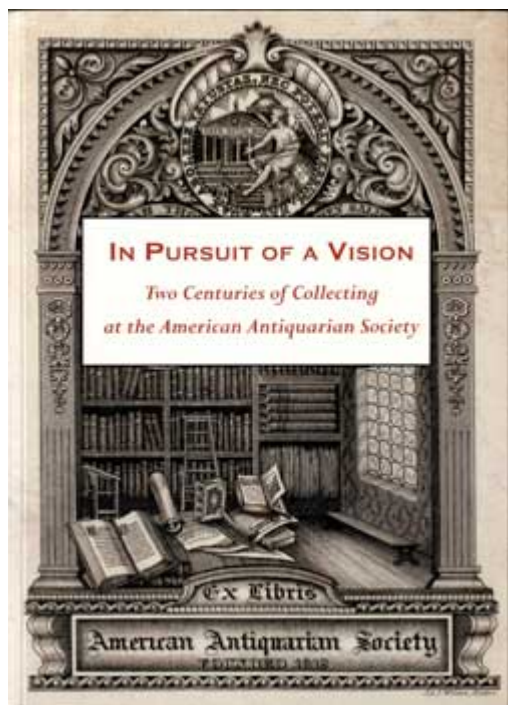


## The Things They Collected



*"In Pursuit of a Vision: Two Centuries of Collecting at the American Antiquarian Society,"* an exhibition at the Grolier Club, September 12-November 17, 2012. Accompanying catalogue published by the American Antiquarian Society, 2012. After musing among the old buildings and tombstones of Boston on a hot August day in 1834, Christopher Columbus Baldwin, librarian for the American Antiquarian Society, exclaimed in his [diary](#), "How much of fashion, wealth, wit, and learning are now buried in oblivion!" This statement served as a rallying call for a unique rescue mission on a grand scale. A mission to rescue the present—to thwart the obscuring powers of time and preserve the materials of "fashion, wealth, wit, and learning" for future generations. Baldwin, along with a host of other individuals, made this mission their life's work and in so doing built the remarkable collections of the American Antiquarian Society (AAS). Their stories, as well as the things they collected, were recently displayed in an exhibition at New York City's Grolier Club, "In Pursuit of a Vision: Two Centuries of Collecting at the American Antiquarian Society," and in its accompanying catalogue. Though the physical exhibition has closed, "In Pursuit of a Vision" and its remarkable collected objects remain accessible in an [online exhibition](#).



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This goal—to collect and preserve the materials of the present—crafted not

simply one vision of American history and culture, that of a nascent nation or a literary laboratory, for instance, but rather a multitude of at once complementary and competing versions of American culture. That so many visions can be contained in one exhibition is the particular strength not only of this show, but also of the American Antiquarian Society itself. Founded in 1812 in Worcester, Massachusetts, by printer Isaiah Thomas, the AAS was intended as a learned society devoted to "American Antiquities, natural, artificial, and literary" (14). Thomas' initial donations documenting early American print culture, a focus of the opening display of the exhibit, demonstrate the broadly inclusive early collection practices that contributed to the breadth and depth of the AAS's holdings. Along with his two-volume [History of Printing in America](#), published in 1810, a 1787 [print type specimen book](#), as well as contemporary newspapers and broadsides gathered nationwide, Thomas also contributed a three-volume collection of [popular songs and ballads](#) culled from the shops and streets of early nineteenth-century Boston. Thomas' rationale for inclusion: "to shew what articles of this kind are in vogue with the Vulgar at this time" (23). Years later, these "vulgar" articles, now more politely termed "popular literature," are indeed valuable and much-studied historical artifacts. This inclusive collecting vision, one that sought to value the materials of the present no matter how they might be perceived or used in the future, defined the AAS's early mission and cast the institution as a chronicler and creator of American histories. Beginning with Thomas' initial gift of 2,650 titles, the research library currently boasts nearly 750,000 volumes, over 2 million newspaper issues, as well as large collections of periodicals, graphic arts, children's literature, and manuscripts (7). From the rooms of Thomas' Worcester mansion, the collections now occupy over twenty-five miles of shelving in Antiquarian Hall, the third building designed and built for the research library. Of these twenty-five miles of collections, some 200 individual artifacts are included in the bicentennial exhibition at the Grolier Club. These artifacts range from print sources such as books, almanacs, manuscripts, and newspapers to the graphic arts of photography, cartoon illustration, and portraiture, to objects such as coffee beans and medals. In the eleven glass display cases outlining the walls of the Grolier Club's exhibition hall, these artifacts are organized not according to a single theme as is common in an exhibition, but rather according to the individuals whose personal collecting interests and efforts built the inventory of the AAS. Organizing the exhibition according to individual collectors inspires a number of valuable insights. One encounters a variety of stories in each glass case—the artifact's historical significance, its path to the AAS, its relation to the other objects collected and valued by that individual. We are thus encouraged to view American history and culture not as a series of events or illustrious personages, but rather as a specific act, a collective and collecting impulse that begins with a single individual but often ends with that individual's disappearance behind the artifact. Indeed, in glancing over the glass cases, the collector—honored with a written description and often, a miniature portrait—rather fades into the background as the three-dimensional objects claim space and attention. Yet one remains aware that the very presence of the objects is owed entirely to the individual they surround and frame. The

