

## The Lengthened Shadow of a Man

### *Isaiah Thomas and the Founding of the American Antiquarian Society, 1812-31*

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In 1812 Isaiah Thomas shepherded the American Antiquarian Society's Act of Incorporation through the General Court of Massachusetts. The formation of the Society had been on his mind for some time, but in that year, he acted. His diary entry for January 13, 1812, noted that he had "proposed to the Rev. Dr. Bancroft and Dr. Oliver Fiske the establishment of a Society by the name of the Antiquarian Society." He continued to visit libraries, including the [Massachusetts] Historical Society of which he was a member, and his work with books included months of bibliographical labor. He worked on a "Catalogue of Books printed before the Revolution" (not completed) and also a "Catalogue of my private Library" that he described as "nearly completed" in April, after spending most of his time on it for more than three months. He took a week in August to arrange the books in his library. In October it was time to take advantage of the legislative session of the Massachusetts General Court. Thomas submitted a petition bearing six signatures, his and five others, seeking An Act of Incorporation of an Antiquarian Society, and waited impatiently for members of the committee to assemble and "attend to my Petition." By the 19th, he had a favorable report, the next day he wrote a bill, and the following day "had a third Reading & passed. . . Antiquarian Society incorporated," he wrote in his diary. The act signed by Governor Caleb Strong on October 24, 1812, recognized that "the collection & preservation of the Antiquities of our Country, and of curious & valuable productions in Art & Nature, have a tendency to enlarge the sphere of human Knowledge, aid the progress of Science, to perpetuate the history of moral & political events, and to improve and interest posterity."<sup>1</sup>

Back in Worcester, Thomas spent the evening of November 2 with several of the founding members and the next day the official notice of the Society's first meeting appeared in the *Massachusetts Spy*. The first meeting of the Society was convened at the Exchange Coffee House in Boston on November 19, 1812. At that meeting, officers were chosen and Isaiah Thomas was elected president. Additional meetings followed in December to nominate members and complete the election of officers.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas was sixty-three years old when he was elected the American Antiquarian Society's first president. He had dedicated his life to printing, politics, and civic work. In retirement, he collected books and reminiscences to write *The History of Printing in America*, a two-volume compilation of printers' biographies and accounts of newspapers that sought to preserve the "authentic" printed history of what he called English America. His life's work came together in the founding of the American Antiquarian Society, a formal way to act on his growing awareness of the importance of preserving the history and origins of the peoples of the United States. For this, he would be best remembered.

By deed, he conveyed "All the Books, &c contained in the Catalogue of one part of the private Library of Isaiah Thomas," to the Society and this he recorded at the top of the first page of the book that he titled "Donations to the American Antiquarian Society, with the Names of its Benefactors." This gift of books was valued at \$4,000. Other gifts—his and others'—soon followed. Hannah Mather Crocker (1752–1829), granddaughter of the famous Puritan divine, Cotton Mather, made her interest in the Society as a place of deposit for family memorabilia known early on. Expressing her wish that the Society might adopt the Mather family coat of arms and family motto—"as the mail [*sic*] line of my family are extinct," she presented it, along with her great-grandfather Increase Mather's whetstone, subsequently used by his son Cotton "to make the pens that wrote the *Magnalia*" (his *Magnalia Christi Americana* [1702], a voluminous and indispensable history of New England), and a tobacco box given to New England Governor William Phips by Increase, with the claim that it once had been owned by Sir Walter Raleigh.<sup>3</sup> At the June meeting of the Council, its secretary, Thaddeus Mason Harris, was instructed to express "the high sense they entertain of her donations and communications to the Society, and of their thanks for her early earnest attention to their interests." More was yet to come.

In November 1814, Isaiah Thomas went to Boston to visit Mrs. Crocker, to whom the library of her famous Mather ancestors had descended. The

purpose of this visit was to arrange the purchase of the remainder of one of the largest libraries from colonial America accumulated over four generations of the prominent American clergymen of the Mather family. Following the death of Samuel Mather in 1785, his daughters, Hannah and Elizabeth (who died three years later), inherited the library. Hannah gave volumes to the fledgling Massachusetts Historical Society and to visitors ranging from autograph seekers to antiquarians, leading the Reverend William Bentley of Salem, who was familiar with the collection, to observe that it was “still without a catalogue [and] I find it diminished.”<sup>4</sup>

Thomas wondered whether Crocker might be ready to part with what was left. Indeed, she was. Although she also wrote on theological subjects, often with a political bent, much of her writing can be characterized as relating to the role of women in the public sphere. The collection of family books in her possession included primarily seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious, philosophical, and scientific titles, many in Latin or Greek. None of her sons having chosen ordination, others could make better use of the volumes that her father had left her to pass along to the next minister in the family.<sup>4</sup> Thomas reached an agreement with her and packed her ancestors’ library for shipment to Worcester.<sup>5</sup>

