

St. Johnsbury Athenaeum

Town of St. Johnsbury, Caledonia County, Vermont



The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum was commissioned by Horace Fairbanks as a public library for the people of St. Johnsbury, Vermont in 1871. Fairbanks was a politician, serving one term in the Vermont State Senate and two terms as the Governor of Vermont, as well as the nephew of Thaddeus Fairbanks, the inventor of the platform scale and co-founder of the prominent E. & T. Fairbanks and Company, and older brother of Franklin Fairbanks, the founder of the Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium.

Horace Fairbanks secured New York architect John Davis Hatch III to design the Athenaeum in a French Second Empire style, which was one of the first examples of this specific architecture incorporated into a public building. Notable design features of the Athenaeum include a mansard roof, tall windows, intricate woodwork, spiral staircases and wooden floors with alternating strips of ash and walnut. Ground was broken for the Athenaeum in May of 1868, with the grand opening occurring in November 1871.

The Athenaeum's library collection originally numbered 8,000 finely bound volumes that were selected with the advice of the notable bibliographer, W.F. Poole. Such care was given to filling the shelves of the newly constructed library that the books were placed over the summer of 1870, and were then cataloged the following year. Many of the original books covered topics in natural history, biography and history. Today, the library collection consists of approximately 45,000 volumes.

An art gallery was added onto the main building in 1873, and was filled with classical paintings that Horace Fairbanks had acquired during a trip to Europe, as well as contemporary American painters, including a variety of artists from the renowned Hudson River School of painting. The Hudson River School collection of paintings included works of art from Asher B. Durand (the father of the American Landscape painting), Joseph Cropsey, Sanford Gifford, James and William Hart, Samuel Colman, Worthington Whittredge and others.

The 19th century American painting collection at the Athenaeum is particularly unique. A large number of the paintings were commissioned, or were purchased directly from the artist, somewhat of a rarity in those days. Many of these paintings have remained within the walls of the Athenaeum since they were purchased, several being purchased between the years of 1859-1875. In fact, the art gallery remains displayed as it was in 1891. In 1965, Time magazine considered the art gallery at the Athenaeum to be "the United States' oldest unaltered art gallery still standing."

In its early days, the combination of library and art gallery made the Athenaeum a true center of public learning. The commitment to preserving the Athenaeum's unique and unaltered features and history now provides to its visitors a trip back in time. Today, the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum is listed as a National Historic Landmark, one of only ten libraries in the country to be designated as such and the only National Historic Landmark in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

Sources:

National Register of Historic Places. St. Johnsbury Athenaeum. Town of St. Johnsbury. Caledonia County. Vermont. National Register #96000970. <<http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/96000970.pdf>>

"The Athenaeum at a Glance." *General Information: Who We Are*. St. Johnsbury Athenaeum- Public Library & Art Gallery. Web. Accessed 18 March 2013. <http://www.stjathenaeum.org/docs/stj_at_a_glance.pdf>