experience of reading the exhibition catalogue is slightly different, though no less suggestive. Titled after the exhibition, the catalogue transforms the display cases into chapters. In thoughtful and engaging introductory essays penned by AAS curators the individual collectors speak first and loudest. Beautiful images and detailed, often entertaining descriptions of the exhibition artifacts follow. Reading the catalogue, one is more cognizant of the unique personalities behind the collecting story of each artifact. Consider the fascinating Chase sisters. After arriving in Virginia from Worcester in 1863 to teach in the freedman's schools, Lucy and Sarah E. Chase devoted considerable effort to gathering materials on the slave trade and the Civil War. Their collecting efforts—self-described as “ransacking” (49)—led them into the abandoned offices of [Jefferson Davis](#) and to those leftover [coffee beans](#) in General Grant's City Point headquarters. Thinking about these artifacts through the Chases invites one to consider the varied practices and idiosyncrasies of documenting historical events (breaking and entering as collecting practice?). Another artifact, [abroadside from the Charleston Mercury](#) shouting, “The Union is Dissolved!” made its way into the AAS' collections after being ripped from a Charleston wall and mailed. These very physical and material paths are often lost once an artifact is deposited in a repository—a portion of its own story fades in service to the researcher's goals. This exhibition and catalogue remind us that the road taken—from event and place to collector to collection—is as historically significant as the artifact itself. From the idiosyncratic ransacker to the focused obsessive to the systematic librarian, “In Pursuit of a Vision” pays homage to the dedicated efforts of the collector. Through their stories and the materials they gathered, we are offered a glimpse into how history is really made—physically and materially through the act of collecting. Though the exhibition and catalogue weave together a variety of visions of American culture through the artifacts on display, the dominant view is of the immense organizational efforts of acquiring, classifying, and disseminating knowledge, no less evident in the mission and history of the AAS than in the vade mecums, catalogues, and bibliographies on display. This energetic “pursuit”—of knowledge, of history—continues in the present mission of the AAS, and forms a final sort of “work in progress” in the exhibition and catalogue. From its pioneer efforts in microprint to today's digital full-text *Early American Imprints* series, the AAS has prioritized access to its collections, an obviously crucial component to historical study and the production of knowledge. Programming for teachers and scholars, fellowship and research opportunities, and its monumental five-volume *A History of the Book in America* series are only a few of the myriad ways the AAS seeks to engage the public and open its treasures to study. Its digital efforts, including the detailed [online catalogue](#), a variety of [online and in-house databases](#), such as the digital image archive, [Gigi](#), as well as the “[Past Is Present](#)” blog, and, of course, this publication, are a significant outgrowth of the AAS's original mission to, in Isaiah Thomas' own elevated view, “enlarge the sphere of human knowledge . . . and improve and interest posterity” (14). The exhibition cases dedicated to collection development and responsible stewardship offer a few screenshots of early digital resources and the catalogue mentions them; however (and ignoring the very real likelihood of technological limitations), it would

have been fitting to be able to browse and search these resources in the exhibition space itself. What better way to demonstrate the complex processes of collecting, organizing, and disseminating information as well as the continuing evolution of the AAS's vision? After all, the ordered nature of an exhibition and catalogue-contained, labeled, organized-can only gesture toward the searching, scrambling, backtracking, and fortuitous discovering that characterize both collecting and the pursuit of knowledge.

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