
“Everything Old Is New Again”: Research Collections at the American Antiquarian Society

JOANNE D. CHAISON

ABSTRACT

THE AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY (AAS), founded in 1812, is the nation's oldest historical organization. Its library of books, serials, manuscripts, and graphic arts extends from the colonial period through the late nineteenth century. Generations of scholars, graduate students, bibliographers, and independent researchers have studied at the library, “under its generous dome.” This article explores elements of the institution's history, the evolution of its collections, and the relationship between its staff and readers that make it a leading humanities research center. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the collections, carefully and aggressively acquired for two centuries, are extraordinarily supportive for new trends in research. Comments offered by several recent scholars working in a variety of fresh historical, literary, and interdisciplinary projects illustrate how the depth and breath of AAS collections proved indispensable for their research. Sometimes referred to as “the stuff of everyday life,” AAS resources not only support new trends in research, but the expansive range of primary documents has enabled the institution to foster a new area of study—the history of the book. An overview of its Program in the History of the Book in American Culture provides examples of the AAS leadership role in this academic discipline.

The American Antiquarian Society (AAS), the oldest national historical organization in the United States, has a research library containing the most accessible collection of materials printed from the colonial period through the Civil War and Reconstruction. An international community of researchers uses these resources for their literary, historical, cultural, ge-

Joanne D. Chaison, Research Librarian, American Antiquarian Society, 185 Salisbury Street, Worcester, MA 01609

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neological, bibliographical, and artistic projects. In their work, they have explored and expanded the frontiers of scholarship by probing the well-known and unexpected wealth of sources within the Society's collections. Some have affectionately described their experiences in such glowing terms as "research brigadoon" and "research spa." This article will discuss what makes AAS a premier research center for the humanities and how its collections and programs support new trends in scholarship.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE INSTITUTION AND COLLECTIONS

The history of AAS begins with one person—Isaiah Thomas (1749–1831). As a young boy, Thomas was apprenticed to Boston printer Zechariah Fowle (1724–1776), with whom he labored from 1755 to 1765. It was in Fowle's print shop that Thomas set his first type from a copy of a broadside ballad, *The Lawyer's Pedigree*. Inspired in the ways of printing from an early age, Thomas established the most influential printing and publishing business in the country following the American Revolution. His businesses in the young nation included newspapers, a paper mill, a bindery, and bookstores, making him the leading printer, publisher, and bookseller of his generation (Whitehill, 1962).

Thomas left his legacy in 1812 when he founded the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. Filled with the patriotic spirit of the newly independent country, he sought to collect and preserve "every variety of book, pamphlet and manuscript that might be valuable in illustrating any and all parts of American history" (Whitehill, 1962, pp. 71–72). He devoted his life to collecting, scholarship, and philanthropy. Thomas gave generous gifts to the Society, including his private collection of 8,000 books that he had personally cataloged on 217 manuscript pages, and more than \$20,000 for its first library building. He was relentless in his drive to acquire materials. Although he loved finely bound books, he was just as comfortable printing or acquiring inexpensive items, "the stuff of everyday life"—newspapers, children's books, travel literature, almanacs, broadsides, political tracts, sermons, primers, etiquette manuals, and government documents, to name but a few. Among the volumes he gave to the Society are such rarities as the first book printed in British North America, commonly known as the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640); John Eliot's *Indian Bible* (1663), translated into the Algonquian language; and the first American edition of *Mother Goose's Melody* (1786). Of special significance for the early American book trades, he deposited his private and business correspondence, diaries, and legal documents, even his apprenticeship indenture to Zechariah Fowle.

