Form 10-300 (Rev. 6-72) UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

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	New Hampshire
	COUNTY:
	Rockingham
	FOR NPS USE ONLY

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The Portsmouth Athenaeum is a narrow and tall building of three main stories, but with a mezzanine story, intermediate between the first and second floors, in the stairwell at the The first-floor main room has a curved rear wall and is finished with wainscoting and an elaborate Federal-style cornice executed by the local builder-architect James Nutter (1775-1855) Behind this main room is a small former office with its original vault. The second full floor above the mezzanine story is a library, but was originally a Masonic lodgeroom. floor, originally a storage area, had its central portion removed in 1861 to create a gallery. From the exterior, the Athenaeum was originally the focal point of a unified architectural composition. The lower flanking buildings shared marble stringcourses with the Athenauem, and the cornices of the two flanking buildings swept upward to the elaborate Athenaeum cornice, drawing the eye to this central building. The Athenaeum's facade has arched window and goor openings, with web-like tracery, on the first story. At the second floor level (corresponding to the third floor level on the lower adjoining buildings) is a marble plinth that serves as a base for four wooden pilasters of the composite order that support the main cornice, 43 feet above the sidewalk. The facade is embellished with round and oval carved wooden paterae, executed, like the pilaster capitals, by local carver William Dearing (1759-1813). The facade derives its design from that of the 1799 Peirce Yansion in Portsmouth.

The present appearance of the Athenageum is close to its appearance when it was completed in 1805 Vas the office of the New Hampshire Fire and Marine Insurance Company. The three major changes that have occurred to the facade are the construction of the present pitched slate roof in 1826, the replacement of the original doors of the building, and the removal of the upward-sweeping cornice from the western adjoining building. The interior appearance is also largely unchanged, except for the removal of western fireplaces on the first and second floors in 1893, remodelling of the reading room fireplace in the same year, alterations to the stairway in 1823, and the alteration of the third. floor into a gallery in 1861. Criginally, the exterior appearance of the Athenaeum, as well as of the adjoining buildings, was rendered quite different by the fact that all these structures had nearly flat reofs covered with "composition" or pitch and gravel revolutionary innovation for the period. The revolution of the Athenauem thus ended at its cornice, which was sampling by a lattace balustrade. The chimneys were, of course that time, and the entire row of buildings had a more uniform appearance. NATIONAL

Form 10-300a (July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Continuation Sheet)

STATE	
New Hampshire	
COUNTY	
Rockingham	
FOR NPS USE ONL	Y
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE
MAY 2 4 18	3

Code:

33

(Number all entries)

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS continued Title of Survey:

An Inventory of Historic Structures, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Date of Survey: 1972 Federal State County xLocal

Depository for Survey Records: Community Improvement Program Portsmouth Planning Department

Street and Number:

City Hall

126 Daniel Street

City or Town: State:

Portsmouth New Hampshire 03301



Pre-Columbian	☐ 16th Century	18th Century	20th Century
15th Century	☐ 17th Century	19th Century	,
PECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicat	ole and Known) 1804		
REAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Ch	eck One or More as Appropri	ate)	
Abor iginal	🔀 Education	☐ Political	Urban Planning
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Conservation	Music	☐ Transportation	Laisin

The Portsmouth Athenaeum, originally an insurance office, is one of the best-preserved Federal period commercial structures in New England, and is likewise one of the bestdesigned. The building is completely documented, not only with regard to its criginal construction, but also with respect to every major change to its fabric up to the present Long attributed to the Boston architect Charles Bulfinch, the Athenaeum is now known to have been designed by the gifted local builder-architect Brachury Johnson 1766-1820), who also worked on or designed such important northern New England structures as the Philips Exeter Academy building (1794), the Portsmouth Market Youse (1800), and the Pepperrellborough (Saco, Maine) First Parish Meeting House Portsmouth's best craftsmen were employed on the (1803).Athenaeum, and the fact that their work can be completely documented has permitted a great extension of knowledge concerning their styles and skills. The Athenaeum is particularly interesting in retaining its original flat "composition" roof under the present high pitched roof-one of very few surviving flat roofs from such an early date. Athenaeum is not only a critical building in itself, but is the most important element in a unified crouping of seven other structures whose facades extend for 234 feet along Congress and Market Streets. Commerce

