funds to create what we call our Legacy Fellowship, the number of short-term fellows has grown since I arrived in 1992 from seventeen to thirty-nine. My first year here we divided the two year-long NEH fellowships among four scholars; now we have the equivalent of three year-long fellowships each year from NEH. To that number we have also added two very important year-long fellowships which have been funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—our Distinguished Scholar in Residence, a post held this year by Professor

Margaretta M. Lovell of the University of California at Berkeley, and our Post-Dissertation Fellowship, which was renamed last year in honor of John Hench and which is this year held by Kyle Roberts who has just received the Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Two years ago I stood before you on the occasion of the annual meeting and reported that the Mellon Foundation had renewed its funding for these two fellowships until 2009 but had issued us a challenge—in the form of a one-million dollar matching grant—to start to build endowment for their perpetual support. The George I. Alden Trust generously agreed to give us \$250,000 toward that challenge, but only if we raised the other \$750,000 first. So, it is with double pleasure that I report that today the Council voted on the last two endowment gifts we needed to take us over our goal and thus fully meet both the Alden and the Mellon challenges, two years ahead of schedule. Those will be two years in which we hope to see this dedicated pool of funds grow even larger, not only through retained investment returns but also through additional gifts, and this growth will be especially important, given that we now draw 4.5 percent for spending from endowment funds instead of the 5 percent on which we based our original calculations when the Mellon challenge was being planned. My thanks to all who contributed so generously to this very special fundraising effort and indeed to all who have supported our growing fellowship program. And, on behalf of everyone who works at AAS, a special thanks to the fellows themselves; you make our work rewarding.

But I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge another important constituent group, still somewhat new to the AAS cohort but just as gratifying to serve: the teachers. This summer we learned that three of the four Teaching American History (TAH) grant applications in which we were to play a role by providing not only document-based curriculum materials, but also weekend workshops, week-long summer institutes, and administrative support for semester-long graduate-level seminars, were funded in the most recent round at the United States Department of Education.

The Worcester Public Schools (WPS) received one million dollars to continue and expand our work of training educators by involving all 200 WPS teachers of United States history in grades five, eight, ten, and eleven. This grant, entitled 'Preserving Our Democracy,' will overlap by one year with our current program, which is open to WPS teachers on a voluntary rather than a required basis. A consortium of charter schools led by the Abby Kelly Foster Charter School here in Worcester received \$500,000 for a project entitled 'Citizenship, Property, Identity and Representation' that will explore the history of New England Indians as a lens through which to examine aspects of the entire American story. And the school district in nearby Hudson received their first one-million-dollar TAH grant, which affords us the opportunity to present some of the successful teacher workshops we have already developed in partnership with the Worcester schools—a model of reuse and reselling that we hope to continue farther and farther afield, given the national scope of our collections and our network of leading scholars on whom the success of our teacher training program largely depends.

I could tell lots of good stories about our work with teachers but will stifle myself after this one. In late May we held in-library workshops for participants in two separate NEH seminars for community college instructors from a variety of disciplines. Organized by Northeastern University, the seminars explored the topic of the Lyceum Movement (which was started in nearby Millbury and flourished in Worcester) and its role in American culture. While other sessions featured great lectures, interesting site visits, and historical reenactments, the AAS sessions were particularly successful because they allowed for hands-on examination of historical materials and afforded the participants an opportunity to work collaboratively with each other. Jim Moran reported: 'Many people came up to me afterwards and spoke individually about how much they enjoyed the workshop. One mentioned that he just sat down randomly and found he was in a group with a political scientist, two literature teachers, and one

historian. He described how it was a great challenge to find common ground as the members approached the texts in ways endemic to each of their fields: the political scientist wanted to make generalizations, the historian kept paying attention to dates and the historical time frame, while the literature folks concentrated on the language of the texts. He further commented on how wonderful it was to engage in this way, and how this discussion was the first time in the week-long program that he had heard two of his colleagues say anything.' It's the power of holding the originals in your hand that gets the juices flowing. For more testimony on the magic that happens at AAS seminars, I recommend that you open up the July 2007 issue of *The Book* newsletter and, after noting the cover story on the appearance of Volume 3 of our collaborative *A History of the Book in America*, read the summary of the wildly successful 2007 summer seminar, 'Re-Reading the Early Republic: From Crèvecoeur to Cooper.' The reviews were written by seminar leader Wayne Franklin and the matriculants, among them impressive scholars of all ranks and several disciplines, Ph.D. candidates, collectors, and librarians, all exhibiting (to quote Joanne Chaison) 'boundless energy, intellect, curiosity, and good will.' The excitement of the seminar is captured brilliantly in these highly readable essays. I recommend them highly to you.

There is much more that I might try to cram into this report: about the great progress we are making with cataloguing and conservation, about the great time we had this summer when some 350 early-American historians all descended on Worcester at the same time for the SHEAR (Society of Historians of the Early American Republic) conference, about how thrilled (and bemused) we all were to see our colleague Phil Lampi and his lifelong quest for election returns described in a recent *New Yorker* article as 'one of the strangest and most heroic tales in the annals of American historical research,' and about how annual giving last year surpassed the high-water mark set the previous year by 25 percent, thanks to our generous members. But I promised that I

would return to 'the matter at hand'—our real estate plans and our neighbors' concerns about them. Let me summarize, as briefly as I can, what we have proposed and why:

