

## *Southern Historical Materials at the American Antiquarian Society*

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THE LAST TIME I spoke in Antiquarian Hall, Marcus McCorison occupied a different position. Today he sits, newly retired from responsibility for anything in this hall. Then he was in charge of everything, including in charge of his speaker. So the minute I reached this podium, I noticed Marcus in back of the room, walking back and forth, in a way which demanded that I keep my eyes on him. He was a good friend of the audience throughout my speech. Initially, he put his hand to his ear, for fear I would not speak loudly enough. Then as I started to talk and talk and talk and talk, as is my wont, he looked at his watch. Very, very closely. He was an uncaged lion, making sure his lair was preserved. Today he is a caged lion, with no control over me or his institution. That cannot be comfortable, for a man who has made this place his own.

I came to Marcus's place with all of my friends asking, why are you going *there*? I was going there to spend a year, finishing a two-volume history of the southern road to disunion, starting in 1776 and culminating in 1861. I completed the first volume before I came, and I wanted a year off from teaching to write the second volume. But why, my friends asked, go to the American Antiquarian Society to study the nineteenth-century South? After all, there are marvelous libraries in the South, where you could go.

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There is the Library of Congress, which has wonderful collections in the nineteenth century. Why, in short, go to New England to study the South, and why go to a library which specializes in the eighteenth century?

I had personal reasons for wanting to come, and I had a student who had been given a fellowship by Marcus's library to use nineteenth-century southern materials. That student's fellowship symbolizes one of the first innovations at Marcus's place. When I started in the academic profession, the scholar had to find the fellowship to go to the library, and few fellowships were available. Now fellowships proliferate in the nation's research libraries, enabling people to come and use their resources. That is a welcome addition to the American academic world, and Marcus is partially responsible for it.

Anyway, my student holding the AAS fellowship told me that the place was incredibly rich in unused southern materials. I could not understand that, but he was a very good student, so I thought he was probably right. I applied. I was given a fellowship. I came, intending to finish up research and then to write the book.

The minute I walked into this room, however, I wondered if I had come to the right place. First of all, it is such a gorgeous place. I'm not used to gorgeous libraries. I'm used to ugly libraries that have wonderful things in them. This is the prettiest library I have seen in America—and also the cleanest. I am used to messy libraries, with ash trays on the tables, dirt on the floor, and scholars slouched, books cradled on their laps. But I could never find a speck of dirt in the place, and cradling, I quickly discovered, was not permitted. Then there was the registration procedure. Here I had been given a fellowship to come, and I still had to apply all over again, to walk in the door. People carefully checked my credentials. And then I finally arrived at the desk and asked the librarian to show me to the stacks, to see material in southern history.

I'm used to librarians who guide me to their stacks. I spent a couple of years in the Library of Congress stacks. That access to the stacks leads to a very creative process. You can find all kinds

of things that you did not know you were looking for, and thus would not know how to ask for, before going in the stacks. But the AAS librarian said 'No, you can't go in the stacks.' And I said, then how am I supposed to use this library? And I thought again, why did I come to the American Antiquarian Society?

My first impression, in short, was of a slightly closed place, a little fussy, a little stuffy, a little forbidding. That bothered me at first. But I had a year here, and I had to do something, so I had to go along with the place as it had been set up. That meant, initially, using the card catalogue, to find the southern material I wanted. I'm not sure what the secret of that card catalogue is, even after working here for twelve months, and I am sure that I will never figure it out. At any rate, I could not discern much of what I wanted from the card catalogue, and I could not walk into those stacks. All I could do was ask Marie Lamoureux and Joanne Chaison how to find material on 'southern Christian ministers.'

The relationship between Christianity and the South was getting to be a hot topic in southern history, and I realized that my previous research in this area had been none too good. Marie and Joanne responded that AAS had wonderful material on southern Christianity. I replied that most of it could not be listed in the card catalogue, and they said, we know it isn't listed in the card catalogue, but we have this terrific material. And so the terrific stuff started coming out and I swiftly understood that Marcus's place depended on a meeting of minds. The librarians knew what was back there, I knew vaguely what I wanted, and as a result of that meeting of minds, that meeting of personalities, the stuff started coming out and it continued coming out and it continued coming out, the most incredibly rich proslavery literature, in, of all places, this library in Worcester, this library specializing in the eighteenth-century North.