Thomas also gave the Society a collection of hastily printed broadside ballads that he purchased in bulk from a Boston printer in 1813, making him the first broadside ballad collector in the United States. These rare sheets span the period from the Revolutionary era through the early part

of the War of 1812. In presenting this collection to the Society, Thomas's inscription speaks volumes about his interest in print in every form: "Songs, Ballads, &c. In Three Volumes. Purchased from a Ballad Printer and Seller in Boston, 1813. Bound up for Preservation, to shew what articles of this kind are in vogue with the Vulgar at this time, 1814. N.B. Songs and common Ballads are not so well printed at this time as they [were] 70 years ago, in Boston. Presented to the Society by Isaiah Thomas. August, 1814."¹

By the time of Thomas's death in 1831, the Society had been infused with his spirit to acquire, preserve, and make accessible the printed record of the United States. Under the stewardship of subsequent librarians, the collections expanded in every conceivable direction. Christopher Columbus Baldwin (1800–1835) added substantially to the collections during his tenure as the third librarian from 1827 to 1835. An energetic bibliophile, Baldwin enthusiastically recorded his acquisition conquests throughout his diary. Perhaps the most fascinating entries deal with the private library of Thomas Wallcut (1758–1840) of Boston. In the morning of 2 August 1834, Baldwin arrived in Boston and went to the garret on India Street where Wallcut's collection was stored. He spent five days in a space of oppressive heat but filled with countless books and pamphlets. He wrote of the treasures that surrounded him in that fourth-floor oil store:

They were in trunks, bureaus, and chests, baskets, tea chests and old drawers, and presented a very odd appearance. . . . Mr. Wallcut told me that I might take all the pamphlets and newspapers I could find and all the books that treated of American history. . . . Everything was covered with venerable dust, and as I was under a slated roof and the thermometer at ninety-three, I had a plenty hot time of it. . . . The value of the rarities I found there, however, soon made me forget the heat, and I have never seen such happy moments. . . . Great numbers of the productions of our early authors were turned up at every turn. . . . (Baldwin, 1901, pp. 317–321)

On the fifth day of Baldwin's stunning acquisition, he filled a wagon with nearly 4,500 pounds of books, pamphlets, and newspapers and returned to Worcester. Today, the Wallcut imprints are one of the most important collections of Americana acquired by the Society in the nineteenth century.

Successors of Thomas and Baldwin continued the drive to acquire materials. They also made significant contributions to scholarship, emulating Thomas's *History of Printing in America*, a seminal reference work for the early history of printing and typography (Thomas, 1810). For example, Clarence Brigham, a far-sighted leader from 1908 to 1959, expanded the collections of the Society dramatically. In a single year, he obtained more than 7,000 imprints issued before 1821. His ability to deepen areas of the collection was legendary. When such mundane material as city directories, nineteenth-century novels, almanacs, or local histories became available, he would buy the largest collection on the market, usually at a time when

interest in that field was low. Clifford Shipton, a consummate scholar-librarian at AAS for twenty years, said that Brigham's "genius in selecting fields which were to become popular for collectors was amazing. . . . He recognized fields of potential source material before most of the professionals and was the first to collect them." (Shipton, 1963, pp. 330, 336). Newspapers were among Brigham's great interests, and he collected them "with a vengeance." In 1947, after thirty-four years of research, his monumental bibliography, *The History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690–1820*, was published, and remains an indispensable resource, among his many other significant publications (Brigham, 1947).

Marcus A. McCorison, referred to as the "Grand Acquisitor" by the staff and book collectors alike, retired in 1992 after thirty-two years of distinguished leadership as AAS librarian, director, and president. During his tenure, he acquired over 150,000 items, ranging from a single broadside or letter to a run of hundreds of issues of a single newspaper. His legacy lies in the great quantities of materials he acquired from the nineteenth century, effectively balancing the holdings of the colonial and Revolutionary era with significant additions to the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras. Moreover, he greatly improved access to AAS holdings through the creation of a machine-readable cataloging system. One of his most decisive and enduring achievements was the establishment of a fellowship program in 1972, which effectively placed AAS in national ranking for humanities scholarship (Hench, 1992).

