

# Museum & Planetarium

## Franklin County, Vermont

Imagine your house filled with natural science and art collections so numerous that you open it to the community every Sunday for public showings, naming it the “Cabinet of Curiosities.” This was exactly what Franklin Fairbanks did in the 1880’s. By 1889 his collection became so large that it no longer fit in his home and he commissioned Architect Lambert Packard to build the Fairbanks Museum.

The Fairbanks Museum was completed in 1891, making it the first natural history museum in northern New England. The Museum was built with red sandstone in the Victorian style, featuring arched windows and a prominent tower in the middle of the building. On the interior, the museum boasts arched ceilings and a grand staircase.



The museum’s founder, Franklin Fairbanks, was the son of Erastus Fairbanks, co-founder of the E. & T. Fairbanks and Company. Franklin’s uncle and co-founder of the E. & T. Fairbanks and Company, Thaddeus Fairbanks, invented the first commercial platform scale. The platform scale allowed freight to be weighed without first removing it from the vehicle or container in which it was shipped. This convenient and time-saving invention made the Fairbanks family quite wealthy.

Following in his father and uncle’s footsteps, Franklin was involved with and worked at his family’s company throughout his lifetime, and became president of the E. & T. Fairbanks Scale Manufacturing Company in 1888. However, from a young age, he was interested in the natural sciences and spent his childhood collecting rocks and minerals. He also began collecting works of art from across the world, as well as local items with historic interest.

Today, the collections at the Fairbanks Museums include approximately 175,000 items. There are 75,000 natural science objects including taxidermy birds, mammals, reptiles and fish; mounted insects; nests and eggs; shells; fossils; rocks and minerals and an herbarium. There are also 95,000 historical artifacts including tools, toys, dolls, textiles, weapons, and archival photographs and documents. Lastly, the museum houses 5,000 ethnological objects from the Near East, Oceania, Africa, Egypt, Japan and native North America.

Franklin’s interest in the natural sciences also prompted him to keep detailed weather records. Shortly after the museum opened its doors, he began working to set up an observation station at the Fairbanks Museum. He also shared his weather records with the National Weather Service. Local weather forecasts began being broadcast in the late 1940s. The Lyman Spitzer Jr. Planetarium opened in 1961 as Vermont’s only public planetarium. Then, in 1981, meteorologists began producing *Eye on the Sky* daily weather segments that were broadcast on Vermont Public Radio. The *Eye on the Sky* segments remain popular today. The Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008.



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