

The Berkshire Athenaeum

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The decade following the Civil War in the United States was marked by economic growth and expansion westward. This was the day when Gould, Fisk, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Rockefeller and countless others were accumulating fortunes. As the economy grew and personal fortunes grew, new public buildings were needed to serve growing communities and new business buildings to contain the expanding businesses. Many of the buildings, public and private, were constructed in a style that was free and wandering in its plans – that is, built toward the sky above it and covered with decoration . This was a style that represented well a society which had won new riches and could afford lavish decorations of all kinds, a society which was itself free and building towards some limitless unknown.

The new riches of the country and of one man in particular, and the new architecture were to combine in Pittsfield in the form of a new library. In 1868 Thomas Allen, Thomas Plunkett and Calvin Martin purchased a counting house on Bank Row to be used as a library for Pittsfield. The building was loaned rent-free to the city to serve as a library for Pittsfield. By 1871 the population of Pittsfield was over 12,000 and the library was inadequate. That year the Berkshire Athenaeum was incorporated “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in the town of Pittsfield an institution to aid in promoting education, culture, and refinement...”¹ The following year Phinehas Allen II, a second cousin of Thomas

¹ Willson, George F., *History of Pittsfield*, 191601955, p. 60

Allen and editor-owner of the Pittsfield Sun weekly newspaper, died and left most of his substantial estate to the Athenaeum trustees.

Thomas Allen had left Pittsfield and had accumulated a fortune in a railroad in the West and quarries in Missouri. He maintained a summer home in Pittsfield and was a trustee of the Berkshire Athenaeum. He knew that the existing library building was inadequate, and so in 1873 he offered \$50,000 of the trustees of the Athenaeum to build a new library. He attached three conditions to the gift: (1) it should be a free and public library; (2) ample ground should be acquired around the old site to provide a good setting for a new building; (3) finances should be obtained or provision should be made to maintain it “in perpetuity.”²

The town of Pittsfield agreed to provide a minimum of \$2,000 per year to operate the library to meet the first condition. The town also provided \$22,400, the amount necessary to purchase several adjacent sites to meet the second condition. At about the same time the defunct Pittsfield Medical College turned over its nearby land and remaining \$4,400 to the Athenaeum. The timely bequest of Phineas Allen provided the means to meet the last requirement. The trustees were then prepared to plan their library, and they selected as architect William A. Potter of New York City.

William Appleton Potter worked in the style of the High Victorian Gothic. He was one of several American architects who were born and educated in this country and who produced buildings in this style. Others in the group included William Robert Ware and Henry Van Brunt of the firm of Ware and Van Brunt, and Potter’s older brother, Edward T. Potter. The influence of this style came to the United States from England, where it was first used by architects directly influenced by the writings of John Ruskin. Particularly influential were Ruskin’s letters and drawings from Venice in which he described that city’s Gothic architecture in great detail.

² *ibid.*, p. 61

The Gothic style was appropriate for the United States in this period of growth and expansion, because it was highly decorative and could symbolize the wealth and grandeur of Venice in her prime. William A. Potter studied architecture under his brother Edward, who had designed the first example of the Victorian Gothic in the United States, the Nott Memorial Library at Union College in Schenectady in 1858. William Potter later designed many buildings of some significance, including two different libraries at Princeton; most of them were done after he became a follower of Henry Hobson Richardson in the late 1870s. Since Richardson's influence was not significant until after Trinity Church in Boston was built in 1876, Potter designed the Athenaeum while still primarily influenced by Ruskin and by Edward Potter.

The structure Potter designed for the Athenaeum was indeed of the High Victorian Gothic. The façade is full of ornamentation, there is much use of contrasting colors of stones, a gabled section flanks the main part of the building on each side and the façade here rises above the center of the building and leaves room for a magnificent Gothic window on each side. The same pattern is repeated at the rear of the building. The very height of the building is reached in a skylight which effectively opens the building to the heavens so that it does not really end, even where the structure stops. The decoration and the shapes of the windows are Gothic. One drawing of Ruskin's made in the 1850s shows a window with staggered archivolt leading into it and with alternating light and dark voussoirs³. Potter's main entrance to the Athenaeum could have been taken directly from that drawing; the shape, the pattern and the design are all the same. From the front the building is perfectly symmetrical except for the first-story window groupings. On the east front Potter used a group of three windows, while on the west he has a group of only two. Both groups are centered, and there is nothing in the present building or in his original plans to suggest why one side should have two windows and the other three.