Currently, Nancy H. Burkett holds the endowed position of the Marcus A. McCorison Librarian. While her scholarly interests lie in the areas of African American studies and women's history, she strives to acquire an exemplar of everything printed through 1876 for the institution. Her collection development statement for 2002 echoes the mission pronounced by Isaiah Thomas 190 years earlier:

The mission of the Society—to build a premier research library and to make collections available to those who seek to learn about and to interpret the past—has remained constant throughout our history. Isaiah Thomas set us on a course from which we have not deviated: to focus on the history of print culture in North America. We collect imprints not only because they are carriers of ideas, but also because they are cultural artifacts. We are convinced that the development of printing throughout North America is one of the principal agents through which American culture developed. (Burkett, 2002).

At the start of the twenty-first century, the AAS library held approximately 700,000 printed volumes, including two-thirds of all imprints issued before 1821; 15,000 titles of American and Canadian newspapers; and 1,400 manuscript collections ranging from family papers, letters, and diaries, to the records, ledgers, and account books of early American printing and publishing houses. The Society's outstanding collection of graphic arts mate-

rial includes broadsides, lithographs, engravings, sheet music, maps, and scores of ephemera (e.g., trade cards, bill heads, binders' tickets, bookplates, colonial currency, and stereographs). The collections offer unparalleled opportunities to study American culture and society from the earliest period of settlement through the nineteenth century.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

The AAS staff are widely recognized as strong supporters of historical researchers of all kinds—whether they are members of the academic community, undergraduate students enrolled in their annual American Studies Seminar, K–12 educators, genealogists, creative artists, or independent researchers. Through their everyday activities, the staff become the allies of researchers using the collections. And the staff themselves have made important contributions of their own by compiling important bibliographies, writing significant monographs and journal articles, and frequently presenting papers at scholarly conferences (Hench, 1997).²

Although the staff work individually within departments, they share a common goal to acquire and provide access to collections. Acquisitions and curatorial staff, for example, strengthen collections by searching dealer and auction catalogs and soliciting gifts, donors, and endowments. Even eBay, the online auction service, is an occasional source for materials.

The AAS cataloging department exemplifies the way that access is provided to an institution's collections. For more than thirty years, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has generously supported AAS cataloging programs, most importantly its North American Imprints Program (NAIP), whose objective is to create highly detailed computerized records of holdings through 1876. These records are unmatched in their level of detail. In addition to providing extensive subject analysis and assigning prescribed rare book genre headings, provenance tracings for former owners and donors, and physical characteristics of the artifact, catalogers have developed a broad range of local subject and genre terms for even richer access to imprints and manuscripts. This internal thesaurus includes dozens of unique headings such as "Blacks as authors," "Women in the book trades," "Juvenile novels," "Sermons to temperance societies," "Addresses to lyceums," and "Autobiographical fiction." Even deeper access to holdings was achieved in the summer of 2002 when Endeavor's Voyager Web-based catalog replaced the earlier online system, which had been available on the Internet since 1992.

Helen Horowitz of Smith College captured the ethos of AAS in the acknowledgment of her recent book, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*, when she wrote:

For all who enter its reading room, the American Antiquarian Society is a special place. . . . Its extraordinary resources, built over its long life,

are a historian’s dream. In addition, the educational program makes it possible both for many to research there and for fellows and staff to learn from one another. It is a model of what thoughtful care, applied for many decades, can do to build a collection and make it accessible. Its mission is furthered by a staff who remember that research is fun. Everyone, from custodian to president, is interested in history and the process of research. (Horowitz, 2002, p. 493)

WORKING AT THE “RESEARCH SPA”

When readers work at AAS, it soon becomes obvious that there is a great deal of communication among the staff and between staff and researchers. This is especially evident at the traditional “staff talk” when fellows present an introductory overview of their projects, followed by comments from staff at all levels and departments who suggest research strategies and sources. They might mention a newspaper just acquired, a book just cataloged, a lithograph just purchased, a collection of family papers being inventoried, an underutilized but relevant subject bibliography, or a handwritten checklist for an uncataloged collection.

