

*Serendipity and Synergy:  
Collection Development, Access, and  
Research Opportunities at the  
American Antiquarian Society  
in the McCorison Era*

*Preface*

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THE ABOVE TITLE was the theme of a symposium, held during the 1992 annual meeting of the Society, to honor Marcus A. McCorison on his retirement after thirty-two years of distinguished service to AAS as librarian, director, and president. The intent of the symposium was to honor Marcus by calling attention both to some of the many collections that he developed during his long tenure and to the improvement in access to them that he achieved. We were particularly anxious to highlight the nineteenth-century holdings of AAS, which Marcus built up admirably, because we have long felt a gap between the reality of the strength of those collections and the public awareness of them, even by scholars.

We invited several scholars to discuss—informally and in concrete and personal terms—their experiences in working in AAS collections and the impact that their work here had on their own scholarship. Our hope—manifested in the symposium title—was

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that this exercise would help illuminate both a "new" form of serendipity of research created not by browsing in open library stacks but by the use of sophisticated, computerized finding aids, by collaboration with caring and knowledgeable curators, and by the collegial sharing of information and ideas with staff, fellows, and other readers, as well as the kind of synergy that results from doing research in the deep and rich collections of AAS, where all sorts of research trails may be efficiently and effectively pursued.

The honoree on the occasion, Mark McCorison, was certainly a 'Grand Acquisitor,' as one of the speakers called him. During his long tenure at AAS he acquired some 115,000 items, ranging from a single letter or broadside to a run of hundreds of issues of a single newspaper title. Numerically speaking, McCorison's greatest legacy as the Society's acquisitor lay in the great quantities of nineteenth-century material he acquired, effectively altering the balance of the collections between the colonial and Revolutionary eras and the nineteenth century. He did everything he could to improve access to AAS collections, from making sure that AAS holdings were listed in bibliographies in progress to helping pioneer the computerized cataloguing of rare and other specialized research materials. His crowning achievement was in the development of MaRK (*Machine Readable Katalogue*), a sophisticated, in-house computerized on-line catalogue, which offers great promise of facilitating access to AAS collections in ways unheard of before. Finally, by establishing the AAS fellowship program and by encouraging and fostering the development of such academic programs as the AAS regional seminars and the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, he provided the mechanisms by which scholars could come to AAS and, with the staff, form a scholarly community.

The four scholars who spoke at the symposium—Patricia Cline Cohen, William W. Freehling, Kay Seymour House, and Roger E. Stoddard—all know AAS, its collections, and Marcus well. All of them are members of the Society and most of them have held AAS visiting research fellowships at one time or another. Marcus

was invited to respond to and comment on their remarks at the conclusion of the symposium, which was chaired by Jill Ker Conway, chairman of the AAS Council.

All four speakers presented lively and fascinating accounts of their particular experiences with, or viewpoints on, AAS. Their remarks are published here in somewhat revised form. Particularly encouraging to the staff members present was the speakers' testimony to the indispensable role that staff play in mediating between collections and readers. In his response, McCorison touched upon the tensions inherent in administering a research library—the tensions produced by the contending desires to foster use of research collections by the present generation of scholars and to preserve them for the future. Of all the presentations, Bill Freehling's talk grappled most directly with those tensions, as seen from the scholar-researcher's point of view. He is right on the mark in his assessment that AAS needs to continue to improve the access to collections through computerized cataloguing and to make itself both better known in and more useful to the community at large, while at the same time maintaining policies for readers that serve to protect and preserve the collections for the posterity of us all. As McCorison pointed out in his response, AAS is committed to continue to bring more of its collections under the control of computerized cataloguing (and, in fact, has already catalogued a good portion of the southern pamphlets that Freehling had used so effectively in his own research here). Perhaps our only disappointment with the symposium was that none of the speakers was able to speak from any direct experience with our on-line catalogue, which had only recently been installed. On the other point, we can assure Freehling and others that the Society is in fact presently engaged in studying appropriate ways in which it might effectively broaden its services to new as well as traditional constituencies.

All of us concerned with the Society wish to thank the panelists for their encouraging words and constructive suggestions, to record our appreciation to Marcus McCorison for his many accomplishments, and to wish him well in his retirement.

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