

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 21, 2005

IN CRAFTING THE COUNCIL REPORT for last year's annual meeting, as some of you may recall, I decided to talk about the work of the Society in 2004—our challenges and our successes—in the context of the issues faced by our predecessors at the library in 1918. This time last year, that particular year was much in the news because of the Red Sox. I delivered that report just thirty-six hours after the Red Sox beat the Yankees in the seventh game of the almost miraculous American League Championship series. Afterwards, several people asked me how I could have been so confident that the team would be going to the World Series again after eighty-six years, since the entire premise of my report would have been a shutout had they not won that final game. Others more familiar with my work habits correctly surmised that I did not even start writing until the Sox were ahead 8–1 in the bottom of the fourth. But now that the Red Sox have slipped back into their standard 'one-year-at-a-time' mode, I am following their lead and will limit my report this year to an assessment of where the Society is today in the context of where we were last year and where we hope to be in October 2006.

I have been looking forward for several weeks now to delivering today's report, but in all honesty, when faced with writing that report last October, I was grateful for the distraction of the pennant race. With our endowment income slipping and our utility and benefit costs soaring, we had finished our 2004 fiscal year with a deficit in spite of painful cuts, and we had had to struggle to balance the proposed bare-bones budget for 2005—even on paper. Except for Red Sox fans, 1918 and 2004 were both difficult years

economically and culturally, and I tried to point out those similarities in my report. While there were a number of successes to report at year-end, many of the most ambitious goals we had set for the Society in 2003 in our Five-Year Plan were on hold for lack of financial resources. Staff members, feeling more thinly stretched than ever, were just settling into a newly created organizational scheme that replaced familiar departments with experimental new decision-making clusters. But I can assure you that their anxiety paled in comparison to that felt by those of us who also attend the working meetings of our investment committee, with all the talk there of the prudence—if not downright necessity—of scaling back endowment spending rates in light of long-term market forecasts. While the Roaring Twenties were still ahead for those in 1918, the Internet-market downturn was still all-too-recent history to us in 2004, and we were feeling the effects at every turn.

On the more optimistic side of the ledger, I was able to report last October that we were beginning to step up our efforts to raise funds in support of basic operations of the Society—as opposed to the endowment and special projects that had previously been our chief emphasis. Contributions made by Councillors to help balance the budget for the new year were noted with gratitude. I was also able to report that student workers, interns, and loyal volunteers were helping us ‘do more with less,’ and that we were excited about the programmatic and financial prospects presented by our digitizing partnership with Readex. At that point in time, however, the remarkable marketplace success of our *Archive of Americana*—about which you have heard in our symposium today—had not yet been proven.

Well, much has happened in the past year—all of it positive—but before launching into those details, let me first give credit where it is richly deserved—with thanks to the staff and to our faithful supporters. To the resolution of appreciation for the staff passed by the Council at our meeting this morning, I want to voice a hearty—and heartfelt—second. The staff has done a tremendous

job in making ends meet while keeping standards high. The service they provide to our readers and fellows is without peer. Our cataloguing is the gold standard and the envy of our colleagues who work at those other institutions. Our conservation staff this year has taken on more work than ever and dispatched it with professional aplomb. Our curators and acquisitions staff continue to build the collections with tenacity, insight, and inventiveness. Outreach—which ten years ago was still a new word in the AAS lexicon—has become a mantra throughout the institution, embraced by those planning travelling and loan exhibitions, first-rate public and scholarly programs, and inventive publications, all meant to share the resources on our shelves with a broader audience. My hat is off to all those on the staff who are taking us bravely and wisely into the digital and electronic realm, still-new territory for us all. And for those—especially few in number though they may be—who keep the buildings running smoothly, the accounting in order, and the contributions rolling in, I offer my final and deepest thanks; their heroic efforts go too often unsung.

Thanks are also due to all who support the Society, with their talent—such as our many volunteers—and with their purses, whatever sizes they might be. In the course of this report, you are going to hear some very large dollar figures, but as you do I hope you will keep in mind what I am about to say: gifts of only one and two digits can mean just as much to an institution such as ours as those of six or seven digits. I cannot tell you what a boost it gives our staff to see grateful readers voluntarily stuff a few dollars in what I call the ‘alms box’ at the front reception desk as they leave the library after a day of successful research or an hour enjoying a free public lecture. In addition, I am tremendously proud of the fact that even in these hard times, the number of givers to our annual fund increased by 6 percent this past year and that they gave 11 percent more in total than the year before. Bear in mind, if you will, that previous year that had already seen a 10 percent increase in giving from the one before and had marked

the final year of our successful capital campaign—so many were generous twice over. By your gifts and support, each of you is making a difference to our work here, so please keep it up. We need you every year—in good times and in lean ones.