After their stay at AAS concludes, fellows submit a written report of their impressions and experiences. In his 1990 report, Scott Casper, then a doctoral candidate in American studies at Yale University, referred to AAS as a “research spa—an intellectually rigorous but relaxing and nurturing environment that enables the scholar to accomplish enormous amounts of research and to rekindle enthusiasm” (Casper, 1990). Seven years later, as a member of the history department at the University of Nevada, Reno, he returned to AAS and further reflected upon his research experiences at a symposium marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of visiting fellowships. Professor Casper highlighted the benefits of staff recommendations to use uncataloged or underutilized collections and suggested that such conversations often help scholars redefine or transform their projects. When he began his fellowship, he said that he

wanted to explore the cultural work of nineteenth-century American biography, the stories that biographies told and the cultural purposes they sought to achieve. As I concluded my [staff] talk [the head of readers’ services] asked whether I knew about the Society’s collection of library catalogues: printed catalogues of nineteenth-century libraries all over the United States, ranging from ladies’ lending libraries to prison libraries. Of course, my answer was no—but not for long. Within a week [she and her staff] were bringing me stacks of uncatalogued library catalogues. . . . I was hooked and my dissertation was transformed. (Casper, 1997, p. 272)

Often a fellow’s initial “want list” of materials expands after conversations with the knowledgeable staff and curators. For example, Barbara Hochman, professor of foreign literatures and linguistics at Ben Gurion University in Israel, recently arrived at AAS to work on her study of the

publication history and popular response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Initially, she focused on reading the abolitionist newspaper, *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), where the novel first appeared in serialized form on 5 June 1851. But, after following through on recommendations she received from the staff, her project took on greater depth to reflect the phenomenal popularity of this novel. Professor Hochman had access to numerous editions of the novel—in fancy and cheap bindings, hard and soft copy, and foreign language imprints. She could access children's editions of the book, Topsy and Eva paper dolls, Uncle Tom songsters, pictorial scenes from the novel represented on lithographed sheet music covers, book reviews in nineteenth-century periodicals, broadside advertisements for the stage adaptation, and a wealth of "anti-Tom" novels that sprang from Stowe's work. One of the best suggestions Hochman received came from the curator of manuscripts who provided her with references to the novel in readers' letters and diaries. Her study took on far deeper dimensions than she originally envisioned (Hochman, personal communication, April 12, 2002).

The breadth and depth of AAS collections provide ample research opportunities for scholars of microhistory and borderland studies, race and ethnicity in America, gender role and identification, historical memory, art history, Atlantic world studies, and cross-fertilized fields such as American studies. In addition to awarding academic fellowships for more than thirty years, AAS has been offering fellowships for creative and performing artists and writers since 1995. Academics now work alongside novelists, playwrights, poets, painters, and filmmakers. Artist fellows have, for example, researched African Americans in the West for a music/dance performance piece; studied the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 for a book of poetry that reimagines the experiences of those involved; explored the history and legacy of the slave trade in New England for a television documentary; and read newspapers for a one-woman play about the nineteenth-century columnist Fanny Fern (Sara Willis Parton). The broadening of AAS constituencies has energized the collegial life of the entire institution and greatly enhanced the interpretation of historical materials; but the major users of collections remain the scholarly community, and they consistently make new and imaginative connections in literary, historical, and interdisciplinary topics. A few profiles illustrate the current directions of work, and some surprises, at the "research spa."

Karin Wulf of American University is working on an expansive project on the cultures and politics of family in early America. She explores lineage practices through the phenomenon of genealogy, which she broadly defines as the literary, performative, and material representation of extended kinship in eighteenth-century America. Her pathbreaking study is closely related to the creation of historical memory and the role of lineage as a source of political, social, and cultural authority. In her fellowship report, she wrote

that "what I had not counted on was finding so many new sources and new ideas for sources." Besides the Society's superb collection of early published family histories, she found extensive family records in Bibles and manuscript collections, listings of family pew rentals in local histories, dozens of book-plates with heraldic devices, and visual and material culture sources—all great resources for her emerging study (Wulf, 2000).

