

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 1999

I AM PLEASED to come before you to give the Report of the Council and to present a brief overview of the state of the Society as it begins its 188th year. It is, in a word, *flourishing*. By all measures, this has been an extraordinarily successful year at the Society and the occasion of the annual meeting affords a welcome opportunity for me to reflect upon our many day-to-day accomplishments and to place them in the larger context of a rich history of achievement and service that has been the hallmark of this great institution since its founding. Our mission—to collect, to preserve, and to make available for research a comprehensive library of early American life and culture—is today as vital and compelling as it was when first articulated by Isaiah Thomas. The goals to which Thomas aspired challenge and motivate us still, and many of the traditions he established have been maintained productively in our time.

But with our meeting today, we are breaking one of those traditions: the holding of the annual meeting on the third Wednesday in October. It is said that this date was picked, in part, for its proximity to the date of the so-called ‘discovery’ of America by Columbus. It was our hope that holding the annual meeting on a Friday and expanding it to a two-day format would make it possible for a broad range of our members and friends to attend, including many who had not yet fully ‘discovered’ the Society, its collections, and its staff. By the large number of you in attendance this evening, many having traveled from great distances, and the still-growing number who have signed up for the many interest-

ing programs being offered by special presenters tomorrow, I am encouraged to believe that a new AAS tradition is in the making. By the time our two-day affair concludes with the wonderful celebration tomorrow night of early American music by the Boston Camerata, leisurely Wednesday afternoon meetings may be gone forever! Let me here record my thanks both to our member Cork Hardinge of Seattle, who has been encouraging us for some time to adopt this format, and to my many colleagues on the staff who have worked to insure the success of this undertaking in its every complex detail. They join me in warmly welcoming you all here.

That Isaiah Thomas himself joins us in that welcome—at least in spirit—I can state with some confidence, for I feel that he and I have been in fairly regular communication of late. In this, his 250th year, the spirit of our founder has been very much among us, thanks to the diligent research and artful scripting of our Director of Outreach Jim Moran and to the superb acting of Neil Gustafson. Together, Neil and Jim have brought Dr. Thomas to life successfully for many audiences—ranging from a gathering of Thomas's own descendants (who visited the Society in June) to meetings of various civic and professional organizations. Earlier this year, we resurrected Dr. Thomas to help us announce the successful launch of our capital campaign. Plans are now being made for him to help us spread the word around the nation of the important work of the Society and to help us make the case for broader support to build, protect, and house our growing collections. He has also been enthusiastically received by classrooms of youngsters hungry to explore early American history through the lively persona of one who played a role not only in *making* that history but also in *preserving* it. For those of you interested in how we have managed to whet these young appetites for the study of history through the use of primary documents, please take note of the presentation Jim Moran is making tomorrow afternoon. He will introduce not only our new 'Isaiah Thomas—Patriot Printer' program; but also a number of our other innovative educational offerings for students and teachers. And tonight you are all in-

vited to enjoy a presentation of the most recent of the plays that Neil and Jim have created. Set in November 1820, 'Preserving All Others' affords us a fascinating glimpse of Thomas worrying over how he will be remembered by posterity, as he discusses with his lawyer the redrafting of his will. Concerned as Thomas apparently was about his legacy—as a printer and as a man—he would, no doubt, wish to be among us again tomorrow when we will hear a lecture by David D. Hall, general editor of *A History of the Book in America*, a collaborative history in five volumes that is being co-published by the Society and the Cambridge University Press. You may recall that Thomas himself compiled the *first* history of the book in America, which he published in 1810. The current scholarly endeavor has been a principal focus of our Program in the History of the Book in American Culture for much of the past decade and is eagerly anticipated in academic circles around the globe. Professor Hall's remarks—which are being recorded by C-SPAN for broadcast nationally on 'Book TV'—are in celebration of the publication of Volume 1 in that series, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, edited by Hall and fellow AAS member Hugh Amory. This is the third time that the C-SPAN cameras have come to Antiquarian Hall and is yet another example of the success we have had of late in using new technologies to extend access to our programs and collections beyond the confines of our particular locale.

