



VISION 2026

**A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR
THE PROVIDENCE ATHENÆUM**

*APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
SEPTEMBER 15, 2021*




THE PROVIDENCE ATHENÆUM

began developing its strategic plan in early 2019. As key stakeholders gathered to assess the environment, measure the institution's progress, and examine its priorities, the world was about to change. A pandemic, a social justice movement, and the longest closure in the institution's long history would quickly follow. In the ensuing months, the Athenæum would reinvent itself, changing both the way it fulfilled its mission and its internal operations. As the pandemic entered its second year, the Athenæum had already introduced new programs, services, and processes.

Our strategic plan needed to adapt, as well. During 2020, the Athenæum's leadership team and members of its board convened to redevelop its plan, and they benefited from the counsel of numerous external consultants and reports to inform the process. This plan, **VISION 2026**, is the fruit of that labor.

The progress the Athenæum made between 2015–2021 is significant and undeniable. It is a testament to the dedication of our members, board, and staff, and it demonstrates the continued relevance of our beloved institution. But we have much more work to do – work to ensure the Athenæum is accessible, inclusive, and welcoming to all; that its historic building and collections are preserved; and that it fosters a healthy, civil, and humanistic dialogue.

The goals and objectives here are ambitious, but we believe they are achievable. We are grateful for all the support of our expanding community, and with your help, we will better serve our vital mission: to enrich the mind, inspire the spirit, and elevate the public discourse.



JONATHAN BELL
PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD



MATT BURRIESCI
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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MISSION

THE PROVIDENCE ATHENÆUM
ENRICHES THE MIND, **INSPIRES**
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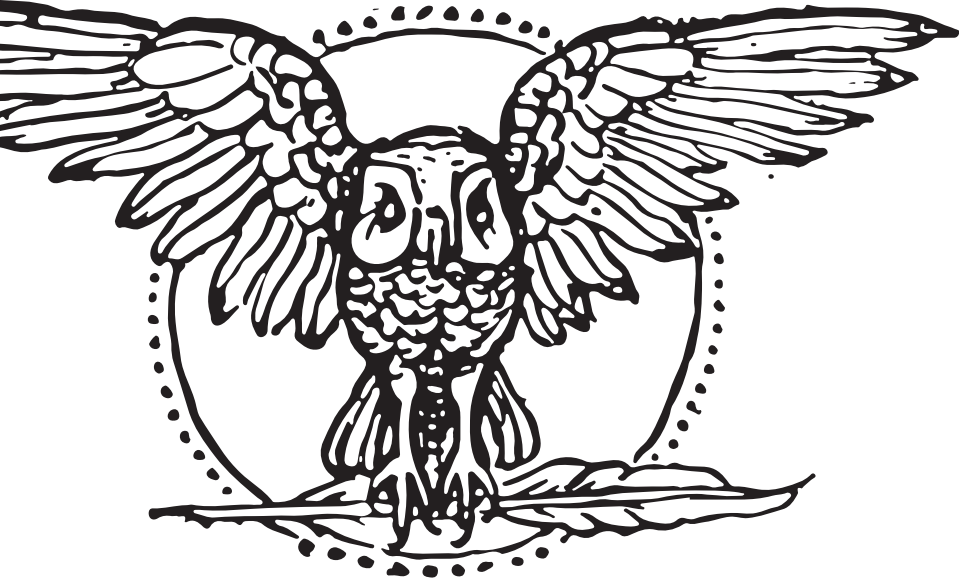
VISION 2026

The Providence Athenæum will expand its constituencies, become more resilient, and ensure equity among its members, staff, and Board. We will protect our historic building and collections; develop programs that have national resonance; and enhance the facilities and services we offer our patrons.

WE BELIEVE...

- Every library is a benefit to its community.
- The culture of books helps realize a more just society.
- Republics flourish through a diversity of voices.
- Examining the past is fundamental to informing the present and shaping the future.
- Character and civility matter.
- Hospitality is an essential custom.