Until recently, one of the most underutilized collections at AAS was the Mather Family Library—more than 1,500 printed books that once belonged to Richard, Increase, Cotton, and Samuel Mather and their families and colleagues. This is the largest extant portion of colonial New England's most important library. Isaiah Thomas purchased the bulk of the collection from Hannah Mather Crocker in 1814 and now—nearly two centuries later—a new generation of scholars interested in transatlantic studies recognizes the vast potential of this important historical artifact. Mark Peterson of the University of Iowa knew about the Mather Family Library before he arrived at AAS and later wrote that he "had no idea how rich it would be, how well it would suit my interests, and how it would shape the direction of my research and writing." He examined hundreds of volumes for his current book project about Boston's involvement in the cultural, intellectual, and social history of the early modern Atlantic world. Professor Peterson found a wealth of evidence of the influence of books in shaping the intellectual lives of the Mathers by examining the books they read—the marginalia in the volumes, the subject matter, the places where the books were published, and how the books could be seen as part of the Mather family's involvement in an international Protestant culture (Peterson, 1999).

Elisa Tamarkin from the University of California at Irvine studies American Anglophilia from a unique perspective—as a post-Revolutionary fixation which found its way into the character of American high culture and intellectualism, as well as the practices of colleges and the academy and the pretensions of American taste. She asks, for example, why were there, in the American academy, flagrantly cultivated British accents? She explores the ways that Anglophilia affects the experiences of being American and of American assimilation. At AAS, she uncovered the shapes of pretentiousness through recognizably British forms of conduct and manner at universities. Before arriving she had examined elements of Anglophilia in the works of major literary figures, but she still needed evidence of the English character in American academic circles. Professor Tamarkin writes:

What I found at AAS—wonderfully, fortuitously—in addition to "official" college materials, printed editions of public lectures, college rosters, etc. (which I knew I *would* find) is a surprising treasury of college student publications from 1810–1870. Volume upon volume of student humor, cartoons, fashion, miscellany, of reflections of what it meant to be a student, or to *look like* a student, of mock-manuals on edict and behavior for underclassmen and upperclassmen (lest they be con-

fused). . . What was equally rewarding was being able to compare the social life at New England colleges to that of colleges in other regions. . . . By the end of my stay so many facets of antebellum academic life had taken focus: I had familiarized myself with student slang, with habits of dress and behavior, with club and fraternity life, with tales of college romance and courtship, with what it means to be a college “swell” and, more importantly, with the regional and institutional subtleties of such student conduct across U.S. campuses. And why hadn’t I found these materials before? Because AAS has such a unique—perhaps the most unique and comprehensive—collection of such materials. (Tamarkin, personal communication, September 24, 26, 2002)

Historical and literary scholars are exploring new ways of studying sexuality in antebellum America by analyzing a unique collection of ephemeral publications at AAS referred to as racy or flash newspapers. These newspapers of urban life were published in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Richmond, among other cities, during the 1830s–1850s. Young editors targeted a readership of unmarried male youth—clerks and apprentices, fops and dandies, loafers and low-wage workers—by providing humorous stories, jokes, and gossip. Their “sex and the city” articles dealt with the world of parties and balls, of brothels and parlor houses, of theaters and saloons. The subject of prostitution, men and girls on the town, and sporting events convey a real sense of the celebration of a leisure culture of pleasure, a defiance of standard middle-class values. With titles like *Budget of Blunders*, *Viper’s Sting*, *Polyanthos*, the *Rake*, the *Whip*, the *Flash*, the *True Flash*, this collection of flash papers has recently become a vital source for scholars who are researching the underground geography of urban sexuality (Cohen, personal communications, September 9, 10; October 8, 2002).

