



# Nantucket Atheneum: A Brief History



# Charles G. Coffin

(1801-1882)

**A co-founder of the Nantucket Atheneum in 1834, Charles G. Coffin was born on Nantucket.**

**Coffin and his brother Henry ran a business empire which included a fleet of whale ships. Because of Coffin's life-long interest in education, each of his ships contained a lending library.**

**1844 Painting by William Swain (1803-1887)**



# David Joy

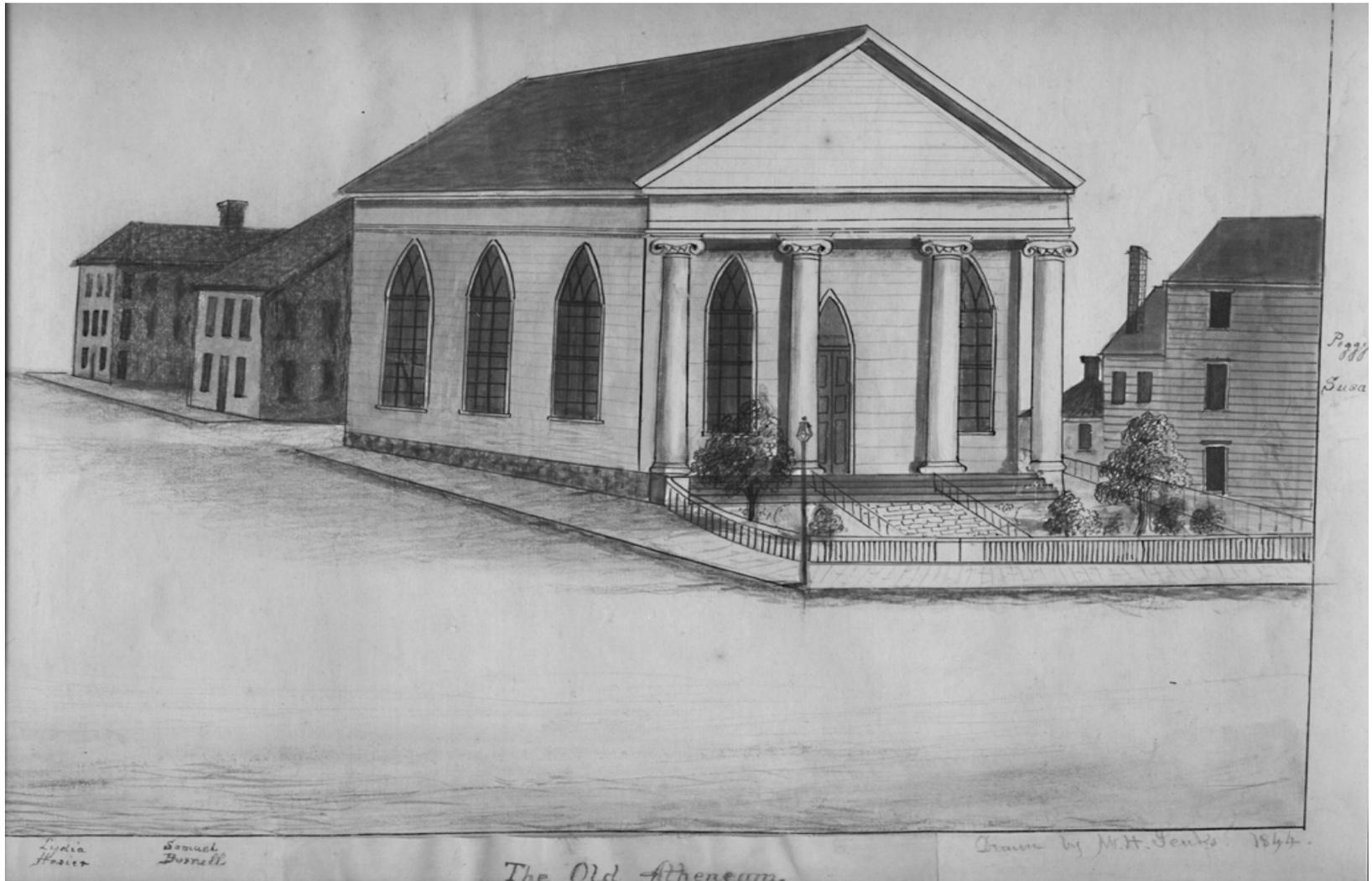
(1801-1875)

