

## ‘Heart of A.A.’: A Brief History of A.A.’s General Service Office

From inauspicious beginnings in a two-story office building at 17 William Street in Newark, New Jersey in 1938, A.A.’s General Service Office has been at the heart of A.A.’s efforts in carrying the message of hope and recovery to still-suffering alcoholics around the world. Often called “Headquarters,” the “National Office” or the “Central Office” in the early days, A.A.’s General Service Office (G.S.O.) has grown and evolved as the Fellowship itself has grown and evolved from the parlor of Henrietta Sieberling’s home in Akron, Ohio, where Bill W. and Dr. Bob first met, to become the international Fellowship that it is today.

Through changing times both within and outside of A.A., G.S.O. has ministered to the needs of the Fellowship with characteristic dedication and tireless effort. In its earliest years, the office was home to a cooperative buying organization of gasoline dealers known as Honor Dealers, a business venture undertaken by A.A. cofounder Bill W., a few years after his last drink, along with his friend, Hank P., a fellow alcoholic whom Bill had sponsored out of Towns Hospital.

Together, they rented an office in Newark, New Jersey, and hired a secretary, a woman named Ruth Hock, to whom it soon became clear that the two men were really far more interested in helping a bunch of nameless drunks than they were in organizing gas stations.

It was here, in A.A.’s unofficial first office, that Bill produced the manuscript for the Big Book, A.A.’s basic text, with Ruth’s considerable secretarial help. And it was here, before it was even finished, that Bill and Hank formed Works Publishing Company to publish the book themselves, selling stock certificates to fellow alcoholics and their friends, a venture that led to the ultimate purchase of the company a few years later by the Alcoholic Foundation to ensure that the book would forever belong to A.A. as a whole.

Providing an official home for the Fellowship was a project undertaken by the Alcoholic Foundation, and in 1940, through a committee of trustees, a modest two-room office was located at 30 Vesey Street in the downtown financial district of New York City. The rent was \$650 a month. “National Headquarters—Alcoholics Anonymous,” as its letterhead read, was in business. “Ruth (though nonalcoholic) became A.A.’s first national secretary,” said Bill, “and I turned into a sort of headquarters handyman.”



17 William Street, Newark, New Jersey. Hank P. & Bill W. set up the first A.A. “Headquarters” here at the office of Honor Dealers and auto dealership owned by Hank P. (1938 to 1940)

In no time, the little office was swamped, as the 1940s ushered in a period of expansive growth for A.A. The Rockefeller dinner, increased media exposure, and ultimately the Jack Alexander article about A.A. in the *Saturday Evening Post* brought significant attention. “Came then the deluge,” said Bill. “Frantic appeals—six thousand of them—hit the New York office. At first we pawed at random through the mass of letters, laughing and crying by turns. How could this heartbreaking mail be answered? It was a cinch that Ruth and I could never do it alone.”

Although it was originally thought that the office would be supported by



*415 Lexington Ave. (43rd Street). Manhattan. A.A. headquarters operated here in Grand Central Area from about 1944-1950.*

profits from sales of the Big Book, an appeal was now made to the A.A. groups to help pay for this enormous Twelfth Step job. The groups responded and as funds flowed in they were collected in a separate account, earmarked for A.A. office expenses only.

At the same time, “Headquarters” took on another important function, that of managing public relations for the fledgling Fellowship. With the national spotlight shining brightly the office now began dealing with the public on a large scale.

In May 1944, Headquarters moved into a three-room office at 415 Lexington Avenue, opposite Grand Central Station. “We made this move,” wrote Bill, “because the need for serving the many A.A. travelers through New York had become urgent. Our new location near Grand Central brought us into contact with visitors who, for the first time, began to see Alcoholics Anonymous as a vision for the whole world.”

