

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL

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THIS year marks the 125th anniversary of the founding of the American Antiquarian Society. We have not planned to signalize the completion of a century and a quarter by any celebration, but perhaps the occasion should not pass without a transient reference. When the Society was established in 1812, there was no national organization formed for the collecting and preserving of material for the historian; nor, except for the Massachusetts Historical Society, founded in 1791, was there any State association designed for such a purpose.

Isaiah Thomas, if we can judge from the meager references in his Diary, first conceived the idea of the Society in January 1812, when he records under date of January 13, "Proposed to the Rev. Dr. Bancroft and Dr. Oliver Fiske the establishment of a Society by the name of the Antiquarian Society." Thomas had finished his "History of Printing" in 1810, and in the course of its preparation had gathered a large collection of rare books and newspaper files. These, added to a considerable number of books gathered during a lifetime of collecting, constituted a library of over three thousand volumes, probably the best in the country for the study of American history, literature, and printing. He realized the value of having a permanent depository for these books, destined to be of so much value for future historians, and this undoubtedly inspired the idea of a national historical library.

The petition for incorporation was granted by the Massachusetts legislature, October 24, 1812. As the founders stated, they applied to the State rather than to the Federal Government, from the belief that the Congress of the United States did not have the

constitutional power to grant charters to public societies outside of the District of Columbia. The By-laws originally provided that there were to be three meetings a year—two in Boston in June and December and one in Worcester in October. It was provided that the Library of the Society should be located in Worcester, the reasons for which were stated in one of the typically long sentences so frequently used by early writers: "For the better preservation from the destruction so often experienced in large towns and cities by fire, as well as from the ravages of an enemy, to which seaports in particular are so much exposed in time of war, it is universally agreed, that for a place of deposit for articles intended to be preserved for ages, and of which many, if destroyed, or carried away, could never be replaced by others of the like kind, an inland situation is to be preferred; this consideration alone was judged sufficient for placing the Library and Museum of this Society forty miles distant from the nearest branch of the sea, in the town of Worcester, Massachusetts, on the great road from all the southern and western states to Boston, the capital of New England."

Accordingly the Society started in to hold meetings and to gather material for its library. Beginnings were humble, but the Society had one advantage over many in that it possessed, from the very outset, a collection of books which constituted one of the best private libraries in the country.

There is no doubt but that the motivating force in the establishment of the Society was Isaiah Thomas. Yet the petitioners for incorporation were well scattered over Massachusetts. Of the twenty-eight incorporators, nine were from Boston, nine from Worcester, two from Cambridge, two from Northampton, and one each from Quincy, Dorchester, Medford, Barre, Springfield, and Brookfield. From the beginning the Society was administered by a Council made up about equally from residents of Worcester and Boston. The

membership was chosen from the country at large, more members from distant points gradually being elected as the officers became familiar with their accomplishments. In about a decade, one-third of the membership came from outside of New England.

The chief reason for the founding of the Society was the far-seeing realization that there soon would be historians who would interpret the country's annals and who would require sources for their research. A Report written in 1814 said, "The philosopher and the historian, or any to whom the Library of this Society may be useful, will not greatly regret the distance which separates them from the objects of their pursuit, if they can but eventually obtain in one place, what, otherwise, they would have to seek in many." Whether due to lack of libraries and of material, or to the scarcity of trained scholars, the output in American history in the thirty years following the Revolution was meager indeed. Ramsay's "History of the American Revolution," Holmes' "Annals of America," Marshall's "Life of Washington," Bristol's "Resources of the United States," Tench Coxe's "View of the United States," Hannah Adams' "History of New England," Thomas' "History of Printing" in the reference field, and about five histories of States are all that come to mind. Yet dozens of scholarly writers—themselves leading actors in the Revolution or in the establishment of the Constitution—might have written authentic narratives and interpreted those important periods. They recorded their thoughts in diaries and in letters, which when published, were of the highest value to later historians, who lacked the personal contact with the times, but had the incentive and the will. Perhaps it was the establishing of this Library, and libraries like ours, as well as the gradually increasing zest for the intellectual life, so graphically described in Van Wyck Brooks' "Flowering of New England," that inspired a more learned and more active school of historical writing in America.