**A co-founder of the Atheneum in 1834, and a Nantucket native, David Joy first worked as a laborer in the island's candle factories.**

**Later he invented a process for the manufacture of spermaceti candles - which made him a wealthy man.**

**A fervent believer in the abolition of slavery, Joy introduced Frederick Douglass as a speaker at the Atheneum during the antislavery convention of 1841.**

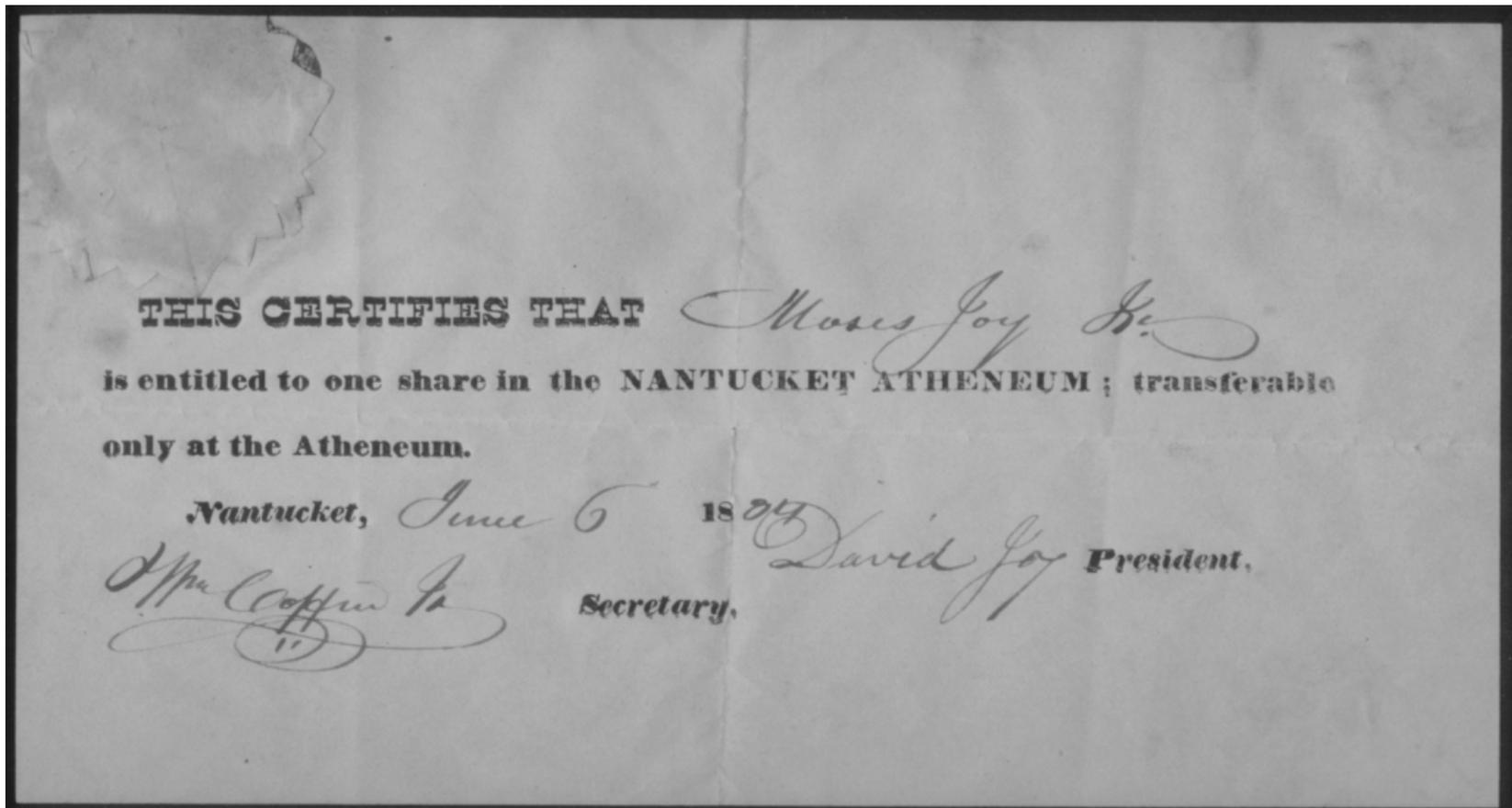
**1836 Painting by William Swain (1803-1887)**