Besides Bill, the personnel at this time consisted of Margaret “Bobbie” B., who had replaced Ruth Hock as “A.A.’s National Secretary #2,” and three assistants. A.A.’s growth continued, as Bill noted, “By almost geometric progression the multiplication went on year after year. We no longer counted by thousands; we began to reckon by tens of thousands. . . The spread to foreign lands began. This development brought us a whole new set of problems to solve. . . Each new beachhead had to go through its flying-blind period. Our pamphlet literature had to be translated into other

tongues. . . We became heavily involved in correspondence, helped by American members in New York who could translate for us.”

By early 1945, the office had six full-time employees, though the needs of the Fellowship continued to mount. “A.A. was getting so big,” said Bill, “that we could not possibly educate all members on what Headquarters was doing. Many groups, preoccupied with their own affairs, failed to help us at all. Less than half of them contributed anything. We were plagued with constant deficits in contributions, which luckily would be plugged up with money from the sale of the Big Book and our growing pamphlet literature. Without this book income we would have folded up entirely.”

To help educate the Fellowship on just what its office was doing, the Trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation sent a letter to A.A. members in June of 1946, outlining a suggested code of tradition and defining their hopes for operation of the office:

“We conceive the Central Office as the ‘Heart of A.A.’—so well constructed that it can promptly answer thousands of pleas for help which flow in; so designated that it can assist new A.A. Groups at their birth and growing pains; so informed that it can reach A.A. travelers on their rounds and guide them to those who seek their help; so constituted that it can speak the A.A. message by word of mouth, literature and good public relations to all who would hear or read; and so authorized that it can promptly advise those who would learn our A.A. policies and traditions.”

In addition, referring to A.A.’s national magazine, the Grapevine, which had started up in June 1944, initially maintaining separate editorial offices in midtown Manhattan and later in Greenwich Village, the letter continued, “We think that the Grapevine ought to become the ‘Voice of Alcoholics Anonymous,’ bringing us news of each other across great distances, and always describing what can be freshly seen in that vast and life-giving pool we call ‘A.A. Experience.’”

With its heart beating soundly, the office continued providing essential services to the Fellowship and to the growing number of nonalcoholics interested in Alcoholics Anonymous. Employees were added as the office tried to keep pace, developing directories of A.A. groups and corresponding with the Fellowship to address a rash of high profile anonymity breaks.

One notable addition to the office staff was Nell Wing, a nonalcoholic who had stopped over in New York to get a temporary job and pick up a little travel money enroute to her final destination of Mexico where she planned to pursue a career as a sculptress. Nell, of course, never did make it to Mexico, serving the Fellowship for many years as Bill W.’s secretary and ultimately, G.S.O.’s first Archivist.

Along with a series of operational improvements instituted by the Alcoholic Foundation, a committee of Trustees was appointed to act as an advisory body to the Headquarters staff to address any problems of policy and administration

requiring immediate attention. The chairman of this committee was therefore, the de facto volunteer manager of the office, a position filled by Hank G. for a number of years.

Under his leadership, the office began to take on a more coherent structure and moved yet again in 1950 to a larger office at 141 East 44th Street, still close to Grand Central Station and its hub of activity. The term “headquarters” was dropped at this time, replaced by the more descriptive name that it now holds, the General Service Office, (G.S.O.). Rotation was instituted among the staff secretaries, and due to a number of relapses, new policies were brought about establishing a minimum sobriety requirement for alcoholic staff members.

A further hiring was made in 1950, to bolster the office’s bookkeeping functions. Dennis Manders, a nonalcoholic, saw his employment as a temporary thing like Nell. “I gave myself six months to whip the place into shape,” he said, “and then I was going to quit. But after six months I was thoroughly hooked; you would have had to fire me to get rid of me.” Dennis, too, stayed on for over 35 years, ultimately becoming G.S.O.’s chief financial officer.

Hank, however, resigned as volunteer manager in 1951 because the workload was taking too much time away from his business life, and for the next two years there were three different volunteer managers. In 1953, however, Hank was hired back as general manager, compensated for one-third of his time, becoming the first paid A.A. manager.

