

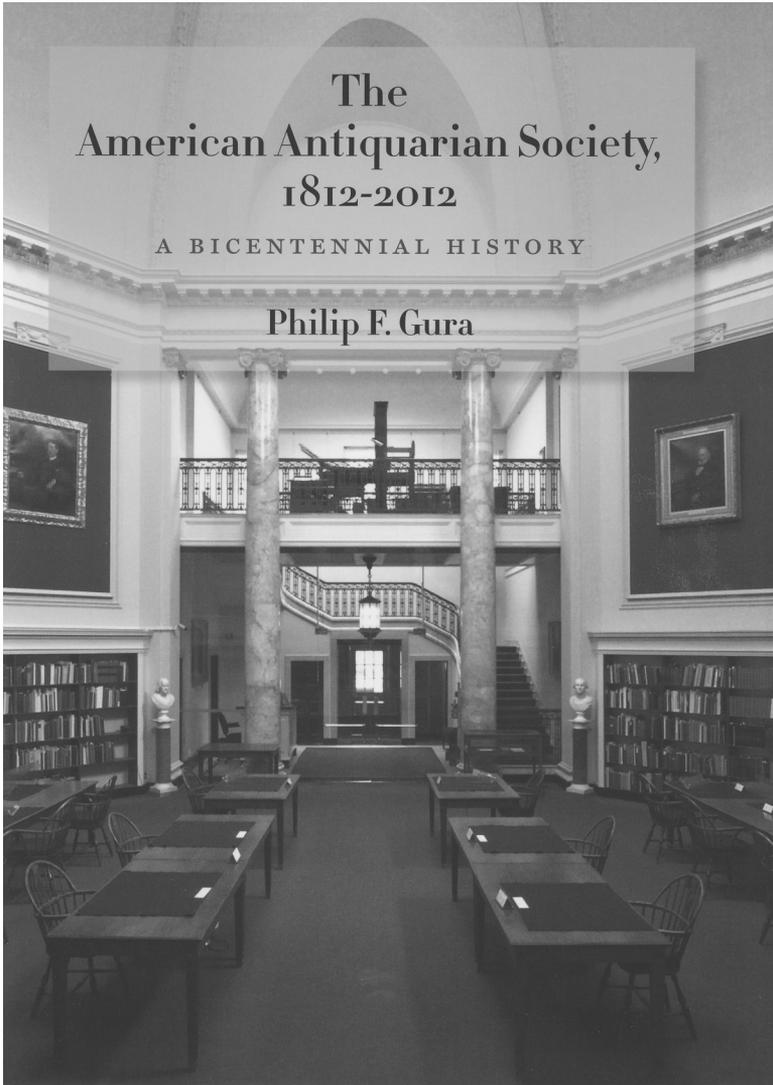
## The History of One of The Great Books and Manuscript Libraries

WILLIAM BUTTS

**GURA, Philip F.** *The American Antiquarian Society, 1812-2012: A Bicentennial History*. Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 2012. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xvi, 454pp. Illustrations. **\$60.00.**

It's unfortunate that America's great private research libraries—the Folger, the Huntington, and the Newberry among them—are an unknown quantity to the general public. Even among academics you find only sporadic familiarity with these great institutions, depending what type of scholarly folk you query. At or near the top of this small pile, depending on who you ask, is always found the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester, Massachusetts. Philip Gura's hefty new bicentennial history of this great treasure house of early American books, manuscripts, newspapers and printed material chronicles its ups and downs in a lively yet scholarly style that may change your perception of an institutional history.

If the name Isaiah Thomas doesn't ring a bell, Gura's tome will change that. This legendary colonial printer, patriot and historian of American printing created the AAS single-handedly



in 1812, getting the Massachusetts General Court to incorporate it and becoming its first president—his own sizeable collection of course becoming the core of its collection. (Bibliophiles will need no introduction to Thomas. I'm looking at a set of Thomas's 1790 edition of *Blackstone's Commentaries* as I write this—only

the second appearance of this legal classic in this country—and the thrill of handling Thomas imprints never lessens.)

The early days of the AAS, when the pickings were good, were heady indeed, as Gura makes clear. For instance, Thomas visits Boston to see Hannah Mather Crocker, granddaughter of the renowned Puritan cleric Cotton Mather and keeper of the extensive family library. She'd been imposed upon by autograph collectors and others for mementos and had given away some treasures. "And what treasure it was!" writes Gura of the haul purchased by Thomas. "...the remains of the ancient Library formerly belonging to the Rev. Drs. Increase, Cotton, and Samuel Mather... above nine hundred Sermons and manuscripts and separates, written and preached by the Mathers... hundreds of family letters and choice manuscripts... the manuscript of Increase Mather's autobiography, and eight volumes of Cotton Mather's diary, as well as the manuscript of his 'Angels of Bethesda'...." Choice material was flowing in and the collection moved from Thomas's house to a dignified building he'd had built—though there was still no full-time librarian to pursue acquisitions and to make the collection accessible to the public.