# Original Atheneum Building

Coffin and Joy purchased the vacant Universalist Society Church, located at the corner of Pearl Street (now called India Street) and Federal Street, and in 1834 created a membership library known as the Nantucket Atheneum.

1844 Original illustration on paper by Mr. Samuel Haynes Jenks (1789-1863)



**THIS CERTIFIES THAT**

*Moses Joy Sr.*

**is entitled to one share in the NANTUCKET ATHENEUM ; transferable  
only at the Atheneum.**

*Nantucket, June 6 1834*

*Charles Coffin Jr.*  
Secretary

Secretary,

*David Joy* President,

## Atheneum Proprietor's Share 1834

To raise funds for the purchase and renovation of the building, David Joy and Charles Coffin sold shares for \$10 each. Shareholders, also known as Proprietors, formed the membership of the Nantucket Atheneum which was incorporated in 1834.



## Atheneum's Early Days

The Atheneum, originally a members-only institution, had a circulating collection of books, hosted meetings and lectures, and exhibited small collections of whaling and South Seas artifacts brought home by Nantucket mariners.

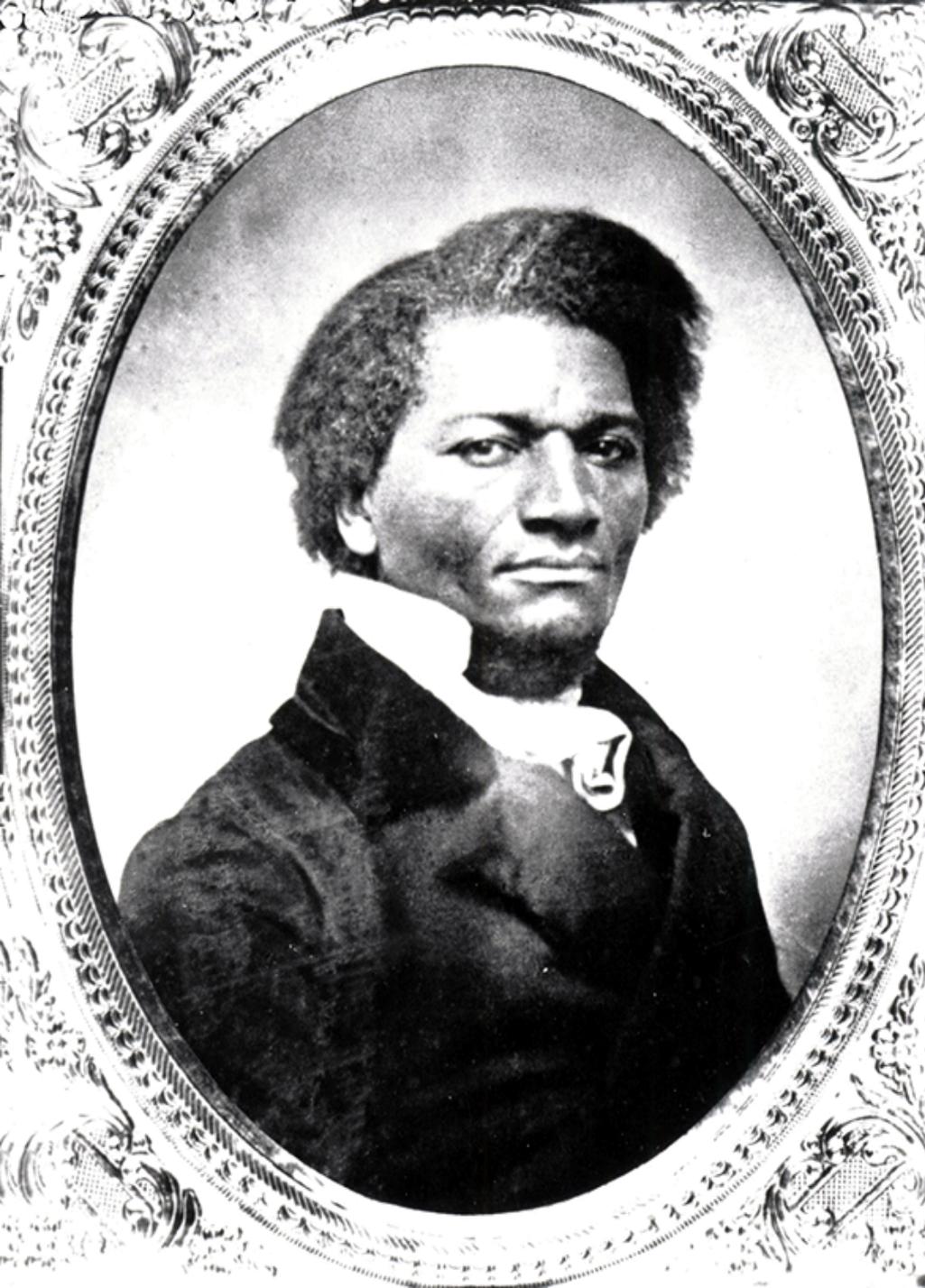


# Maria Mitchell

(1818-1889)

**Born on Nantucket, Maria Mitchell started her career as a teacher. She became the first librarian of the Nantucket Atheneum at age 18 -- a position she held for 20 years.**

**Mitchell also discovered a comet and eventually left the Atheneum to become the first Professor of Astronomy at Vassar College. She was the first woman elected to the Academy of Arts and Sciences.**



# Frederick Douglass

(1817-1895)

**Born a slave in Maryland, Frederick Douglass became a noted reformer, orator, and writer devoted to the abolition of slavery and discrimination.**

**Just four years after he escaped slavery, he spoke on his experiences as a slave on August 11, 1841 at the Atheneum during an anti-slavery convention.**

