

*Isaiah Thomas,
the American Antiquarian Society,
and the Future*

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THE NATURE of an institution and its place within the social fabric at a given time can be a phenomenon worth describing, for that description may be a useful telltale in testing the history of a time and place. An institution may make manifest the aspirations and purposes that have been invested in it by the people who made it. Like individuals, an institution is complex and is driven by varying or even conflicting motives or necessities from time to time; it derives life from the energy of people within it and the society that surrounds it, yet it takes on priorities and dynamics of its own that affect those involved with it. What follows is designed to describe some portions of the life of Isaiah Thomas—whose influence (or a refraction of it) still has meaning for the American Antiquarian Society—that may suggest some of the elements in his character that led to the founding of AAS, some of the basic purposes of the Society in 1812, and how these aims manifest themselves now in 1981, 150 years following the death of our founding president, librarian, financier, and builder.

The Society is a child of Thomas and he was an actor in the American Revolution. In Boston on August 7, 1770, Thomas issued the first number of the *Massachusetts Spy*, a newspaper that at first had some difficulty in finding a point of view and an

A version of this paper was read at the semiannual meeting of the American Antiquarian Society held in Worcester on April 15, 1981.

audience. However, by early March 1771, Thomas had identified a readership eager to purchase his publication. In his *History of Printing in America* (1810) he stated how he developed an editorial policy that resulted in that happy outcome:

For a few weeks some communications were furnished by those who were in favor of the royal prerogative, but they were exceeded by the writers on the other side; and the authors and subscribers among the tories denounced and quitted the *Spy*. The publisher then devoted it to the cause of his country, supported by the Whigs, under whose banners he had enlisted. . . .

Common sense in common language is necessary to influence one class of citizens, as much as learning and elegance of composition to produce an effect upon another.

The *Massachusetts Spy* was deliberately aimed at the common reader—a mass audience (if such existed in eighteenth-century Boston) and supported the popular, Revolutionary cause. This was Thomas's natural constituency. At age twenty-one and with minimal formal schooling but impatient with his circumstances, he was no scholar. Yet, he had a very good mind and a lively wit. He possessed a clever facility for combining editorial comment with news. With these attributes and skills he made a success of his enterprise. By the time of the battles of Lexington and Concord, although his business affairs were at high tide, Thomas's personal position in Boston was tentative at best. He was forced to get out of Boston which he did early on the morning of April 19 and, following his press to Worcester, he set up shop fully expecting to receive, through the influence of his patron John Hancock, the printing business for the Revolutionary government. In that expectation he was disappointed and his business affairs took a disastrous turn.

Early in 1779 Thomas, having suffered through the difficulties of the first years of the war, began anew in Worcester and business advanced steadily and rapidly from that time forward. When he retired from active supervision of his printing affairs in 1802, he had become a man of great wealth. It is not difficult to understand the reasons for his success. He was possessed of

splendid intelligence, great diligence, a handsome appearance, and charming manners. He seemed to know how to obtain financial backing and how to use it to the fullest. His system of partnerships was a means of establishing centers of commerce in various locations; his system of actively trading book stock with his competitors was a means of enlarging his inventory efficiently and cheaply. All these practices served as coordinated ways of increasing his assets. He was, it is fair to say, a modern entrepreneur—regularizing the means of production, distribution, and sales into a coherent system.

In addition to carrying on a successful business career during the 1780s and 1790s, Isaiab Thomas pursued other interests. As his means grew he collected books and had some of them beautifully bound by Henry Bilson Legge of Boston. He actively collected newspapers and other products of the American press as well as notes for the writing of his *History of Printing*. It is quite possible that the difficulties he experienced in attempting to gather material for the history prompted him to establish a new society two years after the publication of his book. In 1812, in an address to the members of the newly formed American Antiquarian Society, Thomas wrote:

The great benefits arising to the civilized world from associations of individuals for promoting knowledge, industry, or virtue, are universally acknowledged. . . . [Men] are so constituted by nature, that 'human actions, and the events which befall human beings, have more powerful influence than any other objects to engage and fix their attention.' We cannot obtain a knowledge of those, who come after us, nor are we certain what will be the events of future times; as it is in our power, so it should be our duty, to bestow on posterity that, which they cannot give to us, but which they may enlarge and improve, and transmit to those, who shall succeed them.—It is but paying a debt we owe to our forefathers.