It's thrilling how donations of huge collections came the Society's way seemingly effortlessly in its early decades. One early member gave the fledgling society his copy of the 1640 *Bay Psalm Book*, the first surviving book printed in British North America and one of the Holy Grails of any Americana collection. Thomas Jefferson wrote to accept membership, and "sent a manuscript account of the Massachusetts Indians that he had been given fifty years earlier." In 1834 in Boston they packed up Thomas Walcutt's collection of many thousands of rare early American books, pamphlets, maps and newspapers—among which they unearthed another of Cotton Mather's manuscript diaries to join the others that they already owned. The wagon laden with this collection weighed in at 4,476 pounds. The Society chased after 30,000 pamphlets owned by Reverend William Sprague (known "all too well known as a person who had 'much fury about him in collecting autographs'"), but only got "many hundreds of items." Yet another way that books flowed into the Society was "The custom of authors who had done historical research in Antiquarian Hall depositing copies of their books, often with inscriptions," a practice that "began early in the Society's his-

tory." Later, shelves were thinned out (and filled back in!) by weeding out many thousands of duplicates and sometimes even eliminating categories deemed outside the Society's scope, often trading these with other institutions for desired titles.

By this time the Society had its first full-time librarian, the remarkable young Christopher Columbus Baldwin. Baldwin's indefatigable soliciting of donations from far and wide was getting results. "And so the letters went," notes Gura of the librarian's massive correspondence, "to friends, town historians, editors, members of Congress, genealogists, naturalists, amateur archaeologists, all over the new nation." Baldwin loved manuscript material as well. In 1832 he tried by letter to persuade a Louisiana resident to donate the journal of Mississippi River Valley explorer Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, but failed. Another failed overture involved a Boston home where Cotton and other Mathers had lived. Beneath the attic floorboards the owners discovered masses of "old papers that nobody could read." Gura feels, however, that Baldwin's excitement conveyed to the owners the value of this cache, for instead of packing up the papers for Baldwin they packed them up and sold them to someone in New Orleans—never to be seen again.

One of the AAS's biggest challenges, and one that Gura conveys well, is as hands-on as it gets: Housing. How do you properly house collections that grow exponentially and how do you safeguard those treasures yet make them accessible at the same time? By 1853 the Society's original structure was cramped and inadequate and a new, larger facility was built on a new site. In 1876 an addition to this building doubled their storage ability. As the Society's centennial approached, it became clear that a third, even larger location would be necessary. By 1911 the move to their current location on Salisbury Street was complete—a state-of-the-art building on a site with room to expand (and expand they have, adding serious square footage on occasion and acquiring nearby buildings for fellowship residences and other functions). With this move came the push to become less of a local and more of a national institution.

Overcoming the Society's image as a bastion of elitism proved far more difficult, however. Research libraries have always baffled the public, and for many of its earliest years the public visited mainly to gawk at the curio cabinets filled with natural

history and Native American artifacts that were a staple of museums at that time—material which the Society donated to other, more appropriate museums in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Worcester grew rapidly throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Society became aware that few locals really understood what the AAS was. The outreach efforts that are an absolute necessity to successful institutions today were unheard of a century or more ago, but the Society made efforts to increase and broaden their usage.

As if building up and trying to sort and care for their mushrooming collections weren't enough, the AAS early on decided that publishing transcripts of some of its original significant manuscripts and other appropriate texts was within their purview. Thus in 1820 they published Caleb Atwater's *Archaeologia Americana*, an illustrated study of ancient Indian mounds commissioned by Thomas, as the first volume of their *Transactions*. Not until 1836 did the second *Transactions* volume appear, and in 1837 *A Catalogue of the Books in the Library of the American Antiquarian Society* appeared after twenty years in the making. A steady trickle of titles would continue to be published by the Society, such as transcripts of Massachusetts Bay Colony treasurer William Hull's diary and Robert Fotherby's 1613 whaling voyage journal in 1857. The Society also sponsored research that resulted in publications by others, such as the Smithsonian Institution's 1848 *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* by Squier and Davis and the 1855 *The Antiquities of Wisconsin* by Allen Lapham. In the late 1950s the Society made available to other libraries the full text of all imprints between 1640 and 1740 in the then state-of-the-art form of microprint cards, a gargantuan Readex Corporation project taking years. In the 1980s and '90s the Society's publishing work resulted in the massive five-volume *A History of the Book in America* series, "one of the Society's major achievements of the past twenty years." Recent years have seen a bewildering array of complex projects funded to make various areas of the Society's holdings available in digital form, an effort that continues today. Gura's book itself is the Society's most recent hard-copy publishing contribution. These and other scholarly efforts assured that "By the late 1950s, the American Antiquarian Society was world-renowned for its collections and widely admired for its first-rate bibliographical work."

