

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 19, 2001

BEFORE I PRESENT the Report of the Council, I would like to thank all of you for your forbearance with our logistical predicament—what with room changes for the various parts of the annual meeting this year—and I would like to explain briefly how we got ourselves into it. A few years ago I read through all the past Reports of the Council to glean information about the history of Antiquarian Hall and the three additions to it. I was intrigued to learn that when work commenced in 1923 on the first stack addition, the Society had only enough money in hand to erect the shell of the structure and to run heating to it, which they did. At the annual meeting that year, the Council outlined to the members the costs of erecting the bookshelves, running the electrical wiring, and converting the book lift to a passenger elevator. The members were then asked for their approval to borrow that sum, to be repaid as quickly as the rest of the money could be raised. The meeting then adjourned for luncheon on the ground floor of the empty stack building, no doubt so each member could see for himself how important it was to get the project completed and, thus, would be prompted to contribute as generously as he could.

Since we too have borrowed the costs of our construction project and have a bit more to raise to guarantee the successful retirement of that debt, we got the bright idea of having a dinner in our half-finished stacks. And since each level of our new addition has 6,000 square feet of floor space, we thought, why not make it a BIG dinner and have dancing, too? Our contractors assured us that—barring the unforeseen (which we have now seen many

times)—at least one level of the stack building would be completed by October 19. And they were right; it is ready. But two weeks ago—when we had to make the final decision about where to have the party—it just didn't seem humanly possible that it would be, so we went to plan B to have the party in the reading room (with tours of the new addition) and to hold the annual meeting here. We settled on that plan before knowing just how many of you would be attending this meeting. Given the crowded conditions, I will keep my report mercifully short.

I'll begin it, though, with a personal story. Just six weeks ago, late in the day on Friday, September 7, I was reading at my desk when I came across a notice of the forthcoming volume of memoirs by Jill Ker Conway—which has now come to hand. As many of you know, Jill preceded Bob Baron as chairman of the AAS council and her leadership, along with Bob's, paved the way for the success the Society has enjoyed in recent years. She and I try to stay in touch, despite her hectic schedule, and so I decided to send her a note, not only to congratulate her on the new book, but also to share a number of exciting developments at the Society. I wrote the note out in longhand on one of our lovely new notecards and ended it by saying that, while the year just completed had been one of extraordinary achievement for the Society, I had every confidence that the year ahead would be even better. I began to gather up relevant news-clippings, reports, and copies of correspondence to send along with my note, but finding that one publication I wanted had to be requested from another department, I set it all aside to attend to later.

Monday of the next week, September 10, found me in New York City, where the Nominating Committee worked into the early evening to put the finishing touches on the excellent rosters of prospective members and Councillors just presented to you. The following morning, at about 8:50, just as I was preparing to get into my car for the drive from my sister's house back to Worcester, the phone rang. It was my sister's daughter, calling from her cell phone from the lobby of the World Trade Center.

Something had happened, debris was falling, panic everywhere, but she was getting out and safely away from the building. I jumped in my car and headed north, and for the next two-and-a-half hours, I listened on the radio as the horrific events of September 11 unfolded. My memories of the days that followed are obscured by a thick fog of great sadness, but I recall distinctly what I did when I came again upon that note I had written to Jill and left—unsent—on my desk. I tore it up, into little pieces. It just didn't seem appropriate anymore, it now sounded too boastful and self-satisfied, perhaps irrelevant. And as to my claim that the year ahead would be even better than the one just past, I could not have been more uncertain.

In the weeks since, however, I have begun to resolve my doubts somewhat. Last night David McCullough spoke to the point so eloquently: we cannot predict the course of human events because they are just that, human. But we must take strength from knowing what others before us have endured, and we must strive to be worthy of the good fortune that has long been ours as a people. As David pointed out, our nation has been built by men and women who accepted responsibility and displayed courage in the face of great uncertainty, and he encouraged each of us to do likewise. Thus I have concluded it is time to put the torn pieces of my note to Jill back together and to share it with you: to celebrate the achievements of the last year, to acknowledge the hard work of all who contributed to our success, and to look forward with you to meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

I began my note to Jill by telling her what a banner year it has been for acquisitions at the Society, and the enclosures documented some of the highlights. From the Zinman Collection, now owned by the Library Company of Philadelphia, Nancy Burkett has arranged to purchase more than 150 pre-1801 imprints, the largest single acquisition of early American books the Society has made since we acquired the Mather library in 1814. Through the generosity of AAS member Jay Last, the graphic arts collections have continued to flourish, this past year with the addition

of 150 prints and a couple of print portfolios. Mr. Last's generosity has enabled curator Georgia Barnhill to fill many lacunae in the collection, to build on strengths, and to move the collection in significant new directions. In the manuscript department, curator Thomas Knoles reports that fifty accessions were logged last year, the largest number in memory. They range from single letters of great interest to large archives of rich research value. But topping all these, one might argue, is the bounty gathered in this past year by the newspaper department—almost 200,000 issues representing more than 2,000 separate titles—gathered in largely through partnerships with other libraries who support our goal of creating and preserving a comprehensive national newspaper collection. And while these large gifts and purchases are worthy of our attention, let us not overlook the fact that the day-to-day work of hunting down and snaring single items for the collections—through gift and purchase—constitutes the lion's share of our acquisitions effort. To support that effort, we have continued to make progress over the past year in meeting the terms of the NEH Challenge grant for acquisitions endowment. More than thirty new book funds have been created and five substantially augmented, thus far, with gifts totaling almost \$2.3 million, leaving us with about \$500,000 to be raised to secure the full NEH award.

