

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

ST. JOHNSBURY ATHENAEUM

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: ST. JOHNSBURY ATHENAEUM

Other Name/Site Number: None

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 30 Main Street

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: St. Johnsbury

Vicinity: N/A

State: VT

County: Caledonia

Code: 005

Zip Code: 05819-2289

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
1
1

Noncontributing
buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1
(Contributing Building in St. Johnsbury Main Street Historic District)

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this _____ nomination _____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ____ Entered in the National Register _____
- ____ Determined eligible for the National Register _____
- ____ Determined not eligible for the National Register _____
- ____ Removed from the National Register _____
- ____ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic:	EDUCATION RECREATION & CULTURE	Sub:	LIBRARY MUSEUM
Current:	EDUCATION RECREATION & CULTURE	Sub:	LIBRARY MUSEUM

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late Victorian: Second Empire

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Granite
Walls: Brick
Roof: Slate, Rubber
Other:

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, is one of two known extant structures designed by John Davis Hatch III (1826-1875). The Athenaeum's Library and Art Gallery, two joined timber and masonry buildings, are little changed in their interiors and there are no external additions except for a single-story Children's Library constructed in 1924. The Athenaeum has 33 original large-scale drawings by Hatch, ranging from elevations to details of roof and cornice.

The following description is based on a 1992 report prepared by John I. Mesick:

I. OVERALL DESCRIPTION

The Athenaeum's Library structure (1871) consists of two stories above a full basement, with a foundation of rubble stone, and walls of rock-faced granite laid as ashlar and brick over a timber frame. There are entrances at the east elevation (front) and north side. The roof is mansard with dormer windows set above the second story into slate-clad flanks.

The front elevation, facing east, extends 47 feet on Main Street. The side elevations of the Library extend 95 feet westward. The building is flanked on the south by the United States Post Office and on the north by the municipal building.

The Art Gallery (1873) extends another 50 feet westward, and is attached to the northwest portion of the Library. Its west elevation is 25 feet wide, and the Gallery room, shaped in a cross, is 37 feet wide across the two bays. Overall construction is similar to that of the library, without the dormer windows over its single tall story.

The single-story 1924 addition, now serving as the stack room for adult non-fiction books, is attached to the Library at the southwest corner. It has a poured concrete foundation, with walls as above, but is topped by a flat roof with no cornice or other ornamentation above the windows. The 1924 addition is 30 feet wide and extends 35 feet to the west (see "First Floor Plan").

The building is situated at the top and center of a "T", looking down Eastern Avenue toward the commercial district, railroad, and Passumpsic River. The top of the "T" is the center of the Main Street Historic Design District (National Register). From the front of the Reading Room, one can see the Larkin Mead Civil War monument (1868) across Main Street, in Courthouse Park. The Athenaeum is located at a slight bend of Main Street, affording views from the front of the Reading Room up and down the town's primary thoroughfare of the late nineteenth-century.

Today the lawns on each side are occupied by public buildings and there is a fenced-in lawn some 30 feet deep behind the building. The Athenaeum still commands Main Street, however, and is the focal point of St. Johnsbury's townscape.

II. LIBRARY BUILDING

First Floor

The first approach from Main Street is reached by a flight of nine steps 5 feet high. The original massive oak doors are stored in the building, and have been replaced by aluminum and glass, which is also the case for two more sets of doors flanking the entryway before the first large public room, the Reading Room. The vestibule floor is of Minton tile in *fleur-de-lis* pattern, which is in need of restoration. Patrons then enter a foyer at the foot of the grand stairway located to the left, with the Reading Room ahead, a staff space through a tall door located to the right, and a reading alcove also on the left, wrapping under the stairway.

The Reading Room is 22 feet deep and runs across the 40 foot width of the building. Behind that room, on the south side of the Library, is the Book Room, 25 feet wide and extending west 45 feet to the back wall of the 1871 building. On the north side of the Library proceeding from the Reading Room are first, the Reference Room (15 feet wide and 20 feet deep), and behind that, at the northwest corner, the Librarian's office (15 feet wide x 12 feet deep) and the back stair. Ceiling height throughout the 1871 Library is 16 feet. The Librarian's office has a ceiling height of only 8 feet, as above it there is an original mezzanine, now used for the storage of magazines and for curatorial work space.

In general, the interior detail in all of the entrance areas and rooms survives well. The trim and wainscot are of naturally finished ash. The balcony added to the Reference Room in 1882 is of white ash, with its floor of narrow strips of maple and walnut. The balcony, circular stair and upper bookcases added to the Book Room in 1892 are of walnut. Hardwood floors, now covered with carpet or resilient tile, are of alternating light and dark woods (walnut and ash or maple). The reading tables for patrons and the periodical table, are original. Some tables bear the circular mark in the center as evidence of a gas fixture. The oak library chairs are not original. In the Reading Room also stands the town's oldest clock, an English tall clock c. 1780.

