

## **The Portsmouth Athenaeum**

Charles E. Clark and Michael A. Baenen

The Portsmouth Athenaeum is a non-profit membership library incorporated in 1817. As it evolved during its earliest history, it drew on two distinct kinds of institutional tradition. One was the scholarly and genteel “social library” with collections of books that circulated among its members. The other was the commercial “reading room” or “subscription room,” which featured current newspapers and business talk. For many decades, Portsmouth had been home to a few versions of each, but most had not experienced long lives.

The founders of the Athenaeum, building in part on the remnants of the Portsmouth Library (whose collection had burned in the great Portsmouth fire of 1813), and more remotely of the long-defunct Portsmouth Social Library of 1750, envisioned an institution different from its Portsmouth predecessors and from the other private libraries then being established in New Hampshire. An “athenaeum” in the usage of the time signified not only a collection of books but also a place for reading and study in which its members and other patrons presumably would undertake scholarly research. The ancient Athenaeum was a center of teaching, scholarship, oratory, and the arts in the temple of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. The name was later applied to similar institutions in the ancient world, and in modern times adopted by European and American societies, beginning with the famous Liverpool Athenaeum in 1797. The Boston Athenaeum, established in 1807, was the first of several such institutions in New England. The Portsmouth Athenaeum, some of whose founders had close ties with its Boston counterpart, was one of the earliest to follow.

The most decisive step in the Athenaeum's subsequent development, after it had occupied rented quarters for a short time and then a rent-free space on the third floor of the customhouse, was its move to 9 Market Square in 1823. The main floor of the slender Federal building, erected by the New Hampshire Fire and Marine Insurance Company in 1805, housed one of the town's rival commercial "reading rooms," open at first only to the insurance company's stockholders and more recently to subscribers (of whom there were only a few). The company suffered heavy losses in the War of 1812, and the uncertain commercial situation that followed the peace did not promise future profits. The stockholders eventually decided to liquidate the company when its twenty-year charter expired, rather than seek its renewal. The insurance company shareholders, seeking a new use for the building but reluctant to give up the reading room, and the Athenaeum, seeking its own quarters and more members, quickly discovered a mutual interest in the sale of the building to the Athenaeum in exchange for new shares. Eventually the Athenaeum would recover some of the claims against the French government that had been assigned to the Athenaeum when the insurance company was liquidated.

Thus it was that the inheritors of the "social library" tradition, largely either men of leisure or members of the learned professions of the day, found common cause with the generally wealthier trading segment of the community whose place of business and discussion of current affairs had been the reading room. Together, these two seemingly disparate elements, which up to now had overlapped only to some small extent, forged a newly vigorous, prosperous, and elegantly housed Portsmouth Athenaeum. In 1879, the fruits of the new relationship were recognized explicitly by a proprietor who recalled in a memoir that in the Athenaeum, "minds of

diverse training and habits of thought got the benefit of mutual attrition [*sic*], the scholar coming down from the library to compare his views with that of the men of affairs . . . .”

In addition to the book-lined library with its reading tables on the second floor of the new quarters and the newspaper reading room on the first, the Athenaeum housed on the third floor a museum. This was a small collection in the mode of what the eighteenth century had called “cabinets of curiosities,” intended as “a receptacle & repository of specimens in the various departments of natural history, & of the production of foreign art & industry.” From time to time it made a few additional acquisitions, sometimes displayed at other places in the building. The natural history side of the collection has long since been discontinued, and the third floor itself was replaced in 1861 by a gallery to help house the library’s growing collection of books. The museum side of the Athenaeum’s activities, though important for its artifacts illustrating Portsmouth and maritime history, never developed as the library did. Nevertheless, the early collection survives mainly in the reading room, as does an extremely important collection of portraits acquired somewhat later. The book collection grew from a few hundred volumes to become the largest library in New Hampshire during the 1830s; by 1866 it had reached 10,000 volumes.

During the Jacksonian era, at a time when several other newspaper reading rooms flourished in the city, each aimed at a particular clientele, the Athenaeum came to be seen as a center of elitism and, in some eyes, of Whig politics. Though the directors tried hard to keep partisan politics out of either the admission of members or the administration of the Athenaeum’s affairs, they did little to counter the general view that the institution was operated for the exclusive benefit of an elite few. In 1838, the proprietors voted to end the use of the library as a

meeting place for outside groups without special permission, and in 1840 turned down a proposal to extend borrowing privileges to subscribers. This was at a time when for a small annual fee, one could subscribe to use either the reading room or library or both, but only if he lacked what was deemed “sufficiently ample” means to purchase “with prudence” a proprietary share. The relatively few subscribers, in short, were by definition in a lower economic echelon than proprietors. (By more recent definition, the Athenaeum’s “subscribers” are fee-paying applicants for proprietorships who have been admitted with borrowing privileges to a waiting list, pending the availability of a share. Often they are active volunteers in the Athenaeum’s programs and activities.)

