

The background of the entire page is a repeating geometric pattern in a muted green color. The pattern consists of interlocking, stylized shapes that resemble a combination of a trellis and a lattice, creating a complex, symmetrical design.

THE PROVIDENCE ATHENÆUM

Self-Guided Tour



ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH, C. 1940S

WELCOME TO THE PROVIDENCE ATHENÆUM!

Since 1836, the library has welcomed members and visitors to engage in reading, conversation, and debate. Our mission is to enrich the mind, inspire the spirit, and elevate the public discourse.

This self-guided tour will help you explore the Athenæum's Main Level, its history, and its collections. All tour points are located on one level, but several optional stops invite you to explore other areas on the mezzanine and in the lower-level Reading Room that require stairs to access. The primary tour should take about 25 minutes, and the supplemental points will add another 10-15.

General Visitor Guidelines:

PLEASE DO: ask staff members questions, take photos (without flash), use caution on the 19th-century stairs, turn on light switches

PLEASE DO NOT: take phone calls while in the building, eat snacks in the stacks, visit spaces marked as staff/members only, visit the mezzanine with children under 10 years old

We begin the tour at the large statue of Athena, just outside the Visitor Center (you can't miss her).



ATHENA FROM *THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE* BY J.C. STOBART, 1929

POINT 1

ATHENA

Let's start with the basics. You can pronounce athenæum as ath-uh-NEE-um or ath-uh-NAY-um. The “æ” in the library's name is a ligature mark called “ash” and is used in the traditional spelling.

The term takes its name from Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom, and is defined most broadly as an association for the advancement of learning. The first organization called ‘Athenæum’ was founded by the Roman emperor Hadrian in about 133 CE.

This seven-foot-tall plaster statue of Athena is on long-term loan from Wheaton College in Norton, MA. The early 20th-century work is based on a lost bronze statue from Athens' Acropolis, created between 450-440 BCE.



You'll also find Athena in our beloved logo drawn by Rhode Island School of Design student Ralph Leete Foster in 1901.

*Now walk a few steps past Athena to find a framed photo on your left, hung at the end of an alcove for **POINT 2**.*

—
Legend has it that Wheaton students used to paint our Athena statue's toenails on special occasions.



FRANKLIN AT THE COURT OF FRANCE, 1778, PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM JAY, CHARLES J. HENDENBERG, & WILLIAM H. EMERSON, 1853

POINT 2

MEMBERSHIP LIBRARIES

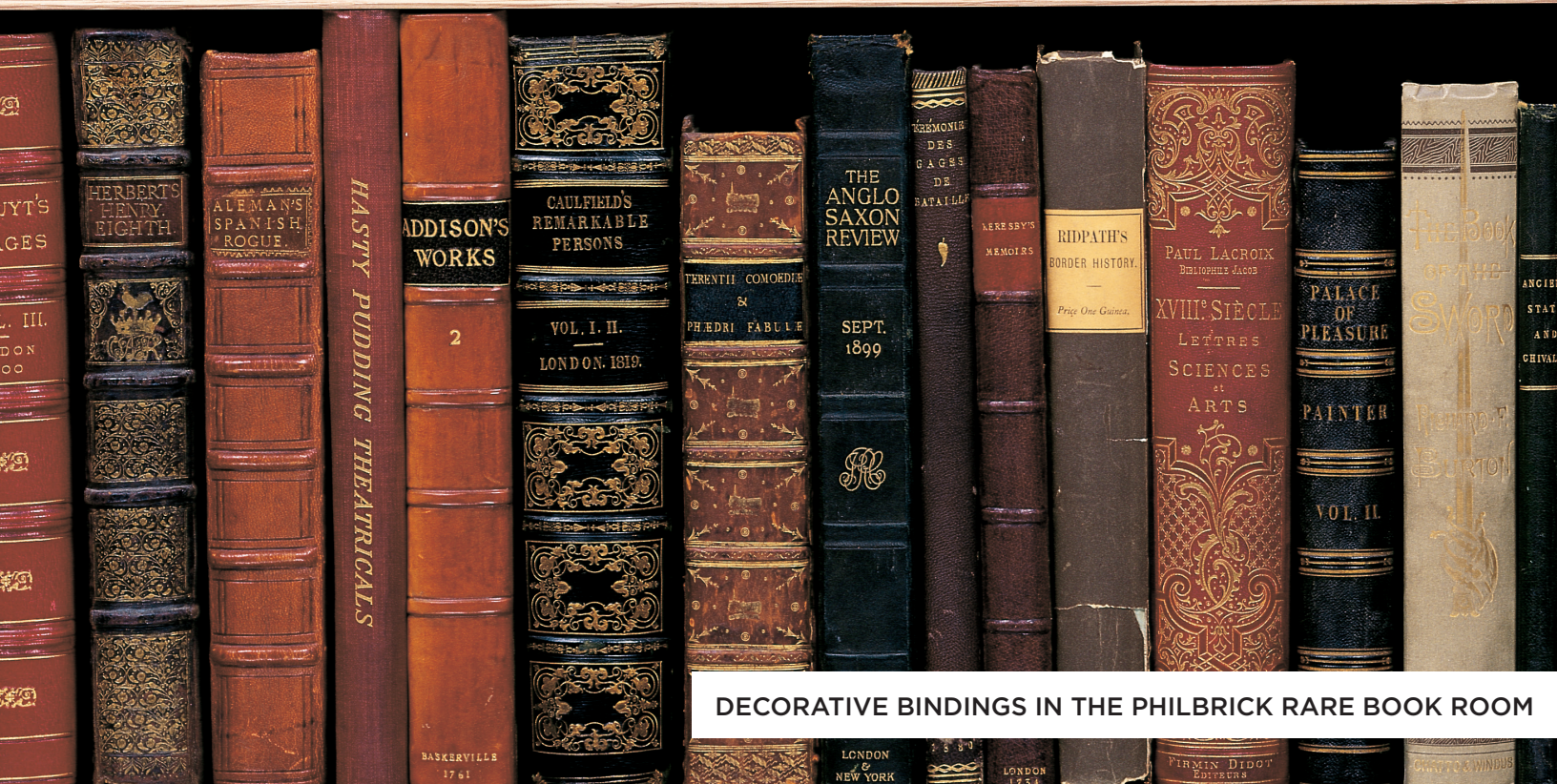
This is one of the oldest known photographs of the library (c. 1860s), but the Athenæum's roots stretch back more than a century before it was taken.

