

Isaiah Thomas as Printer, Collector, Historian, and Benefactor

The American Antiquarian Society owes its existence to Isaiah Thomas, printer, journalist, publisher, historian of printing, and philanthropist. The Society was Thomas's vision, and from the time of its founding in 1812 until his death in 1831, he was its principal benefactor. Thomas gave AAS its founding library, its first building, and funds for the support of its first librarians.

Isaiah Thomas was born on January 19, 1749, the child of Moses Thomas and Fidelity Grant. Shortly after Isaiah's birth, Moses Thomas left his family; he died in North Carolina in 1752. Left with three children in Boston, Fidelity kept a small shop. In 1755 the Overseers of the Poor in Boston placed the six-year-old Isaiah with a Boston printer, Zechariah Fowle, and the boy was apprenticed to Fowle the following year. In later life Thomas described Fowle as "a Printer and seller of ballads and pedlar's small books," "an indifferent hand at the press, and much worse in the case. He was never in the printing house when he could find an excuse to be absent." By Thomas's account, Fowle made little effort to educate his apprentice and Thomas's learning, both of the printing trade and of things more generally, was done through his own efforts.

In 1765 Thomas left Fowle after an argument and went to Halifax, Nova Scotia, with a plan to go on to England to learn more of the printing trade. Instead, he spent several years moving, working in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Charleston, South Carolina. In 1770 Thomas returned to Boston and began publication of the *Massachusetts Spy* in partnership with Fowle, buying Fowle out after just three months. The *Spy* increasingly became a strong proponent of liberty, and on more than one occasion Thomas was brought before the British authorities. Finally, in April 1775, Thomas removed his press to Worcester, some forty miles west of Boston, where he continued publication of the *Spy*.

In the years following the Revolution Thomas's business empire grew. He formed partnerships with printers (many of them former apprentices) throughout New England. By the 1790s his business was matched in size only by that of Mathew Carey in Philadelphia. After 1800 Thomas gradually reduced his active involvement in the printing and publishing business, and he turned his attention to gathering information on the history of printing and publishing in America from their origins up to the Revolution. This process included the active collection of books, pamphlets, and newspa-

pers. Thomas wrote, "Few persons would form an idea of the cost which has attended the collection of the information I have found it necessary to procure, from various parts of the continent.... The purchase of volumes of old newspapers alone, has required a sum amounting to upwards of a thousand dollars. It is true, however, that these volumes are valuable; and, together with the collection previously owned by the author, probably, constitute the largest library of ancient public journals, printed in America, which can be found in the United States." The first fruit of this research and collecting was *The History of Printing in America, with a Biography of Printers, and an Account of Newspapers...* (Cat. 9) which appeared in two volumes in 1810. Thomas's work is a



FIG. 1

singular source for its subject, containing much that would otherwise be unrecoverable. The second fruit of this activity was the American Antiquarian Society.

The earliest record of Thomas's plan to found the Society is an entry in his diary early in 1812 noting that he had proposed the organization to two other Worcester men. A few months later Thomas and a group of hopeful incorporators sent a petition to the Massachusetts Legislature, and the Society was created by law on October 24, 1812. Thomas conceived of AAS as a learned society similar to the Society of Antiquaries of London. His hope was that the Society would "enlarge the sphere of human knowledge, aid the progress of science, . . . perpetuate the history of moral and political events, and . . . improve and interest posterity." "The chief objects of the inquiries and researches of this society will be American Antiquities, natural, artificial, and literary; not, however, excluding those of other countries."