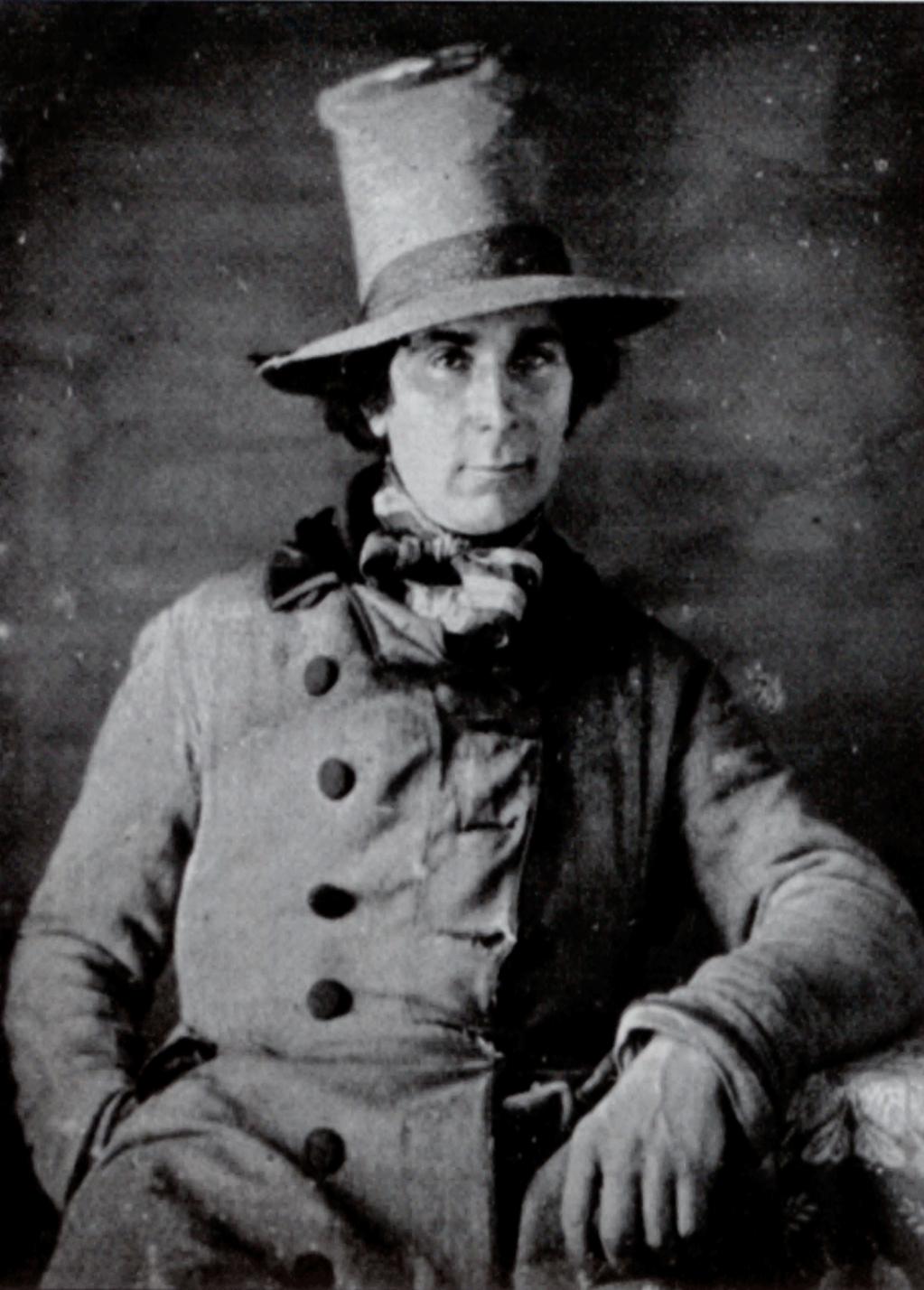
**Douglass returned to the Atheneum to speak in 1842, 1843, 1850 and 1885.**

# The Great Fire - July 13, 1846

The Great Fire began in William Geary's hat store on lower Main Street. The fire quickly spread as a result of drought conditions, warehouses full of whale oil and the lack of a municipal fire department. The Atheneum was among the hundreds of buildings destroyed by the fire (marked by shaded areas).

Lithograph by Samuel Haynes Jenks, Jr. (1819-1858)





# Atheneum Rebuilds

**The Nantucket Atheneum was the first civic building to be rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1846.**

**Designed by Frederick Brown Coleman, the new building was done in the Greek Revival style similar to the original building but he changed the interior design so that the lecture hall was on the second floor and the book collection was on the first floor.**

**Charles Wood, the builder (shown here), completed the project in just six months. Wood then left Nantucket and went to San Francisco where he built the San Francisco Customs House.