A COMMITMENT



THIS IS A CIVIL HOME FOR THE FREE EXCHANGE OF IDEAS. ALL ARE WELCOME.

When Francis Wayland gave the address at the opening of the Athenæum's building in 1838, he charged the fledgling institution to act for the future:

We must render knowledge, valuable knowledge, accessible to the whole community.

We must collect the treasures of science and literature, and throw them open to all who are disposed to avail themselves of their benefits.

We must provide the means by which the light of intellect shall shine into every house, and pour its reviving beams into the bosom of every family.

And still more, we must act for the future. In our present state, no great object can be accomplished, unless we act for posterity.

We must, therefore, lay the foundations of this institution in such principles, that it will grow with the growth of intelligence, widening and deepening the channels of its influence, as it passes on from age to age, more and more thoroughly imbuing every successive race with admiration of all that is great, with love for all that is beautiful, and with reverence for all that is holy.

The Providence Athenæum is committed to this enterprise. We pledge to examine the past, improve the present, and inform the future. We will build a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization where all feel welcome.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT 2015-2021

Between 2015-2021, the Athenæum grew rapidly, invested heavily in its historic building, and achieved many strategic milestones. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 delayed development of a new strategic plan, but it also resulted in numerous emergency innovations that will likely outlive the pandemic, including virtual programming, curbside pickup, and enhanced access to digital collections.

PROGRAMMING

The Athenæum produced hundreds of humanistic programs and welcomed a wide array of cultural leaders and authors, including multiple Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award recipients, a former United States Poet Laureate, and two United States Senators. Many Athenæum events were free and open to the public, and recordings of nearly all library programs were posted in a new digital media archive, available free of charge to members and non-members alike.

More than 54,000 people attended an Athenæum program in this period, and several events had to be moved offsite to accommodate the largest audiences the library has ever attracted. Speakers included David Blight, Sherrod Brown, Alexander Chee, the producers of *Crimetown*, Rita Dove, Oskar Eustis, Annette Gordon-Reed, Stephen Greenblatt, Terrance Hayes, Major Jackson, Gish Jen, John McWhorter, Daniel Mendelsohn, Greg Pardlo, Ann Patchett, Nathaniel Philbrick, Colson Whitehead, Sheldon Whitehouse, and Gordon Wood, among dozens of others. Story Time in the Children's Library was ever popular, and handmade craft kits for our youngest members flew off the shelves when the pandemic temporarily halted in-person children's programming.

In 2021, the Athenæum inaugurated its Program Working Group. Made up of members of the staff, Board, and external community, the PWG ensures that diverse voices are curating the programming at the Athenæum.

Partners included the ACLU of Rhode Island, the English Speaking Union, Heifitz International Music Institute, the Modern Language Association, New York Public Library, Providence Children's Film Festival, the Public's Radio, Rhode Island Chamber Music Concerts, the Rhode Island Historical Society, the RISD Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, Trinity Repertory Company, and Yale University's Beinecke Library, among many others.

COLLECTIONS

In 2018, thanks to the generosity of members Brian and Lyn Hayden, the Athenæum established the Hayden Special Collections Development Fund which allowed the library to make significant purchases to enhance the Special Collections. Our first acquisitions included three missing plates from the *Description de l'Égypte*. Subsequently, we added three important pieces of public art as part of the Bust Project. The Athenæum commissioned three busts of cultural figures Mary Wollstonecraft, Frederick Douglass, and Louisa May Alcott. Remarkably, the Athenæum's bust of Wollstonecraft is the only known public monument to this important philosopher in North America.

Exhibitions, including *Walt Whitman: Poet of the Body*, *Ravenous: The Enduring Legacy of Poe*, and *Observing Nature: Edna Lawrence & Cabinets of Curiosities*, attracted a record number of visitors and featured incredible treasures both from the Athenæum's collections and on loan.