Before tax-supported public libraries existed, there were limited ways for people to access reading material unless they were wealthy enough to have a personal collection. Recognizing the importance of making such knowledge available, statesman Benjamin Franklin founded the first American membership library in 1731, the Library Company of Philadelphia. Membership, or subscription, libraries allowed individuals to pool their resources to maintain a circulating collection, either by becoming shareholders or by paying monthly membership dues.

In 1753, 85 men and one woman came together to establish the Providence Library Company, our Athenæum's ancestor, which was housed down the street at the old Town House. 345 volumes arrived from England in 1756, including Homer's *Odyssey*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. That building burned to the ground in 1758, along with all but 71 books which happened to be checked out at the time (we still have 45 of these books in our Special Collections!).

In 1836, the Providence Library Company decided to merge with another membership library in the city to form the Providence Athenæum as we know it today.

—
See if you
can spot the
two busts
of Benjamin
Franklin in the
Main Hall (hint:
look up!).



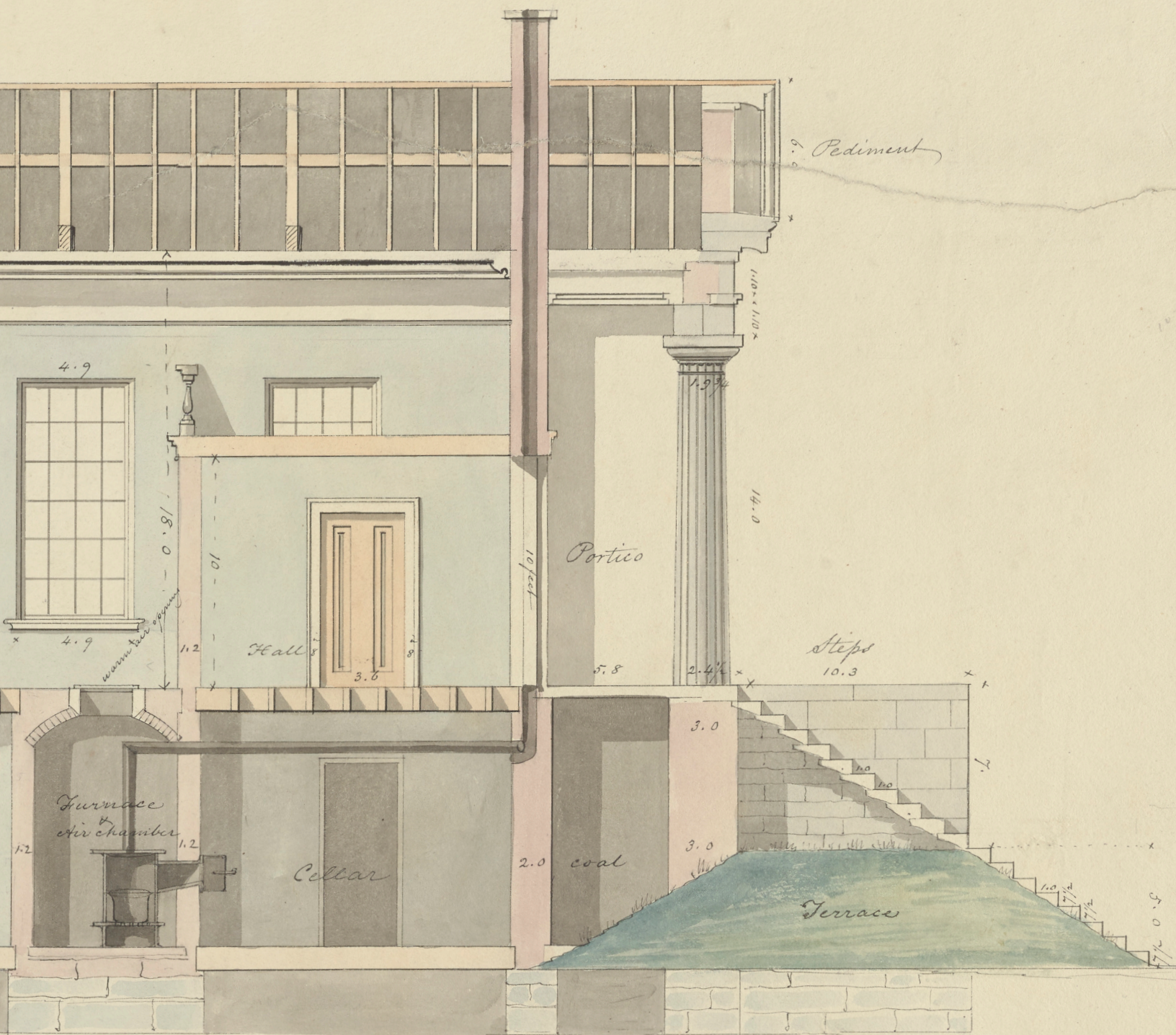
DECORATIVE BINDINGS IN THE PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM

Once common across the United States, most membership libraries have been absorbed into public libraries, but a handful continue to thrive. Many hold special collections of rare books, manuscripts, maps, prints, and photographs.

SURVIVING MEMBERSHIP LIBRARIES

Library Company of Philadelphia <i>Philadelphia, PA, 1731</i>	General Society Library <i>New York, NY, 1820</i>
Redwood Library and Athenæum <i>Newport, RI, 1747</i>	Institute Library <i>New Haven, CT, 1826</i>
Charleston Library Society <i>Charleston, SC, 1748</i>	Nantucket Athenæum <i>Nantucket, MA, 1834</i>