John Mesick noted in 1992 that "better than two-thirds of the original furniture and fitments are still in use," and that "the spaces of the original library retain a fine sense of their nineteenth century ambience."¹

The two chandeliers in the Reading Room are original, converted to electricity in 1901 when it replaced gas as the source of illumination. Elsewhere throughout the first floor, with the exception of the formal stairway, lighting now consists of ceiling-mounted fluorescent fixtures or incandescent bulb fixtures. Some side-projecting gas fixtures are stored in the basement and could be duplicated and electrified.

Downstairs windows received metal-framed combination storm windows in 1966, but the sash-cord suspensions, interior wood frames, and complete interior louvered wooden shutters are in place and in use.

Above the wainscot the walls are painted a light beige. The plaster moldings in the Reading Room are painted in light and dark green bands, duplicating paint samples taken from the walls. The Book Room has a plaster cornice, painted in the same light beige. Scattered throughout these first-floor rooms are some 31 paintings, photographs and busts.

Monumental Stairway

¹ Mesick, John I., "Architectural Assessment," July 28-29, 1992, typescript at the Athenaeum, p. 44.

The front stairway was originally lit by large windows facing all four directions in a tower above the roofline. With the 16 foot height of the first story, and another 21 feet at the second story, the shafts of light down the stair must have been impressive. In the 1960s the light shaft was capped at the top of the stair and a fluorescent lighting fixture installed.

The electrified gas fixture at the foot of the stair, mounted on the lowermost stair post, is 6 feet high and is surmounted by four cut-glass globes. The treads are 57 inches wide and are carpeted with high-quality wool. The stairway hugs the wall on its right in ascent, with the rail on the left. There are 14 steps to the first landing, four more to the second, and 11 in the last flight as the stair arrives at the second floor. The walls are painted Tuscan Red. There are usually four to six paintings hung on the walls.²

Second Floor

The original use of the second floor, until the mid-1960s, was as a meeting and lecture hall, seating 275 persons. "Athenaeum Hall," as it was called, occupied a 40 foot x 60 foot area, with a stage and access corridor at the western end. Ten-foot pocket doors with bulls-eye windows, still in place, are at the entrance to the hall. The original ceiling is 21 feet high. The lobby's ceiling was lowered in 1962, but the large east central window and the niches for sculpture are still present. In 1966 the hall underwent several changes, fortunately not permanent in nature, when the children's library was moved there from its original site in the 1924 addition (see below). A dropped ceiling of 8 feet 6 inches and fluorescent lighting were installed. The upper arches of the north and south windows were filled with insulating material, now visible from the exterior, and the lower halves of these windows are now aluminum sash and storm.

The original gasoliers hang on the central axis in the more than 12 feet of space above the dropped ceiling. The geometric painted border pattern on the ceiling and tops of walls is also intact. John Mesick noted in 1992 that an elaborate cast metal grille survives above each gasolier fixture, connected by ductwork to rooftop ventilators now removed. Smaller grilles in the baseboards may have introduced fresh air. There are also smaller ducts in the upper portions of the exterior walls.³

² While the present effect is both gracious and colorful, restoration of the tall source of light, perhaps supplemented by period fixtures, would provide an even grander sense.

³ Mesick, John I., "Architectural Assessment," pp. 47-48. As Mesick stated, "In all likelihood, a new HVAC system can incorporate the surviving features (i.e., ducts in the exterior masonry walls, and various metal grilles) of the original natural ventilation system."

Basement

There is little of historic fabric here. The western half of the Library building has a poured concrete floor. The eastern half of this building, as well as the space under the adjoined Gallery, have dirt floors. The 1924 addition has a half-basement of poured concrete with the other half as unexcavated crawl space. Leading from the excavated space under the Art Gallery to the parking area on the north is a wood-framed bulkhead for trash removal.

The basement, which was made fire-safe in 1995, is the location of the heating plant and is used for storage of janitorial supplies and tools, architectural elements (e.g., the original sets of front doors, and extra pieces of the cornice never attached), back issues of periodicals, extra chairs, and interior shutters.⁴

Gallery

The 1873 Art Gallery consists of a relatively narrow entrance area (14 feet 2 inches wide) from the library under the 1892 balcony (88 inches above the floor), then a sudden opening to the full 37 foot width and 40 foot depth with the very large Bierstadt painting of the Domes of the Yosemite filling the back (west) wall. In the center of the room, the skylight is 40 feet above the floor, giving the impression of a cube filled with diffused light rather than a narrower gallery.

Suspended from the ceiling, 15 feet above the floor, is the original frame for gas lighting, now hung with incandescent spotlights. While some modern insulating material has been installed, the Gallery is remarkable for its decorative and architectural integrity. Original walnut floors and butternut, glass-front bookcases and counter tops are in fine condition.