The Athenæum also eliminated all of its offsite storage and, after decades, returned important volumes from the Providence Library Company Founders Collection to the main library. With help from students from Wheaton College, the institution cataloged a significant portion of its art collection and made that digital resource available to public scholars.

The onset of COVID-19 in the Spring of 2020 resulted in the longest closure in the institution's history. The Athenæum responded by developing its curbside pickup service and investing heavily in its new digital borrowing service, hoopla. Both proved to be extremely popular.

PRESERVATION

Since 2015, the Athenæum has invested millions of dollars in its efforts to preserve and restore its historic building. In 2018, we repaired and renovated the Richmond Fountain. We replaced the entire roofing system, renovated the staff offices, completely restored the Art Room, and upgraded the electricity service to the building. With support from funders like the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Athenæum was able to bring together interdisciplinary teams of architects, engineers, landscapers, and experts in preservation, conservation, fire detection & suppression, and code compliance to study the entire building and develop long-term plans for the care and preservation of the building.

VISITORSHIP

The Athenæum was dedicated to warming our exterior presence and saw a marked increase in visitors. Between 2015 and 2019, visitorship grew from 39,271 to 56,969

(+45%). 2020 was set for another visitor record, but in March 2020, the Athenæum was forced to close to the public as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In preparation for reopening, the former Executive Director office was converted into a welcoming Visitor Center and Shop to sell library merchandise and create an enhanced visitor experience.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership grew rapidly at the Athenæum during this period. The institution's total paid membership increased by 32%, and in 2019, the Athenæum extended free memberships to 2,000 teachers in the Providence Public School System. New membership benefits were added, including reciprocal membership privileges at over 1,000 museums in North America.

FINANCES

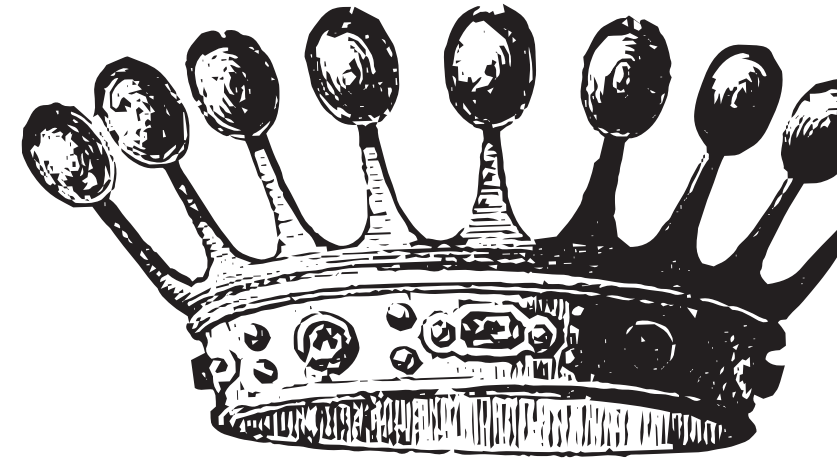
The Athenæum ended this period in the strongest financial position it has enjoyed in decades. The organization eliminated its deficit in 2017, when it also retired all its existing debt. Between 2018–2021 it ran four consecutive budget surpluses, largely on the strength of new revenue streams and the incredible generosity of its donors. Gifts to the Annual Fund increased by 38%. The organization also reduced its draw on its endowment, which grew by 22%, and established dedicated funds for its Special Collections and historic building. In 2021, the Athenæum established a cash reserve, which will help it delay endowment draws and better manage cash flows.

STRATEGIC GOALS

I. DEVELOP, EVALUATE, PRESERVE, AND SHOWCASE THE ATHENÆUM'S COLLECTIONS.

By 2026:

- Environmental conditions and security of collections are significantly improved.
- The library's collections are more accessible to members and the public.
- Members benefit from expanded services and technologies.
- The Conservation Program continues, with an emphasis on the Providence Library Company Collection.



