

Report of the Council

APRIL 1998

I AM PLEASED TO COME BEFORE YOU to present the Report of the Council—a report on the state of the Society midway through its 186th year. I intend to be brief. There is simply not time enough for me to recount all the Society's current activities nor to paint a complete picture of our many projects and initiatives. It is my hope, however, that through four brief sketches you will be able to catch a glimpse of where we are today. The sketches center on four recent incidents, selected because each struck a special chord that resonated with me at the time. Furthermore, I think that they each speak to larger questions that are altogether appropriate for us to consider today, gathered as we are here at the British Library. What does it mean to be a national research library? indeed, a national treasure? How can we best serve the needs of today's audiences while preserving our collections for tomorrow's. How can we engage an audience sufficiently large to sustain us, yet not so large that it overwhelms or undermines our institutional resources? With those questions in our minds, let me begin my sketching.

This first scene takes place in the reading room of Antiquarian Hall, where I have retreated to avoid the distractions of telephone and e-mail. Like the other readers, I too am pursuing a research project: to prepare a quick outline of dates, names, and figures corresponding to each of the major architectural events in the history of our library building. This outline will guide us in gathering original source materials for review by consulting architects and engineers at work with the Council's 'space planning' com-

mittee to consider the long-range and short-term space needs of Antiquarian Hall, a legacy building that has been entrusted to us, strengths, problems, and all. I sit at the desk nearest the shelves of the Society's *Proceedings*, skimming through the volumes within each relevant time period: 1905–1910 when the building was planned and built, the mid-1920's when the first stack addition was constructed, the mid-1950's when the second was added, and the early 1970's which saw a major expansion and remodeling. I work under the portrait of Waldo Lincoln, head of the AAS Council from 1907 to 1927, who came to the Society almost every day to attend to affairs. Reading, year after year, in the Reports of the Council I find myself charmed anew by the rich history of the Society and by how through the generations it has been kept true to its founding mission and yet ever a vital part of the current times. Later that day, my search through the archives will bring to hand an album of photos assembled by Lincoln, showing daily progress on our building as it rose from its hand-dug foundations in 1909 and was readied for occupancy a scant year later. It is a fascinating thing to look at and a wonderful reminder to me of the contributions of the AAS members like Waldo Lincoln who have given so much dedicated attention to the Society — a tradition that continues today, and for which we are continually grateful.

My second sketch also shows the reading room, but here it has been transformed from a quiet haven for research into a standing-room-only lecture hall. We are ready to begin the lecture by Jill Lepore, a former fellow whose book on King Philip's War has just been published — and still the crowd surges in. A bit of precious seating capacity has been lost to the cameras and lights of C-SPAN, here to record the lecture for broadcast nationwide — for book-loving insomniacs everywhere — as part of their popular 'About Books' series. Except for the seventy-five disappointed people we have turned away, it is otherwise just another AAS lecture — a bright young scholar talking about a fascinating book, researched in part in the remarkable AAS collections with notable

assistance from the Society's notoriously helpful staff. Her talk brings to life the events of a war 300 years ago but still relevant today to our understanding of American identity and race relations. The audience is wide-ranging, including noted historians and interested 'lay persons' alike, all sharing interests and profiting from each other's perspectives. Gatherings like this are one of the things that AAS does best of all, I think, and I am pleased that we are able to capture it for the nationwide audience. Of course, I am thrilled to have the opportunity to turn my introduction of Ms. Lepore into a shameless three-minute infomercial for AAS. Had we only had an 800 number scrolling across the screen saying, 'Operators are standing by to take your donations.'

Indeed, it is the fund-raising that garners the lion's share of my attention, and so it will not surprise you that the third sketch shows me — a smile upon my face — receiving news that the National Endowment for the Humanities has just awarded the AAS two major multiyear grants, totaling \$422,400. We are no stranger to such news — AAS has received fifty-three previous NEH grants and these two — one to continue our long-term fellowship program and the other to complete the cataloging of our broadsides — bring the total in direct aid we have received since 1972 from NEH to almost \$7.5 million. But the smile on my face is not about the money alone. It is also put there by my sense of pride at being associated with an institution — no, I should say it as it is — with a *staff* that is deserving of national recognition and so eager to continue the hard work required to maintain its fine reputation.

For my final sketch I wanted to find a way to share with you the feelings of pure exaltation that I have when I read reports of recent acquisitions made by our new curator of newspapers and periodicals, Russell Martin, who follows in a line of legendary collections builders — including Joyce Tracy, Marcus McCorison, Clarence Brigham, and Isaiah Thomas himself. The collection of historical American newspapers which they have assembled at AAS is widely recognized to be without peer, but like his prede-

cessors, Russ is not one to rest on these or any other laurels. Since his appointment, he has worked tirelessly in partnership with curators and keepers of newspaper collections at other libraries to ensure that at least one copy of every historical American newspaper is preserved for posterity in its original format. Few libraries today are in a position to be able to devote the shelf space and the staff time to the proper management and protection of such large collections. Most rely instead on microfilm copies of newspaper files, films which were produced chiefly through the yeoman efforts of state-project participants in the U. S. Newspaper Project. As state filming projects around the country are culminated, the original papers from which the films have been produced — or duplicate runs held in other institutions in the state — are often made available to AAS. Listen, if you will, to this report on a prospective acquisition: 'The Maryland Historical Society has proposed to place on permanent deposit at AAS their holdings of 386 Maryland newspaper titles. The duplication with what AAS has already is very slight. Some examples may help to illustrate that point. AAS has a single issue of Dunlap's *Maryland Gazette*; after the transfer we will have 1775-78. AAS has a single issue of the Chestertown *Apollo* for 1793; we will have the entire year. Over years of collecting, AAS has assembled three issues of the *Easton Herald and Eastern Shore Intelligencer*; we will now have a complete file, 1799-1804. AAS has nineteen scattered issues of the *Republican Star, or Eastern Shore General Advertiser*; again, the transfer will give us a complete file, 1802-14. The story is the same for title after title. AAS will hold not only the major newspapers from Baltimore and Annapolis but exemplars from Cumberland, Ridgely, Princes Anne, Hagerstown, Bel Air, Easton, and Frederick; often these are the only surviving files or issues known.'

Clarence Brigham once noted, 'If all the printed sources of history for a certain century or decade had to be destroyed save one, that which could be chosen with the greatest value to posterity

would be a file of an important newspaper.' I know it is not possible nor practical for all libraries to save newspapers in their original form. But I am certain that posterity will some day record their gratitude for one library in Worcester, Massachusetts, that was willing and able to take on that responsibility for the entire nation and will praise all those who gave AAS the wherewithal to do so.

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.