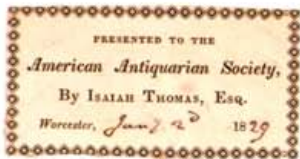


FIG. 2

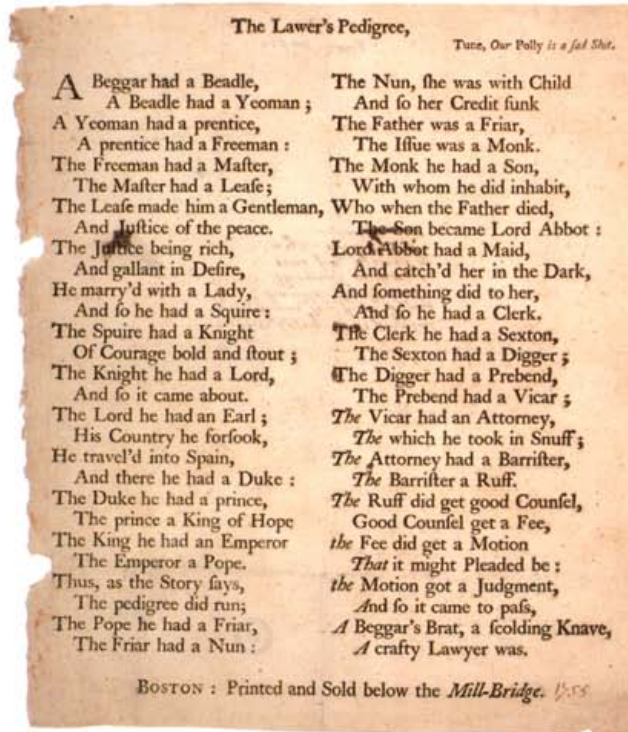
In keeping with the Society's national ambitions, men from all over the country were elected to membership and plans were made to have at least one councilor in each state who would be able to receive gifts and forward them to Worcester. The initial library of AAS was a collection of books which Thomas listed in a catalog he completed in July of 1812 (Cat. 11). The catalog listing Thomas's initial gift contains 2,650

titles which Thomas conservatively valued at \$4,000. Almost immediately Thomas began listing additional gifts he made to the Society in its donation books, and by the time of his death in 1831 he had made 116 additional gifts of printed works, manuscripts, and items for the Society's cabinet, all of which he valued at a total of over \$6,000. By 1827 the library contained 7,000 volumes and some 15,000 pamphlets.

In the early years the Society's books and cabinet were housed in Thomas's Worcester mansion. Construction of the first Antiquarian Hall began in 1819; Thomas supplied the land, \$2,000, and 150,000 bricks toward the building. In addition to his own benefactions, Thomas also sought gifts on behalf of AAS, cultivating collectors and others who could supply books. These early donors included Hannah Mather Crocker, the daughter of Samuel Mather; William Bentley, a Salem minister; Mathew Carey; and William Buell Sprague of Albany, who would in later life author *Annals of the American Pulpit*.

Thomas was also the initiator of the Society's publication program. In 1820 AAS published the first volume of *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*. The primary work in this volume was Caleb Atwater's "Description of the Antiquities Discovered in Ohio and Other Western States." This was the first of a number of nineteenth-century publications dealing with Native American archaeology, ethnography, and languages. Over the next ninety years eleven more volumes of the *Transactions* appeared, including Isaiah Thomas's own diary, published in two volumes in 1909.

Thomas was careful to provide for the continued health of the Society after his death in 1831. His total bequest to AAS amounted to more than \$30,000, which included the land, building, and collection materials he had already given to the Society, as well as \$12,000, the interest of which was to pay a librarian's salary. This support allowed AAS to enter its third decade as a healthy, active organization.



CAT. 1. *The Lawer's Pedigree*, 1755.

1. *The Lawer's Pedigree*. Boston:
 Zechariah Fowle, 1755.

BEQUEST OF ISAIAH THOMAS, 1831.

As a child, Isaiah Thomas received only six weeks of schooling before his mother allowed Boston's Overseers of the Poor to place him with printer Zechariah Fowle. The precocious six-year-old Thomas performed chores, sold ballads on the street, and soon was put to the job of setting type. Thomas's first composition was *The Lawer's* [i.e., Lawyer's] *Pedigree*, a humorous broadside ballad about the making of a lawyer, sung to the tune "Our Polly is a Sad Slut." Pleased with young Isaiah's industry, Fowle took him on as an apprentice in 1756, and Thomas's life course was set.

Thomas took great pains to preserve two copies of his first effort, eventually bequeathing them to AAS to ensure their permanent preservation; these are the only copies to have survived. Thomas inscribed one copy: "This is a copy from the first types that I set for the press. It was in the summer of 1755." Thomas also