**



## New Atheneum

**Within six months of its destruction, a new Atheneum was opened in 1847. The original Atheneum building was covered by insurance which helped finance the construction of the new building. However, the contents were not insured. Fortunately, Maria Mitchell had saved a full record of the library's holdings before the fire and with the help of the Atheneum Proprietors she secured book donations from nearly every state in the union.**



Lucy Stone



Ralph Waldo Emerson



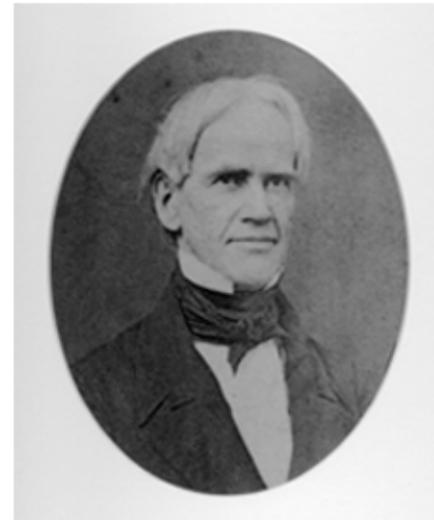
Horace Greeley



Henry David Thoreau



Lucretia Mott



Horace Mann



William Lloyd Garrison

## Early Atheneum Speakers

Since its founding in 1834, the Nantucket Atheneum has sponsored educational and cultural programs including the following: Women's rights advocate Lucy Stone in 1886; orator and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1847, 1855, 1856 and 1857; publisher Horace Greeley in 1855; writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau in 1854; women's rights advocate Lucretia Mott in 1854; educator Horace Mann in 1847; and publisher William Lloyd Garrison in 1841.