And I have saved my ultimate thanks for those who serve as our elected Councillors—the stewards of the Society, those who have accepted on behalf of all the members the important responsibility of keeping a sharp eye on present-day realities and inspiring our best thinking about future possibilities, both at the same time. ‘*Thank you*’ hardly seems sufficient a phrase for all that each of you has done to help us through this past year, but I have underscored it three times here in my notes, just to let you know how strongly I mean it. I offer a special thank-you to two of our Council members: Jim Donnelly for his Herculean efforts as our treasurer for the past eight years—I shudder to think how many hours he has devoted to our investments and budgetary matters (and his law partners probably do as well)—and to Meridith Wesby for all that she has done as our recording secretary to move us from the quill-pen era to the laptop age with great practicality and panache. I hope they will enjoy their continued service on the Council even more now that their relievers have been called in from the bullpen.

So what exactly is it, I hope you are curious by now to know, that has happened in the course of these past twelve months that seems to have made this October a ‘new ballgame’ for the Society. Well, it is the happy feeling of having a little change to jingle in our institutional pockets for a while; of being able to look again at those Five-Year Plan documents and ask ‘which of these deferred agendas shall we tackle next’; to be able to offer more than token raises to our hard-working staff. For me personally, it is being able to sit more calmly through a finance committee discussion of reducing our spending rate from 5 percent to 4.5 percent, now that I know that—with the right mix of revenue streams—it is possible for the Society not only to survive, but also to thrive. Here is the news: in just over a year’s time, we have secured *new*

funding for core activities of the Society amounting to about \$3.9 million—call it \$3.3 million net after counting the move to the 4.5 percent endowment spending rate. However, this is not endowment, mind you, but \$3.3 million in real, spendable dollars, to be used over the next three years or so to maintain and enhance core operations and to help us regain momentum lost in the recent belt-tightening times.

These new monies have come not only from our entrepreneurial partnership with Readex, but also from increased state and federal grants, from far-sighted foundations, and from members and Councillors who have stepped to the plate to give us some extra help at a time we needed it most. It has felt in recent months—as the welcome news of these gifts and grants has come in—a bit like a steady rain falling in a dry desert. Everything is soaking up this new infusion and getting ready to bloom again. What a great feeling! To repeat the phrase used in my April report, what a relief!

In many cases, these monies are reserved for particular core projects—cataloguing, conservation, digitizing, fellowships, and our ubiquitous and seemingly omnivorous technology needs—but the rest we will be able to apply according to priorities we set for any given year. Acquisitions are a perennial priority, but we will now be able to devote new resources for cataloguing to help address the backlog that seems a natural by-product of an active acquisitions program. In the coming year we have also given priority to a facilities study to advance plans to expand our conservation lab and to better utilize the Goddard-Daniels House and the house we own at 9 Regent Street (where we have temporarily relocated our administrative and development offices). We are trying as well to use the money in smart ways, in ways that will lead us to even more resources. Confident that there is a market for our very successful one-man performance of 'Isaiah Thomas—Patriot Printer' in schools far beyond the geographical reach of our locally based Isaiah impersonator, we are investing some of these new funds in creating a short film segment. Having such a

trailer, as it is called in the movie business, will position us to compete more successfully for funds at the national level when we go for the big grants we will need to capture his entire performance digitally for distribution on-demand to classrooms around the country. And speaking of the geographical reach of film, we have even optioned the film rights to Esther Forbes's 1938 book about the famous Bathsheba Spooner case to a German filmmaker. As you see, when it comes to looking for new revenue, we consider almost any opportunity.

Fearing that you might not find a recitation of the long list of our gifts, grants, and new revenue sources as entertaining as I do, I want to focus attention on just four key projects as examples of the many undertakings that are now possible. And I shall start with the most recent: we just learned yesterday that our request to the federal Save America's Treasures program was one of only sixty-one funded out of the 337 applications received in this round. The grant for \$60,000 in matching funds is the third award made to the Society by the program over the past five years for conservation and protection of our collections, and this new grant will go where it is sorely needed: to our burgeoning collection of historical American newspapers. Along with the matching dollars we raise from private funders, these federal dollars will pay not only for the thousands of new boxes and tens of thousands of new folders we need, but also for additional staff assistance to help with the tedious work of rehousing the collection. Once we have identified the volumes in most critical need of repair in our conservation lab, the grant will help pay for extra hands to get that done too. In the past, the annual investment we have been able to afford the newspaper department for rehousing supplies has been but a drop in an ocean of need. By this time next year, the tide will have turned: the housing of this highly important component of the collection will be—at long last—on par with that long afforded to the rest of the Society's collections.

