

The Report of the Council

April 20, 1976

AN AD HOC committee consisting of Bernard Bailyn, Bruce G. Daniels, Henry B. Dewey, O. B. Hardison, Hudson Hoagland, Barnes Riznik, Roger E. Stoddard, and John Jeppson, 2nd, chairman, was appointed by the President on October 15, 1975, to look at the Society in terms of its major functions and the effectiveness with which these functions are being carried out. It was asked to recommend such changes in the Society's purposes and objectives, organization and membership as it saw fit in order to meet changing conditions.

In charging the ad hoc committee with this task, the President was responding to several problems. One is the difficulty of developing broadly based financial support for a Society which opens its unique and substantial library resources to a relatively small group of scholars even though these scholars through their publications make available the resources of the library to a much broader public. For the same reason, Mr. Wiggins also questioned the Society's practice of retaining a relatively small membership, only a portion of which supports the Society financially, adds to its collections, uses its facilities, or attends its meetings. Finally, he questioned whether or not the resources of AAS could not be more widely utilized in order to benefit society to a greater degree.

The committee, after several meetings in camera and one with the Society's staff, reached the following conclusions, which were approved by the Council:

First, that the functions of AAS as established in its charter

are as pertinent and viable as ever: To collect and to preserve the nation's historical record in order to encourage the enlargement and dissemination of historical knowledge of our country.

Second, within this charter, AAS should provide the means of opening its resources to a more diverse public as well as an enlarged scholarly clientele. This may be accomplished by building on existing activities and accomplishments of the Society such as publications, Readex Microprint editions, facsimile kits for schools, fellowship programs, and so on. In particular, the Council recommends as courses of action:

a) improved delivery of library and conservation services to care for and to exploit the collections through a professional staff in sufficient numbers and compensated at a professional level;

b) a reassessment of the Society's publication program with an eye to improving the *Proceedings* and enlarging its influence within the scholarly community, as well as involving the scholar-members of AAS more fully in its publication;

c) the encouragement and enlargement of the fellowship program, moving toward the establishment of a center for advanced studies in American history and culture through the year 1876;

d) the establishment of an educational office to enable AAS to plan and schedule lectures, classes, symposia, and other events appropriate to the Society's purposes;

e) the establishment of cooperative relationships with appropriate educational institutions in order to enhance the Society's ability to develop such programs as outlined above;

f) the encouragement of funding efforts to accomplish these ends.

Third, the Council believes that at present the character of AAS membership should be retained but that the number of

members should be gradually expanded. Therefore, the Council and officers of the Society will make strenuous efforts to increase the sense of responsibility of all members of the Society in order to strengthen the Society and to enhance the usefulness of its library.

Fourth, the Council realizes that to remedy existing financial deficits, or to carry out these recommendations, the Society must enlarge its endowed financial base and increase its annual income. It recognizes that the competition for the eleemosynary dollar is becoming greater but also that the economic base of our nation is growing. AAS will need fundraising skills of the highest order to realize its goals. Beyond that, the members of the Society must take on a greater share of the burden in seeing that their institution not merely survives but that it fulfills its proper function in the nation's educational system.

Finally, the Council enthusiastically commends the staff of the Society for their loyalty, imagination, and diligence in making AAS an effective institution for learning. The Society's purposes are sound, its combination of resources unique, its staff excellent, and its possibilities for service great. The Council recommends to the membership that the Society make every effort to fulfill its opportunities to serve the nation.

The following statement, prepared by the Director and Librarian, grew out of conversations held between members of the ad hoc committee and the staff.

John Jeppson, 2nd

It is clear that for the past several years a number of factors within the national fabric have produced unusual strains upon all cultural institutions. Essentially, those factors are based on the broad raising (or leveling, according to one's point of view) of expectations for personal enrichment, both cultural

and economic, among the nation's population. This has been due to a greatly enlarged national economic base which developed after World War II. Attendant to this were improved opportunities for higher education, expressed through such national policies as the GI bill of rights, for members of our society who heretofore had not been able to obtain collegiate level education.