Some 55 works of painting and sculpture are displayed in salon fashion, now hung according to a set of 1891 photographs. There are no humidity or temperature controls; indeed the room presents more conservation challenges than restoration needs. The walls were last painted in 1949 in a deep mauve, with dark green and dull gold trim, again repeating the original color scheme.

Hot water radiators were formerly covered with granite tops and decorative metal sides. They are now uncovered but the covers can be reconstructed from photographic evidence.

⁴ Architect Mesick has urged further study of the space for future library work rooms, curatorial space, and even relocation of the children's library (to allow restoration of the second-story hall). The only alteration to the basement is construction of wooden walls to partition off restrooms and storage areas.

1924 Addition

This single-story structure has a ceiling of 10 feet 7 inches, trim and baseboards of fir, and floor covering of masonite sheets. It is densely packed with books, both on shelves lining three of the walls and in metal stacks in the center of the room.⁵

The best historic features in the 1924 addition are the two facing murals of *Heidi* and *Hans Brinker*, painted on canvas in 1934 by Marjorie Lang [Hamilton] under the arts program of the federal Works Project Administration. Ms. Hamilton, a student at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, was accompanied by John Davis Hatch V, the regional federal arts administrator. Hatch did not know until he arrived in St. Johnsbury that the building's architect was his grandfather.⁶

Exteriors

During the three construction periods of 1868-71, 1872-73, and 1924, rubble stone foundations were constructed below grade in the library and art gallery; and a poured concrete foundation was built under the 1924 addition. In all three sections, the exterior walls to the elevated first-floor level are veneered in rock-faced granite laid as coursed ashlar. Above the first floor line, the walls are brick. Each of the three sections has distinctive mortar with different mortar and colors of the joints.⁷

On the front elevation, the granite cheek walls flanking the steps show some dislocation and subsidence. Careful masonry repair is also needed on the five chimneys over the library, especially on the chimney caps.

All three external balconies have been removed, the eastern one last, in 1956. Also missing are the crestings and finials on the tower, the flagpole and eagle visible at the turn of the century, and ventilation caps on the roof over the lecture hall.

The original system of gutters and leaders on the north and south sides has long since disappeared, leading to much deterioration at different points of the cornice.⁸

⁵ In the future, according to the long-range plan, it is intended to use the space as a site for a modern, four-story addition to enclose an elevator, contemporary electronic equipment, and a relocated children's room, thereby preserving the 1871 structure and freeing up the second-floor space for restoration as a lecture and concert hall. The Athenaeum will make changes in this room to accommodate persons with physical handicaps. The steep stair to the building's only public restroom will be covered over, and a modern restroom conforming to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards will be installed on the main level.

⁶ Letter, J.D. Hatch V, Santa Fe NM, to Gael Stein, Librarian, St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, 28 January 1991.

⁷ Sand-blasting in 1961 did not damage the granite, but has exposed mortared joints and has left the brick more porous. Repair and restoration have been minimal, leaving the way open to careful masonry conservation practice for the joints.

⁸ The Athenaeum received funding in August 1994, from the State Preservation Office, a Vermont foundation, and local donors and will repaired the cornice and surrounding flashings and slates this year (1996).

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Other changes to the exterior woodwork are limited to the removal of the front wooden doors, still stored on the premises, and replacement of the lower half of the second-story windows with aluminum sash and storm.

The roof sections of the 1871 building had, by 1988, been covered by an EDPM (rubber membrane). Originally there was a skylight over the entrance alcove of the Art Gallery, probably designed by the architect. Chronic leaks required this skylight to be covered over during the era of roof repairs in the 1980s. The nearly-flat roof over the 1924 addition, of much deteriorated asphalt and gravel, was replaced during Fall 1994 with an EDPM covering as part of the August 1994 preservation funding. Missing elements on the cornice and the gutter system are well detailed in the set of original drawings and are even represented by original pieces never installed.

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Athenaeum's construction (1868-1873), its collection of American landscape paintings and serious books, its original role as a public library and free art gallery for a northern New England town of fewer than 5,000 people, and the industrial origins of the fortune that provided it, all contribute to the national significance of the building.

The combination library-art gallery is an authentic period piece serving the town as a cultural center where books, magazines, newspapers, and video and audio tapes combine with an art gallery of more than 100 paintings and sculptures. The art collection has a number of Hudson River School paintings, most of which were purchased directly from the artists and are completely documented in the library archives. This unaltered building retains a strong, elegant Victorian flavor of the nineteenth century. The art collection itself, now hung as in 1891, is considered the nation's oldest art gallery in its original condition.