Providence Library Company <i>Providence, RI, 1753</i> <i>[dissolved in 1836 to become the</i> <i>Providence Athenæum]</i>	Mercantile Library <i>Cincinnati, OH, 1835</i> Providence Athenæum <i>Providence, RI, 1836</i>
New York Society Library <i>New York, NY, 1754</i>	St. Louis Mercantile Library Association <i>St. Louis, MO, 1846</i>
Boston Athenæum <i>Boston, MA, 1807</i>	Mechanics' Institute Library <i>San Francisco, CA, 1854</i>
Salem Athenæum <i>Salem, MA, 1810</i>	Minneapolis Athenæum <i>Minnetonka, MN, 1859</i>
Athenæum of Philadelphia <i>Philadelphia, PA, 1814</i>	St. Johnsbury Athenæum <i>St. Johnsbury, VT, 1871</i>
Maine Charitable Mechanic Association <i>Portland, ME, 1815</i>	Lanier Library <i>Tryon, NC, 1890</i>
Portsmouth Athenæum <i>Portsmouth, NH, 1817</i>	Athenæum Music & Arts Library <i>La Jolla, CA, 1899</i>
Center for Fiction <i>New York, NY, 1820</i> <i>[previously Mercantile Library]</i>	

*Walk directly across the Main Hall to another framed photograph for **POINT 3.***



William Strickland

of the interior rooms & passages.

POINT 3

251 BENEFIT STREET

This photograph was taken around 1875 and is a wonderful snapshot of what life was like on Benefit Street in the 19th century. Can you imagine arriving at the Athenæum in a carriage? Our stately building, designed to look like an ancient Greek temple, was custom built to house the new library.

Within months of the Athenæum's 1836 founding, businessman and philanthropist Moses Brown Ives donated a plot of land on Benefit Street for "an Edifice to be erected in stone or Brick," as well as \$10,000 for its construction.

While the library raised additional funds and rented temporary rooms in the Arcade (an indoor shopping mall which still stands downtown today), the building committee hired the famous Philadelphia-based architect William Strickland to design the library's home. Costs totaled just under \$19,000, and the Athenæum opened its doors in July of 1838.

