

*From Microprint to Megapixels: The
Fifty-Year Partnership between Readex
and the American Antiquarian Society*

Introduction

JOHN B. HENCH

THIS YEAR we are commemorating a relationship between the American Antiquarian Society and a commercial business, Readex Microprint Corporation, that has endured for half a century. Although relationships between not-for-profit entities like AAS and decidedly for-profit businesses like Readex are by no means unusual, the longevity of this partnership is particularly worthy of note. As in any relationship of long standing, this one has had its share of ups and downs. Just how active the partnership has been has varied greatly over this time. It is likely, however, that the partnership is more important now than ever before, although we must wait to hear from our panelists, who represent AAS, Readex, and the scholarly and library communities, to confirm that hunch.

When the history of the American Antiquarian Society is written (as it will be by Philip Gura, Newman Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as a major project of the AAS Bicentennial, which will be celebrated in 2012), I would hazard that it will be

JOHN B. HENCH is vice president for collections and programs at the American Antiquarian Society. Editing the Second Series of *Early American Imprints* was one of his responsibilities when he joined the staff as editor of publications in 1973. The symposium, 'From Microprint to Megapixels: The Fifty-Year Partnership between Readex and the American Antiquarian Society,' was presented at the annual meeting of the Society on October 21, 2005.

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found that the two most significant activities ever undertaken by the Society, aside from our core functions of acquiring, caring for, and assisting readers in gaining access to our superb collections of printed and manuscript materials documenting American history and culture through 1876, were, first, the creation of large-scale microform series in partnership with Readex, and, second, the establishment of our visiting research fellowship program in 1972.¹

Both of these undertakings were founded on the desire to make our rich collections more accessible and useful to scholars—the first project by making facsimiles of our holdings available in libraries around the world, the second by providing incentives to scholars from around the world to read our materials right here, under this generous dome. Both of these programs have been of great importance in the development of the Society and both have had—we would argue—profound and salutary effects on the trajectory of American historical scholarship over the last half century. I alas cannot substantiate the quotation, but I do retain in my memory that someone once wrote or said that the two most important factors behind the increase in quantity and quality in historical scholarship on the colonial and Revolutionary eras since World War II was the establishment of the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg and the publication of the AAS-Readex *Early American Imprints* series.

We have put together this panel to discuss the past, present, and future of the AAS-Readex relationship, to assess the impact on the organizations and on the worlds of librarianship and historical scholarship, and, perhaps, also to speculate on the future of the Society and other libraries when significant portions of their collections are available to subscribers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (366 in leap years) in libraries, dorm rooms, faculty offices and studies at home.

1. See Ellen S. Dunlap, John B. Hench, Scott Casper, and Philip F. Gura, 'A Quarter Century of Visiting Fellowships at AAS, 1972-97,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 107 (1997): 245-300.

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