Almost 125 years later, the building and its functions in the town are virtually unchanged. Indeed, the town has grown only to a population of 7,604 (1990 census), thus allowing the Athenaeum to maintain its role of making accessible to all residents great books, general knowledge, and the chance to appreciate great art. The Athenaeum has added only one major function since 1871: a separate children's library, first located in the 1924 addition and now located on the second story of the main building, in the former lecture hall.¹ Relatively unchanged is the late nineteenth-century tradition of coming to the Athenaeum for lectures, musical performances and poetry readings.

Unlike the neighborhoods of many urban libraries of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Athenaeum's townscape has changed little since its opening. Main Street is a district listed on the National Register, with the great majority of buildings erected 1850-1890. St. Johnsbury remains somewhat isolated from the more populous southern half of New England. The town is still a county seat although no longer served by a railroad. The population of the entire county is little changed from 1830; however, the town itself is 15% smaller than its previous highest level of population in 1940.

The Architect and the Building

Architect John Davis Hatch III had previous experience in building with timber and stone. In 1868, he completed the enormous 99-room house, "Greystone," in Yonkers, New York, for the hat manufacturer John T. Waring at a cost of \$225,000. The walls of "Greystone" were of coursed granite left rough-hewn. There was a mansard roof with cornice above the second story and a four-story tower with cresting and finials over the grand entrance, which would be repeated on a less lofty scale in the Athenaeum.² "Greystone" was razed in the 1950s.

Hatch had broken ground for the Athenaeum by May of 1868, and by July 31st, with some twenty hands at work, the 90-foot side walls were, according to *The Caledonian* newspaper, "half way up the windows of the first story." The newspaper also noted the use of 70,000

¹ In 1871 no American library provided facilities for children. The first such reading room in a public library was in Brookline, MA in 1890. C.H. Cramer, *Open Shelves and Open Minds*, 1972, quoted in Paul Dickson, *The Library in America*, New York, 1986, p. 36. There is a portrait of the Athenaeum's children's room about 1940 in Dickson, p. 92.

² Rebic, Michael P., *Landmarks Lost and Found: An Introduction to the Architecture and History of Yonkers*, np, nd (but after 1983), p. 98.

bricks in the basement, and that "the outside course of brick is being laid in black mortar—something never before done here." Although the flag pole was in place atop the tower by November 1868, construction was interrupted during the height of winter, and the building was not described as "new and elegant" until July 16, 1869. A year later, on July 15, 1870, the *Caledonian* could report that the Athenaeum "is being completed the present season. Workmen are now painting the outside and putting on the finishing touches... it is ...probably the most expensive private building in the state." By late October 1870, the building was "brilliantly illuminated" by gaslight.³

During this long period of gestation for the Athenaeum—the dedication was not to take place until November 27, 1871—Hatch had spoken on behalf of "building with timbers and filling in with brick," at the third annual convention of the American Institute of Architects in New York City on November 17, 1869.⁴

The mansard roof was also coming into vogue at this time. The first two secular buildings designed by H.H. Richardson, in 1867 in Springfield, Massachusetts, had mansard roofs and the mansard roof was a subject of discussion at the same 1869 AIA meeting. A contemporary of the Athenaeum is College Hall (1868-72) of the Vermont College campus in Montpelier, Vermont. Built as the Vermont Methodist Seminary atop one of Montpelier's taller hills, the three-story structure has a mansard roof repeated in the central tower.⁵ The mansard roof enjoyed great popularity across the country in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Hatch's use of tall arches to indicate the presence of a large public room on the second floor, as well as to admit light, predates by ten years the Brooklyn Society's building (NHL), formerly Long Island Historical Society, in New York.

A second distinguishing feature of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum is the advanced ventilation system. Although now temporarily covered over by interior insulation, there are open grilles about the base and top of the central skylight. Each of the skylight units has a monitor top, and there are four venting towers still prominent on the roof of the art gallery.⁶ Steam heat in the Gallery was conserved by marble-topped double radiator units. Similarly, there was an elaborate ventilation system for the large lecture hall, both for intake of air and for ventilation of the three gasoliers.

The architect for this building remains somewhat of a mystery. John Davis Hatch III was born in 1826. His early training is still unknown. At the time of his marriage in Charlestown, Massachusetts, on May 16, 1873, at age 45, he described himself as an

³ *The Caledonian*, copies at the Athenaeum, 15 May and 31 July 1868, 16 July 1869, and 15 July 1870. The newspaper had evidently seen plans, noting on 12 June, 1868, the 46 foot x 90 foot overall dimensions, the extent of stone work above ground, the deep basement and the "Mansard roof with tower in front."

⁴ Archives of the AIA, mss "Proceedings," Washington, D.C.; Rebic, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁵ Paul A. Bruhn, ed., *A Celebration of Vermont's Historic Architecture*, Windsor, VT, 1983, pp. 62-63; Bruhn, ed., *Vermont's Historic Architecture. A Second Celebration*, Windsor, VT, 1985, pp. 38-39.

