

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 22, 2004

EACH TIME I SIT DOWN TO DRAFT one of these semiannual reports of the Council I gather beside me—if not physically, then at least in computer space—a big stack of recent reports, minutes, memos, and other documents. From these I try to extract not only the who, what, and when of the Society's work over the most recent six months, but also something of the flavor, the personality, even the 'local color,' to set the scene of life at the Society in our particular time. Although I am no doubt guilty of talking more about our successes than our shortcomings and frustrations, it is my hope in each of my semiannual reports to render a faithful picture of where the Society is along the path of its dreams and ambitions as an institution. And the continuity of that path—stemming from Isaiah Thomas's founding vision, which animates our work still today—is something that never ceases to fascinate and inspire me.

To indulge that fascination, on occasion I unlock the chain that keeps me tied to the computer in my office and come out here to the reading room. Picking a volume of the *Proceedings* from the shelves at random, I read the staff and Council reports and peruse the financials and the lists of new acquisitions, permitting my thoughts to wander. I try to imagine what the work here was like back then. For all the obvious differences between our time and any other, the similarities are often all the more striking. As a test of this phenomenon, for my most recent trip back in time I picked one particular year about which there has been much mention made in the last few days: 1918, the year the Boston Red Sox last won the World Series. Now that the Sox will be competing yet again, beginning tomorrow, for the coveted trophy, many

are looking back to that time eighty-six years ago and asking wistfully, 'Could history repeat itself, at long last?'

Of course, except for the Red Sox win, there are lots of reasons one wouldn't want a repeat of the year 1918. In its October report that year the Council wrote: 'The war is casting its baleful influence upon the activities of this Society. Whether its library is a necessary enterprise and therefore entitled to ask for the exemption [from the draft] of its librarian and to receive its full quota of fuel, is a question which is seriously disturbing your officers. The loss of the librarian would be so grave a disaster that your president refuses to consider its possibility. Up to the present but half of the amount of coal has been granted by the fuel committee of the city, which will be required to maintain the temperature within the building sufficiently high to permit the staff or the public to work there. . . . Plans are being made to burn wood in one of the boilers if more anthracite cannot be secured. It is essential for the safety of the collections to maintain the temperature high enough to preserve the books and papers from dampness and frost, and this can be done with the coal on hand, even if the building must be closed to readers.' Two of the Society's five staff members left for reasons related to the war economy, if not for the working conditions. Political tensions ran high; the minutes of one Council meeting for the year take note of 'accusations of a lack of patriotism of one of the members of the Council,' although the minutes go on to assert that the allegations are surely false. Although peace was declared in November, its restorative powers were eclipsed by a potent epidemic of influenza that has been cited as the most devastating epidemic in recorded world history. Worldwide between twenty and forty million people perished, including 675,000 in the United States, more than ten times our losses in the war itself. These tensions over war, concerns about economic matters, and fear of the draft and of catching the flu are familiar today as well, but in 2004 it would be 'low-ash pellets' that would be burning in the boiler's firebox, not wood logs.

But setting the record of AAS activities for 1918 alongside that of 2004, I am able to trace many common threads. Those in attendance at the 1918 annual meeting were Francis Henshaw Dewey, William Trowbridge Forbes, Waldo Lincoln, and Herbert Edwin Lombard; their sons and nephews are with us today. At the 1918 meeting, there was presented a memoir of the long-time librarian of the Society Edmund Mills Barton, who had served the Society for fifty-two years. In his remarks, the presenter touched upon the conviviality of late-nineteenth-century meetings of the Society, when members would gather informally in the librarian's office before the meeting. 'Here one could confer with the Worcester members and later as the trains arrived from the various points of compass, the newly arrived members from more distant localities,' a gathering much as we have all enjoyed this afternoon, sans the arriving trains. In the 1918 report, note is made of the many volunteer hours devoted by members to 'fostering care' for the collections—activities that we today categorize as collections processing, rehousing, cataloguing, and conservation. Today, in 2004, our dependence on volunteers and interns is at an all-time high: thirty-four individuals contributed more than five thousand hours of work time in the past year alone. We are most grateful for this assistance because—to quote our 1918 counterpart—'our staff is too small and too busy with other matters to give [every collection] the attention it deserves.'

While on the subject of collections conservation, I am pleased to be able to announce today that the Society has been awarded a \$100,000 grant from the highly competitive 'Save America's Treasures' program, a funding initiative begun by the Clinton administration and continued by the present one. This grant will be spent over the course of two years to support the conservation, rebinding, and rehousing of selected manuscripts, broadsides, and library and trade catalogues relating to the history of the book in America, including the Mathew Carey papers. That our primary resources in the book-history field are used intensively goes almost without saying. Next month, on Friday, November

19, Philip Gura of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill will present the 2004 James Russell Wiggins Lecture in which he will consider the essential role that AAS has played over the past twenty years in the creation of the history of the book field. All are welcome to attend.