Sometime around October of 2006, our conservation department will be able to turn attention to these newspaper volumes

because their work on another huge project—funded by an earlier Save America's Treasures matching grant—will be entering its home stretch. For this project, we chose to concentrate our efforts on choice selections from our collections that relate to the 'history of the book' field. These include manuscript records from two early-nineteenth-century printers (Mathew Carey and the firm of McCarty and Davis); book trade and auction broadsides from the same period; and booksellers' and auction catalogues from throughout the history of American printing. Also earmarked for conservation are James Fenimore Cooper manuscripts and some of the earliest volumes collected for the Society by Isaiah Thomas himself. Attention to these collections was long overdue. That cannot be said of the programmatic aspects of our work in the 'history of the book' field, now more active than ever. This summer we hosted a highly successful national conference—the first of three we have planned—to explore American book history within the AAS period in the larger contexts of time and place and through relationships with other forms of communication. The 2005 conference focused on forms of the spoken word and performance—oratory, theater, music, for example—and brought many scholars in those fields to AAS for the first time. Thus we met not only our primary goal of advancing our chosen field of 'book history' in new directions, but also gained greater awareness of all the Society has to offer among a new cohort of scholars and students. And by the time of next year's annual meeting I hope to be able to report similar success for our 2006 conference, which will consider the role of early nineteenth-century texts inciting revolution in the western hemisphere. While I believe it may be a first for the Society to have a program announcement appear in English, French, *and* Spanish, this conference will not only broaden our constituency but return us, somewhat, to our nineteenth-century roots when many of our members were elected from regions far south of New England. Were there time enough, I could also share with you here details about the national summer conferences and seminars we are

planning for AAS in 2007 and 2008. But let me take a moment instead to say that this sort of far-sighted planning is not only a credit to our staff and advisors, but also a positive outcome of the recent financial difficulties we have worked our way through, resulting in new strategies for new times at the Society.

The third new undertaking I offer for your consideration today also is hot-off-the-press news. The Society will be serving as principal partner over the next three years to the Worcester Public Schools in what was described in last week's newspaper as 'a \$1 million program that will turn history teachers into historians and—very likely—many of their students into genuine history buffs.' Funded by the federal Department of Education, this 'Teaching American History' project strikes me as something of a dream deferred for the Society. I well remember Marcus McCorison, our president emeritus, telling me when I arrived in Worcester thirteen years ago of his frustrations in trying to secure funding for a similar, if smaller-scaled, project to use AAS collections and experts as resources for local teachers. The need that Marcus saw then was one about which David McCullough spoke so eloquently during his talk here just a few weeks ago: the best teachers are ones who are passionate about their subjects, and one cannot love something one does not know. Too many history teachers in our classrooms today do not know history, and to address the growing problem of historical ignorance in our young, we have to teach their teachers first. For the next three years, 125 local teachers will be taking courses in American history from 1763 to the present, many for the first time in thirty years. They will take a series of six graduate-level seminars, each accompanied by three weekend workshops to give them firsthand exposure to primary documents and authentic objects. Two courses will be based entirely within the AAS timeframe, and two others will draw significantly from our collections. During annual summer institutes, teachers will have a week-long opportunity for in-depth study of seminal documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address,

and a keynote address by a noted historian will offer inspiration and/or provocation at the beginning of each school year. This project is a direct complement to another with which we are also in partnership with the Worcester Schools. There we are working with scholars and teachers to create resource materials—enhanced not only with primary documents, but also with video and audio recordings we are helping to produce—exploring five pivotal events that occurred during the years from 1815 to 1860. This is a time so important in the shaping of our national identity and destiny and yet so often poorly taught in schools where some teachers simply race to get from one war to the next. Both projects are exciting and path breaking for us, but the thing that excites me most about the ‘teach the teachers’ program is that leading these workshops and institutes at AAS will be a real ‘who’s who’ of early American history, prize-winning historians and master teachers all, most selected from among the ranks of our distinguished members and former fellows. You would accuse me of name-dropping were I to start listing them, but rest assured that I am going to do whatever I can to sneak into each and every one of the sessions over the course of the next three years. What a great opportunity for our Worcester-area teachers, and what a great chance for the Society to do what we do best—bringing people and collections together to advance the understanding of our nation’s past.