I later learned Marcus had collected much of this material in blind faith that someone such as myself would some day need it. He had collected all too much. Instead of writing my book, I spent almost all my AAS time on that material that wasn't listed in the

card catalogue and that I couldn't go to the stacks to find. This isn't the place or the time to tell you in detail what I found and why I think it is exciting. But briefly, I found the proslavery ministers admitting that much of the antislavery indictment of slavery was right. The southern clerics conceded that slavery had terrible defects, including letting masters sell husbands from wives and children from parents. Worse still, from the standpoint of Christian ministers, all slaves did not have access to Christianity. Some slaves were not allowed to go to church. Few slaves were allowed to learn to read, meaning they could not read the Bible. To these ministers, that was a mortal sin against Christ. Slaves *had* to read the Bible, had to hear revivalists, had to be able to come to ecstatic communication with God. If slavery, in short, was not changed, slavery was not right. And all of this was embedded in proslavery literature, emanating from people who were defending slavery, who were saying that slavery was the best possible way to organize a society, the best possible way to control blacks in a Christian environment.

I had found that the proslavery group and the antislavery group were really talking *to* each other, not past each other, as I had always thought. The antislavery group was saying, in effect, slavery is anti-Christian and you must therefore abolish it. The proslavery crowd was answering, no, slavery is right and we must keep it, but it is indeed wrong for it to be anti-Christian, and we must change the institution, change the very nature of slavery in America. And if we can't change it, they conceded, we must abolish it.

I used my last weeks at AAS to begin an article on the subject, which has since been published in the *Journal of Southern History*. I announced that all my information came from the American Antiquarian Society and that all scholars interested in southern history possessed a fine resource up North. That essay spurred me to write a book of essays, to be published next year and to include a revised version of my AAS essay. So it was an extraordinary year despite the forbidding first impression and despite the fact that I never had time to write my intended book, precisely because of all

the southern sources that Marcus McCorison, truly a Grand Acquisitor, had acquired.

As I used this material, I came into contact with other people studying here. That contact became almost as exciting as the material. Marcus's library has created a community of scholars in the library itself. As you heard from the previous speaker, that community of scholars interacts in wonderful ways. I shared my year here with Mark Velari, who was studying the eighteenth-century New England clergy. You can see immediately the connection between his New England clergy in the eighteenth century and my southern clergymen in the nineteenth century. Lee Heller was meanwhile studying novels in the early nineteenth century. The way novelists were trying to come to terms with their contrary world was similar to the way my proslavery writers were coming to terms with their difficult world. Mason Lowance was studying blacks and how blacks were coming to terms with the problems of slavery, the very same problems which my proslavery writers were tackling. We had excited discussions at lunch and at coffee breaks, coffee breaks enhanced by Lee Heller's cookies.

I know of no other institution in the country like this. Centers for advanced study flourish at Stanford and at Princeton, but those are centers for people who are primarily sitting alone in their offices, writing their manuscripts. And then there are research libraries where everybody is doing their own research and there is little community among the scholars. I know of no other place where research is being done and at the same time there is a community of scholars discussing their research.

Furthermore, one gets to know the outside community, the non-scholarly community, in the process of being a fellow. I was invited to lunch by William Sullivan and to dinner by Jane and Harry Dewey. We had fine discussions of history on these occasions, with academics and non-academics trading ideas. And thus I enjoyed not just a community of scholars but also a community of non-scholars and scholars, all working together.

Finally, there were symposia where I was enabled to present my

research in public ways, including to audiences like this. That is very useful to a scholar who is working on the materials by day and is able to talk about it at night, particularly to lay people who are not scholars. That interaction between professionals and amateurs, another Marcus McCorison ideal, lets authors know what readers are going to want to hear, what can excite them about what they are finding.

When you add up all these things that Marcus has created: this community of scholars that he has drawn here with his fellowships; this rich material that he has collected and which you finally can get at with the help of the librarians he has hired and trained; the private community in Worcester who sometimes dine with the fellows and eagerly come to talks like this; well, all of it, fused together, makes for one fine experience. It was easily my best academic year. I cannot thank this society or Marcus enough, for allowing me that year.

