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For image – please see attached

Image caption

Athena, goddess of wisdom, inspired the creation of the Portsmouth Athenaeum in 1817. An exhibit honoring and demystifying the group's bicentennial is on display daily at Discover Portsmouth from Friday May 5 - through Friday September 1. (Courtesy photo)

Athenaeum Explained in Discover Portsmouth Display

200 Years of Portsmouth Athenaeum: Collect, Preserve, Share

Opening reception Friday May 5 5-8pm

*Portsmouth, New Hampshire...*For 200 years people in Portsmouth have been asking the same two-part question --What is an athenaeum and why do we need one? A free exhibition at Discover Portsmouth (May 5 - September 1) tackles these topics in honor of the 200th anniversary of the Portsmouth Athenaeum. The subtitle of the bicentennial display -- "Collect, Preserve, Share"-- tells much of the story.

We get the word "athenaeum" from Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and diplomacy, often depicted with a wise old owl. In statues and paintings Athena usually wears a helmet and carries a spear. That's because she also serves as the very busy goddess of war, not to mention the goddess of weaving, poetry, medicine, and commerce.

The athenaeum concept is equally wide-ranging. These membership organizations, popular in the early 19th century, served as libraries, periodical reading rooms, social clubs, cultural centers, history archives, museums, lecture halls, and galleries. Long before the Internet, and even before most public libraries, the Portsmouth Athenaeum was a place where people could access important information. In Portsmouth the first paying members or "proprietors" were primarily ship captains, merchants, and religious leaders. For more than a century, the local Athenaeum was largely private. But times change. Today the Portsmouth Athenaeum is reaching out and telling its story.

"In the 1980s, under new leadership, the Athenaeum began an amazing transformation," says historian Richard Candee, who organized the Discover Portsmouth exhibition. "It has become THE place to find information about Portsmouth's past." Today the Athenaeum in Market Square serves over 400 paying proprietors, but it is also open to the public Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Its purpose--to provide a hub for local knowledge--remains the same

as at its founding in 1817. But the modern Athenaeum is busier and more vital than ever. The collection has been greatly expanded--adding local maps, books, architectural surveys, church and city records, paintings, artifacts, newspapers and manuscripts. More and more of the library's 28,000 photographs can be seen on the Athenaeum website.

The library houses roughly 35,000 books and bound pamphlets, including 3,000 rare books, many printed in Portsmouth. Over 2,500 unique collections in the archive include documents spanning Portsmouth's nearly 400-year history. The collection is an invaluable tool for authors, scholars, the media, and to the public, especially those researching their home or family tree.

The Discover Portsmouth exhibit includes rare photos, lithographs, paintings, and artifacts selected from the unique Portsmouth Athenaeum collection, including a gigantic poster for Frank Jones Ale, discovered under the porch ceiling of a local home. Visitors who see the free display upstairs in the Special Events Room may be inspired to visit the Portsmouth Athenaeum in Market Square where more priceless items from "the vault" can be seen during this bicentennial year.

Tom Hardiman, the "keeper" of this nonprofit Athenaeum, recently returned from Liverpool, England, where he visited the oldest surviving athenaeum, founded in 1797. The Boston Athenaeum opened in 1807, and Portsmouth followed in 1817. By the middle of the 19th century, Hardiman says, there were tens of thousands of membership libraries in America. Little more than a dozen have survived, including the Portsmouth Athenaeum.

The mission of a membership-supported library is to promote "self-improvement through diverse reading and meaningful discussion," Hardiman notes. So the Athenaeum is both educational and social. The Liverpool Athenaeum, he adds, also has a "jolly good" bar and dining room.

For more about "200 Years of the Portsmouth Athenaeum," call [603-436-8433](tel:603-436-8433) or visit PortsmouthHistory.org. Discover Portsmouth is open daily from 9:30am to 5pm. The exhibition opens Friday May 5 during Art 'Round Town when Discover Portsmouth is open 5-8pm. The Special Events Room at Discover Portsmouth is also available for business, nonprofit, and private functions.