While the reports of 1918 say many nice things about the late Mr. Barton, the truth of the matter was that during his long tenure the Society's collections had grown in an undisciplined manner, accumulating and accreting rather than being shaped into useful and comprehensive entities. His successor Clarence S. Brigham had a clear vision for how the collections should be developed and together in partnership with Council president Waldo Lincoln set upon a rigorous agenda for reshaping them: 'To collect everything is today an evidence of weakness and every effort should be bent on collecting in such lines as shall make the Society known for its specialties and as shall complement the specialties of other institutions.'

Mr. Brigham was particularly devoted to the preserving of early American newspapers and to chronicling the bibliographical history of each title, and in those endeavors he has a worthy successor in our current curator of newspapers, Vincent Golden, who recently reported that in the last twelve months alone he has accessioned 67,571 issues of 674 newspaper titles, and that 248 of those titles were previously unrepresented in our collections. In fact, in reviewing the 1918 and 2004 reports for stories of newspaper acquisitions, one is sometimes hard-pressed to sort out the Brigham deals from the Golden ones: 300 volumes of German periodicals, which have not been called for at AAS in more than fifty years, are exchanged with Harvard College (that was Mr. Brigham); 138 volumes of German American newspapers come to AAS on deposit (Golden); 400 volumes of nineteenth-century Vermont papers have been received but not yet processed (Brigham); after months of artful negotiation, a nineteenth-century publisher's file is acquired from a small Pennsylvania newspaper that increased the Society's holdings from 36 issues to 4,500

(Golden); after three years of sorting, some ten tons of duplicate newspapers—almost filling a freight car—are sold to a Midwest university, thanks to the generosity of a major donor (Brigham, although I wouldn't be surprised to hear from Golden that he'll be needing a freight car to transport some future haul); or duplicate newspapers are judiciously deaccessioned, netting not only a war chest of funds for the buying of selected historical newspapers already on the market, but also the means by which dealers can be induced to offer significant runs of newspapers in trade (Golden). One major difference between 1918 and 2004, however, lies in the fact that Brigham was out of space for newspapers (and would build a new addition in 1925), and Golden is happily filling up the empty shelves made possible by our 2001 construction project.

One other difference: in 2004 Golden has a computer and Mr. Brigham, of course, was compiling his *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (AAS, 1947) without the benefit of one. Thus, Vince has been devoting his free time to preparing a 1,800-page typescript of the Brigham work and to enumerating the 334,000 issues of pre-1820 American newspapers AAS currently holds. Brigham and Golden are bibliographical kinsmen, indeed.

When the less-acquisitive Mr. Barton died in 1918, it was said that he left the Society with a well-catalogued collection. By the time the twentieth century had run the rest of its course, and the AAS collections had been multiplied in size severalfold by the prodigious collecting of Messrs. Brigham, Shipton, and McCorison, it could no longer be claimed that there was a card in the catalogue for every book and pamphlet in the collection. In 2004 we set out to remedy that predicament for one of the largest and most inaccessible groups: the 24,000 pamphlets known in-house as the 'misc. pams. collection'—the miscellaneous pamphlets. In making generous contributions toward funding the project, Bill Reese and other Councillors had challenged us to think of innovative ways in which we might create high-quality cataloguing

records at a faster pace than had been the AAS tradition—six records per cataloguer per day. Toward this goal we hired four college students for a ten-week project we called ‘cataloguing camp.’ Working under the supervision of two staff cataloguers, Jeannette Blohm and Megan Bocian, and using our newly adopted ‘brief records standard,’ these young people produced approximately seven thousand records over the course of the summer. (That’s six times faster than the rate at which full cataloguing records have traditionally been prepared as AAS.) Titles are fully transcribed, author names and dates are verified against the National Union Catalog (which includes about 95 percent of the items), and—after the records have been carefully proof-read—target cards are produced for more efficient paging of the pamphlets. While the sheer number of records produced was significant, the project has had a greater impact by demonstrating, if only to ourselves, that we can employ creative means and non-traditional staff to reduce our cataloguing backlog without compromising our standards for high quality.