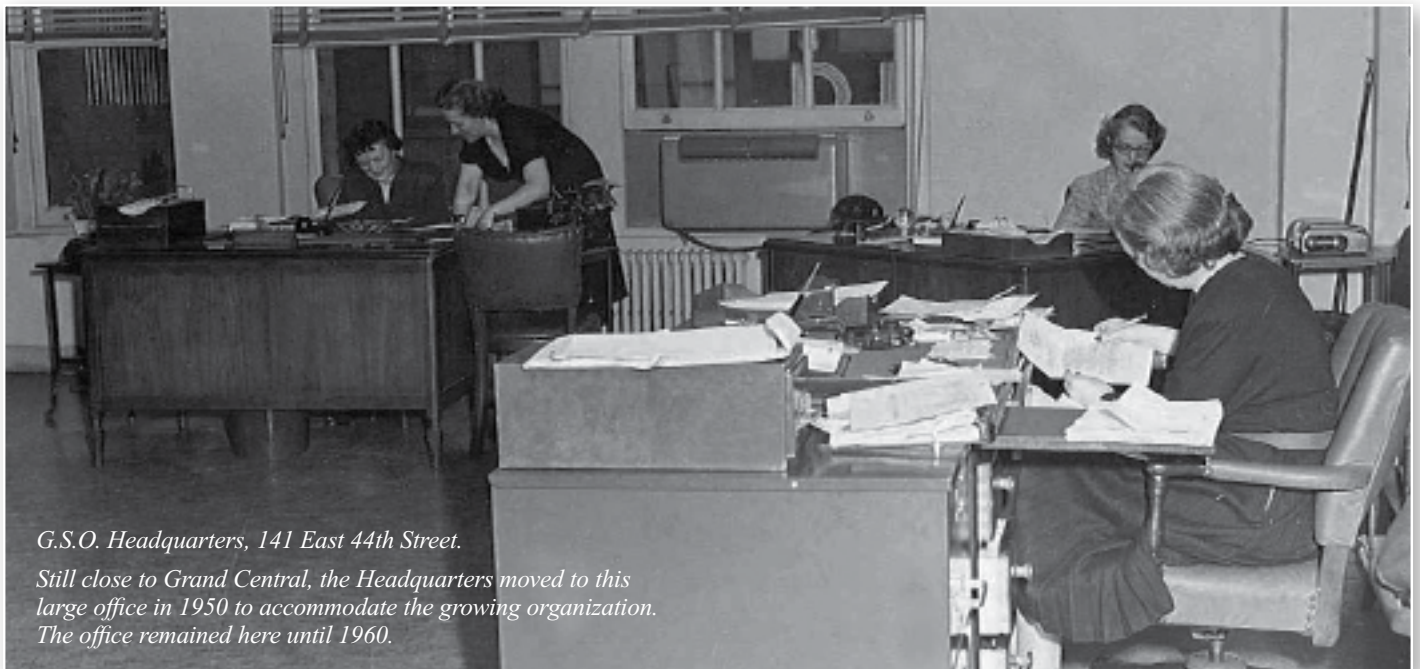
The annual volume of incoming mail during this period of time exceeded 31,000 pieces, and over a million copies of A.A. books and pamphlets were sold. Additionally, correspondence with lone members such as Captain Jack S. was helping to formulate the Loners/Internationalists programs of today and the office began regular correspondence with Conference delegates regarding breaks of anonymity

throughout the Fellowship. Along with these service activities, A.A. Works Publishing, which had been charged with oversight of the General Service Office, changed its name in 1953 to A.A. World Services, Inc., the name it still bears in 2011.