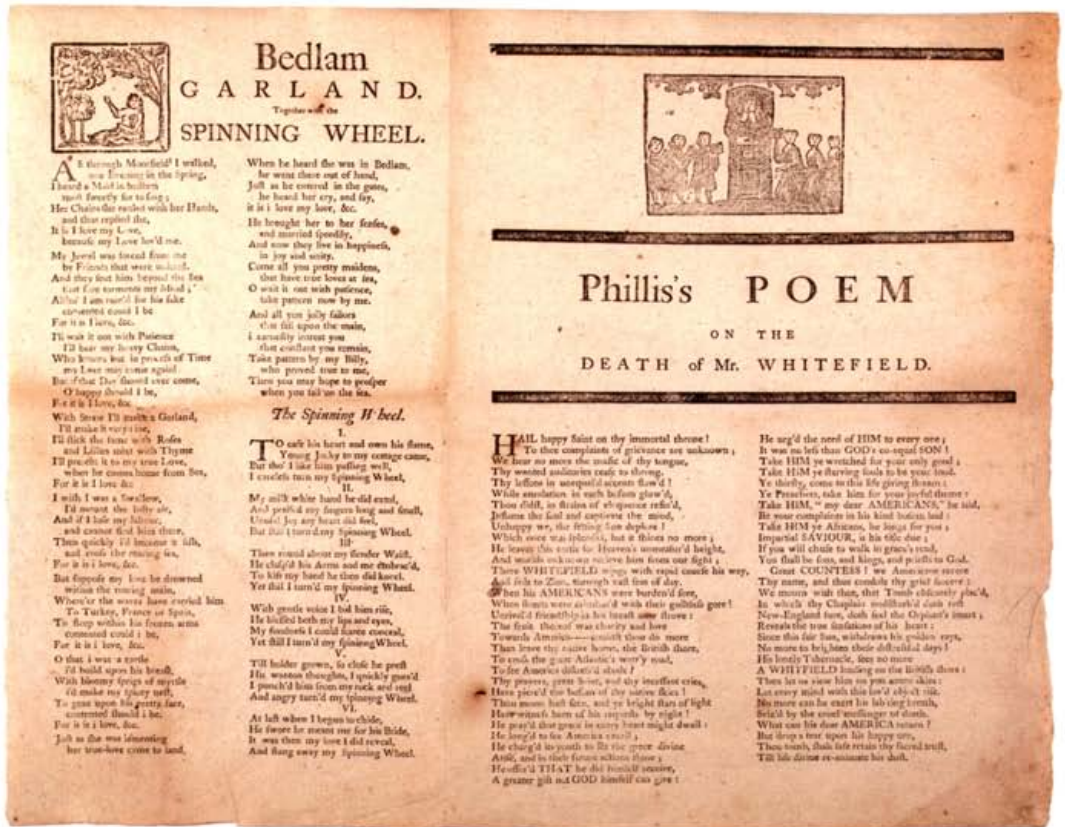
told the story of this broadside in the autobiographical essay he published in *The History of Printing in America*.

AAS Chief Joys 4; Evans 7446.

2. *Tom Thumb's Play-Book; to Teach Children Their Letters as Soon as They Can Speak*. Boston: Printed by Isaiah Thomas and sold by A. Barclay, 1764.

GIFT OF ISAIAH THOMAS, 1812.

Isaiah Thomas's manuscript notation—"Printed by I. Thomas, when a 'prentice in 1764, for A. Barclay"—shows that this rare miniature chapbook was one of the earliest pieces that he printed. With its evenly spaced lines, consistently centered ornaments, and elegant use of white space, it is quite a neat production for a fifteen-year-old apprentice. The text features alphabet rhymes which had been earlier printed in *The Child's New Play-Thing*



CAT. 3. Phillis Wheatley, *Phillis's Poem on the Death of Mr. Whitefield*, 1770.

(London: T. Cooper, 1743; Boston: John Draper for Joseph Edwards, 1750). In some respects, *Tom Thumb's Play-Book* provides a more light-hearted and secular alternative to *The New England Primer*. Instead of featuring events from the Bible, the alphabet letters in *Tom Thumb's Play-Book* allude to earthy, even humorous scenes such as, “A was an archer and shot at a frog,” and “D was a drunkard and had a red face.” But like *The New England Primer*, the text concludes with a catechism—albeit much more simply worded than the Westminster Assembly’s *Shorter Catechism*, which is frequently found in *The New England Primer*—and various short prayers. The back cover features a wood engraving of boys playing with marbles and hoops and offers the modern viewer a glimpse into the eighteenth-century world of children at leisure.

Bradbury B5; Evans 10189; Welch 1318.1.

3. Phillis Wheatley. *Phillis's Poem on the Death of Mr. Whitefield*. On a sheet with *Bedlam Garland. Together with the Spinning Wheel*. Boston: Isaiah Thomas, 1770.

BEQUEST OF ISAIAH THOMAS, 1831.

Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American to compose a book of poems, was brought to Boston on a slave ship in 1761 and sold into slavery to the family of wealthy merchant John Wheatley. Unusually, she was educated and encouraged in her literary efforts. Her poem on the 1770 death of George Whitefield, the prominent English clergyman who prompted the Great Awakening and founded multiple American schools and orphanages, was Wheatley’s first published work, written when she was just seventeen years old. Isaiah Thomas’s