⁶ It is not yet clear how these elements worked together or how ventilation was controlled, but any new environmental system could make use of Hatch's original components.

architect.⁷

By 1857 Hatch was among eleven architects voted membership in the new American Institute of Architects at the close of the first meeting of the 13 founding trustees. Tony Wrenn, the AIA archivist, considers Hatch an AIA member "from the beginning," although Hatch did not appear in the minutes of meetings until the first convention of 1867. A vocal member of the Committee on Education in 1869, he was subsequently elected a member of the Board, and in 1870 became a "Fellow." By September 1872, however, Hatch had not paid his annual dues and was dropped from membership.⁸

Between 1864 and 1875, Hatch maintained architectural offices in New York City.⁹ By 1875, Hatch had joined Richard W. Buckley and Clarence W. Smith in practice at 229 Broadway. John Davis Hatch V, the architect's grandson, cites family oral tradition that Hatch committed suicide in 1875 in Charleston, Massachusetts.¹⁰

Hatch had an abbreviated career, and left only two completed buildings, of which the Athenaeum alone survives. He was among the earliest American architects to apply Second-Empire principles to a public building.

The Collection

The Art Gallery's collection, and many of the paintings hung elsewhere in the building, reflect the collecting principles of the donor and builder of the Athenaeum, the scale manufacturer Horace Fairbanks (1820-1888). His taste clearly ran to American landscape painting. The period of his most important purchases (c. 1871-1876) found Hudson River paintings still popular and available but no longer commanding high prices. The first catalog of the Gallery, printed in 1875, lists 25 works. The next catalog, in 1890, was printed two years after Fairbanks' death and lists 40 original paintings, seven copies, two statues, a mosaic, and seven bronzes. Most of these were acquired in the early 1870s, suggesting that Fairbanks consciously bought for public display in the gallery destined for the town of St. Johnsbury. After his death in 1888, his widow, daughter, and son-in-law made inquiries of several of the artists about the circumstances of sales. Thus we know that Jervis McEntee sold to Fairbanks on February 9, 1872, *The Woods of Asshokan*, for \$800.¹¹

During the first half of the 1870s, Horace Fairbanks was frequently in New York City. During these years he sought national financing for his growing scale manufacturing company. In May of 1870, he and his family returned to St. Johnsbury from a six-month

⁷ Archives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

⁸ Letter, Wrenn to Perry Viles, Executive Director of the Athenaeum, 2 September 1993; AIA archives.

⁹ Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice In New York City, 1840-1900*, np, nd, p. 38.

¹⁰ Letter, Kristin L. Gibbons, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, to Gael Stein, St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, 27 July 1990. Massachusetts archives reveal no death entry for Hatch 1871-1880.

¹¹ Letter, McEntee to Mrs. Fairbanks, Studio Building, 51 W. 10th Street, New York City, 5 March 1890 (Athenaeum collection).

stay in New York. There he had been presented for membership in the Century Club, home to many established landscape painters, by Worthington Whittredge, who painted for Fairbanks *On the Plains, Colorado* (1872).¹²

Fairbanks' acquisition of Albert Bierstadt's monumental *Domes of the Yosemite*, painted in 1867 on commission for Le Grand Lockwood for his mansion in Norwalk, Connecticut, may also have depended upon New York contacts. The painting was purchased from Lockwood's widow in 1872 by Alfrederich Smith Hatch, brother of the Athenaeum's architect, for \$5,100 (the original price charged by Bierstadt was \$25,000). A.S. Hatch, who in 1883 was President of the New York Stock Exchange, sold it in 1873 to Fairbanks. The *Domes of the Yosemite*, despite its mixed critical reviews over the years, remains Bierstadt's largest extant canvas at 116 inches x 180 inches and has never left the west wall of the Athenaeum since it was installed there in July 1873.¹³

Over the next two years Fairbanks hung works by Asher B. Durand (*Landscape with Rocks*, 1859, purchased at a National Academy Exhibition), Sanford Robinson Gifford (*The Views From South Mountain, in the Catskills*, 1873, painted to order), William Hart (*Summer—The Passing Shower*, 1873, painted to order), James McDougall Hart (*Under the Elms* 1872 and *Landscape with Cattle*, 1872, both purchased from the artist), Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (*Deer*, 1872, painted to order), as well as the above-mentioned McEntee and Whittredge. Genre paintings purchased at this time had rural themes, especially the two works of Montpelier's Thomas Waterman Wood and John G. Brown's *Hiding in the Old Oak*, 1874, purchased from the artist. In 1876 Fairbanks was to add Jasper F. Cropsey's *Autumn on the Ramapo River*, also purchased from the artist. The principal sculpture acquired at this time was Chauncey B. Ives' *Pandora*, executed in Rome in 1875 and purchased from Tiffany & Co.