On the technology front, without doubt our biggest news is that we have embarked on the ambitious task of bringing *all* of the computer equipment and programs at the Society thoroughly—and at long last—up to date. Many months of planning have gone into this undertaking, but it is still a thrill to see the network cable at last being strung and the equipment orders being finalized. All told, over the course of four years, thanks to the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and a donor who wishes to remain anonymous, the Society will be investing \$1.4 million—over and above the considerable resources that we are already devoting to information technology—for equipment

and programs, for training, for increased staffing, and for expert outside services to help in the massive migration of data from our old catalogues and administrative systems to an integrated and modern new one. These significant developments are being watched with understandable anticipation by our cataloguers. They have been successfully utilizing computers of various earlier vintages in their work for more than twenty-five years and are eager to insure that none of the quality and useful detail in the catalogue records they have created—and for which AAS is so widely recognized and heralded—is lost in the translation to more modern systems. With their watchful assistance, I am assured that it won't be. In fact, with the power of our new systems, the outstanding quality of the records that we already have online and continue to create, and the creative imagination of our remarkable staff, our ability to enhance access to our collections really knows no limit. Our priority will remain, however, on the acquisition, cataloguing, and preservation of unparalleled collections of originals, rather than on the systematic amassing of electronic surrogates. That work we are leaving largely to others, as we believe it essential that AAS remain focused chiefly on fulfilling its unique role among libraries, as the mother lode of historical materials in their original format.

Of course, it is our dedication to that role that continues to guide our acquisitions efforts as well, and the year just past has been a banner year for the growth and development of our collections, as those of you who will attend the presentation by our curators at noon tomorrow will see. Not only have we been able to acquire—by gift and purchase—many significant single items, but we have also been able to establish important new relationships with private and institutional collectors in our field of Americana that are already bringing a steady train of landmark additions to our library—newspapers, children's books, imprints, almanacs, manuscripts, and especially graphic arts items—and the bounty of those partnerships will continue for years to come. It is indeed true that strength begets strength, and it is particularly

exciting to see that phenomenon at work in our acquisitions program, where the capture of each and every new item is to be celebrated.

Joining in that celebration—and benefiting directly from it, of course—are our fellows, and this year the reading room has seen a bumper crop of them, including many receiving stipends that are supported by new endowments and grants. This is the first year, for instance, that we have had in residence scholars supported by all three of the new Mellon-sponsored stipends for long-term fellows. In addition, we have welcomed our first Richard F. and Virginia P. Morgan Fellow to study Ohio imprints and our first Reese Fellow in bibliography, and look forward to naming scholars to the new ‘Drawn to Art’ fellowship post and to the artists and writers fellowships begun with seed money from the Wallace Fund and now to be continued permanently thanks to a \$100,000 endowment just established by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. In all, we hosted thirty-one fellows during the past year who were in residence at the Society for a record total of seventy-nine months. In addition, we enjoyed the presence this year of a number of long-term research associates, including our old and dear friend Bill Gilmore-Lehne, who spent a highly productive fall semester at AAS and then was taken from us—suddenly and tragically—in the spring by a heart attack. Those of you who have followed our fellowship program over the past twenty-five years or more know that the fellows and staff enjoy a special bond of personal friendship and mutual esteem. So involved does our staff get in helping our researchers, in fact, that it is claimed, only half in jest, that the staff is able to deliver to the fellow—with record speed—*every* item he or she might possibly need for a research project and does so *even before* the fellow knows to call for the item. Thus the generous enthusiasm of staff and the voracious appetites for resources displayed by readers combined this year to produce a statistic that is truly remarkable. This year our intrepid reference services staff served 1,246 readers, who made 5,607 visits to the library and filled out more than

34,301 call slips, thus substantially surpassing the circulation figures that were set only a year ago. Statistics for graphic arts, for newspapers and periodicals, and for manuscripts all set records, dramatically and rewardingly so.