He recognized that his generation had taken part in a great human event. He intended to preserve its history. As a republican, Thomas believed that those events had been wrought by the common people, not solely by great actors upon the world's

stage. Thus he wanted to preserve the materials used by, read from, or worked upon by the citizens of the new American Republic. He was a patriotic American and, like many others, strongly resented the condescending attitude displayed by Englishmen and Europeans toward all things American. It was then commonly held as a scientific truth that the flora and fauna (including man) of the New World were inferior to those of the Old. Whatever merit the native inhabitants of the American continent might possess was due to the fact that they may have been the descendants of the lost tribe of Israel. And we may recall Sidney Smith's later, condescending query, 'In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?' The questions were: What is the truth about America? Where are the data to prove the theories concerning Americans and their continent? Isaiah Thomas felt that there was no place in the new nation where those materials were being preserved, so he set about to establish one.

Thomas and his colleagues intended that the responsibility of their Society would include the antiquities of all of the Western Hemisphere—literary, natural, manufactured. Examples of them were to be placed in a collection that would be open to any inquirer. The knowledge gained through investigation of the collections was intended to benefit all. Americans should be able to determine for themselves the secrets of the past, just as they were able, themselves, to determine the course of their new nation.

Access to knowledge was part and parcel of the democratic ideal, in which was embodied the notion of the perfectibility of man, gained through one's own exertions, a notion linked to expectations of both spiritual and worldly rewards. As did other learned institutions, Thomas's American Antiquarian Society was to provide the sources and opportunities for self-improvement, knowledge, and wisdom to any citizen of the Republic who desired to make use of the resources preserved therein. In addition to its usefulness to individuals, Thomas's

institution would preserve the proofs of a social ideal that, for its adherents, balanced personal freedom with self-control and communal responsibility. 'In Free States,' Cato wrote, 'Polite Arts and Learning [are] naturally produced.' The result of free inquiry in religious or political matters is consensus and a truer resolution of public questions. A political system of checks and balances produces the same result in public life. Thus it was argued that the free interplay and resolution of ideas would result in the growth of perfection in all things—political, religious, cultural. The American Antiquarian Society was founded to channel historical knowledge and opinion into this arena from which truth would surely emerge.

In his 1812 address, Thomas went on to state that it appeared that a society might be established in the United States to promote literature and the useful and fine arts, one that could be 'truly beneficial, not only to the present, but particularly to future generations—a society not confined to local purposes—not intended for the particular advantage of any one state or section of the union, or for the benefit of a few individuals—one whose members may be found in every part of our western climate and its adjacent islands, and who are citizens of all parts of this quarter of the world.'

The intended objects of the society were to be, as Sir William Jones said of the Asiatic Society in London, 'Man and Nature—what is, or has been performed by the one, or produced by the other.' Isaiah Thomas intended that investigations of his society would be devoted to American antiquities, for he believed that the 'study of Antiquity offers to the curious and inquisitive a large field for research, for sublime reflection, and for amusement. Those who make collections in this branch of science, furnish the historian with his best materials, while he distinguishes from truth the fictions of a bold invention, and ascertains the credibility of facts; and to the philosopher he presents a faithful source of ingenious speculation, while he points out to him the way of thinking, and the manners of men,

under all the varieties of aspect in which they have appeared.' Thomas intended that his institution should receive 'books of every description, including pamphlets and magazines, especially those which were early printed either in South or in North America; files of Newspapers of former times, or of the present day, are particularly desirable. . . . Manuscripts, ancient and modern, on interesting subjects, particularly those which give accounts of remarkable events, discoveries, or the description of any part of the continent, or the islands in the American seas; maps, charts, etc.' He went on to urge his fellow members to search for those 'numberless old books, newspapers and magazines, and many relicks of antiquity, crowded together in garrets and store houses, of no use to any one, and hastening to destruction by means of the weather and vermin.'