These key works have remained within the building for over 120 years, providing the essential flavor to the collection. Moreover, the collection was accessible for viewing by the public many years before the great museums of Boston and New York. With the addition of European landscapes by Andreas Achenbach, George Loring Brown, and Mauritz F.H. De Haas, the Athenaeum portrays to its visitors a benign view of nature. The collection is a moment frozen in time in art history. Barbizon painting, Impressionism, and the era of such American originals as Eakins, Homer, Ryder and Whistler were soon to relegate to the past the taste of Horace Fairbanks.

¹² *The Caledonian*, 20 May 1870; Letter, Whittredge to Agnes Fairbanks Willard, Studio Building, 51 W. 10th Street, New York City, 13 November 1890 (Athenaeum collection).

¹³ Letter, Kristin L. Gibbons, to Gael Stein, October 18, 1989; Nancy K. Anderson & Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, New York, 1990, pp. 27, 225. *New York Times*, May 14, 1904, obituary of A.S. Hatch (Burlington, Vermont 1829—Tarrytown, New York 1904).

The Athenaeum was opened near the end of a quarter-century which saw the number of libraries in the nation grow from 779 in 1850 to 3,682 by 1876.¹⁴ While records have not revealed the size of the original endowment (there are no minutes of the 1882 corporation until after the founder's death in 1888), the Athenaeum was among the first to receive an endowment.

Other new practices at the Athenaeum included the circulation of books to persons as young as fourteen and, more especially, open stacks for the first collection of 8,000 books assembled by the bibliographer W.F. Poole. Nineteen years later it was considered an innovation when the new Boston Public Library provided open-stack access. The original cataloging system predated Melvil Dewey's decimal plan by some five years, and not until 1902 was the collection recatalogued under the now-familiar decimal system.¹⁵

Fairbanks' library preceded the five New England library buildings designed by Henry Hobson Richardson by eight to twelve years. Richardson's first library commission, in March 1877, resulted in the high-ceilinged, barrel-vaulted Winn Memorial Library (a National Historic Landmark) in Woburn, Massachusetts, opened in 1879. By this time, Richardson had already abandoned the Second Empire style, a transition especially evident in the Romanesque doorway of the library in North Easton, Massachusetts (also commissioned in 1877 and also a National Historic Landmark).

The founder of the Athenaeum filled the shelves with care, taking the summer of 1870 to furnish the Book Room and place the books, and the next year to catalog them. Evidently the English booksellers were slow in delivering Fairbanks' purchases, which ran heavily to natural history, biography, and history.¹⁶ Fairbanks appointed as the first librarian his uncle, the Reverend William W. Thayer. The business affairs of the Athenaeum were administered by Fairbanks until his death in 1888.

The family fortune which erected and equipped the Athenaeum, as well as St. Johnsbury's North Congregational Church in 1878 and the Fairbanks Museum in 1890, was the principal source of business support until the company secured national investors in 1874.

Three brothers from Brimfield, Massachusetts, founded E. & T. Fairbanks and Company in 1834, to manufacture stoves, balance scales, and other metal goods. Erastus (1792-1864), the father of the Athenaeum's donor and of Franklin, the benefactor of the 1890 Fairbanks'

¹⁴ Dickson, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Catalogue of St. Johnsbury Athenaeum*, 1875; Edward T. Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury, VT*, St. Johnsbury, 1914, p. 320.

¹⁶ See the copy of Horace Fairbanks' remarks at the dedication on November 27, 1871, in the first volume of Trustees' minutes (Athenaeum collection).

museum, was the senior partner and later, twice governor of Vermont. His next younger brother, Thaddeus (1796-1886) was the mechanical genius of the family, holding over 40 patents and devising a large platform balance to weigh wagon-loads of hemp.¹⁷

Horace Fairbanks became a confidential clerk to the firm in 1840, at age 20, and by 23 was a partner. At the time that construction began on the Athenaeum, Horace had been senior partner since 1865, and was seconded by his younger brother, Franklin, and his surviving uncle, Thaddeus. In 1874 E. & T. Fairbanks became a corporation, and Horace filled the presidency until he died in 1888.

As was the case in many American businesses, the end of the Civil War brought great growth to E. & T. Fairbanks. Between 1864 and 1870 the company built three new shops and a new foundry, added three cupola furnaces, twice replaced the plant's large steam engine, and brought in a railroad spur. Capital investment grew from \$330,000 in 1860 to \$2,651,131 in 1880. The completion of the first railroad line into town in 1850—brought about by Erastus Fairbanks—allowed the use of coal, pig iron, and heavier timber in making scales. After the war, the company offered a full range of scales, established a world-wide marketing network, and issued illustrated catalogs. At the two great industrial celebrations, Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893, the Fairbanks company occupied first 2,000, then 3,000 square feet of exhibition space. The work force, 250 in 1860, almost doubled to 475 in 1868, weathered the 1869 depression, and reached 600 in 1880. In that year the firm employed 73% of the town's industrial workers and, measured by value, produced 82% of the town's products.¹⁸

Accordingly, the town's population enjoyed its greatest absolute growth in the decade from 1870 to 1880. By 1900, the population reached 7,010 and E. & T. Fairbanks still held the position of the world's premier manufacturer of large platform balance scales, with sales world-wide. Historian Allen Yale notes that the 819 workers listed in the census constituted 30% of the nation's scale workers in 1900.