Several scholars who have read the flash newspapers of the 1830s–1850s have found them invaluable for exposing the subterranean worlds of urban America. A leading expert, Patricia Cline Cohen of the University of California at Santa Barbara, read the flash papers exhaustively for her book on the sensational murder of Helen Jewett, a New York City prostitute (Cohen, 1998), and for her current project on Mary Gove Nichols and Thomas Low Nichols, two health and marriage reformers of the 1840s and 1850s who became nationally known leaders of a sex reform movement in which they advocated for “free love,” generating tremendous press both favorable and condemnatory. Professor Cohen describes the AAS’s holdings of flash newspapers as an “unparalleled collection” (Cohen, personal communications, September 9, 10; October 8, 2002). The Society recently acquired several new titles and issues of the flash papers, making it the largest repository of source material for scholars working on the frontier of this new area of antebellum urban studies.

In another area of research, scholars of Native American history are seeking to reclaim the active voices of Indians in the communities in which they lived and survived. Unlike earlier historical works that dealt with the

decline of native communities upon European contact, a new generation of historians is focusing on native culture and intra-Indian topics, including gender, family, class, communities, and regional interactions with one another. For instance, David Silverman of Wayne State University, a recent AAS Mellon Post-Dissertation Fellow, is revising a manuscript in which he places the Indians themselves at the center of their history.

At AAS, Professor Silverman found manuscripts and newspapers to be among the richest sources for answering questions about how the Wampanoag Indians of Martha's Vineyard and whites lived alongside one another in peace throughout the colonial period and beyond, and how native communities on the island survived as distinct cultural and geographical entities to the present day. The manuscript collections that he read include the John Milton Earle Papers with capsule histories, genealogies, and censuses of Vineyard communities, as well as the rare voices of Indian religious figures found in letters to Earle during his tenure as commissioner to the Indians of Massachusetts. As he sifted through colonial newspapers, Silverman was able to locate the presence of the Native American, a crucial source for his study, in these daily or weekly papers. He commented that “only in the newspapers among the advertisements for runaway servants can we learn the details of native workaday dress, of the extent to which Indian bonds people were sold away from their locales, and of their fluency in the English language. . . . Only in the newspapers can one trace the 1763 yellow fever and smallpox epidemics that ran riot throughout the Wampanoag villages of Cape Cod and the islands.” As scholars unearth the histories of Indians living among colonists, not west of them, newspapers are a crucial primary source. As Silverman notes, “no other institution has as rich and complete a collection of early American newspapers than those found at the American Antiquarian Society” (Silverman, personal communication, September 9, 2002).

Documents of a distinct nature were essential for another scholar of Native American Studies whose work takes a completely different track from Silverman's. Catherine Corman of Harvard University is completing a groundbreaking study of Native American literacies during the Removal Era of the 1820s and 1830s and the ways that natives were affected by the revolution in print that was occurring during this period. At AAS, she examined original documents from a new and revealing perspective—by analyzing the printed document as an artifact and giving meaning to the document itself as opposed to the “text.” With an interest in both semiotics and print culture, she wanted most to explore a single genre, the treaty, which was a formal, written diplomatic convention that Europeans and Euro-Americans had used from as early as the sixteenth century to obtain Native American land cessions. During her fellowship, Professor Corman examined more than 150 printed treaties, dating between the 1620s and the 1860s, looking for changes in material and format. She wondered, for example, what

happened when Indians were forced to negotiate with Americans who were immersed in a new culture of print and mass circulation. Would printing alter conventions of treaty-making? Would the treaties themselves look different with the advent of organized government printing? What role would print play in changing power relations between the United States and Indian nations as wars and white settlement devastated Native communities (Corman, 2001)?

What printers did to change the treaty format revealed important clues about Native and U.S. national appreciations of each other. Corman states that

what mattered to me was how a set form accommodated changing needs and relationships. The words were less important, in some ways, than the fonts, bindings, papers, inks, and formats. Because AAS allowed me to get close to original printed Documents . . . it gave me a chance to think about the ways that ephemera are essential . . . I believe historians have to go back to the Documents [and] I think it's important to have the room and space to ask the Documents a universe of questions. . . . Only the originals—the gems in the holdings of the AAS—would help me find the answers to the questions I wanted to ask. (Corman, personal communication, August 1, 2002)

“AN AMERICAN BOOK CENTER”

For nearly two hundred years, Isaiah Thomas and his successors assembled a vast archive of original artifacts that has provided generations of scholars with opportunities for innovative research. The Society's expansive collection of books, pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, visual materials, ephemera, and manuscripts also lays the foundation for a new field of scholarship—the history of the book. These collections are the starting point for studying print culture from its earliest beginnings in North America through the nineteenth century (Gross, 1993).