II. POSITION THE ATHENÆUM AS A SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL INSTITUTION LOCALLY, REGIONALLY, AND NATIONALLY.

By 2026:

- Athenæum programming is diverse, compelling, and accessible.
- Library programs reach local, regional, and national audiences.
- Members enjoy an expanded array of curated cultural programs.
- Programs are more self-sustaining.
- Internal systems for the management of program logistics are substantially improved.
- The institution's profile and name recognition are enhanced.



III. PRESERVE OUR HISTORIC BUILDING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

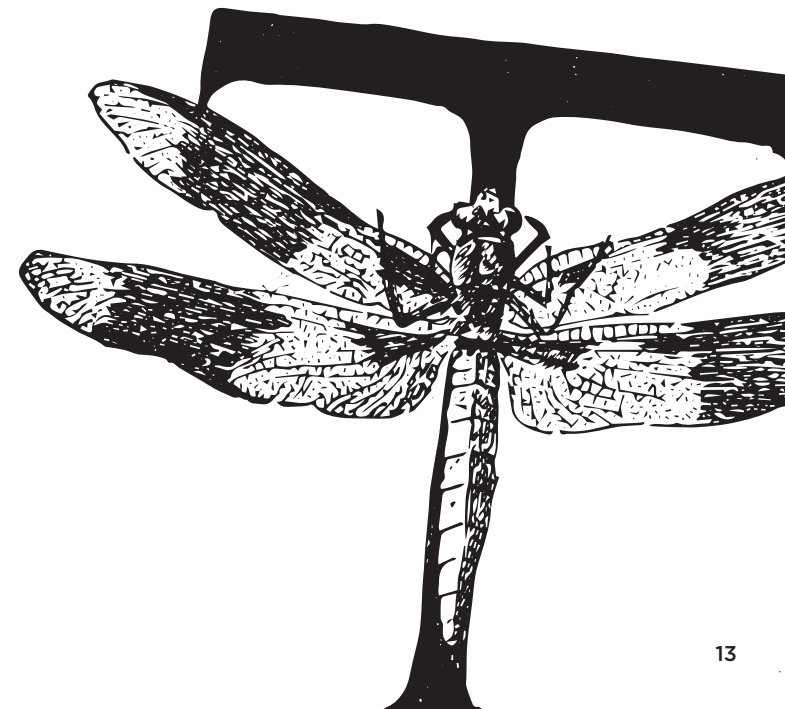
By 2026:

- The Athenæum enjoys a new heating system.
- Fire detection and suppression systems are installed throughout the building.
- Building security is significantly improved.
- Hardscaping issues are resolved.
- The building's envelope is tightened.
- The institution is making progress in addressing accessibility and patron comfort.

IV. BROADEN OUR CONSTITUENCIES AND SERVE THEM WELL.

By 2026:

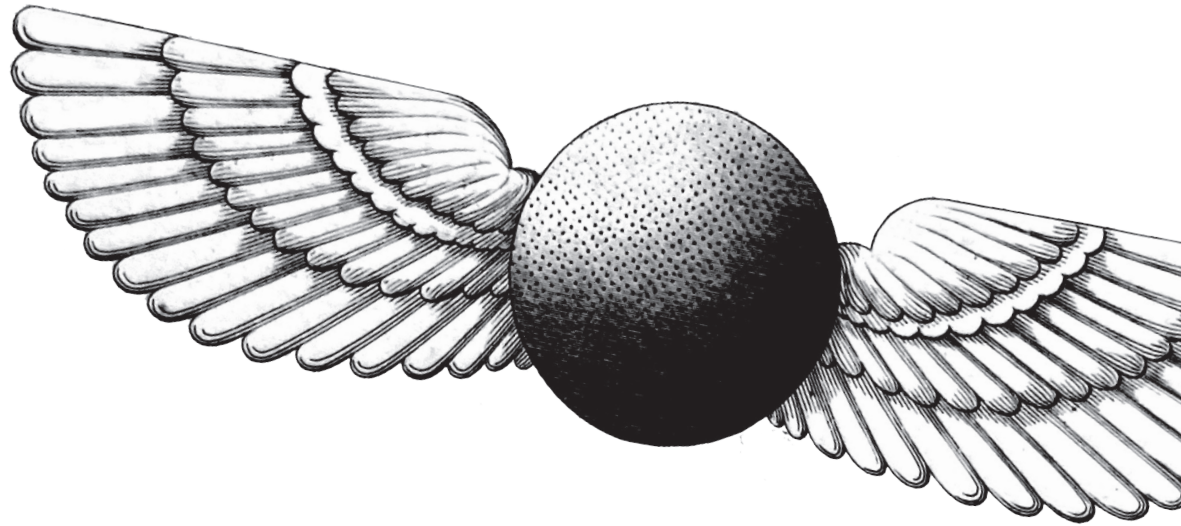
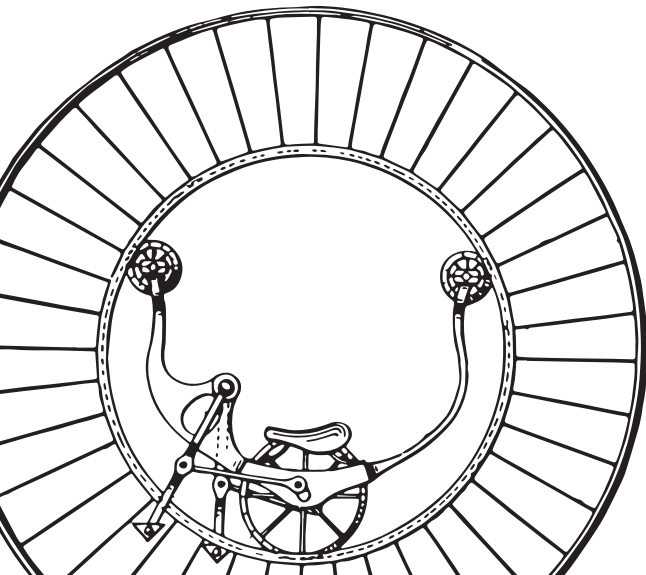
- The Athenæum attracts, retains, and supports a diverse staff, board, and membership.
- Diverse stakeholders curate programming.
- Membership has grown by 25%.
- The visitor experience is better understood and improved.
- The Athenæum's partnerships serve and support the mission of the institution.



V. BUILD THE ATHENÆUM'S FINANCIAL CAPACITY.

By 2026:

- The Athenæum continues to operate with balanced or surplus budgets.
- Operational revenue has grown by at least 29% (\$161,000 annually).
- The institution's cash reserve is equal to two months of expenses (\$200,000).
- The building fund is larger due to a targeted fundraising effort.
- The endowment draw is 4.6% of a 3-year rolling average.
- The Athenæum has an integrated, system-driven development program.



VI. BECOME A MORE EFFECTIVE, EFFICIENT, AND RESILIENT INSTITUTION.

By 2026:

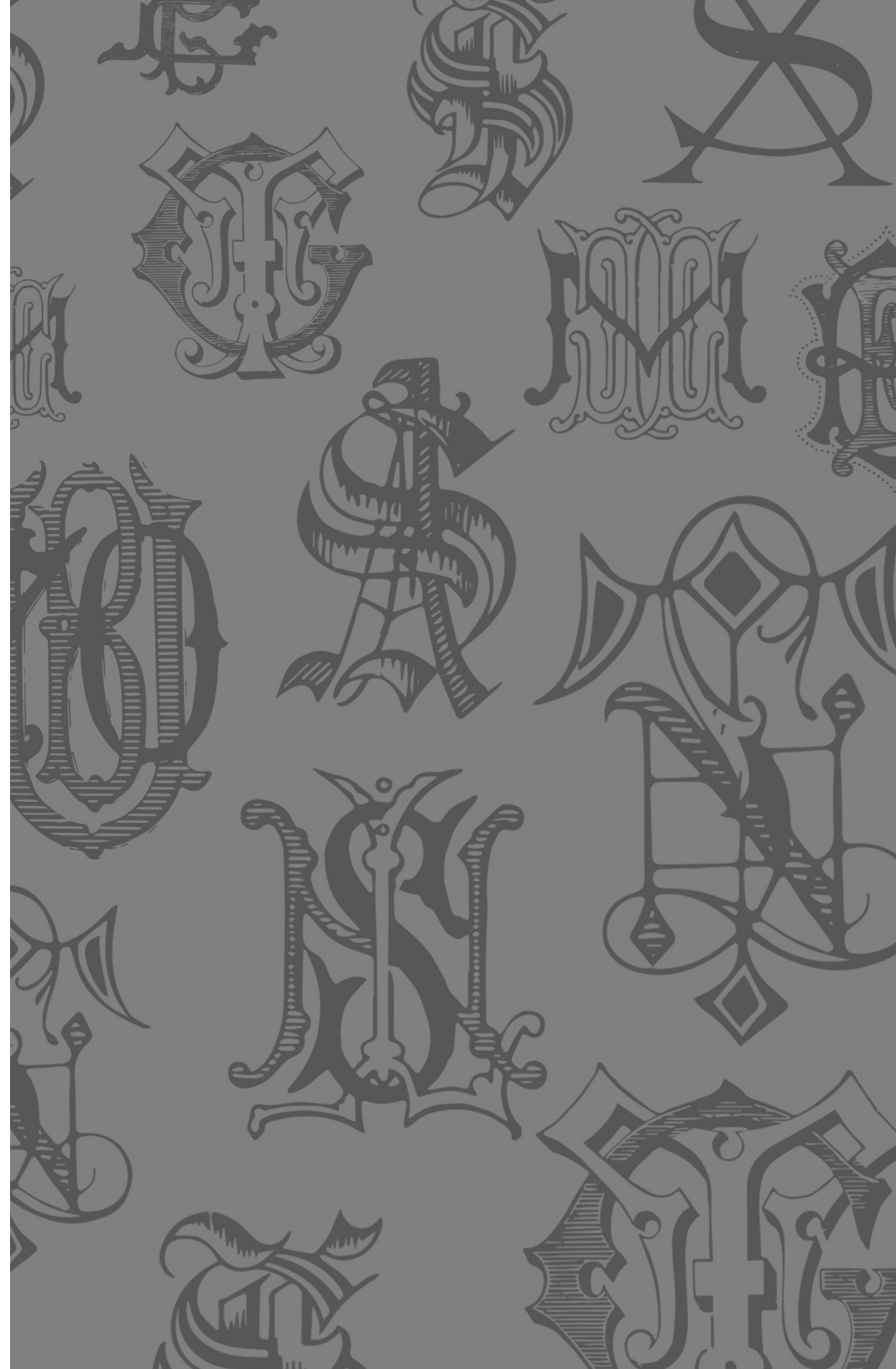
- Staffing is optimized to sustainably achieve mission objectives.
- A policy and procedure framework fosters smooth operation.
- The Athenæum promotes an innovative internal culture.
- The institution is better positioned to deal with disasters and interruptions to its operations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Athenæum is deeply grateful to the efforts of the Strategic Planning Committee. Since the plan was begun in 2019, the world has changed, and we are indebted to the Committee's focus, hard work, and ambitious vision throughout this process.

ARTWORK

The illustrations in this publication were taken from a unique item shelved in the Athenæum's Art Room - a scrapbook of hand-cut illustrations compiled by member George A. Stockwell in the 1910s. We don't know much about Mr. Stockwell or this scrapbook, but he seems to have had a fondness for monograms, owls, the letter T, and vexillology.





THE
PROVIDENCE
ATHENÆUM

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