As I look about this exceedingly attractive meeting-room, of which the Club of Odd Volumes is so justly proud, I am reminded of the first Boston meeting of the Antiquarian Society which I attended, thirty-one years ago, in Ellis Hall at the Massachusetts Historical Society. I well remember Charles Francis Adams, Dr. Samuel A. Green, James F. Hunnewell, Andrew McFarland Davis, William B. Weeden, and others, but of the thirty-five members present, only three are now living. The earliest Boston meetings of the Society were held in the Exchange Coffee House in Congress Square, a seven-story building reputedly the finest hotel in the country. After this was destroyed, the meetings were held at various hotels, in the afternoon, and generally followed by a dinner given by some member. In 1848 the Society met for the first time in the Hall of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in the Boston Athenaeum on Beacon Street. In 1921 the late Henry H. Edes wrote for the Report of the Council an account of the Boston meetings of the Society, in which he described some of the social features of those occasions about which the official records are painfully silent. Would that some earlier chronicler of a social bent had performed a similar service for the middle of the century. After the Academy moved to the Fenway, the Society from 1900 to 1915 held its meetings through the invitation of the Massachusetts Historical Society in Ellis Hall. When the Academy constructed its new building on Newbury Street, the members of the Society in 1916 accepted the invitation of the former host, and there gathered until last April. Therefore from 1847—a space of ninety years—we have had but two organizations sponsoring our Boston meetings, and now a third—the Club of Odd Volumes, to which we express our deep indebtedness for this friendly act.

The deaths of three members are to be recorded in this Report—William Crowninshield Endicott of Boston on November 28, 1936; Grenville Howland

Norcross of Boston on February 12, 1937; and Nathaniel Wright Stephenson of Claremont, California, on February 9, 1935, the last not previously reported. Obituaries of these members will appear in the printed Proceedings of this meeting. Also should be noted the deaths of two foreign members—William Lawson Grant, of Toronto, Canada, on February 3, 1935, and Sir Charles Harding Firth of Oxford, England, on February 19, 1936.

During the past winter a new Handbook of the Society has been in course of preparation and will shortly be distributed to members and to libraries throughout the country. The last Handbook was published in 1909 and has long been out of date, but lack of funds for printing has prevented us from replacing it. Through a generous gift from an interested friend of the Society, we have now been able to produce a new Handbook, designed to describe the resources of the Library and their usefulness in historical research. The Librarian, Mr. Vail, has made a comprehensive examination of the various collections, the first exhaustive accounting since the doubling of the size of the Library in the last twenty-five years, with a view to record their comparative strength in the field of American history and literature among the country's leading libraries.

As Mr. Vail points out in his manuscript, our collections of American historical and literary materials are especially rich in the following fields, in each of which our holdings are either the most extensive or are among the three or four most complete collections in the country: general American history, literature and bibliography; newspapers, periodicals and imprints to 1820; biography, genealogy and local history; almanacs, history of printing and journalism; cookbooks, directories, book auction and dealers' catalogues; federal, state and municipal documents, including New England town reports; institutional, educational, industrial and transportation reports;

college and school publications and amateur journalism; learned, historical and patriotic society publications; the literature of the Revolution, the War of 1812 and the westward movement; negro literature, slavery, Civil War and reconstruction; American literature including early poetry, fiction and drama and modern first editions; children's literature and textbooks; early religious history and literature including the most extensive collection of the writings of the Mather family, their manuscripts, private library and family portraits; Bibles, hymnology and psalmody; song books and sheet music; early broadsides and broadside poetry and ballads; early maps, caricatures, copperplates, lithographs, mezzotints and woodcuts, including the largest collection of American bookplates; stereoscopic and other photographic views and portraits; and manuscripts. The Handbook will be liberally illustrated with views of the building, portraits, and reproductions of rare books and prints.

A primary object in publishing the Handbook is, and should be, to attract gifts and financial support. President Waldo Lincoln, in appealing for funds in 1909, said, "If such funds are raised, the members will be astounded to find how soon we can make this the great historical library of the country for matters pertaining to the history of the Western Hemisphere. Today, poor in money as we have been, our library is so rich in material that no historical writer can afford to neglect it. All that we need are the means to complete what others have so well begun." That statement is as true today as when Mr. Lincoln wrote it—even more so, since the Library has grown so greatly. But although the collections have doubled and the work of the staff has trebled, the financial resources have not kept pace. We have been told many times that if we explain our situation and prove the help that we are rendering to American scholarship, the appeal will instantly be understood by those who are in a position to give generously. Yet this prophecy has

not been fulfilled. Wealthy patrons of learning have their own local charities near at hand, for which the appeal is stronger and more persistent. An institution not located in one of the greater American cities, no matter how unselfishly it serves scholarship as a whole, is overlooked in munificent bequests or the granting of large gifts. Yet what better or more permanent result could a donor ask for than the knowledge that his benevolence would be used to serve and broaden the intellectual life of the country.

Respectfully submitted,

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*For the Council*

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