- In order to make more effective use of the Goddard-Daniels property, we have developed tentative plans to renovate and completely restore the carriage house, connecting it to the main house by a new structure which would contain an elevator to serve both buildings. The carriage house would provide not only working offices for staff but also a multi-function seminar and workshop space where collection materials could be safely handled, displayed, and stored on a temporary basis. Currently our Council Room here in Antiquarian Hall is the only space we have for such use, and it is often double-booked or too small for the group or class. The public spaces on the first floor of the Goddard-Daniels House would remain largely as they are for social gatherings, community meetings, and educational programs where access to library materials is not essential. And the five bedrooms on the second floor, currently used by resident fellows, would be put to use as administrative offices with minimal reworking. These new and existing offices at the Goddard-Daniels House would make it possible for us to amalgamate all our non-library personnel—including those of us who have been 'camping out' at 9 Regent Street for the past two years—into one building. But this proposed use of the Goddard-Daniels House raises two important questions: (1) where do we put the fellows' residence and (2) where will we accommodate—as unobtrusively as possible—the twenty spaces needed for staff parking and required by the city parking code?

As I hope you can appreciate after hearing what Jennifer Hughes said about the value of the community formed by fellows in the shared living arrangements at AAS, we are very eager to

continue to provide such housing and to have it easily accessible to the library. The house we plan to vacate at 9 Regent Street is simply too small and cannot meet code requirements for handicapped access and secondary emergency egress without extensive exterior reconfiguration—a potential challenge in our local historic district. Thus when the house adjacent to the Goddard-Daniels House at One Montvale Road was being readied for market earlier this year by the heirs of Anne Morse Lyell—a longtime friend of the Society—we were pleased to discover that it could comfortably accommodate as many as eight resident fellows, with one ground floor suite being easily made accessible for people with handicaps. Massachusetts law allows educational organizations such as AAS to make institutional use of property otherwise zoned for single-family residences if the use is central to the organization's mission, as the fellowships are to ours. And we believe all the code requirements for such use can be met without any exterior changes, which would have to be approved by the local historical commission.

As for staff parking, a portion of the Lyell property contains a now-derelict tennis court, which was built by the Daniels family in 1938 after they acquired the parcel as part of a real estate transaction with their Park Avenue neighbors, the Estabrooks. When the Lyells acquired the court from the Daniels family in 1959, they also obtained a right of way through the old Estabrook property out to Park Avenue—which I believe they intended to use had they ever had the court rebuilt—because the change in elevation made it difficult for construction equipment to be brought in from Montvale Road. Like most of the other properties along Park Avenue, the old Estabrook place is now zoned for professional office use and is not included in the Montvale Local Historic District, which largely features an attractive set of houses in a variety of styles, built in the first quarter of the twentieth century. So while the Lyell house, built in 1918, is included in the district with its contemporaries along Montvale, the tennis court portion of the property was left outside the district (although there is a vigorous

move now afoot to have that boundary redrawn): Through the cooperation of the present owner of the old Estabrook property, we have proposed to use the existing right of way to configure a driveway which would lead from Park Avenue, through the heavily shaded northern portion of the Goddard-Daniels property, to a staff parking area located on the footprint of the tennis court, surrounded by shrubbery to obscure it from public view as much as possible. We are proposing that the parking surface be constructed of eco-pavers—which allow grass to grow up through an attractive lattice of concrete block—and that lighting be designed to have a minimum impact on any neighbors. Since staff use of the lot will happen most often only during the regular work day, we envision that the lights will be used only as needed, being turned on via remote control by staff when entering the lot and off again after a short interval by an automatic timer.

The purchase and sale agreement we have made with the Lyells is contingent upon our getting all the necessary approvals from various boards, commissions, and officials, and we are working hard toward that end. Over the past few months, we have attended many meetings—formal and otherwise—with neighbors and with preservation activists. While many have complimented us on the plans, others have taken great objection to them. We have tried to address the concerns of neighbors who have offered constructive suggestions and criticism. At the end of the day one is reminded that the real estate priorities of an institution are sometimes, by their very nature, at odds with that of a single-family homeowner, although the goal of peaceful coexistence should be one we all strive to achieve.

Those of you who follow these Council reports of mine will recall that I sometimes draw upon the reports of past Councils for inspiration or instruction, and in recent days I have been reading with renewed interest such texts as the 1908 report of the Council, under the leadership of Waldo Lincoln, in which the decision to build the new library on this site was being justified to the

members. Photographs I have seen of this neighborhood from that era show a rolling countryside, largely open, with large homes beginning to appear here and there. Bucolic seems the right word. A bit defensively, perhaps, the committee wrote, 'Undoubtedly to some, and particularly to members from out of town, the site may seem to be far away from the centre of the city, and perhaps too far away from our present home [which was at Lincoln Square], but those who know Worcester well, who are familiar with the conditions which contribute to its growth, and who have faith in its future, feel that it is well chosen.' Statistical predictions of Worcester's population—based optimistically on nineteenth-century growth patterns—seem to imply that downtown would expand to embrace the Society within a few decades, and in the meantime, it is noted, 'Electric cars from Main Street pass every 15 minutes, and it is not unreasonable to expect increased service in the near future.' Were those streetcars still running, we might not be having this battle over parking lot requirements now, but history—as much as we study it and celebrate it and want to draw our strength from it—doesn't allow for 'do-overs.' The history of this neighborhood is what it is, and we've been a part of it for almost a hundred years. With your continued support and a little forbearance from our critics, I hope we will be able to work out a successful plan so that the American Antiquarian Society might continue to flourish and serve up our magic for our growing constituencies for generations to come, all from these still gracious environs.

Ellen Smith Dunlap

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