But when it comes to the notion of turning back the clock to 1918, my question for the sports fans is simply ‘Do we get to take our computers and networks with us?’ Looking over the accomplishments and initiatives detailed in our 2004 reports, it is clear that in just five years’ time, we have become an organization that is very plugged into technology and entirely dependent upon it:

- Our most widely read publication is a lively online journal called *Common-place* (common-place.org), which has a new institutional co-sponsor—Florida State University—and an innovative new editor, Ed Gray, who is on the history faculty there.
- We have received a grant from the NEH for \$200,000 to begin to digitize and make available on the web all of Phil Lampi’s growing body of early American electoral data. Collected over a lifetime, this data—which has to date been kept in impeccably handwritten notebooks—looks a bit more like 1918 than 2004.

- We are currently making great progress with plans for digitizing graphic arts collections. The super-sized scanner acquired a few months ago is now set up with its own workstation. We have appointed an experienced ‘digital assets manager,’ and, most importantly, we have begun to secure grants—and to line up interns and other volunteers—to support the cataloguing and scanning. The most recent grants secured were from the Graham Foundation and the Museum Loan Network.
- We are launching, just today, an entirely revamped website at *americanantiquarian.org*, replete with easier navigation and search capacity, up-to-date graphics, and facilities for handling secure financial transactions, such as paying for purchases and services and making contributions to the Society.
- But all these accomplishments may pale by comparison with the challenges (and rewards!) that seem to await us in our partnership with Readex, now about to enter its fiftieth year! Sales of the digital versions of Evans, Shaw-Shoemaker, and Early American Newspapers—which are now known collectively as the Archives of Americana—are meeting or exceeding expectations (which were high to begin with). Sold by subscription to major research universities and liberal arts colleges, these online resources are bringing full-text and imaged pages of every title known to have been published in early America into the classroom, library, and living quarters of graduate and undergraduate students alike. Plans to repurpose the data for additional markets are already advancing. And these new streams of earned income are coming at just the point in our financial circumstances that a diversified revenue source is needed to shore up our diminished endowment takeout.

More than likely, it would be on the topic of ‘making do with meager resources’ that we from the 2004 AAS would have the most in common with our colleagues from 1918: they ended their fiscal year with unexpended income amounting to \$5.90, a far

sight better than our own performance for this particular year. Like us, salaries were their biggest expense (\$6,923 annually for the entire five-person staff), and controlling the costs of light, heat, water, and telephone were their biggest challenges. When I read in the 1918 Council minutes that they were 'uncertain how much increased taxes due to the war will diminish the Society's income' from investments, I nodded in sympathy.

I was also touched to read the fine tributes that appeared in the 1918 *Proceedings* upon the deaths of the Society's two most long-standing members, Samuel Abbott Green of Groton and Samuel Swett Green of Worcester. On a more modern and happy note, I am able to report that our longest-standing member, Charles Sawyer, who was elected in 1946 when he was director of the Worcester Art Museum, continues to stay in touch. He wrote a lovely letter upon receiving—and reading from cover to cover—the fine portrait catalogue that appeared earlier this year as an issue of the *Proceedings*, and—thanks to the generous support of Charlie Barlow and Jim Heald—as a richly illustrated monograph in hard covers, as well. We are grateful not only to them for their generosity, but also to Mr. Sawyer for his continued interest and loyal support over these fifty-eight years.

There were other things as I read the 1918 reports that made me smile. The Council received with favor that year a request to lend to the city of Marietta, Ohio, the original lead plate that was placed by the French in 1749 at the mouth of the Muskingum River; to this day the schoolchildren of Marietta are still lobbying to get it back from the Society permanently, just as Greece would like to have the Elgin Marbles returned. And the research topics of that earlier day—the history of early manufactures at Pittsburgh, steamboating on the Mississippi, Esek Hopkins as commander of the United States Navy—harken to a simpler time for research pursuits; those topics being explored in the collections today range from the history of eyeglasses and the history of the mahogany trade to insanity in early America and sex, violence, and sport of the mid-nineteenth century. And on that

note of how different things may seem from that time eighty-six years ago, I will end with my own surmising. Those of us who have the honor of being associated with this institution, with free and ready access to its remarkable collection, have the privilege of walking back into the pages of history on a moment's notice. We enjoy a feeling of connectedness with the past—and understanding for it—that makes it possible for us to appreciate the present and anticipate the future all the more gladly. The work done to build this organization by the seven generations of members, Councillors, and staff who have preceded us put us very much in their debt. Unlike a baseball game, which can come down to just what happens with a single swing of the bat on the last pitch of the last inning of the last game in the series, the success we enjoy here comes from decades of effort at acquiring, cataloguing, and preserving. Our own efforts would have produced less exemplary results had it not been for the loyal and generous support of every true-blue AAS fan—our members, our fellows, and friends. For that steadfast support we remain most grateful.

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.