

The Meeting Phenomenon

As we close in on the AAAS Annual Meeting in Boston, 18–24 February, it may be of interest to consider the phenomenon of scientific meetings and of the rather unique role which AAAS Annual Meetings play in this regard. Open communication has been the hallmark of modern science, the single lever which pried science loose from its arcane forebears of magic and mysticism, a communication which made verification not only a possibility but a normal procedure. It is no accident that the growth in scientific publication parallels the growth in science itself over the past three centuries.

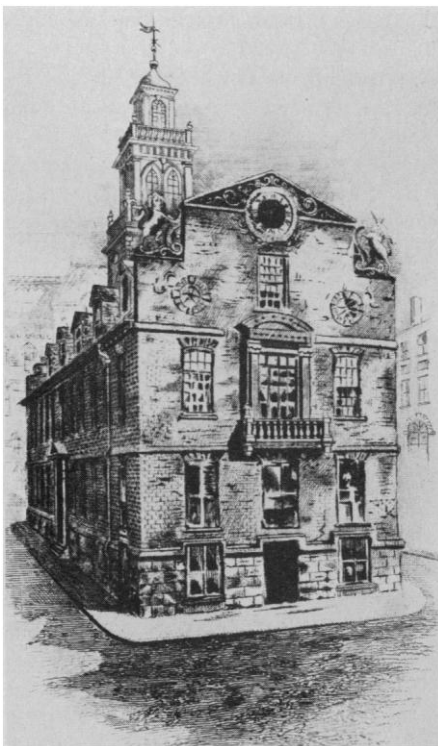
Meetings as a means for communications greatly antedate formal publication. The symposia which make up the bulk of a AAAS Meeting (for the details of the 180 scheduled for Boston, see the Pre-convention Issue of *Science*, 9 January 1976, pages 59–73) are named for the drinking party which Plato describes and at which Socrates, Aristophanes, and a few others discourse on the nature of love. The Platonic term (like Platonic itself) has changed greatly in intent during the ensuing two and a half millennia; for one, the small (sexist) ingroup has given way to the large and diverse open forums of today.

The history of AAAS Meetings, going back as it does to the founding of the Association in 1848, forms an interesting backdrop against which the development of the modern scientific meeting can be appraised. The forthcoming meeting in Boston is the 142nd national meeting of the Association. There was no meeting in 1852 "... because of the prevalence of cholera along the approaches to Cleveland from the South," and no meetings were held during the Civil War and World War II years. Until 1902, the Annual Meeting was usually held in August. In that year, the week immediately after Christmas was selected. In some years, principally within the period 1931–41, there were extra summer meetings. The practice of holding the Annual Meeting in late winter was initiated in 1974 with the San Francisco meeting at the beginning of March. By a recent resolution of the Board of Directors, beginning in 1980 (again with a meeting in San Francisco), Annual Meetings will be held during the week after New Year's (3–8 January).

For well over 100 years, the Associa-

tion's meetings have reflected the subtle changes and major shifts in the scientific enterprise of the United States. Their history records the bold innovations of the latter half of the 19th century when research establishments were proposed that still serve today, the enormous growth in size and complexity of the separate branches of science, and the gradual drift into specialization. Most of the specialized disciplines we recognize today formed specialized societies during the period 1890–1910 and began meeting separately from AAAS, at times with juxtaposed meetings. Before this period, virtually the only large scientific meetings were those conducted by AAAS. These meetings were not only large (considering the size of the scientific population at the time) but were also the principal forum for the exchange of scientific ideas, particularly at the time when disciplines of science were only beginning to be defined; most of the specialized scientific journals which we recognize today had not yet become established. (*Science* became the official journal of the AAAS in 1900.)

Although more and more specialized



The Old State House. Engraving, 1748. [Library of Congress]



Annual Meeting
Boston

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For program details and Housing and Registration forms, see the Pre-convention Issue of *Science*, 9 January 1976, pages 59–73.

scientific meetings took place in the period after 1900, AAAS attempted to continue the traditional pattern of its own meetings, but by the time of its centennial in 1948 it became clear that a new departure in the nature of its Annual Meeting was necessary. Such a departure was approved by the Board of Directors in 1951 as the Arden House Statement. This statement recognized that sessions which deal with "the intensive and specialized interests of individual branches of science" should more properly be presented "before meetings sponsored and arranged by the appropriate specialized groups," and that AAAS should hold meetings "at which one branch of science is interpreted to the other branches of science, meetings at which are stressed the interrelations between the branches of science, meetings which cultivate borderline fields, and meetings at which the unifying theme would be central problems whose treatment requires the attack of several disciplines."

In the quarter century since that resolution, the character and size of AAAS Meetings has changed greatly. In the first decade the attendance doubled from just under 3000 to just under 6000, closely following the postwar growth in science itself, oscillating in the 1960's between 5000 and 7000. In more recent years, attendance has been declining, perhaps due to the change of meeting date from the Christmas vacation (one of the reasons for the Board's resolution to change dates back to the mid-winter recess beginning in 1980) and perhaps due to the general tightening in scientific budgets since the late 1960's. The close correlation between attendance and the budget lends a great deal of credence to the latter.

We hope that in this our bicentennial year many, many more of our members will attend the very large and diversified Annual Meeting we will hold at the Sheraton-Boston Hotel and the adjoining Hynes Veterans Auditorium and experience the great wealth of scientific, social, and cultural material which some 1500 dedicated individuals have prepared for them. Come and join us.

—ARTHUR HERSCHMAN

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