Like so much that goes on at the Society, this growth in demand for our resources has been steady and inexorable over the course of many years, as our fellowship program has continued to expand, as our reputation as 'simply the best place' to do research in early American history has spread, and as our catalogues and collection finding aids have become searchable via the Internet. As we look at the ambitious goals we have set out to accomplish in the near- and long-term, it is easy to lose sight of how far we have already come. To remind myself, I recently pulled from the shelf the *Proceedings* for the annual meeting of 1974, twenty-five short years ago. Nixon had just resigned, Dutch elm disease was taking its toll on the spectacular trees that once lined our front walk, and investors were full of uncertainty about Wall Street, not that that has changed or ever will for long. Other comparisons from that day to this are also of interest. At the 1974 annual meeting, among those attending were Tom Adams, Bruce Daniels, Harry Dewey, and Linwood Erskine, all here again today. Then, newly elected member Barnes Riznik was in attendance for the first time, and I am pleased to say that he, too, is here again, being this semester in residence at the Society to lead our undergraduate research seminar. Final details associated with the 1972 addition to Antiquarian Hall having been completed, the Report of the Council notes, 'We believe that the building is in a condition which will meet our full needs for the foreseeable future,' a reminder to all of us who have spent the day in deliberation about the future expansion of this building that the word 'foreseeable' is a relative term.

On the financial side of the house, this quarter century has meant these differences in this an order of magnitude: our endowment has grown from \$3.2 million to \$44 million, our annual expenditures from \$554,000 to \$3.2 million, and unre-

stricted gifts that stood at \$28,000 in 1974 totaled \$243,000 last year. A bequest of \$7,500 was duly noted in the earlier report, and it is with great gratitude to a remarkable woman that I wish to note the receipt this year of a \$750,000 bequest from the estate of Helen Stoddard. She and her late husband, Robert, were stalwart supporters of the Society for more than a generation.

In gleaning these statistics from the 1974 report, my eye also fell upon a list of staff changes for the year, and there among the 'new hires' I saw two more or less familiar names: Alan N. Degutis and Carol R. Alexander, who since her marriage in 1982 has been known as Carol Kanis. Both Alan and Carol began their AAS careers in the reading room, assisting Mary Brown and the AAS readers (who, by the way, made 3,593 visits that year—about 65 percent of this year's number), but soon enough both Carol and Alan gravitated toward the cataloguing department and to various of the then newly-funded NEH grant projects underway there. In 1980, much to Carol's own surprise, I gather, she was named head of the cataloguing department, a post to which she devoted the full measure of her professional effort until the higher calling of motherhood was heard. Since 1984, Carol has served the needs of her family and the needs of AAS with equal devotion, as part-time cataloguer and full-time mom. Her diligence and skill as a broadsides cataloguer is legendary and, I know, is appreciated by none more than her colleague, Alan Degutis. After securing his library degree in 1977, Alan returned to the Society as a cataloguer working under Carol's direction. He quickly earned a reputation not only for his bibliographical knowledge of eighteenth-century American printing, but also for his willingness to take on the challenges of the then-new computer cataloguing, taking his first course on computing at WPI in 1980. When Carol stepped down as department head, Alan was tapped to succeed her, and thus their partnership as colleagues continued. Together with others at AAS they have built an online catalogue simply renowned for its quality and usefulness. The devotion and high-caliber service that Carol and Alan both have

shown to the Society over the past twenty-five years are exemplary, and so it is with a special measure of gratitude for jobs very well done that we recognize them both—upon the completion of their first quarter century of service. Unfortunately, Carol has other obligations that prevent her being with us today, but I would invite Alan to come forward to accept this token of our admiration and gratitude.

In closing, let me extend the Society's thanks as well to all who have contributed to the success of this remarkable year—to our members and Councillors, to our many supporters and friends, to our readers and fellows who contribute to the Society just as surely as they are served by it, to my colleagues on this great staff, and of course in this special year to Dr. Thomas, as well. I am honored to work alongside you all in support of a great institution.

Ellen S. Dunlap

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