In a revealing study of the town's "grand lists"—property evaluations for tax purposes—Yale traced the relationship between the property owned by E. & T. Fairbanks Co., the immediate members of the Fairbanks family, and the town as a whole. In 1860, the firm and the family owned 9.0% of the town's landed wealth, with the family share only 4.4%. Ten years later, in 1870, the family share had grown to 13.7%, with the firm adding another 5.8%. Firm and family property holdings continued to approach 25% of the total town values in 1880 (23.5%) and in 1890 (24.4%), but only in the year 1870 did the family's wealth surpass that of the firm.¹⁹

We do not have accurate information on the cost to Horace Fairbanks of creating the Athenaeum, or its effect upon his personal fortune. The only contemporary estimate was that of a staff member of the *Boston Journal* on October 25, 1872, setting the cost of

¹⁷ For these facts and many others in this section, I am indebted to Allen Yale of Derby, VT, who is completing a doctoral dissertation on the scale business (typescript, under submission to the University of Connecticut).

¹⁸ Yale, *loc. cit.*, especially Chapter V.

¹⁹ Yale, *loc. cit.*, Chapter VII. The evaluation of property held by Fairbanks family members fell from \$308,783 in 1870 to \$182,589 in 1880, suggesting two conclusions: The Athenaeum was built and furnished precisely at the moment when the family was wealthiest in land values; and in the 1870's there was a divesting of land (whether for charitable purposes or investment in the corporation is not known).

building and books at \$175,000. There is a clear record of his other business and civic involvements, however, as befits the town's leading businessman. From 1856 until his death, he held bank directorships, serving as President of the First National Bank in the last years of his life. Horace Fairbanks was particularly interested in railroad management, being the principal backer (and President) of the Vermont branch of the Portland and Ogdensburg Railroad, 1869-1873. When that line went into receivership in 1880, Fairbanks became the President of its successor. When the St. Johnsbury and Lake Champlain Railroad was sold in 1885 to the Boston & Lowell Railroad, Fairbanks became a director of his third rail company.²⁰

Horace Fairbanks was also involved politically. In 1869 he was elected to the Vermont Senate and also presided over the village government. He was a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1864 and 1872, and in 1876-77 answered his party's call to serve as Vermont's Governor.

Closer to the spirit which impelled him to build the Athenaeum were Fairbanks' numerous philanthropic activities. He served as superintendent in the Sunday School of the North Congregational Church from 1856 to 1861, built the great new limestone church building in 1878-1881 (162 feet long, seating 800), and in his will left \$13,000 in bequests to church activities (but none to the Athenaeum). He served as trustee of the town's private secondary school from its opening in 1843 until his death 45 years later. In 1866 he was appointed at Town Meeting to head a three-person committee to plan and estimate the cost of a suitable soldier's monument for the town's dead in the recent war. Three months later, Fairbanks and his committee had engaged Larkin G. Mead, Jr., Vermont's second-best-known sculptor after Hiram Powers, and had led the town to appropriate up to \$10,000. The site, in Court House Park, was across Main Street from Horace's lot, where he was to build the Athenaeum two years later.²¹

Horace Fairbanks, evidently a close-mouthed man, left little direct testimony on his motives for building the Athenaeum. Among the predecessors to the Athenaeum, along with the Ladies Library Association (1855-1872), was the "Mechanics Library," established in 1855 with 800 volumes of "well chosen books in good bindings" as described by the Athenaeum's librarian in 1914. A later transcribing of the founder's remarks at the dedication in 1871 quotes Horace as expressing his "highest ambition" and "fullest expectations" that "the people make the rooms of the Athenaeum a favorite place of resort for patient research, reading and study."²²

Contemporary observers noted that enlightened employers, by bestowing upon their workers reading rooms, libraries, and the best schools, brought happiness to the nation's manufacturing villages. Perhaps Fairbanks' library is most accurately described as not only the grand plan of a Christian capitalist to placate his labor force, but a genuine attempt to elevate the level of knowledge and learning in his town.²³ There are nineteen private libraries

²⁰ Yale, *loc. cit.*, Chapter V, Appendix E; Athenaeum collection.