³ Ruskin, John, *The Stones of Venice*, Volume IX of *The Complete Works*

In the original building a shed-like section of the building projected behind the east side only and was used for stacks. This section was later removed so that a complete rear addition could be made in 1897.

All the windows around the structure have the alternating light and dark voussoirs used around the door. Two chimneys directly out of the wall on each side of the building in the original plan, although the chimneys were removed in 1926. The building is all of stone, rectangular blocks of red Longmeadow freestone and blue limestone laid in varying patterns and strips of red Missouri granite breaking the building into horizontal sections. The structure was built by A.B. and D.C. Munyan, cooperating with Patrick Treanor of Boston, who actually finished the building in 1876.

The building has suffered from structural problems at different times since it was built. Settling has left holes in the walls. There has been extensive water damage in the basement (complaints of this are recorded as early as 1903) and general problems with the structure. It is difficult to evaluate why these problems have arisen. However, one interesting indication can be found by study of the roof. In the original plans for the building, Potter gave detailed instructions for constructing the roof around the skylight. One full page of the eight or nine pages in his original drawings is devoted to this problem. In an engineering survey of the building in 1945 Matthew Hiller Jr., found that one of the building's worst problems was a basically unsound design of the roof⁴. Perhaps Potter suspected that the plan for a skylight there would weaken the roof and thus treated it at length to try to make it workable. Or perhaps Potter's engineering was weak, a possibility that would explain the other structural problems.

By the 1890s Pittsfield had again outgrown its library. However, this time the trustees simply added on to the existing structure. The design of the addition is simple. It extends eighty feet behind the entire building. It resembles the nave of a

⁴ Hiller, Matthew, Jr., Engineering Report on the Berkshire Athenaeum.

Gothic church inside and out. The center rises over two stories high, and the roof slopes down sharply from that point. It ends abruptly over a series of clerestory windows. This drop in the roof-line at the sides makes it possible to retain the huge Gothic windows on each side at the rear on the second story.

Outside, the design of the new section is the same as that of the old, using the same stone-laying patterns and the same size and shape of window that appeared on the east side of the original building. The only way the casual observer of the exterior can tell that the rear part has been added is by perceiving that the dark voussoirs on the addition remain a bit redder than the ones on the older part. The interior of the addition contrasts markedly with the interior of the older section by Potter. Much of the new section is finished entirely in rich woods, including the whole ceiling (which is the true underside of the roof) and the framing around the windows. The only masonry work is on the large sections of wall. The interior of the original has all been covered with paint, but it seems to have had little natural wood.

The design of the addition is attributed by some sources to the architectural firm of Hartwell, Richardson and Driver of Boston and by others to Harlan H. Ballard, librarian at the time of the addition. The latter group agrees that Hartwell, Richardson and Driver worked on the project, but they feel that the firm only did the engineering for Ballard. The latter group seems to have the more cogent argument, but no records can be found to provide a definite answer.

In 1926 the building underwent other changes. The four chimneys on the original building appeared to be dangerous and were removed. A second floor was added in the upper part of the addition. This floor was subsequently removed in 1934. In 1945, after Hitler did his survey of the building, the whole building was shored up to provide better support for the heavy walls, and a steel framework was

laid over much of the second story to hold the building together. Steel tie-rods were inserted all around the skylight to prevent the collapse of the roof.⁵

Although one needs only to enter the Athenaeum and view its crowded conditions to realize that Pittsfield needs a new library, the Athenaeum building itself stands as a fascinating example of the High Victorian Gothic architecture in the United States, the style that was considered “picture-book” beautiful in a dynamic and expanding country only a century ago.

[Notes: The library moved out of this building in 1975, to a new facility across Wendell Avenue. The “old” Athenaeum was soon converted to serve the Probate Court. For an update, see [*Against the Odds: Accounting for the Survival of the Berkshire Athenaeum*](#), a thesis submitted by John S. Dickson to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, May 2014, Department of History.]

⁵ Hiller, Matthew, Jr., from drawings In specification for correcting of structural problems of Athenaeum.