Now this is a sad moment of saying good-bye to the Grand Acquisitor. In the process of saying good-bye, you look back at all the wonderful things you've enjoyed, but you also look at some of the things that might be just a little better. Let me suggest two things that I think this society might do in the post-Marcus years. They are really extensions of what Marcus has already done.

First of all, I think that scholars ought to be able to come to a library and go through a catalogue and find what is available without depending so heavily upon the staff. The librarians here are marvelous, they may even be the best in the country, but there has got to be systematic ways to locate materials, beyond wonderful relationships with wonderful librarians. Of course Marcus agrees. He has done a tremendous amount, a pathbreaking amount, about the problem in recent years. The AAS has undertaken the most systematic computer cataloguing of its material on many periods. I think a next step in the next few years is for AAS to take that rich literature on slavery, that rich literature on antislavery, that rich literature on proslavery and truly catalogue it, truly organize it, and truly make it easy for scholars to find.

Secondly, I hope more can be done to get the Worcester community even more involved than it is now. Indeed, I hope the whole New England community can become involved in this New England treasure. New England and Worcester have here one of the great institutions in American and it's amazing how few New Englanders know about it, how few are involved in the work of this society, how few contribute financially to it. I think the thin base of support may have a little to do with that stuffiness I first encountered. The place has a way of seeming a little forbidding to people who first walk in the door. I think the society has got to be, in some ways, opened up to the rest of the world. Otherwise, the base of financial support and financial contribution will be too slim, and the next Grand Acquisitor will be inhibited in collecting great material for some future scholar.

Here again, I am suggesting exactly what Marcus himself has begun to do. In another fine experience here, I had the pleasure of teaching the American Antiquarian Society's undergraduate seminar. Each year two students from each of five local colleges come here and study in a research seminar run by a visiting professor. It's a unique opportunity for undergraduate education. First of all, the whole course is devoted to research. Secondly, it is very small, led by a professor who knows something about what can be done in one of the best research libraries in the United States. That process opens up the Society to the wider community. It brings in undergraduates who do not ordinarily come; they participate with the scholars; and thus that entrance door swings wider.

I think that the undergraduate seminar could be a model, that more people must know more about this society, more people must contribute to it, more people must support its magnificent work. But on the other hand, in the process of opening up, I think we've got to retain some of the closedness, got to keep control over the materials. I said in the beginning that I loved to work in the Library of Congress, because they let me in the stacks. But I was taken aback last year when the Library of Congress closed its stacks, because some of its books were disappearing. So that door

to the stacks has to be as forbiddingly closed and that entrance door to the Society has to be more invitingly open.

How to do that? I'm not sure I know. I don't envy Ms. Conway and her Councillors and our new president their task in trying to figure it out. But I think the model that has been adopted at Winterthur in the last couple of years may hint at the answer.

Winterthur, which I suppose is my second favorite place after the American Antiquarian Society, is a lot like this society. It is a museum for decorative arts in Wilmington, Delaware, set up by Harry DuPont, who was also a Grand Acquisitor. It's the best repository of American eighteenth-century furniture, just as this is the best repository of printed materials on eighteenth-century American society. Both of these public institutions restrict public access. At Winterthur, you go through the main collection in groups of four, you make appointments well in advance, you're never allowed to touch anything. Everything is under careful control and only a certain number of people can enjoy an institution like that when it is *so* controlled.

As a result, those who love Winterthur decided, four or five years ago, that there wasn't a large enough base of support, there weren't enough people coming through the doors, there weren't enough people contributing to the museum. So the board of trustees decided to build a new gallery, open to the public without appointment. That new part of the museum will draw hundreds of thousands yearly into the museum. Meanwhile, the rest of the museum will continue to be tightly controlled. I'd love to see that at AAS: more people coming in the entrance door, so that word will spread of this fine society, but no visitor going in the stack door, so that the fine materials can be preserved. It's all a matter of slightly shifting the balance of access on the one hand and control on the other.

But it's always easy to criticize. When I criticize the American Antiquarian Society, I criticize, as I criticize my wife and my children, with great love and affection. This place is a marvelous library. It opened my eyes to southern Christianity, deflected me

from what I came to do, delayed the publication of my book three or four years, but what a year it was, what an excitement it was, to discover the antislavery side of the proslavery argument. Thanks again, Marcus, for letting me come and for making this place a mecca for all who cherish our past.

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