The AAS has always held large and important manuscript and

document archives, although cataloguing and utilizing them has always lagged far behind the book and pamphlet inventory. Handwritten material has always presented special challenges in sorting and cataloguing, and with the Society's large mass of material these challenges must have seemed overwhelming. As early as 1842 librarian Samuel Haven remarked upon "the new taste for collecting and its study went beyond antiquities, to the preservation of autographs, coins, pamphlets, and manuscripts." He considered one of his prime duties to be "a collector of manuscripts," remarks Gura, who quotes him as writing that documents "which have hitherto suffered neglect, and enjoyed but a musty reputation" had become all the rage. He realized that under certain conditions they may also make good trade bait, as when he traded the famed collector George Brinley "a few old pamphlets, and a Ms. Of Cotton Mather" for a rare book the Society wanted. Not until the 1880s, though, did Haven and then Edward Mills Barton make a serious attempt to organize the "massive manuscript collection"—taking the unsorted mountains and organizing, flattening and binding them into albums that could be used. In 1885 an employee was hired specifically to arrange several large manuscript collections. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, during one evaluation of the Society's holdings and how to pare them down, one advisor cautioned "preserving association copies, books with an important or interesting provenance, for their possible interest to future writers on early American literature and culture."

This centennial period also provided one of this book's greatest illustrations. "One of the most remarkable" of centennial gifts "was the gift of Frederick Lewis Gay—the manuscript record book of the Council for New England, 1622-1623." Notes Gura, "This manuscript is the original book of the minutes of meetings of the Council for New England between May 31, 1622 and June 29, 1623. It is the oldest surviving documentary record relating to all of New England...." Manuscript progress was slow but sure. 1926 witnessed a staff member "hired to work on making the manuscript collection more accessible. Hale continued in the position until his death a decade later, and by then the Society was committed to the employment of a staff member responsible for manuscripts." Another staffer worked on making an index guide to the manuscripts. Much later, in 1968, Marcus

McCorison proposed “a curator of manuscripts for that remarkable collection that had been given sporadic attention over the years, but remained virtually uncataloged.”

Gura shows that the AAS has been uncannily successful in its choice of head librarians, with the result that amazingly few have held that position in the Society’s two centuries. Baldwin’s brief tenure ended tragically in 1835 in a stagecoach accident in Ohio while researching Native American mounds. In 1838 the attorney Samuel Foster Haven assumed the job in an “experimental” year-long trial that lasted 43 years, until 1881. His assistant, Edward Mills Barton, filled the post for the next quarter century (until 1908). The brilliant young Clarence S. Brigham assumed the position upon Barton’s retirement until 1930, becoming director at that point for the next 30 years. R.W.G. Vail served as librarian during the 1930s, Clifford K. Shipton became librarian (and later director) from 1939 to 1967, Marcus A. McCorison became librarian (and later president) from 1967 to 1992, and Ellen S. Dunlap became president in 1992. Each of these were noted book scholars in their own right, most with strings of bibliographic studies and other bookish accomplishments under their belts. I won’t even discuss the voluntary AAS presidents—financiers, corporate and civic leaders—who for the first century worked tirelessly with the librarian on the Society’s behalf. Gura profiles each of these extraordinary persons in some detail, and they deserve a book unto themselves. Suffice it to say that, together with the Society’s librarian, these dynamic duos worked wonders in soliciting support (both financial and bookish) and in guiding the Society’s general direction.

Recent decades at the AAS have focused on the need to increase visibility and usage of the Society’s resources. Marcus McCorison established fellowships for visiting scholars and transformed a nearby mansion donated to the Society into a residence. “The Society set the standard that encouraged other research institutions to establish their own fellowship programs and follow suit... by making housing available for visiting scholars.” (Some of these fellowships, incidentally, occasionally involve manuscripts, as with one recent scholar researching “the semiotics of association copies.”)

Under Ellen Dunlap’s able leadership, “outreach” has become the Society’s mantra. Despite their staggeringly rich hold-

ings, their collections continue to grow, albeit in specific and focused directions. The goal now seems to be to find as many ways as possible to make those holdings accessible—whether through fellowships, online access, public programs and events, whatever it takes. It's fascinating to follow Gura's dissection of the various fund raising campaigns the Society has undertaken over the past century. The shoestring budget that barely sufficed in those early decades has given way to today's multi-million dollar annual budget and an endowment that's grown well into the double digits.

On a disappointing note, this handsome, well-made and well-illustrated volume includes typographical errors that suggest haste and should never have escaped the editorial process. Dropped words and phrases, repeated words ("what precisely the Society Society should collect," "donated money or items items from their own collections"), misused words ("economic downtown" instead of "downturn"), spelling errors ("noone" for "no one," "wellbeing" for "well being"), and a frequent misuse of commas (one of which changes an endowment fund from 16 *million* to sixteen *thousand* dollars) aren't what one expects to find in a major publication from a learned society. There's a basic, important difference between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, and you expect writers to know the difference and use commas accordingly. Let's face it: If those whose professions and lives revolve around the printed word can't be counted on to pay fastidious attention to detail, who will?

This annoyance aside, Gura's bicentennial history of the AAS is an enjoyable and informative account of an institution that grew up with the United States. Its institutional life is surprisingly analogous to a human life: The first tentative steps and teething pains, growth spurts, awkward years as it rebels and seeks an identity, sudden maturity and growing responsibilities, middle age spread and midlife crisis. You can't follow the analogy through old age, of course, unless you know the ultimate life span—so at 200 years old let's hope the AAS is only reaching full maturity and has hundreds more years to go.