

A Gem on Salisbury Street

Janet Ouellette

What do tea from Boston Harbor, a printing press manufactured in England in 1741 and *The Massachusetts Spy* newspaper have in common? The obvious answer is that all three are connected to United States history. The less obvious and perhaps, unknown part is that the items are part of the collection housed in the beautiful Greek revival building of the American Antiquarian Society located on Salisbury Street in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Recently, members of the Wachusett Writers and Poets Club visited the Society's building and were treated to a wonderful tour conducted by Mr. Thomas Knoles, the Marcus Allen McCorison Librarian and Curator of Manuscripts of the AAS. Mr. Knoles explained that the American Antiquarian Society, founded in 1812, is a learning society and functions as an independent research and rare book library. It is the repository of the largest collection in the world of newspapers printed in the United States before 1877. Some two to three million volumes are catalogued and are stored in climate controlled stacks which are monitored for heat, light, and humidity. It is a never-ending task since high acid content paper reacts with the 'h-l-h' conditions.

In addition to newspapers, the AAS also houses almanac collections, books and pamphlets printed before 1820, early children's literature up to 1877, games, more than 30,000 sheet music printed in the United States, and manuscript collections. It is of note that the Society has in its collections two-thirds of the known books and pamphlets printed in America prior to 1820.

It must be asked, who had the foresight to begin such a collection. It was the founder Isaiah Thomas. He was the President of the Society from 1812 to 1831 and it was his collection of 3500 books which became the core collection. His life story is well documented and provides insight into the man who had the courage of his convictions and the passion for his trade.

As regards the printing press mentioned above it belonged to Mr. Thomas. He purchased it while working in Boston and used it to print the Worcester edition of the *Massachusetts Spy*. A facsimile of the May 3, 1775 edition is on display.

The tea reputed to be from the Boston Tea Party sits on a shelf in the Council Meeting Room on the balcony level overlooking the Reading Room. On a placard next to the tea it states: "Tea thrown into Boston Harbor, December 16, 1773 from Reverend Thaddeus M. Harris, died 1842. He was five years old when he gathered up the tea on the beaches of Dorchester Neck."

The American Antiquarian Society is a fascinating place well worth a visit and a free library card. The website is: <http://www.americanantiquarian.org>.

©2012