Thomas had identified a sphere of investigation that was worthy of the new Republic. It was to be not the classical antiquity of Europe, but the origins of the New World. Americans would excavate the remains not of ancient Greece, Rome, or Britain, but those of the Mississippi Valley or Peru. The members of the Society would collect not the ancient volumes of classical learning but the public prints, pamphlets, books, broadsides, and graphic arts of the Western Hemisphere. A participant in political revolution, Thomas would establish a library on revolutionary principles, one preserving democratic literature and the written materials of a culture in which all sorts of ideas freely circulate and from which precipitate new ideas of the true and beautiful.

This *was* revolutionary, for even the libraries that passed in 1812 as 'public' were given over to a reasonably stable body of literature, that is, the classics in the original and translation; basic works of religious commentary; volumes on ancient history; some mathematical, scientific, and practical works; and a handful of belles lettres. A review of library catalogues demonstrates a remarkable congruence of opinion on what constituted an acceptable stock of books in collegiate or social libraries.

The curricula of institutions of higher learning were constructed on Baconian principles. Thus the library and field of inquiry established by Isaiah Thomas constituted a pioneering departure from the norm and reflected his own essentially secular, nonacademic, and proletarian background.

Thomas's ambitions for his foundation were substantial. Having identified the field of inquiry and the sources from which historical knowledge were to be drawn, Thomas wrote in an 1814 address to the Society, 'When we consider, that the vast Libraries, and the splendid Museums, possessed by similar institutions on the elder continent, had an origin as humble as ours, we may with confidence indulge the hope, that when this institution shall have arrived at the respectable age which those now bear, its means for extensive usefulness will not be exceeded by any of the like kind in any section of the globe.'

The founders of the Society understood that knowledge, to pass beyond mere opinion, must possess authority that is based upon a firm body of evidence and must withstand the criticism of peers. They intended that the deliberations and publications of the American Antiquarian Society should be a means of establishing and conferring authority upon facts and theories pertaining to their field. To legitimize their activities before the populace and to establish their enterprise as one conducted for the public good, the founders obtained a charter from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts so, they said, that they might enlarge the sphere of human knowledge, aid the progress of science, perpetuate the history of moral and political events, and improve and interest posterity.

Institutions such as the American Philosophical Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the American Antiquarian Society during the nineteenth century were centers for the encouragement of learning. Our national government was notoriously slow to assume such a task, taking ten years before accepting the opportunity offered through the 1836 bequest of the Englishman James Smithson. College faculties transmitted

received knowledge rather than attempting to enlarge the body of knowledge. Independent learned societies encouraged and published the results of the investigations of its members who were amateurs of learning or who were members of the learned professions—theology, medicine, law. They met on an equal footing at institutions such as AAS and to a considerable extent still do. The meetings of the Society, now almost 170 years after the founding, are testimony to the concept of the open republic of letters. The interaction between lay people and members of the professions resulted in a ‘multiplicity of thriving new worlds of learning,’ rather than encouraging a separation between professional scholars and laymen. The nineteenth-century learned society was an exemplar of that free state in which the growth of polite arts and learning was the natural result.

However, as the nineteenth century wore on, as American scholars such as our own George Bancroft traveled to German universities to be trained in new ways of developing knowledge on formalized, scientific grounds, as modern American universities developed, the amateur tradition was displaced and the old, learned societies gave up a portion of their responsibilities to the research universities where the scientific nature of knowledge was esteemed and where, the public came to believe, more effective ways of developing useful knowledge would flourish. The public may have correctly judged the matter, but not the social cost which has been a cruel separation of the lay public from professional scholars. The increasing ‘professionalism’ of historians, each practitioner attaining and claiming authority over a body of esoteric knowledge, led to narrow focuses of historical studies and to a lack of application to the human condition. The price of these trends is a lowered appreciation of a historical point of view by a large portion of our present society.