²¹ Yale, *loc. cit.*, Chapter VIII; Fairbanks, *History of St. Johnsbury*, 306; *The Caledonian*, 9 March, 15 June, 6 July and 7 September, 1866. When Fairbanks had his portrait painted to hang in the Athenaeum, he had the artist depict the statue as visible from his work desk in the library.

²² Fairbanks, *History of St. Johnsbury*, p. 242; mss Trustees' records at the Athenaeum.

²³ See, for example, a quotation from Scribner's in *The Caledonian* for 6 February, 1874. For a dissenting view on the motivation of the Fairbanks family—one

extant, eight of which are housed in historic buildings. Six of these structures are National Historic Landmarks: The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, the Boston Athenaeum, the Charleston Library Society, The Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, the Salem Athenaeum and the Long Island Historical Society in New York.

There is even less evidence on Fairbanks' intentions in creating the Art Gallery, which was opened to the town with far less ceremony than had been the case for the library. Horace Fairbanks was unlike many of the other wealthy American art collectors after the Civil War in two respects. While he kept paintings in his nearby home, especially the more sentimental or genre works, his collecting career does not seem to have predated his desire to give the town a free art gallery, and he built no tall-ceiling gallery in his own house. Secondly, he bought works mostly from American artists and bought them in America. By contrast, another small-city collector, Matthias H. Arnot of Elmira, New York (1839-1910) bought paintings from the early 1870s on as mementoes of his European travels, eventually constructed a tall gallery in his home, and left his collection to the public only upon his death. Arnot was an inveterate auction-goer, unlike Fairbanks who seemed to take the more direct route of buying from men he met in New York.²⁴

The predominance of landscapes, and of landscapes far removed from the extravagance of Cole and Church, as well as bucolic country scenes and genre paintings centering on children and young adults, suggests that Horace Fairbanks wanted to keep alive in his rapidly-changing town a vision of innocence.²⁵ At least four of the major Hudson River paintings show a moment of discovery, as if man had just wandered into a pastoral setting. Two are eastern scenes—Cropsey's Ramapo River and Gifford's Catskill peak—and two are western, Colman showing the white man's emigrant train, and Whittredge placing an Indian family in that same Colorado territory.

stressing their baronial control of the village—see Charles Edward Russell, *Bare Hands and Stone Walls*, New York, 1933 and T.D. Seymour Bassett, *The Growing Edge: Vermont Villages, 1840-1880*, Montpelier, 1992, pp. 216-218.

²⁴ See Rachael Sadinsky, *A Collector's Vision: The 1910 Bequest of Matthias H. Arnot*, Elmira, NY, 1989. Letters from Whittredge, McEntee, and relatives of Gifford in the Athenaeum collection all testify to the agreeable impression the Vermont manufacturer made upon these New York painters as he sought direct purchases from them.

²⁵ While canvasses by Durand, Hart and Verboeckhoven depict farm animals, there is little sense of the farmer or the rural economy in the collection, and it does not appear that Fairbanks was creating an image of "agrarian harmony." His harmony was that of simple games, majestic mountain views, animals in noble poses, or bowls of fruit. For a contrasting view of popular taste, see Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*, Philadelphia, 1989.

ST. JOHNSBURY ATHENAEUM

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

The Art Gallery was designed on an inviting human scale, and today visitors comment on its beauty. Although not a formal gallery despite the salon appearance, it is one of the finest in America. Not only does the Art Gallery have a sense of human scale, but a sense of being able to see it all from the middle of the room. There is also evident in the Gallery collection a lack of conflict, an absence of urban settings, and no portrayals of the industrial age. The visitor of 1873 made a step back in time. In a virtually unaltered gallery, Fairbanks' vision of a nobler and simpler America is even more apparent today.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**Manuscripts, Archival & Unpublished**

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ____ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
 Previously Listed in the National Register: **St. Johnsbury Main Street Historic District**
 ____ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
 ____ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
 ____ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
 ____ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ____ State Historic Preservation Office
 ____ Other State Agency
 ____ Federal Agency
 ____ Local Government
 ____ University
 Other (Specify Repository): **St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Manuscript Collection**

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Less than one (1) acre

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing
 A 18 737100 4922390

Verbal Boundary Description:

Lot #14 of Section 7 of Map 23, town of St. Johnsbury. See also the attached map from the property atlas of 1927. There have been no boundary changes since 1924.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the building, its addition, and the rest of the lot on which it is located that have historically been known as the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum and which maintain historic integrity.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Mr. Perry Viles, Executive Director
 St. Johnsbury Athenaeum
 30 Main Street
 St. Johnsbury, Vermont 05819-2289
Telephone: 802/748-8291
Date: August 27, 1994

Edited by: Ms. Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian
 National Park Service/Washington Office
 History Division (418)
 P.O. Box 37127, Suite 310
 Washington, DC 20013-7127
Telephone: 202/343-8166
Date: December 21, 1994