

The Undigested History of the Nantucket Atheneum



Tearing up floorboards in search of hidden treasure is a bad idea. A messy process, it seldom yields anything of value. As a rule, attics are a better bet.



Figure 1: Nantucket Atheneum

Every rule has its exception. In 1994, the Nantucket Atheneum began an extensive renovation that rescued the island's public library from shabby gentility, restoring the neoclassical beauty the building was known for when it first opened in 1847. The renovation added a striking new wing for the children's library and highlighted the soaring ceilings in the Great Hall upstairs, where the windows stream sunlight or the gray Nantucket sky, depending on the day. The renovation also uncovered an archive. As construction began, floorboards came up, walls and doors came down. Eventually the building itself was lifted off its foundation as the crawl space was turned into a ground floor. But to my mind, the removal of the floorboards marked the turning point of the renovation. For as it happens, the space beneath them sheltered a collection of over five hundred nineteenth-century pamphlets.



Figure 2: Floorboards removed from the first floor in Nantucket Atheneum

Charlotte Louisa Maison, then the director of the Atheneum, remembers the day the pamphlets were revealed. An island carpenter, there to remove a set of bookshelves, found that he needed to pull up the floorboards on the librarian's

dais on the first floor. Not long into his work, he called Maison into the room. There beneath the dais, where a hundred years' worth of librarians had sat, lay a carefully organized collection of pamphlets, untouched for more than a century. A deep layer of dust covered the boxes holding them. Breathing masks were in order, and Maison rushed out to buy some. Although they could not be sure, Maison and Betsy Tyler, the Atheneum's Great Hall librarian, began to speculate that the pamphlets were placed in their uncommon vault late in the nineteenth century as a stopgap measure. Thanks to the renovation, the Atheneum is now a winter refuge for year-round islanders. But in prefiberglass 1890s Nantucket, when the last major overhaul of the building was undertaken, the Atheneum was a notoriously drafty and cold structure in the dreary winter months. Pamphlets seem to have done the trick of blocking those persistent island winds whistling through the floorboards.



Figure 3: Pamphlet from the Nantucket Atheneum

It is an odd collection of materials the Atheneum belched forth. Among the oldest of the pamphlets is the 1825 *Sermon on the Death of His Excellency, William Eustis, Late Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Preached in the First Church in Roxbury, February 13, 1825*. The author, Thomas Gray, "Minister of the Church on Jamaica Plain," laments the passing of Governor Eustis in a nationalistic language common to many of these short publications. "Most of the revolutionary patriots," he tells us, "after having served their generation faithfully, have, at length, fallen to sleep." In *The Morals of Freedom. An Oration Delivered before the Authorities of the City of Boston, July 4, 1844*, Peleg Chandler chastises Americans for past Independence Day indiscretions and urges a more sober approach to freedom:

The men of the revolution have been accustomed to join in the festivities of the occasion, and their presence has added interest to the scene, imparting to the orators of the day an animation, that has sometimes exceeded the bounds of sound discretion and cultivated taste. But with the present generation a change is taking place. The scenes of the revolution are growing dim in the distance; those venerable men are no longer with us, and our independence is celebrated by the children's children of those who achieved it. The period for declamation has passed away. A more somber hue now rests upon the day.

Francis C. Gray's 1832 *Oration Delivered before the Legislature of Massachusetts, at Their Request, on the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington* similarly marks the passing of the Revolutionary generation and the coming of a new type of American.

The collection includes abolitionist arguments, religious tracts from a variety of sects, and my personal favorite: an illustrated short history of hats. Beyond their obvious draw as historical documents, the pamphlets gathered in this chaotic collection are an appealing site for speculation about the life of

readers and reading in the nineteenth-century U.S. How was it that the Atheneum ended up with a haphazard collection such as this one? When, if ever, were these pamphlets read on the island? Other than their status as ephemera, what do these short works share that would have warranted their being organized together? Answers to these questions may lie in the common history of these pamphlets, a history intimately tied to the larger story of Nantucket itself. A history punctuated by every bibliophile's nightmare: fire.

In 1846, Nantucket suffered a tragedy still known to islanders as the Great Fire. This conflagration swept through downtown Nantucket, destroying businesses, homes, and the original Nantucket Atheneum. It was there in the Atheneum's first building that Frederick Douglass gave his first major speech before a mixed-race audience in 1841, as he recounts in his *Narrative*. It was there that both Nantucketers and visitors from the mainland, or "coofs," publicly debated the death penalty and phrenology, insanity, and Chinese poetry.