And what treasure it was! Crocker gave “part of the remains of the ancient Library formerly belonging to the Rev. Drs. Increase, Cotton, and Samuel Mather” (valued by Thomas at \$300); and Thomas recorded paying \$500 for “the other part of the remains; and in itemizing found “above nine hundred Sermons and manuscripts and separates, written and preached by the Mathers.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to the printed volumes, many of them even then exceedingly rare, Thomas had acquired hundreds of family letters and choice manuscripts, including the 1648 Cambridge Platform of church discipline in Richard Mather’s hand, the manuscript of Increase Mather’s autobiography, and eight volumes of Cotton Mather’s diary, as well as the manuscript of his “Angel of Bethesda,” a lengthy medical treatise (Fig. 1.1). Crocker later gave the Society additional books and objects, including portraits of her ancestors and the high chair used by the descendants of Richard Mather.<sup>7</sup>

The Society’s library, an already extensive collection of books and manuscripts had taken a quantum leap. Like some of the new volumes, the books already in hand pertained to the early history of the country, but there were as well significant numbers of books that related to the history of printing on both sides of the Atlantic, a subject of particular interest to this retired printer, publisher, and bookseller. Some were treatises that illustrated the

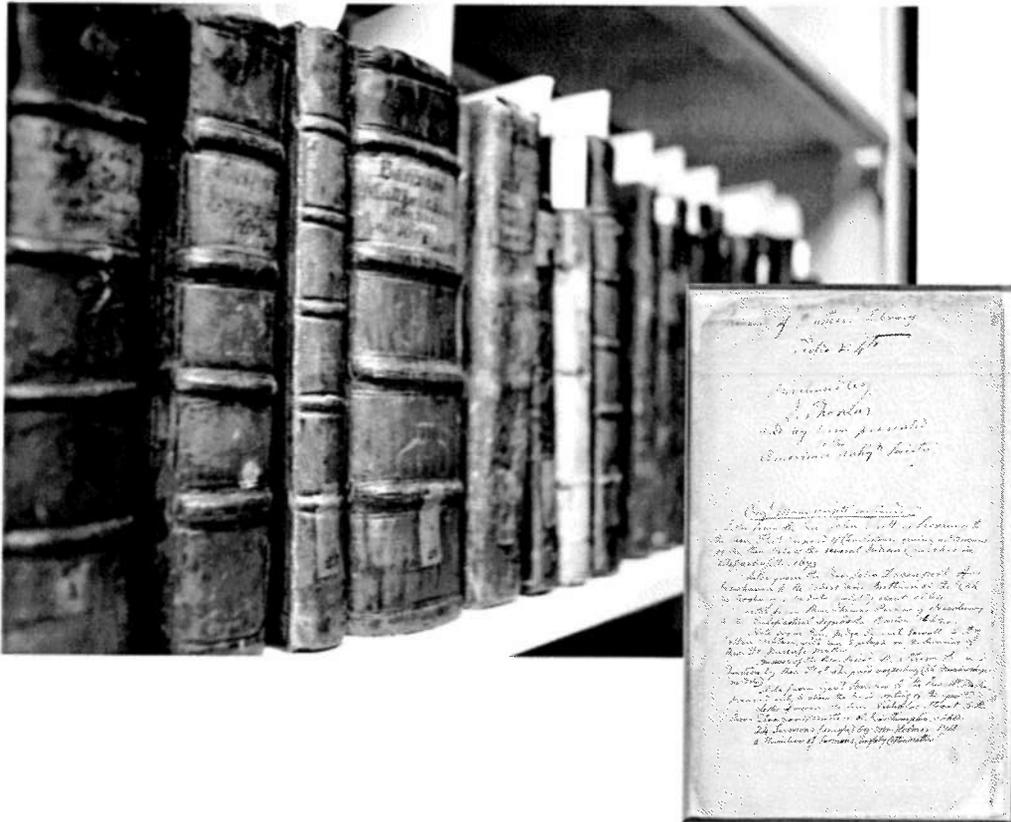


FIGURE 1.1 Thomas's purchase of the Mather Library from Hannah Mather Crocker in 1814 after the annual meeting of the Society added some nine hundred items to the three thousand then in the collection. Over the following winter, Thomas augmented the brief entries in the donation book by going through the purchase in detail and listing each item with his appraisal of its value. He created three categories for listing the books, one for the smallest books, another for the folios, quartos, and manuscripts, and a third list of the contents of twenty-five bound volumes containing English tracts printed between 1690 and 1730. The first page of one of the three lists in Thomas's handwriting, "Remains of Mather's Library Folio & 4to. Purchased by I. Thomas and by him presented to the American Antiquarian Society," is shown with a shelf of Mather Library volumes, now securely stored in the Stack D vault constructed in 2000.

mechanics of the trade; others were selected as or discovered to be early or fine examples of the printer's art to this skilled printer's eye (Fig. 1.2).

With this addition, Thomas's collection was becoming more than a private library: it was now the core of the American Antiquarian Society's collection. A few years earlier, for example, he had systematically acquired runs of early American newspapers from their printers and had collected ephemera—broadside ballads, for example—believing that they illustrated