Although the library's exterior remains mostly unchanged other than two additions to the south, you might be surprised to learn that not all of the iconic interior building elements are original. The grand central stair that leads to the lower-level Reading Room was added in 1849, and the mezzanine level was constructed in 1868.

Find another framed photograph on the front of the card catalog for
POINT 4.

—
The bookshelves recessed into the wall at the back of this alcove were once a window!

BAIT - BANF

Barrie

1831-1919
Barr, Mrs Amelia Edith (Huddleston),
Harkins, E. F.
Amelia E. Barr. (see his Famous
Authors (women). - 1906,.)

745
B85

Batik.
Buchanan, Florence

BAEN - BASKE

POINT 4

THE CARD CATALOG

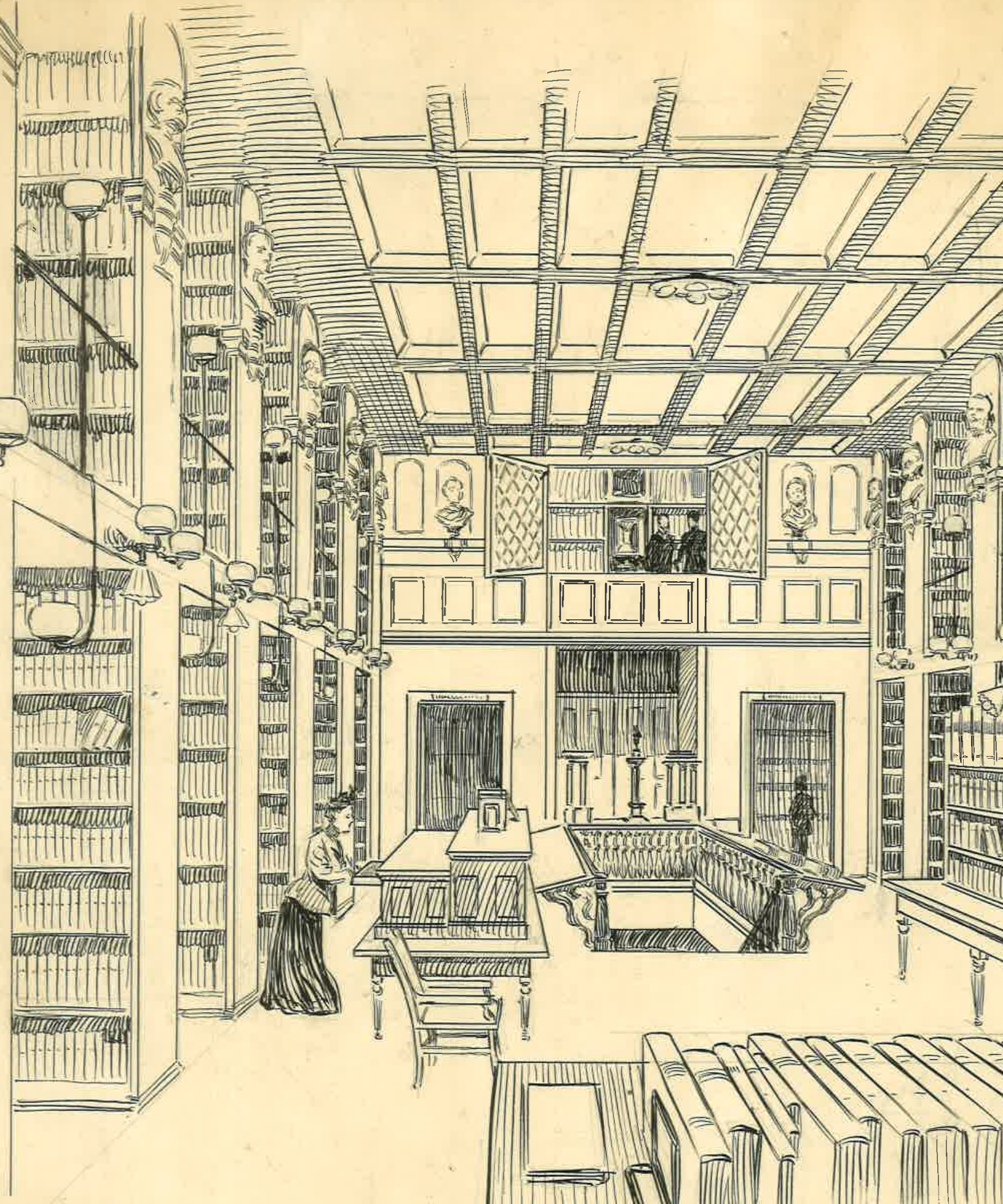
The Athenæum's beloved card catalog was introduced to the library in 1883, and the first cards were written by assistant librarian Mary Angell. In 1895, librarian Grace Leonard was hired to catalog the entire collection using the newly invented Dewey Decimal System (it took her 13 years!). She became the Athenæum's first female Head Librarian in 1911 and held the position for 30 years. This framed photograph shows the library as it looked in about 1907. Can you spot any differences to how it looks today?