And it is that very theme—bringing people together at AAS—under which my fourth and final topic today falls. As we approach the Society’s bicentennial, now a mere seven years away, we have begun to identify those programs and activities that are most essential to the success of this organization and to develop strategies and resources to assure their continued usefulness for the years, decades—dare I say—even centuries ahead. It will come as no surprise to you who know us well that the fellowship program ranks high on our list. In 1998 the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded the Society a generous grant that allowed us to take a bold new step to enhance that program by offering two new

types of yearlong fellowships. The first is our distinguished scholar in residence. In addition to doing research, this senior fellow takes responsibility for mentoring younger scholars, for working to make an ever-changing group of researchers at the library into a vital and mutually supportive community of scholars, and—as an added benefit for all of us—for lecturing in our great public program series each year. The second fellowship that the Mellon funding has made it possible for us to grant is one at the opposite end of the career ladder: an outstanding young scholar—a freshly minted Ph.D.—who has recently completed a highly promising dissertation and who may or may not yet have even gotten a first faculty appointment. Career success in academia for many depends largely on the critical acclaim one gets for a first book, but few have the luxury while struggling to get a career started to devote the time for further research, reconsideration, and rewriting such acclaim may require. A year spent in residence here—with a stipend to keep the wolf from the door, surrounded by a cadre of scholars and advisors, and with access to rich historical resources and a helpful staff—proved a tremendous boon for the first five young scholars to hold the post-dissertation fellowship at AAS. All have had their books published (or will see them appear soon); all have landed great new jobs; two have already gotten tenure. And the three fellows to hold the post most recently are each well along on that same successful path. You can understand the pride we have in them all. So when the inevitable word came to us from the Mellon Foundation—that after ten years of their funding these fellowships for us, we would need to step up to a challenge grant if we wanted them to continue—you can well imagine our reaction: ‘I guess the very first phase of our bicentennial capital campaign is now underway!’ The Foundation has generously granted the funds we will need to keep the fellowships going until 2009, and will match—dollar for dollar—the first million dollars toward their permanent endowment given between now and that date, four years from now. We received word of the grant only a few weeks ago, and

we are so excited by the prospect it affords us that we are already at work toward our two million dollar campaign goal. Consider yourself forewarned. Our experience over the first eight years of these fellowships has convinced us that this annual infusion of 'new blood' into our organization serves to energize staff and researchers alike. It is part of what keeps us vital as we approach our third century, as I hope you agree.

So with more than three million dollars in new revenues in hand and the prospect of another two million in new endowment in the offing, you can see why I am feeling a bit more upbeat this year than last. But lest I leave you with the wrong impression, it's not just about the money. The reward for me in my position—which I am so honored to hold—comes every time someone writes or tells me what a difference the American Antiquarian Society has meant to him or her. We get to hear it all the time. On my desk right now, in fact, are four wonderful letters. One is from a recent fellow who wrote in such fulsome praise of everything about her tenure here that one might suspect our development staff of writing it; it ends by calling the Society 'a virtual paradise for scholars like me.' The second is from a high school student who worked his first job this summer at AAS as part of our 'cataloguing camp' to prepare the ephemera collection for digitizing. 'Working with actual documents has given me so many new questions to ask about the past. I see tangible proof of the beliefs and biases my history textbook described but could not illustrate. Learning the reality of my history lessons and the responsibility of a real job . . . has been a fantastic experience.' The third letter brings a tear to my eye every time I read it—it is from the Framingham firefighter who won me over in his quest for tickets for our 'sold out' David McCullough appearance by saying that he had given up his Red Sox tickets for that evening as soon as he heard that David would be in town. Not only did I get him tickets, but I also took him backstage. The two of them had a fifteen-minute chat about how reading *1776* had given him a newfound interest in American history, about their families, and about their

mutual love of baseball. In his long thank-you letter to me he wrote, 'You know how I told you I was driving my wife and kids crazy regaling them about the events contained in 1776? Well now, I'm driving everybody I know crazy telling about what happened to me in Worcester. I have a lot of good things in my life, but last Thursday night has to be one of the best.' And the last letter on my desk is a print-out of an e-mail I received from someone in this room today. It reads in part: 'As I sifted through the pile of mail that awaited my return from vacation, I don't think I can describe my sense of astonishment and the feeling of being overwhelmed, as I read your letter informing me of my election to the Society. Using the resources of the Society as I have done for some time and knowing firsthand the quality and knowledge of the staff and members, I am incredibly honored to be considered for membership. Needless to say, I accept this great honor enthusiastically.' Next year I hope to have similar letters from teachers in our new institutes, participants in our seminars, and others to whom we might make a difference just by being here. It is our honor to serve this great institution. Thank you again for your support.

Ellen S. Dunlap

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