The specialization of historical inquiry during the latter decades of the nineteenth century resulted in the abandonment by

the Society of its place as an important center for original ethnological and archaeological investigation. AAS radically revised its scope and activities to meet the challenge of altered responsibilities. Shifting gears at the beginning of this century, AAS revived neglected areas of book collecting and bibliographical research, an element of our work that had its formulation with the interests of Isaiab Thomas. In the intervening seventy or more years, AAS has played a leading role in developing the basic research tools for the study of American printing and publishing, areas of human activity that can be vivid indicators of a culture that is based so firmly as ours has been on the distribution of printed materials. In the process of pursuing these tasks we have also built a great library of materials that can be exploited through research to advance knowledge of American history and culture of all kinds through the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century.

In addition, as patterns of research based on traditional academic disciplines have been found too limiting, independent institutions have taken on new life as centers for advanced study and as dynamic agents in encouraging the interaction of ideas among scholars. Our present task is to make our unique resources most useful to an expanding constituency and to maintain and enlarge the channels through which amateur and professional scholars can enrich our communal historical imagination.

During the past few decades the fabric of our country has undergone fundamental changes. The size and diversity of the population have increased. So, too, has the need for elements in our culture to provide links to our national past and to make connections between our citizens. The purposes and functions of the American Antiquarian Society have been, since 1812, directed toward fostering an understanding of our national identity and toward providing the means to enlarge the minds of citizens who make use of the AAS facilities. Thus, our opportunities and responsibilities for service are greatly expanded.

Because of the quality of the Society's collections and the responsibilities for service that such collections carry with them, AAS has attempted to respond imaginatively to enlarged needs and expectations of scholars and the public at large, all the while relying upon a financial structure intended for a different, simpler age. The Society's response to these pressures for increased and varied services has led to an enlarged staff and facilities, some of the expense of which has been borne through greatly increased levels of annual giving. However, reliance over time on annual contributions, generous as that giving is, will prove inadequate if AAS is to maintain its standing as an internationally important research institution.

The Society fosters research and learning by means of its research library and microform publication of original materials. In addition, the Society disseminates knowledge of American history and culture through its *Proceedings* and separately published works of original scholarship. A fellowship program is designed to bring scholars to the Society in order that they may use intensively the resources of the library. An education program interprets the Society's activities and holdings to students, scholars, and laypeople. The Society participates in the larger world of research libraries and scholarship through membership in the American Council of Learned Societies, the Independent Research Libraries Association, and the Research Libraries Group.

We think AAS does more than seems possible from an undercapitalized financial base. The means for collection building, for the compilation and publication of guides to the Society's collections (indeed to the national printed record), and for rendering library services have depended upon the gifts of money, time, and energy from dedicated members of our staff and from members and friends of the Society. However, we have reached a point in our history beyond which neither dedication nor productivity can take us. Still, if we can achieve an adequate financial base now, perhaps for the first time since

Isaiah Thomas himself stopped cutting the grass in front of the first Antiquarian Hall, the Society can break forth into new levels of service to humanistic learning. We are possessed of a superb staff and a great research collection. We have learned new skills to make the Society more useful to our nation by improved services to readers and visiting scholars, by innovative adaptation of computer capabilities, by influencing nationally important movements to make our research collections more effective; in short, by developing all of the inherent attributes—access, research, interpretation—of a true center of learning in American history and culture.

Some years after the founding of the Society, a spiritual successor to Thomas, Henry Stevens of Vermont, wrote, 'A nation's books are her vouchers. Her libraries are her muniments. Her wealth of gold and silver, whether invested in commerce, or bonds, or banks, is always working for her; but her stores of golden thoughts, inventions, discoveries, and intellectual treasures, invested mainly in print and manuscript, are too often stored somewhere in limbo. . . . they slumber rather than fructify.' It is our privilege, as members of the American Antiquarian Society, to insure that the great, natural treasure of books and manuscripts that has been given to us by past generations and that we hold in trust for future generations will increase for the enrichment and enjoyment of our fellow citizens. As we approach the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Society, it is our duty as its stewards that we be faithful to our task. I invite you to join our Council and me in meeting the challenges that new opportunities and the future offer to us.

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