# Hammond Ideal Typewriter

In 1883 the Athenaeum adopted a new method of keeping track of its collection - the card catalog. In 1899 the Athenaeum acquired its first technologically advanced piece of equipment - a Hammond Ideal Typewriter.

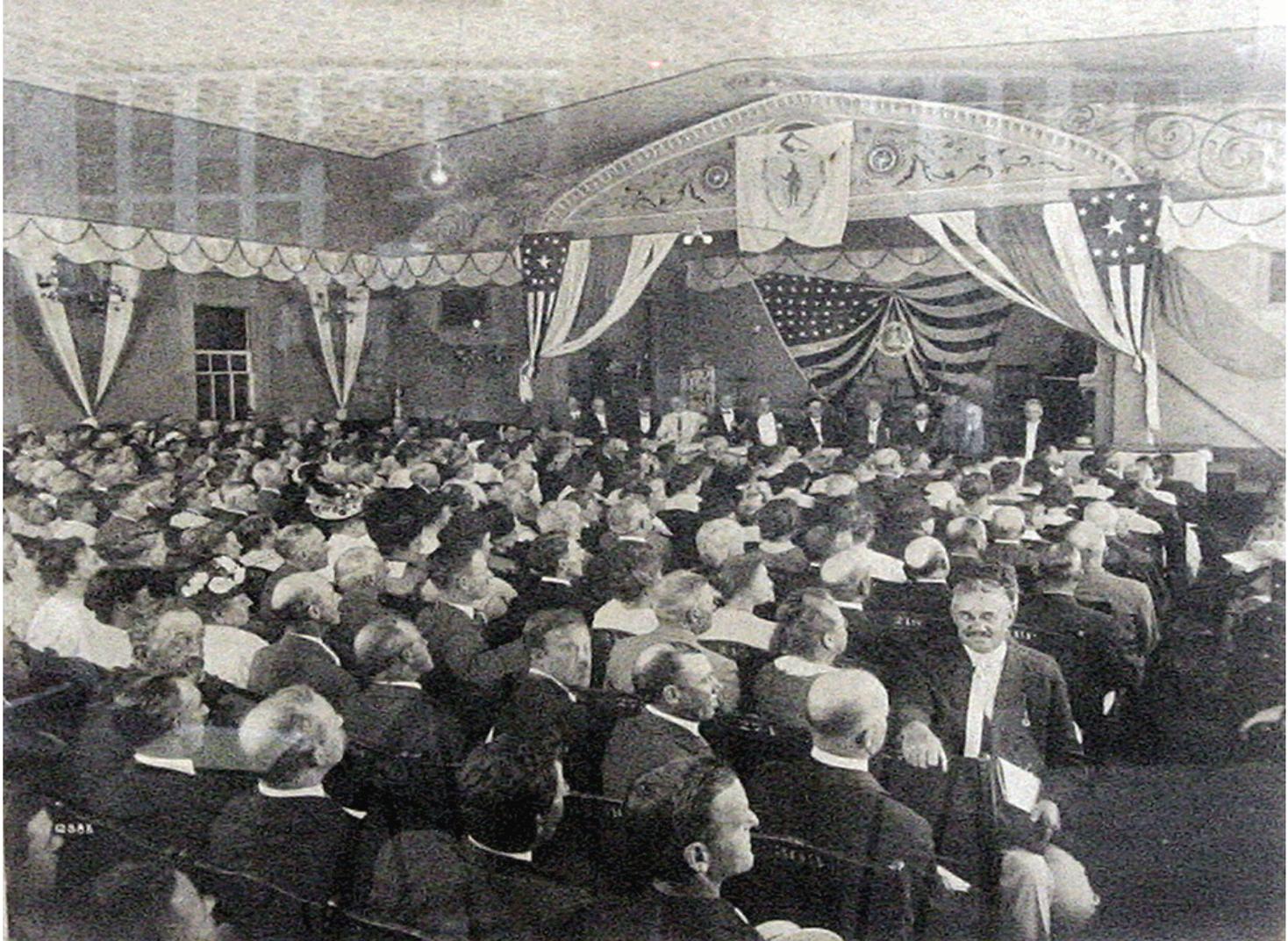
The typewritten Dewey Decimal card catalog would be the standard library finding aid for nearly 100 years.