If you look through the cards, you will see examples of Library Hand, a special style of handwriting taught in library schools. It was developed by Melvil Dewey and Thomas Edison to provide uniformity and legibility in card catalogs and was used until typewriters became widespread.

Staff still occasionally use the card catalog today to find books that have not been entered into our online catalog.

Make your way to the right-hand side of the Circulation Desk for
POINT 5.

—
Please feel free to open a drawer and flip through the cards. You may come across some in Mary's spindly cursive or Grace's library hand.



A SKETCH OF THE MAIN LEVEL BY FRANK E. DODGE FOR
A FEATURE STORY IN *THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL*, 1900

POINT 5

THE COLLECTION

Welcome to the Circulation Desk, the hub of all library activity here at the Athenæum and home to our librarians and library assistants. You can see what the desk looked like in 1941 in this photograph. The woman standing on the far right is Grace Leonard, whose handwriting you might have just discovered in the card catalog.

The Athenæum's 42nd Annual Report, published in 1877, included the following characteristics of the perfect librarian:

The Librarian and his assistant are supposed to have some acquaintance with all the books in the Library, they must inform themselves as to the sources of knowledge on all sorts of subjects... they stake their professional reputation on being able to direct the inquisitive mind not merely to a source of knowledge, but the very best source... there must be patience with dullness and imperturbable good nature with heedlessness and stupidity.

That's a high bar!

Although we are a historic institution, we are also a fully functioning modern library. Membership allows you to check out materials and includes many other benefits. The library now holds about 175,000 volumes, a collection which spans over eight centuries.

Visitors often ask what our oldest book is. The distinction goes to *De Studio Sapientiae*, a handwritten illuminated medieval manuscript that dates to about 1300. The library owns two illuminated manuscripts and eight *incunabula*.

Our newest book is likely being processed right now! The Athenæum is constantly acquiring new titles. You can find our most recent acquisitions on the stand-alone shelves opposite the card catalog.

*If you'd like to head upstairs to visit the mezzanine, please turn to page 33. If you'd prefer to continue your tour on the Main Level, find **POINT 6** by walking down the aisle to your right into the Arnold Room and looking for a photograph of a children's story hour on the end of an alcove.*

—
An *incunabulum* is an early book printed before 1501.



CHILDREN'S BOOK WEEK POSTER BY JESSIE WILLCOX SMITH, 1920

POINT 6

BUILDING ADDITIONS

The Athenæum has always welcomed children, and families have often maintained memberships for generations. In this 1928 photograph, local children enjoy a story hour exactly where you are standing.

Creating a dedicated space for children was a priority for the design of the library's two significant building expansions. You are currently in the first addition. Designed by Norman Morrison Isham in 1914, it was intended to reflect the style of William Strickland's original Greek Revival architecture.

Through the glass doors to your right lies the second large addition to the library. It was designed by renowned designer and architect Warren Platner in 1978 and is a continuation of the 1914 addition that brings the Athenæum flush up against the townhouses next door. This expansion now contains the Philbrick Rare Book Room on the lower level, the Children's Library here on the main floor, and staff offices above on the mezzanine.

*Turn around to find **POINT 7**, a framed Egyptian scene.*



PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM

POINT 7

THE RARE BOOK COLLECTION

This plate is from the *Description de l'Égypte*, one of the Athenæum's most interesting, most valuable, and largest books. It's a 25-volume set documenting Napoleon's 1798–99 expedition to Egypt and was acquired by the library in 1838 from the estate of a disgraced French nobleman.

