

Report of the Council

THE most important event in the affairs of the Society during the last six months has been the resignation of the Librarian, Mr. Robert W. G. Vail. Mr. Vail came to the Library in October, 1930, and thus served as its Librarian for nearly ten years. He resigned on January 15, 1940, to become Librarian of the New York State Library at Albany. A native of upper New York State, a graduate of Cornell and an authority on the history and geography of his State, he brought to the position an interest and an experience which could scarcely have been found in any other candidate. His tenure of office at the American Antiquarian Society has added much to the prestige of the institution. With a wide knowledge of library administration, a familiarity with American history and literature, and a notable ability in the field of bibliography, he helped to spread the importance of the Society's collections throughout the country. During his decade of office, he completed the publishing of the monumental Sabin's *Dictionary*, wrote monographs on Susanna Rowson, Charles Alexandre Lesueur, and the Early American Circus, contributed papers to literary and historical periodicals, and prepared long and valuable annual Librarian's Reports, which in themselves contained many bibliographies of permanent usefulness. His keenness in examining book catalogues brought hundreds of titles to the Library, which would have been otherwise missed. Our loss is New York's gain and we wish him all success in his new position.

Although written by one member of the Council, this is supposed to be the Report of the Council as a whole. The By-Laws, in referring to the Council, say: "It shall, at each stated meeting of the Society, make a report of its doings." In the early days of the Society, a member of the Council, with historical leanings, would compose a historical monograph, even one on a contro-

versial subject, and deliver it as the Report of the Council. Perhaps in those days of a smaller organization, the record of accessions was too small, or the story of progress too unimpressive, to devote a Report to the "doings" of the Society. In that early day, moreover, it was apparently not so difficult to obtain papers, with a greater interest on the part of amateur historians and so many phases of the country's history unwritten. Yet it seems to me that the two reports of the Council each year should concern, as the By-Laws direct, at least some phase of the Society's activities. Hence, following out this idea, the present Report will relate to certain aspects of the Society's work during the previous six months.

The routine of library work has continued on its even way, although with undoubtedly increased use of the collections. Every day brings visiting students who come here, often from distant States, to consult books or manuscripts not elsewhere available, or perhaps not so comprehensively collected. We shall never aspire to a large attendance. The great number of visitors who pass through the turnstiles of well-known museums will never increase our attendance record. We have no museum, no large collection of relics or paintings, no objects to interest either the student of art or the curious visitor. We have nothing to fascinate the youthful sightseers who gain so much of interest and instruction from visual museum exhibits. We have only a library of books and manuscripts, covering three centuries or more of the country's history, formed to attract here the scholar or the writer of history, or the seeker after specific fact. It is true that the name of the Society, which includes the pedantic adjective "Antiquarian," occasionally brings an inquirer seeking what we have not. At least once a year someone, perhaps even an adult, asks to see the fish in what he hopes is a great "Aquarium." We are sometimes asked to identify rare birds or shells, and once within my memory to care for a live turtle. The correspondence over a long term of years shows some unusual titles by which the Society is addressed: American Antiquarian Museum, American Antique Society, American Antiquated Society, American Epic-

turean Society, the American Antiquarian Church, and the National Antiquine Society; also a letter addressed "Library famous for its great Collection of Documents, Worcester, Mass." These we charitably file in a special envelope under the heading of "Humor." It is true that suggestions have been made frequently in the last fifty years to change the name "Antiquarian" to "Historical"; but whether or not the word leads to misinterpretation, it has the value of time-honored usage, and presumably will continue as it has for a century and a quarter.

Since 1905 a record of visitors to the Library has been kept, and the result has been typed on cards arranged in one alphabetical order, both for names of visitors and for subjects consulted. Although only within the last fifteen years have the subjects of research been carefully recorded, it is a fact that this catalogue has proved frequently of usefulness. When a student comes here to work on William Ellery Channing or Phineas T. Barnum, or the Mormons or the Millerite movement, it is interesting to him, and often valuable, to know who has searched his field in previous years. Also, we have made a comprehensive catalogue of subjects treated in correspondence. The correspondence of this Society is exceedingly voluminous, comprising about twelve thousand letters a year. Although many of these letters concern the routine matters of running a library, a large proportion relate to highly important subjects of historical inquiry. In this catalogue are about four thousand cards, often with several entries on one card, covering every imaginable field of research. Both of these catalogues have been of constant value in enabling us to solve problems which have previously been studied.