1899 Photograph of the Hammond Ideal Typewriter



# Atheneum Becomes A Public Library

A debate among the Proprietors about whether to make the Atheneum a public library first arose in 1892 and was voted down. The Proprietors continued to reject the idea of making the Atheneum a public library for several years but in 1900 they approved the Atheneum becoming a free public library.



## First Off-Island Telephone Call

The second floor Atheneum Hall was used for many community gatherings. For example, on August 29, 1916, islanders gathered in the Atheneum for the dedication of the submarine telephone cable and the island's first telephone call to the mainland which connected Joseph C. Brock on Nantucket, William W. Graph in New Bedford and William F. Macy in Boston.



## Atheneum Expands

The land next to the Atheneum has been home to a bakery, a wheelwright shop, Henri Todd's Ice Cream and Confectionary Store and Gladys Woods' real estate office. In 1922 the Atheneum purchased the property.



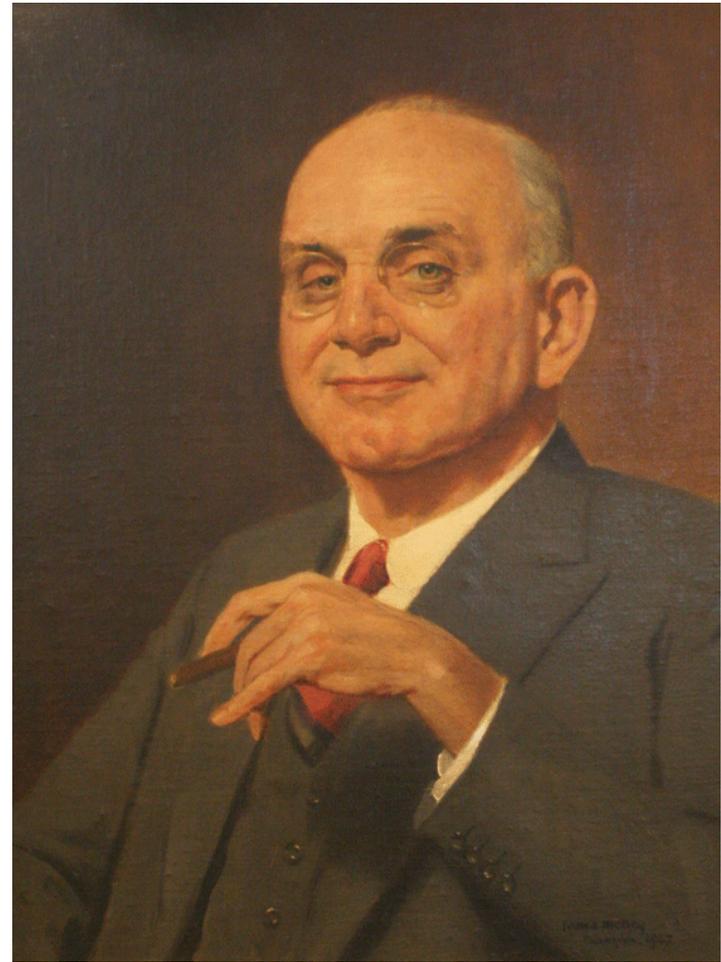
## **Atheneum Garden Today**

**In 1961 Atheneum trustees opened a public garden. The Nantucket Garden Club installed the plantings. In addition, brick pathways and benches were installed.**