Hopelessly cramped, G.S.O. leased an entire floor at 305 E. 45th Street, a location that had housed G.S.O.’s shipping department in previous years along with a special editorial group consisting of Bill W., Nell Wing and Ed B., a writer and editor who was helping Bill with a number of special writing projects. These two “departments” had moved to the new location a number of years earlier and were joined there in 1960 by the remaining G.S.O. departments and the Grapevine, bringing all of A.A.’s service family under one roof.

The location served its purpose well, but in ten years G.S.O. was on the move again, this time to a location it would call home for the next 20 years. Taking space in 1970 at 468 Park Avenue South, the office ultimately occupied five floors in two adjacent buildings, housing the newly-opened Archives, the Grapevine, and including a conference room for A.A. board meetings. Throughout the ’60s and ’70s the volume of correspondence in Spanish had increased, and by 1984 G.S.O.’s staffing included a Spanish-speaking, nonrotating staff member, a position that would last into the late 1990s.

Facing a period of unprecedented growth during which A.A. was estimated to be doubling in size every seven years, G.S.O. scrambled to keep up. Sparked in large measure by the Hughes Bill that prompted the opening of thousands of treatment centers, “The whole field was developing almost faster than we could deal with it,” said Cora Louise B., a staff member during these years. “Then came all the hue and cry from the groups, the A.A. members, which was far more serious to us: ‘These agency people, these treatment people are



*G.S.O. Headquarters, 141 East 44th Street.*

*Still close to Grand Central, the Headquarters moved to this large office in 1950 to accommodate the growing organization. The office remained here until 1960.*



*The file department at East 44th Street, which accommodated G.S.O.'s vast and growing correspondence.*

doing this and doing that, and how are we going to stop 'em? They're trying to take A.A. away from us. . .'" The need to answer these anguished protests led to the writing of A.A. Guidelines, a distillation of A.A. experience on a given subject, which could be sent instead of a lengthy letter. Guidelines were developed on treatment centers, court programs, armed services, A.A. members working in the field, and other topics of interest to the Fellowship. Still a staple in G.S.O.'s service arsenal, today's Guidelines are written and revised as experience filters in, sharing the most up-to-date information available throughout the Fellowship.

To meet the demands imposed by such growth, where sales of literature were increasing by 25% each year, methods and procedures in the office changed dramatically under the leadership of general managers Bob H. and Bob P. Automation was introduced wherever possible, especially in the areas of keeping group records and publishing A.A. directories. A microfiche system was put into place and G.S.O.'s first computer went online in September 1977. The idea of computerization had been explored years earlier, but the idea had encountered some reluctance based on the feeling that it might reduce the personal touch that so typified G.S.O. That reluctance, however, was overrun by the realities of the day and G.S.O. finally entered the computer age.

The increase in the volume of publishing also led to major changes, with G.S.O. absorbing some of the functions of a major publisher, purchasing its own paper for the first time

and getting more deeply involved in literature production and distribution.

Consideration was also given during this period of time to the possibility of moving G.S.O. out of New York altogether. A study was undertaken by a professional consulting firm relative to the pluses and minuses of such relocation and the matter was thoroughly discussed, leading to a recommendation from the A.A.W.S. Board that "it would not be in the best interests of the Fellowship to move G.S.O. at this time." The General Service Board and the Conference agreed and the office stayed put until 1992 when it moved to its current home at 475 Riverside Drive, in the Interchurch Center, a building devoted to providing office space for nonprofit organizations at affordable rates.

Today, visitors to G.S.O. might well conclude that while the office is much larger than any of its predecessors, it still does what it always did, just on a vastly larger scale. As Bill W. wrote about G.S.O. in a message written as the finale to "As Bill Sees It": "The A.A. General Service Office is by far the largest single carrier of the A.A. message. It has well related A.A. to the troubled world in which we live. It has fostered the spread of our Fellowship everywhere. . . [It] stands ready to serve the special needs of any group or isolated individual, no matter the distance or language. Its many years of accumulated experience are available to us all."

Quite a journey, indeed, from the little room on William Street where it all began.