The Library today contains about 630,000 titles in the field of what comprehensively might be termed Americana, together with half a million manuscripts and an equal number of miscellaneous items such as broadsides, maps, prints, and the ephemera of collecting. Probably the material most often used, and especially so by visitors coming from distant parts of the country, is the newspaper collection. This is due to the fact that the student can find under one roof a good proportion of the country's news-

papers, especially in the early period, and to the exploitation of the collection in recent years through bibliographies of newspaper files.

A collection constantly used is that of early American printing—meaning the entire output of printed literature for the first two centuries of American life. Here is another field opened to the student through such bibliographies as Evans and Sabin. Not only for imprint value is this collection used—the study of early printing in hundreds of towns—but also for its subject matter, for it would necessarily follow that fifty thousand examples of books and pamphlets covering two hundred years would relate to almost every field of human thought. Another collection frequently used is that of American literature, built up almost entirely in the last fifteen years. With about four hundred authors selected as a standard of authorship, the attempt was made to secure all of their printed works. Apparently no other library has tried to cover the field in so comprehensive a way and the use of the collection has justified the labor expended in its acquisition.

There are many other collections which are the subject of repeated study, generally because they are not so widely developed elsewhere in this part of the country. The collection of local history of the various States from Maine to California is often used in the investigation of both history and biography. Such figures as 76 county histories of California and 125 county histories of Illinois indicate the value of this collection. The almanacs, with over twenty thousand examples of these often disregarded pamphlets, bring many students to the Library—to study their allusions to history, their poetry, their essays and homely advice, and their preeminence in the field of American humor. Only a short while ago our late associate, Chester N. Greenough, wrote for the *Proceedings* a paper on “New England Almanacs and the American Revolution,” and at least a dozen monographs during the last few years have been produced from a study of our almanac collection. Other collections frequently used are engravings, maps, book catalogues, children’s books, and journalism, but it is difficult to particularize as to the sub-

jects most investigated. Often queries relate to books not used once in a year, or a decade, yet even these volumes are as much desired as if they were in constant demand.

With a comparatively small, if not inadequate, income for book purchase, we have to spend our limited funds on filling in the gaps in our early and important collections. Currently issued books of history and biography we cannot afford at published prices, and we have to rely chiefly upon gifts for such volumes. Of course it is hoped that members of the Society who publish books will see that copies are sent to the Library. Because of the fact that most of the leading historians for over a century have been members of the Society, a fair proportion of our American history has come to us autographed from the authors. But since today this forms but a small percentage of the country's historical output, it is with particular gratification that we record the gift from Herschel Brickell of Natchez, Mississippi, of over two hundred volumes of important works of history and biography published in the last decade. When we were helping Mr. Brickell last summer with his researches in Mississippi newspapers, we little thought to receive so soon this evidence of his generosity and appreciation. Many other gifts have recently come to the Library, but these should wait for the Librarian's Annual Report in October.

There have been six deaths in the Society's membership. William Evarts Benjamin, elected in 1927, died February 24, 1940; John Huston Finley, elected in 1928, died March 7, 1940; John Clement Fitzpatrick, elected in 1928; died February 10, 1940; George Anthony Gaskill, elected in 1917, died February 18, 1940; Eben Francis Thompson, elected in 1933, died December 2, 1939; and John Woodbury, elected in 1918, died January 4, 1940. Obituaries of these members will appear in the printed *Proceedings* of this meeting. The *Proceedings* of April, 1939, is somewhat delayed, due to the difficulty in obtaining one of the papers, but should be issued within a month.

There are several needs of the Society which should be mentioned in this Report. A librarian to replace Mr. Vail should soon be selected and appointed as the Director has been carrying

since the first of the year both Mr. Vail's duties and his own. Already several candidates for the position are under consideration. Another need, and one that is exceedingly pressing, is an addition to the book-stack. Crowded conditions are everywhere apparent, and each new accession of a hundred books involves reshifting of material on the shelves. Already thousands of volumes are piled on the shelves instead of standing upright, and there is scarcely a totally empty shelf in the Library. It is to be hoped that the planning of a new stack will be taken up this fall. Finally, as always, the need of increased funds is evident. Only by the strictest economy, and getting along without things that we need, in books, in help, and in equipment, are we able to survive without a deficit. There is always hope for the future, but it seems to be long deferred.

Respectfully submitted,

CLARENCE S. BRIGHAM,

For the Council

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.