As the proprietors aged, the reading room seemed to at least a few observers to be retreating into obsolescence and these once magnificent quarters becoming alarmingly shabby. The reading room was renovated in 1855 and the upper floors, including the enlargement of the library by cutting through the third floor, in 1861. The renovations did not, however, lead to institutional revival. By the end of the nineteenth century, the reading room had become the haunt of only a small band of regulars, the “Atheneum boys.” Its physical condition was disgraceful. Under the influence of the Colonial Revival, it underwent its second extensive renovation in 1892. This was when a proprietor commissioned a copy of John Smibert’s portrait of Sir William Pepperrell to complement the original Smibert portraits of the other heroes of the Louisbourg expedition of 1745, Sir Richard Spry and Sir Peter Warren, that had adorned the reading room since at least the 1840s.

Membership libraries faced new competition from public libraries in the second half of the nineteenth century. The City of Portsmouth established a public library in 1881. Although the

Athenaeum, unlike most other membership libraries, survived as an independent institution, it was not until well into the twentieth century that the Athenaeum sprang into vigorous new life. Gradual changes in furnishings and decor, none especially dramatic, were made in the reading room and library during the first half of the century or so. In the post-World War II era, the organization began to take on new directions as a result of efforts within the board of directors to reinvigorate the board by bringing in a more diverse membership. In 1982, a committee was able to report 26,000 volumes in the “basic collection” of the library in addition to “modern publications and periodicals acquired for proprietors’ casual reading.” By that time, however, many proprietors, responding in part to previous efforts at change, were sensing the need for fresh directions and a new relationship with the community. Though proprietors had access to the building at any time, they could get professional help with their research only on the one day a week that the library was staffed. There was little encouragement, or occasion, for proprietors to volunteer to work with collections or activities. More seriously, in the words of one proprietor, the Athenaeum was “perceived by the outside world as inaccessible.”

In 1981, under new leadership of John P. Maher, Winthrop Carter, and Joseph G. Sawtelle, the Athenaeum took two bold steps that pointed the way toward a new future. The proprietors voted to buy the top two floors of the adjoining Foye building, which had been designed and built at the same time as the Athenaeum building as part of a unified scheme. At the same time they commissioned a master plan, to be carried out by the Thoresen Group, a consulting firm, with the assistance of future Athenaeum president Richard M. Candee. The partial collapse of the building that housed the new condominium not long after its acquisition complicated the work of the master plan consultants, who published its report in 1982.

Nevertheless, in 1986 the Joseph P. Copley Research Library, named for a proprietor and part-time curator who had previously taken a leading role in the operations of the Athenaeum, opened on the third floor of the reconstructed building. The rest was used for part of the book collection, a vault for rare book and manuscript materials, and office space.

At the same time, the directors put in place many of the recommendations of the master plan. These initiatives included an expansion of staff including most significantly a supervising executive with the title, beginning with the appointment of Jane M. Porter in 1986, of “keeper“ The new research library was opened to the public without charge for twelve hours each week. Scholars and general readers, whether proprietors or subscribers or not, could now make use, with professional assistance and supervision, of an important center for the study of regional history, literature, and culture. The library would soon house 40,000 volumes in addition to extensive collections of manuscripts, maps, photographs, newspapers, periodicals, and local imprints. What stood in 1986 as two file drawers of manuscripts has grown to 77 large manuscript collections including the Wendell family collection and the John Langdon papers, and nearly 800 single items or small collections. In addition, the Athenaeum, through a new program called ArtsAthenaeum, began to sponsor lectures, concerts, and exhibitions, all open to the public. Also during the 1980s, shrewd investment and generous donations brought about a dramatic growth in the Athenaeum’s endowment, laying the foundation for greater financial stability and long-range planning.

The increasing role of women in all aspects of the Athenaeum has been a conspicuous feature of its transformation. The first woman to own a share in her own right was Eliza Wentworth Haven, who purchased hers in 1860. Only since the 1980s, however, have women in

such numbers taken on responsibilities as proprietors, officers, directors, committee members, staff members, and volunteers. In 2001 Eleonore P. Sanderson became the Athenaeum's first woman president.

In 1995, the facilities expanded again with the help of Joseph G. Sawtelle, former president and consistent generous benefactor of the Athenaeum. In 1992 Mr. Sawtelle had purchased two condominium units in the Peirce Block, adjacent to the Foye Building. He now made the third floor unit available for the Randall Room Exhibition Gallery, which since 1996 has been the site of a series of varied exhibits, all open to the public. The gallery is named in honor of Peter E. Randall, noted Portsmouth publisher, photographer, and long-time active participant and contributor to the Athenaeum and its programs. In 2002, after the death of Mr. Sawtelle, his family donated to the Athenaeum both condominium units, including not only the third-floor Randall Gallery but also space on the fourth floor, providing much-need curatorial and archival work areas. The first-floor reading room in the 1805 building has since been named in honor of Mr. Sawtelle, and the mezzanine in honor of Loretta Hassett Slawson in recognition of generous contributions in her memory by an anonymous donor. The Athenaeum's bustling fresh life since the 1980s has enriched the social and intellectual lives of its proprietors while providing new availability and excellence as a scholarly and cultural resource for the community of the Piscataqua.