**Starr Kynett**

(1901-1965)



**Harold H. Kynett**

(1889-1973)

**In 1965 Philadelphia advertising executive Harold Kynett funded a new wing and dedicated it in memory of his wife Starr Lawrence Kynett. The Kynett Wing was designed to house a storage vault, reading room and microfilm reader.**

**1947 Portraits by James McBey (1883-1859)**



# Atheneum Renovation

Under Charlotte Maison's leadership the Atheneum was upgraded for the 21st Century while also preserving the building's historic integrity and beauty. The above photograph from 1995 shows the Great Hall and first floor front doors during renovation.



## Weezie Library For Children

The new Weezie Library For Children wing, named in memory of Louise Frances Walker, opened in May 1996. A sunny and inviting space, the children's library offers a lively, year-round array of children's programs and services.



## Teen Space @ the Atheneum

**Renovation of a portion of the Great Hall in 2007 established a special area for teens including a young adult collection of books, DVDs, video games, and magazines, laptop computers and comfortable seating. Our Teen Advisory Board helps staff develop the teen programs offered throughout the year.**



## Atheneum's 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

In 2009 the Atheneum celebrated its 175th anniversary and invited the community to bury a time capsule containing memorabilia. The 50 blue capsules, representing island families and institutions, were placed in a vault and buried. They will be dug up and opened during the Atheneum's 200th anniversary in 2034.



## Atheneum Learning Lab

In 2015, the Atheneum converted a former vault into a new life-long learning space and community meeting room including smart boards, video conferencing capability, a 3D printer and 20 laptops. Makerspace workshops for all ages were added to the library's program offerings.



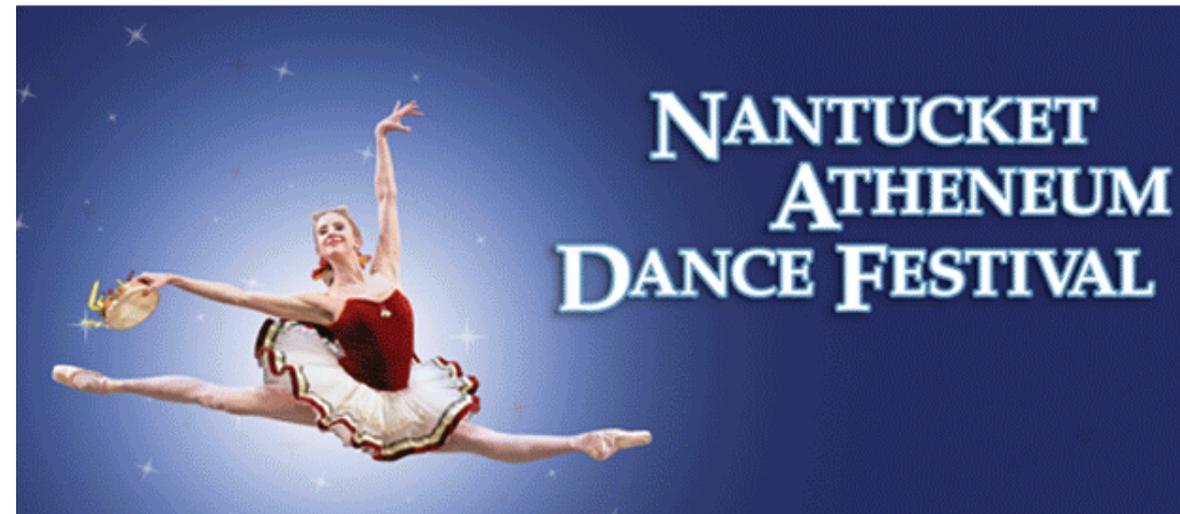
Books, reading and literacy



Speakers, films & music



Information and technology services



Annual Cold Turkey Plunge

## Atheneum Today

Open 6 days per week year-round, the library welcomes more than 170,000 visitors each year and offers free access to 1.6 million books, CDs, DVDs and downloadables, free information services, and over 1,300 free educational and cultural programs per year for all ages.