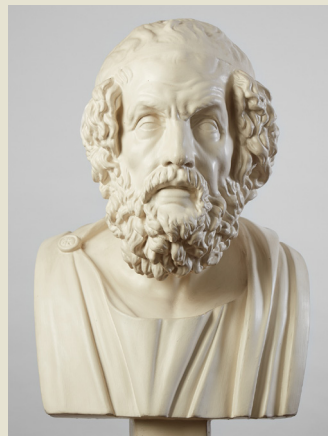
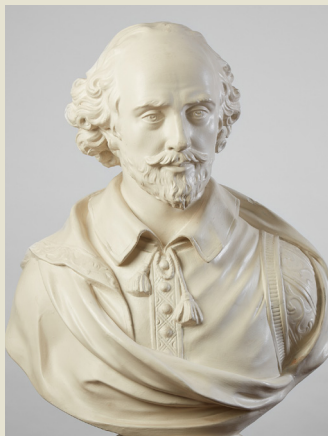
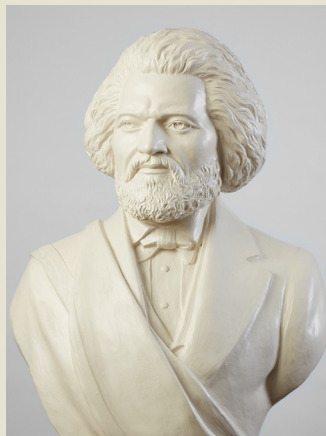
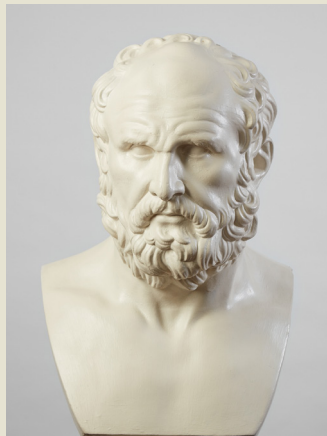
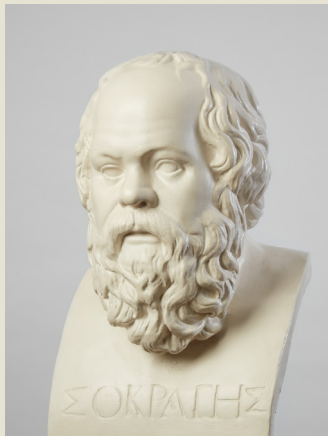
The majority of books now housed in the Philbrick Rare Book Room, like the *Description*, were purchased near or at the time of their publication for members and visitors to read. It's easy to imagine generations of armchair travelers visiting the Athenæum for a glimpse of ancient Egypt.

Along with travel and exploration works such as the *Description*, another subject strength of the Rare Book Collection is natural history. The framed plate depicting shells to the left of the Egyptian temple is from Albertus Seba's *Cabinet of Natural Curiosities*, an 18th-century apothecary's record of his extensive collections and one of the most prized natural history books of all time.

The Rare Book Room also houses large collections of literature and first editions, the works of Robert Burns, rare and beautiful bindings, the library archives, and a collection of early children's literature. This space is periodically opened for exhibitions and special events.

*If you'd like to visit the lower-level Reading Room, turn to page 37. If you prefer to continue your tour on the Main Level, walk back to the Main Hall's card catalog for **POINT 8**.*

— Many of the library's rare books and first editions are tattered and worn, as they were checked out and read many times!



POINT 8

MEZZANINE BUSTS

Look up! Surrounding the top of the library's mezzanine level are 16 niches holding "well-executed busts of illustrious personages, ancient and modern." These busts were gifts to the library, rather than commissions or purchases, so it is unlikely that the Athenæum played a role in selecting who was represented. Until recently, they were all men born before the 19th century.

That changed when a generous gift allowed the Athenæum to make a significant investment in pieces of art that strengthened the collection and spoke to the library's inclusive mission. The Athenæum commissioned Skylight Studios in Woburn, MA, to craft three new plaster busts to sit in the Main Hall. The figures selected were philosopher and proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass, and author and social reformer Louisa May Alcott. The new busts were installed on the mezzanine in 2020.

See if you can find these new faces among their fellows! Starting at the bust above and to the right of the Circulation Desk, you'll find Socrates, Demosthenes, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, William Ellery Channing, Louisa May Alcott, Frederick Douglass, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, Petrarch, and Homer.

*You might have spotted another bust, just above the front doors. Walk back to Athena where you started the tour to learn more about this famous author's time at the library, **POINT 9.***

—
Until recently, the bust now known to be a young Charles Dickens was thought to be poet John Keats.



A 1905 COPY OF POE'S DAGUERREOTYPE PORTRAIT,
TAKEN ON PROVIDENCE'S WESTMINSTER STREET IN 1848

POINT 9

EDGAR ALLAN POE

The Athenæum has welcomed many famous visitors over the years, including the writer Edgar Allan Poe, who has a special connection to our library. In the fall of 1848, Poe arrived in Providence to court Sarah Helen Whitman, a widowed poet who lived a few blocks away and a frequent Athenæum visitor.

Look above the front entrance of the library to see a plaster bust of Poe. This statue is a copy of a bronze bust sculpted by Edmond T. Quinn in 1908.