The Athenaeum is commercially significant in two ways: as a key example of early business architecture, and as the original ome and present repository of the records of the New Hampshire Fire and Larine Insurance Company. As an example of commercial architecture, the building is not only important in its own right but also because the interrelated neighboring structure on the west was the original home of the Portsmouth Bank, an institution founded in 1803 specifically to manage the finances of the Insurance Company. The vault of the Portsmouth Bank building projects into the first floor of the Athenaeum building. The two structures together form an especially important commercial grouping.

The New Tampshire Fire and Parine Insurance Company, in active existence from 1803 until 1823, was one of the most

(Continued on Continuation Sheet 2)

9.	9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES														
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	Nathaniel Adams, Annals of Portsmouth (Exeter, N.H.:182											323).			
	Lawrence Craig and James L. Garvin, <u>listory or Portsmouth Athenaeum</u> (Portsmouth, N.!.: 1966).										y O± C	ne.			
	Gerald D. Foss, Three Centuries									ries	of F	reemaso	onry i	n New	
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	James L. Garvin, "Portsmouth and the Piscataqua: Soc History and Material Culture," Historical New Mampshire,											re.			
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Form 10-300a (July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Continuation Sheet) 2

STATE	
New Hampshire	
COUNTY	
Rockingham	
FOR NPS USE ON	_Y
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE
MAY 24	1973

(Number all entries) 8. SIGNIFICANCE

Statement of Significance important underwriting agencies in northern New England during its early existence. Its records are an invaluable primary resource for the study of the commercial istory of this area and of the early Republic in general.

Education

From 1813 until the incorporation of the Athenaeum in 1817, Portsmouth had no public or semi-public library. After the incorporation of the Athenaeum, this institution possessed the only large opening of the Portsmouth Public Library in 1881. Thus, the Athenaeum had a powerful effect on the educational development and literary enrichment of Portsmouth as that town's major cultural institution during a large part of the nineteenth century.

In the years following its incorporation in 1817, the Athenaeum has acquired a substantial number of important paintings which are displayed in this building. These include a full-length portrait of Sir Feter Marren by John Smibert portraits by Samuel F.B. Morse and Joseph Greenleaf Cole, several marine paintings, and numerous engravings and mezzotints.

The Athenaeum possesses one of the finest collections in existence of models, maintings, and drawings of ships that were built in the Discataqua area. Included among these are many half-hull lift models and the famous admiralty model of the 44-gun ship America, built for the Royal Navy in 1749 by Nathaniel Meserve of Portsmouth. This collection constitutes an unique record of the contribution of the Piscataqua region to eighteenth and nineteenth century maritime transportation. Urban Planning

The Portsmouth Athenaeum is a key component of a unified arc'itectural grouping that was Inad out at the focal point of Portsmouth after a devastating fire in 1802. As such, the Athenaeum is a particularly important example of early nineteenth contury urban planning at its best, and represents the desire of the loading citizens of portsmouth to erect "handsome Brick Buildings" after the fire "ad made the town's first comprehensive redevelopment plan feasible.

Social/Tumanitarian

Between 1805 and 1820, the upper floors of the Athenaeum were rented for use as a Masonic lodgeroom by various lodges. These included St. John's Lodge 1900 1; Pythagoras Lodge, No. 33; Washington Royal Arch C apter 100 and the Grand Lodge of New Tampshire.

Form 10-300a (July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Continuation Sheet) 3

STATE	
New Hampshire	
COUNTY	
Rockingham	
FOR NPS USE ONL	ΥΥ
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE
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MAJCR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES (Continued) 9.

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