Figure 4: Nantucket Atheneum

On January 4, 1847, the Atheneum proprietors wrote the following in their meeting minutes, recalling the events of the previous summer's fire:

On the night of the 13th of July [1846] every effort was made to save the contents of the Atheneum, and too much praise can hardly be awarded to those who used such great exertions to preserve what they could, from the devouring element, neither does it detract from the credit due to those who labored in removing the articles, that their efforts were of little avail. Books, Pictures, and busts were removed from the Library Room, and were overtaken and destroyed by the Fire, when they were supposed to be in a place of safety . . . The portrait of Professor Silliman and a few Books were all that was saved, about 130 volumes [out of 3200], most of them at the time, in the hands of Proprietors, and out of the Library have been recovered, nearly half of which are odd volumes. About 250 coins, and a few relics from the ruined cities of Europe were picked up from among the ashes, & are little injured.

Mourning their deep loss, the proprietors conclude, "The destruction of this Library, and the loss at the same time of the Coffin School, and of many private libraries, left the inhabitants of the island more destitute of reading resources than ever before. The circumstances called for some unusual exertion."

As their early standing in the bloody and dangerous whaling industry indicates, Nantucketers were nothing if not tenacious. When the Atheneum's proprietors learned that its officers had failed to pay the Atheneum's insurance, and that as a result there would be no money forthcoming to replace the Atheneum's lost resources, they did not falter. They rattled the cup up and down the Atlantic

seaboard, writing the Providence Atheneum, the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, and a variety of other organizations, asking each for a donation of books. The proprietors' minutes acerbically note the results: "Of the Institutions addressed, only one, the 'Young Men's Institution of Hartford,' has yet sent any books. Efforts were made by some members of the Providence Atheneum to procure a vote (of a committee to whom the subject was referred,) giving their duplicate-volumes to the Nantucket Atheneum, but the committee were equally divided on the question of its constitutionality. The American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Atheneum sent letters of Sympathy." Undeterred, the Atheneum's leaders wrote to "Certain Gentlemen of Boston" seeking counsel. They, in turn, "advised that Individuals, as well as Institutions should be addressed." At last the Atheneum advocates met with success.

In a remarkable demonstration of generosity, books, newspapers, and printed matter of all kinds began to pour into the Atheneum. In the first week after the call to individuals was sent, the Atheneum received "One Hundred and seventy volumes from mess. Little & Brown . . . and One Hundred Dollars, from Amos Lawrence, Esq. of Boston." From that point on, the tide turned so drastically, the Atheneum faced a virtual flood:

"Citizens of Boston" who are unwilling of a public appearance of their names . . . collected the sum of Seven Hundred dollars, purchased and forwarded to the Atheneum about 800 volumes . . . From Ticknor & Co. Boston, 44 vols. from Edwd. Everett 39 vols. Two daily and two weekly papers are forwarded to the Atheneum by Mr. Everett on the day after their publication. From C. P. Curtis of Boston 32 Vols. and the unbound nos. of two foreign Reviews. From Wiley & Putnam of N.Y., their Library of Choice Reading in 29 vols.

The list goes on at length, closing finally with the following reference to two native Nantucketers: "from Mrs. Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia, 6 vols. & from other ladies 16 volumes, and 20 vols . . . from Paul Mitchell, Esq."

Several pieces of evidence link the treasure in the floorboards to this moment of unparalleled giving. The boxes holding the pamphlets were labeled according to subject matter in a careful script, which appears to be the handwriting of Maria Mitchell, the Atheneum's first librarian. Mitchell would go on to be a noted astronomer, a professor at Vassar College, and the first woman admitted to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. But in the late 1840s, immediately after the fire, she was still the caretaker of the Atheneum's holdings.

From all indications, it appears that Mitchell processed these pamphlets in the aftermath of the Great Fire and the highly successful call for donations. Each pamphlet bears the stamp of the Atheneum and an accession number. Each pamphlet also carries a different handwritten name on its inside or outside cover. Near as anyone can tell, these names belong to those donors who, responding to the island's plea for "reading resources," sent pamphlets old and new.

This collection poses several intriguing problems of interpretation. There is the obvious challenge of confirming that in fact these materials were donated in the aftermath of the fire. But beyond that, assuming they were, how do we understand them? Do they represent what the Atheneum's generous donors perceived as important materials of the day, things that any major cultural repository should hold? Maison believes they do. She thinks that the pamphlets were, at one time, an "essential part of the library's collection," as Mitchell's meticulous cataloguing might suggest.

On the other hand, maybe the pamphlets were more akin to a current feature of the Atheneum: a swap bin where islanders drop off magazines they have read and take those they haven't. Lucretia Mott's name is on the inside cover of one of those pamphlets. Perhaps Mott was, for the good of the Atheneum, sacrificing a piece she cared for. Or perhaps she was simply weeding her collection.

And maybe, finally, the lesson to be drawn is that these two possibilities are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. Maybe at some point it was simply decided that a lamentation of the death of Governor Eustis was more useful as insulation than as reading material. Which leaves us asking the most significant question of all: at what point, and for what reasons, does print "culture" start to look like pulp? When, and at whose command, does treasure turn into trash?

For more information on the Nantucket Atheneum's pamphlets and its historic nineteenth-century collection, contact [Betsy Tyler](#), the Great Hall librarian.

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