My note called Jill's attention as well to our AAS website, which was unveiled at our annual meeting last year and has continued to develop under the enthusiastic direction of On-line Services Librarian Caroline Stoffel. Each week she posts new pictures from our construction project, updates information on seminars and programs, and adds resources that enhance access to our collections. The on-line exhibitions that she and Curatorial Assistant Terri Tremblay have created are simply terrific, and I knew that Jill would be especially interested in the one they had created for Labor Day: 'A Woman's Work is Never Done' that looks at women's work from before the American Revolution through the Industrial Revolution, using selected images from the Society's

collection. The coming year will see significant enhancements to our website offerings, most notably an entirely new on-line catalog system and a thorough reworking of our guides to collections. Our website is so active, in fact, that we have had to institute a 'what's new' page just to track all the changes. New acquisitions are featured there and are always worth reading about. If she found a moment to visit the AAS website, I told Jill that it would be well worth her while also to click on the link to *Common-place* (www.common-place.org), a lively on-line journal of early American history sponsored jointly by AAS and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute. The articles are provocative, informative, and—sometimes—downright fun.

If memory serves me, I also may have mentioned to Jill that we are making great progress—through partnership with a number of on-line publishers—in our plans to provide access to items in our collections in electronic form—searchable texts of books and newspapers, scanned images of texts and graphics. We see these efforts as being particularly helpful as we work to make rare materials from our collections accessible for classroom use in grades K–12. Jim Moran, director of outreach at the Society, has developed a number of excellent curriculum projects for possible national distribution, but none has been more successful than his *Isaiab Thomas—Patriot Printer* program. Over the past year, actor Neil Gustafson has put on his powdered wig and knee breeches more than thirty times in order to take the engaging story of our founder and the role he played in our nation's history to 2,253 students, teachers, and interested members of the public. Grants have been secured to underwrite presentations of the program for underserved schools in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield that can't afford even the modest fee we charge, and plans are afoot to capture digitally the performance and the primary source documents that support the classroom activities we've designed around it. Then the program will be available throughout the country. Our reputation for providing quality programs for teachers and their students is growing, as evidenced by the invita-

tion we received from the Boston Public Schools to participate with them in a \$1,000,000 three-year program of professional enrichment for all their American history teachers. I also told Jill how pleased I am that we have recruited and trained a great group of volunteer docents to help staff our outreach activities, and that we have also secured a number of college interns to assist in our program offerings. Finding places for them all to sit is a problem from time to time, but this new cadre of volunteers and interns adds enormously to our ability to carry out our mission.

Of course, my biggest news for Jill was about the extraordinary progress we are making in constructing our state-of-the-art book-storage facility. Having seen it through five years of planning, it should be 'old hat' to me by now, but I am nonetheless amazed and excited to see all the details come together and the plans become concrete . . . and brick and granite and marble. To recap briefly, we are building a two-story, 12,000 square foot addition, with environmental systems designed to ensure the long-term preservation of books and papers; that is, it's cold and dry. In addition to new workspaces for the graphic arts and newspaper departments, the new wing will feature shelving and flat-file storage units that roll easily back and forth on floor-mounted tracks, so that many units can share but a single aisle, thus making it possible to store vast quantities of collection materials in a relatively small space. The new addition will permit us to almost double the Society's holdings, so that even with our augmented acquisitions funds we should have plenty of collection space for—and here I had written—'the foreseeable future,' but heeding David McCullough's admonition last night I changed it to read 'a helluva long time.' To protect the collections further, new fire detection and suppression systems are being installed not only in the addition but also throughout the existing facility. The most challenging part of this work is the protection of the reading room itself, which will require extensive scaffolding, thus forcing us—regrettably—to close the library to the general public for as long as ten weeks beginning in mid-January. Thus far,

however, the closing is just about the only regret in the project, which continues to remain on budget and only a few days behind schedule. I urge you to follow progress on the construction by visiting our website—www.americanantiquarian.org—as I encouraged Jill to do, as well.

I was also eager to report to her on our progress in completing the fundraising for the building, especially since it had been at her encouragement that we had applied to the Kresge Foundation. At the time our application went before their board in February of this year, we were barely halfway to our \$8 million goal. They challenged us to continue broad-based fundraising—seeking gifts large and small from members, friends, and even mere acquaintances—and IF in eighteen months' time, by September 1, 2002, we could come within 90 percent of our campaign goal for the building project by raising \$2.8 million, Kresge would contribute \$800,000—the final 10 percent we needed. As of our last tally, we are within \$350,000 of that goal, with ten months left on the clock. Gifts of every size have been welcome. This summer at our cornerstone preparation ceremony, a young graduate student who had been able to afford her month here at the library only because we had awarded her a modest research stipend—enthusiastically thrust into my hand her check for \$15.00. I was almost as pleased at that expression of support as I was on a Tuesday afternoon in late July when I picked up the phone and found that it was our member Jay Last calling from his home in California. He had been thinking carefully about all the things Gigi and I had been telling him about the building plans, especially about what a significant difference they would make in our ability to house our growing graphic arts collection. Ever the careful investor, he had done his due diligence, by calling up various members of the Council to confirm the assertions made by staff, and he was calling to tell me that he had made up his mind to make a gift of \$1 million for the Kresge Challenge. Jay went on to say how pleased he is to work with Gigi in acquiring materials and with how the entire staff works to support the use of the collections by re-

searchers. Both of these gifts, and the hundreds of others that have brought us so near to our fundraising goals, have proved to be a wonderful affirmation to all of us here at the Society and a great incentive for us, as well, to redouble our efforts to preserve our nation's history so that in circumstances present and future, we might all be informed by our past. We are grateful to all of you who are engaged with us in that noble effort.

Ellen S. Dunlap

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.