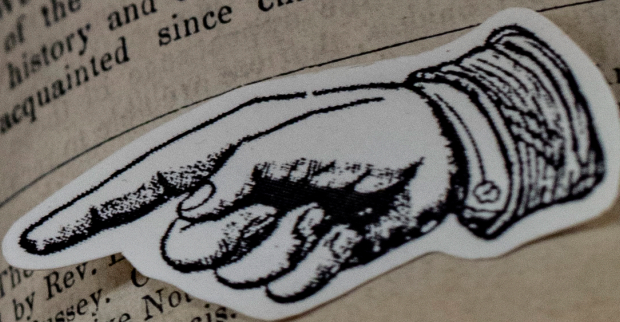
During their courtship, the couple spent time together in the library. During one visit, Whitman asked Poe about an interesting poem called “Ulalume,” recently published anonymously in the *American Whig Review* (December 1847). Poe revealed that he was the anonymous author and, as Whitman later recounted, “turning to a bound volume of the *Review* which was in the alcove where we were sitting, he wrote his name at the bottom.” Whitman discovered the book still on the shelf years later, and *American Whig Review* and its pencil signature remain in the library’s Special Collections. While we certainly don’t encourage visitors to write in our books, this bit of graffiti is now a treasured piece of Athenæum history.

Poe also checked out a book! On December 21, 1848, he borrowed *Stanley: Or, Recollections of A Man of the World*. Published anonymously, the novel was later attributed to Horace Binney Wallace. Poe used the account of Athenæum member Thomas Davis to borrow the volume, and his signature can still be seen in circulation records.

—
Poe returned the book he borrowed on time, and that exact volume is still in the Athenæum’s Special Collections.

Edgar A. Poe.

The Rev. C. M. Bussey,
 and Illustrative Nov.
 Boston: J. H. Francis



Despite significant resistance from her mother and friends, Poe doggedly pursued Whitman, offering her dreams of literary greatness. Overcoming her family's and her own reservations, Whitman finally agreed to marry him on the condition that Poe stop drinking alcohol.

On December 23, 1848, two days before their planned Christmas Day wedding, the couple was sitting in an Athenæum alcove when a messenger handed Whitman a note. It told her Poe had broken his promise of sobriety. Whitman called off the wedding, rushed back to her house, drenched her handkerchief in ether (an anesthetic drug), and attempted to lose herself in unconsciousness. Although Poe attempted to rouse her, she merely murmured "I love you" before fainting.

The two would never see each other again, as Poe left Providence that evening and died mysteriously in Baltimore ten months later. Whitman would live for almost 30 more years, spending many hours at the Athenæum. Despite their broken engagement, Whitman continued to be a devoted advocate for Poe's reputation and work both nationally and abroad.

Your tour around the library has now come to an end, but we have one more story to share before you go...



RICHMOND FOUNTAIN, C. 1950S

COME HITHER

When you leave the library, we recommend that you pause on the sidewalk in front of the Athenæum on Benefit Street. Here you will find the Richmond Fountain.

Built with funds donated by Athenæum neighbor Anna Eddy Richmond in 1873, this Gothic Revival granite and marble fountain was designed by the renowned Boston architectural firm of Ware & Van Brunt.

Installed at a time when fresh drinking water was scarce, the fountain was both beautiful and useful. The library's Board prepared a statement "to express to Mrs. Richmond their grateful appreciation of the generous liberality which has prompted her to bestow upon the Athenæum this costly and gratifying benefaction, not only for the adornment of these grounds, but also for the refreshment and comfort of the community."

Its curved inscription reads "Come Hither Every One That Thirsteth," and water flows from about April to October each year. A longtime legend claims that all those who drink from it are bound to always return to Providence. So whether you are compelled by fate or just enjoyed your visit, we hope you decide to return to the Athenæum soon!

—
The Richmond Fountain is likely the first public drinking fountain in Providence and possibly one of the very first constructed in the United States.



THE
MUSEUM
1896 THROUGH
INSTITUTIONS
LIBRARIES
EVIDENCE
3.
STRICKLAND
ON BENEFIT
OPENED TO
188.
187-1888

CIRCULATION DESK

THE END

We hope you enjoyed your adventure around the Athenæum! Feel free to continue to explore the building or find a seat to read a book.

For more information on the library's history, collections, and membership, just ask a staff member.

Visit us again soon!



OPTIONAL STOPS

THE MEZZANINE & READING ROOM



AN 1884 *TABLEAU VIVANT* CREATED BY AMY DORRANCE RICHMOND TAYLOR AS PAST, MARY HEPBURN PARSONS AS PRESENT, AND ANNA RICHMOND AS FUTURE

THE HOURS

Walk up either staircase to the mezzanine level, and make your way to the small painting in a glass-fronted cabinet above the Circulation Desk. Please use caution while on the narrow catwalk and view the painting one or two people at a time.