AAS is now a hub for scholars who study the production, dissemination, and consumption of words and images in writing and print (Gross, 1993). The seminal studies in this new enterprise, each based on extensive research in the Society's collections, and supported by AAS fellowships, include Richard D. Brown's (1989) *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865*; Cathy N. Davidson's (1986) *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*; William J. Gilmore's (1989) *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1730–1835*; David D. Hall's (1989) *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*; David S. Reynolds's (1988) *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Thoreau*; Michael D. Warner's (1990) *The Letters of the Republic*; and Ronald J. Zboray's (1993) *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the Reading Public*.

A number of equally impressive monographs were recently completed by a new group of scholars, also benefiting from the AAS fellowship

programs. These include Scott E. Casper's (1999) *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*; Patricia Crain's (2000) *The Story of A: the Alphabetization of America from the New England Primer to the Scarlet Letter*; Ann Fabian's (2000) *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America*; Alice Fahs's (2001) *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861–1865*; Isabelle Lehuu's (2000) *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*; Meredith McGill's (2002) *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853*; and Marcus Wood's (2000) *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865*.

Moreover, the AAS staff have introduced scholars from numerous fields to the methodology of the history of the book. Many never thought this new field of study would have a dramatic impact on their projects before they arrived at AAS. One scholar remarked that the history of the book is "in the air" at the Society. Another, studying the eighteenth-century Jamaican diarist Thomas Thistlewood, wrote that he "had not anticipated that my work . . . would focus quite so heavily on his reading practices. But the more I researched, and the more exposed I became to History of the Book approaches, which are such a vital issue at the American Antiquarian Society, so I increasingly saw the value and necessity of exploring Thistlewood's reading habits in great detail" (Morgan, 1997).

The Society is deeply committed to fostering broad interest in book history and print culture. The Program in the History of the Book in American Culture (PHBAC), formally established in 1983, sponsors an annual lecture series in book history and publishes important bibliographical and monographic literature in the field through the Society's journal, the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*. A major undertaking of PHBAC is the five-volume series entitled *A History of the Book in America*. The first volume in this series, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, edited by Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (2000), proved to be a major contribution for the transatlantic study of reading, printing, publishing, and book trade practices through the eighteenth century.³

The combination of bibliographical and original sources has made the Society "an American book center," and an ideal setting for a second major PHBAC activity, the annual history of the book summer seminar (Babanes, 1997). Since 1985, these seminars have brought together an interdisciplinary group of historians, literary scholars, librarians, archivists, bibliographers, and graduate students. Seminar offerings, led by authorities in the field, have ranged from "Critical Methods in Bibliography," "The Business of Publishing: Reading Financial Records as a Source for the History of the Book," "The Politics of Reading, Writing, and Publishing in Nineteenth-Century America," to "Reading Culture, Reading Books," "Getting Into Print," "Books in American Lives, 1830–1890," and "Teaching the History of the Book."

The Society's staff work closely with seminar leaders in shaping and designing workshops. Although topics and source materials vary from year to year, for the past twelve years an annual staple has been the workshop on bibliographical sources for book history research. In this session, the research librarian introduces dozens of reference sources and comments on their usefulness and intrinsic value. Workshops are tailored to the specific focus of each seminar with opportunities for the hands-on study of materials from a variety of collections, such as the financial and accounting records of printers, publishers, and booksellers; popular literary journals with book reviews and advertisements; editions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels with marginalia and scribblings; etiquette books advising men, women, and children what to read; ethnic and immigrant newspapers from a selected city for a range of years; almanacs from several cities for a selected year; book trade papers and broadside advertisements for trade sales; prospectuses; and subscription books, engravings, and lithographs of images of people reading, to name but a few.