These factors in the 1950s and 1960s produced a crisis in formal educational institutions which was met by greatly increased state or federal appropriations to all levels of public education, and successful fund drives for enlarged facilities in the private sector. However, in the public view, the independent learned societies or research libraries (such as the American Antiquarian Society) are on the periphery of the educational establishment. Such institutions were denied access to government funding and because they lack an easily definable, large, and loyal constituency have found the raising of private monies difficult indeed. To aggravate our situation, scholars are abandoning collegiate institutions as places to conduct serious research. They have come to view independent research libraries as centers of advanced research in the humanities which are not immediately under the influence of student needs. Moreover, younger scholars in particular have developed expensive expectations of service and access to research collections through long-distance electronic or photographic means. There is still little basic support for independent research libraries in sight from foundation or governmental sources. The tax reform bills of 1969 and 1975 bode ill for continuing private giving. Although the need and demand for services from independent institutions still increase, continuing economic difficulties are making new accretions to capital even more difficult.

The Council sees the matter thusly: the essential and continuing work of the Society requires expanded financial support through increased endowment and additional annual in-

come. To meet the needs and expectations of modern society, AAS must sponsor additional programs which will carry the unique resources of AAS to a more diverse public. The latter efforts also will require additional funding. Over the next few years the Society must either successfully meet these demands or radically reduce even its traditional services. We are reaching the point at which very real choices will have to be made.

In considering solutions to these problems, the essential nature of the American Antiquarian Society must be kept before us. It is first and last a learned society. It is a full and respected member of a small group of national and international organizations whose functions are to encourage original humanistic thought and to make possible the discovery of truth. Our purpose is not to popularize history nor to serve as a local, state, or national attic. Rather, the functions of AAS as established in our charter are, in order of importance: To collect and to preserve the nation's historical record in order to encourage the enlargement and dissemination of historical knowledge of our country—that is, to make those collected and preserved records culturally useful.

These purposes are based upon the belief of our founders and the present governors of AAS that humane learning is of value to mankind because through it one may acquire perspective to understand that the present does not stand in isolation from the past or the future.

The library of the Society is the basic and most important means by which AAS fulfills its mission. AAS has depended upon the existence of its library collections and staff assistance to individual scholars as the primary means of disseminating historical knowledge. In this equation, scholars do their research at AAS and publish their results, thus multiplying historical knowledge by the number of readers of their books.

During the past few years, in order to serve scholars more

adequately, we have professionalized the staff, have enlarged and renovated the 1910 library building, have pared our collections to essential bodies of materials required to support research within AAS responsibilities, and have modernized library techniques. Despite these gains, the primary goals for organization of library materials and the establishment of a staff structure capable of maintaining and exploiting the collections have not yet been achieved. Until the Society is enabled through sufficient endowment or increased annual income to do so, the very foundation of the Society's functions is in danger. In short, the Society must face the necessity of funding adequate to its needs if its great library built by seven generations of members is not to fall into desuetude, much less to reach any semblance of fulfillment of its potentiality.

The basic work of the library staff is to organize, conserve, and interpret the collections under their care for the use of readers and, it is to be hoped, to make use of the collections themselves by appropriate scholarly means. Recent changes in procedures governing readers' access to the Society's library materials presuppose that AAS will develop suitable catalogues in order to provide entry to collections other than by searching shelf by shelf, or by handling uncatalogued manuscripts, newspapers, broadsides, or pamphlets. Maintaining the physical integrity of the collections and ensuring their conservation required such a change. However, until we make our collections more accessible through organization and cataloguing, we cannot fulfill this vital function of curatorship—making the records held in trust by AAS useful to scholars and to society generally. In this responsibility we are falling behind in our work. There is no other solution but staff, employed at salaries which are within the norm for people of their talent and experience, to do the intellectual work which will permit us to capitalize on the benefits which new technologies make possible.

Beyond these traditional problems of library economy is the growing need for increased physical conservation work on research materials—repairing, deacidifying, and doing other things necessary to insure that the physical objects will survive for the use and enrichment of later generations. The Society has yet to meet that problem on a scale sufficient to the magnitude of it. The solution may lie in cooperative ventures, but to engage in them will require funds not now available to the Society.