This exquisite work is *The Hours*, a watercolor miniature on ivory. It was painted in 1801 by renowned Newport artist Edward Malbone. The three female figures represent the Greek *horae*, goddesses that personify the passage of time.

In 1854, Eliza Patten, the teenage daughter of the Athenæum's Vice-President, ambitiously raised the funds to purchase the painting after overhearing her father despair of affording it for the library. She went door-to-door in Providence with the painting in hand, asking for donations until she raised the \$1,200 needed (a monumental sum if you consider that the entire building cost under \$19,000 16 years prior).

The Hours was a subject of *tableaux vivants*, or “living pictures,” in which people would dress up like famous scenes or works of art.

—
***The Hours* was stolen with several other paintings in 1881, but was quickly recovered after the library offered a \$200 reward and hired “a skillful detective” to trace its whereabouts.**



FOLIOS 797
B C

794 792
C F

Feel free to explore the remainder of the mezzanine from this point. If you see an available desk, you're welcome to open its drawers – you might find some secret notes from past visitors. If you do, please leave them where you found them for others to discover!

*When you're ready to rejoin the main tour, make your way down to the Main Level. Take a right turn at the Circulation Desk and walk down the aisle into the Arnold Room. Turn to page 17, and look for a photograph of a children's story hour on the end of an alcove for **POINT 6**.*



PORTRAIT OF GEORGE WASHINGTON, C.1830S

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Make your way back into the Main Hall and walk down the library's central staircase to find the largest piece of art in our collection at the bottom.

This handsome portrait of George Washington was the first piece of art acquired by the Athenæum. It is a copy of one of the most well-known 18th-century American paintings, a 1796 portrait of George Washington by Rhode Island-born artist Gilbert Stuart.

This copy was painted by an unnamed “accomplished Italian artist” and was given to the library in 1838 by Samuel Larned (1788–1846), a Providence merchant and the Chargé d’Affaires to Chile and Peru. He donated the portrait to celebrate the building’s opening, with the hope that its placement in the public halls of the library would encourage the virtuous and patriotic character of Providence’s youth.

Turn to your left and find the recessed door between bookshelves (look for the illuminated display cases flanking it). Please note the Philbrick Room is staff-only for security, but you can take a look through the glass.

—
The original painting, known as the Lansdowne portrait, is now in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.



A SELECTION OF EARLY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

THE PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM

The Philbrick Room is staff-only for security, but you can take a look through the glass. Please do not attempt to open the door.

Through this door lies the Philbrick Rare Book Room, where the Athenæum's Special Collections and Archives are kept. It is open for special exhibitions, and the materials inside are viewable for research appointments. The illuminated cases to your left and right often contain small exhibits showcasing items from the collection.

The library's treasures are stored in this space, including:

- The Athenæum's oldest book, an illuminated medieval manuscript dating to 1300
- The Founders Collection, 45 books saved from the Providence Library Company fire in 1758
- First editions of many important works, including:
 - The Raven and Other Poems* (1845), Edgar Allan Poe
 - Moby Dick* (1851), Herman Melville
 - Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau
 - My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Frederick Douglass
 - Little Women* (1868), Louisa May Alcott
- A very rare first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), purchased from a local bookseller for \$1.25 the year it was published
- Albertus Seba's handsomely illustrated four-volume *Cabinet of Natural Curiosities* (1734-1765)
- A gold mechanical pencil owned by Athenæum architect William Strickland

-
The smallest books in the collection are two miniature editions of Robert Burns' *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, each measuring about an inch tall!



HAND-PAINTED DETAILS ON THE ATHENÆUM'S EGYPTIAN CABINET

You might be wondering about the large Egyptian-style cabinet in the center of the room...

The most unique piece of furniture in the library's collection, the Egyptian cabinet was built between 1838–1840 and was designed to house *Description de l'Égypte*, a 25-volume set of books documenting Napoleon's 1798–99 expedition to Egypt.

The Athenæum purchased its copy of the *Description* in 1838 from the estate of a dishonored French statesman for about \$500, an enormous sum at the time. The set is massive; its largest volume is a double elephant folio, measuring an astounding 29.5" x 43.5". Books this large cannot fit on standard library shelves, so the library commissioned this special cabinet to store the set.

The cabinet was designed by Athenæum member John Russell Bartlett and English architect Frederick Catherwood to evoke an Egyptian temple, with exterior decoration based on illustrated plates in the *Description*. The short sides of the cabinet open to reveal deep drawers in which the volumes could safely lay flat.

When you're ready to rejoin the main tour, head back up the stairs. Stand in front of the card catalog, turn to page 21, and look up for

POINT 8.