As an exercise at one recent workshop, participants read diaries for evidence of "reader response." Robert Gross has written about the use of diaries to provide a wider view of the constraints and choices in the social system of print (Gross, 1993). Among the many diaries held by AAS is the journal of Edward Jenner Carpenter, a young apprentice cabinet-maker in western Massachusetts whose daily writings span the period between March 1844 and June 1845. Throughout his journal, Carpenter comments upon all of the books, newspapers, and magazines that he read. The AAS holds copies of each of the items he mentions in his diary, thus providing an interior view of a young man's reading world of popular novels, sensational literature, biographies, histories, and local newspapers (Clark, 1988). The extensive collection of print and manuscript sources offers vast opportunities for seminar matriculants to explore print culture themes and to appreciate the role that print has played in our society.

The AAS is not only a center for studying print culture; it is also a catalyst for advancing interdisciplinary scholarship in productive ways, often stemming from relationships that were formed during the summer seminar program. *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America*, edited by Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles, is a collection of essays, most of which were written by members of the 1992 AAS summer seminar (Moylan & Stiles, 1996). More recently, Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves coedited *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary* (Casper, Chaison, & Groves, 2002). Without the resources of the American Antiquarian Society, the editors and contributors would not have been able to produce this innovative textbook of primary documents and original essays, with its accompanying CD-ROM of captioned images of print culture. Nearly all of the contributors to *Perspectives on American Book*

History were drawn from the Society's various book history seminars or from its fellowship program.

In 1997, Philip Gura, professor of American literature and culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, spoke eloquently of the scholarship that AAS has fostered through its fellowship program. His comments apply equally well for all who enter the library to use its collections in new and exciting ways. He remarked that

such an appreciation of the potential magic inherent in all aspects of the historical record to evoke another age is yet another sentiment that unites those of us who have worked in these August halls . . . a government document, a bookseller's catalogue, the Mather Family library, a sheet of lithographed sheet music, a first edition of Cooper's work, an almanac, an emigrant's guide, a history of the Sandwich Islands, a railroad map, the Cambridge Platform: here they are all equal, waiting for a fellow who will burn whatever fragment she chooses until it catches the light thus so, brightly illuminating another corner of our past, and kindling the flame of her scholarship. (Gura, 1997, p. 298)

Professor Gura's impressions of the wealth of AAS resources—materials that reflect "the stuff of everyday life"—are shared by the other scholars whose work has been described in this paper. The research collections have also made the Society a preeminent center for advancing scholarship in a new discipline—the history of the book. This article has provided a brief overview of the history and culture of the Society, the collaboration between staff and scholars in the research process, and the magnitude and importance of its collections. What were once undiscovered, overlooked, or underutilized resources are now what researchers consider essential for their projects, whether these sources be heraldic devices on bookplates, marginalia in imprints owned and read by the Mathers, antebellum college student publications, Indian treaties, colonial newspapers, manuscript records, flash papers, or an archive full of invaluable artifacts that enables one to study the history of print culture in North America.

In 2012, the American Antiquarian Society will celebrate its 200th birthday. One can feel confident that the institution's incomparable collections, acquired since 1812, will continue to support new trends in scholarship. The Society will remain a "research spa," where cutting-edge research means that "everything old is new again." This was so evident in 1992 when President Emeritus Marcus A. McCorison said "if we can get the books into the place, the scholarship will take care of itself" (McCorison, 1992, p. 345).

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NOTES

1. For information about this and other aspects of the Isaiah Thomas ballad collection, see Schrader (1988).
2. Recent staff publications produced by the Society include Barnhill (1991); Knoles (1999); Knoles and Knoles (1999); and Wasowicz (1996).
3. For an overview of the History of the Book Program, see Hench (1994); for collected essays published by the Society on the emerging field of book history, see, for example, Joyce et al. (1983); Hall and Hench (1987); and Hall (1989).

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