During the past few years AAS has sponsored a number of short-term fellowships for scholars and students living at a distance from Worcester. The purpose of this program has been to bring people to Worcester to use the resources of the Society's library effectively over a period of one to three months. We have been pleased with the results, which have helped spread the news of the richness of our holdings, allowed our staff to work with and learn from our visitors, and given the staff experience in administering a modest fellowship program. Also, we have participated in the family history project sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation at Clark University which has brought three scholars to AAS for longer periods of time than our own funds could support. The upshot of this experience is that the staff and Council believe that a fellowship program is of definite value to the Society's efforts to promote the utilization of our library. The collections are fully capable of supporting the scholars' work while we benefit from their knowledge and appraisal of our holdings. New fellowships funded through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities will be a further valuable expression of our interest in this area as we look forward to the future establishment of a center and residence for visiting scholars.

Beyond serving individual scholars through its library facilities, AAS from its founding has made efforts to disseminate historical knowledge to a wider clientele by means of publication: the Proceedings from 1813 (now in the eighty-sixth

volume of the New Series); the *Transactions and Collections*, 1820–1912, constitute twelve volumes of edited documents or pioneering historical interpretations; since 1912, separately published finding guides to printed matter; and, most importantly, the Readex Microprint edition of American printed texts, 1640–1819, a project accomplished at a great cost to AAS but one which has made serious scholarship in early American history possible throughout the world.

The Council is convinced that the Society's publication program is a vital way of fulfilling in part its responsibility to spread abroad historical knowledge. It sees little need to question the assumption that subjects relating to American printing and publishing would remain the primary field of coverage. However, its committee requested staff and the Publications Committee to consider again problems relating to the *Proceedings*. Can it be made to be more effective, thereby finding circulation among more subscribers? Does the fact that it tries to sustain the dual purposes of communicating to Society members as well as of publishing material unrelated thereto severely inhibit its usefulness for either purpose? These questions have not been resolved and are matters for further consultation.

The Council endorses the concept that publications offer the Society an economical means of reaching audiences beyond those to which we have traditionally addressed ourselves. For example, the *American Bicentennial Historical Facsimile Packet*, which our staff developed with Francis G. Walett, represents a trial venture in full-sized facsimile reproduction suited to use by secondary school pupils. Future projects might be possible which would make use of project funds for staff and photoreproduction, as well as the specially developed skills in curriculum development of staff members at Old Sturbridge Village.

Similarly, the newspaper series, funded and distributed by the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation

and developed by AAS staff and Professor Walett, is another means of approaching an entirely new audience for AAS materials. So too is the film *Pictures to Serve the People: American Lithography, 1830-1855*.

In short, the Council believes that through judicious selection of publication projects, in conjunction with specific project funding and through arrangements with commercial distributors, the Society can begin to serve a constituency beyond our traditional one.

On the advice of its ad hoc committee, the Council is of the opinion that, when time, place, and funds are available, an educational program mounted in conjunction with the Worcester Consortium for Higher Education will be a suitable means of sharing resources with local collegiate institutions. Such a program could take the form of a senior honors or a graduate-level seminar which would be open to selected students from appropriate Worcester institutions. We would expect that one or more of the AAS visiting scholars would serve as an intellectual resource for the seminar which would be planned by an AAS educational officer with suitable training and experience. Should such a member be added to the staff, we would hope that other public educational programs, perhaps in the form of lectures and concerts, could be planned.

Such ideas, of course, are dependent upon independent funding and a suitable location for such activities.

The final topic which the ad hoc committee discussed was the matter of Society membership. A number of members think that the traditional method of electing their colleagues is an anachronism—that, given both facts that the Society's services are designed for a non-mass audience and that the membership is elective, the Society has an unnecessarily exclusive reputation. However, the Council's opinion on this matter is that AAS members have accepted election because of personal interest in and willingness to support historical scholarship—as practitioners, as administrators, as amateurs,

or as encouragers of the enterprise. It was suggested that a major effort to attract and hold a popularly based, dues-paying membership could well alter in undesirable ways the primary mission of the Society, and would entail a very large expense. The results, in short, might not be worth the candle.

On the other hand if membership is to continue in its present form and approximate numbers, the Council believes that the sense of responsibility and involvement by the members must be sharpened. The day is long past when the Society can be considered a private preserve. If we value learning and the benefits which it confers upon civilization, then it is our responsibility to preserve and strengthen the American Antiquarian Society to enable it to fulfill its rightful function in the present generation and those that follow.

Toward the fulfillment of these purposes your Council asks for and urges your cooperation. Without it, it is not unlikely that this independent learned society and its great library will be forced to seek other means of fulfilling its function as a national resource for historical scholarship.

Marcus A. McCorison

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.