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The Athenaeum of Philadelphia Refreshed With Facade Renovation

MARCH 7, 2023 | [by Kimberly Haas](#)

Among the city's many, old institutions, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia is not the oldest, but certainly is one of the most venerable. It was founded 1814 as a subscription library before the establishment of [public libraries](#). In addition to providing its members with access to books, the Athenaeum was also chartered to collect historical materials focusing on American arts such as architecture. Today, it houses significant archives of hundreds of thousands of architectural drawings, photographs, and manuscripts.

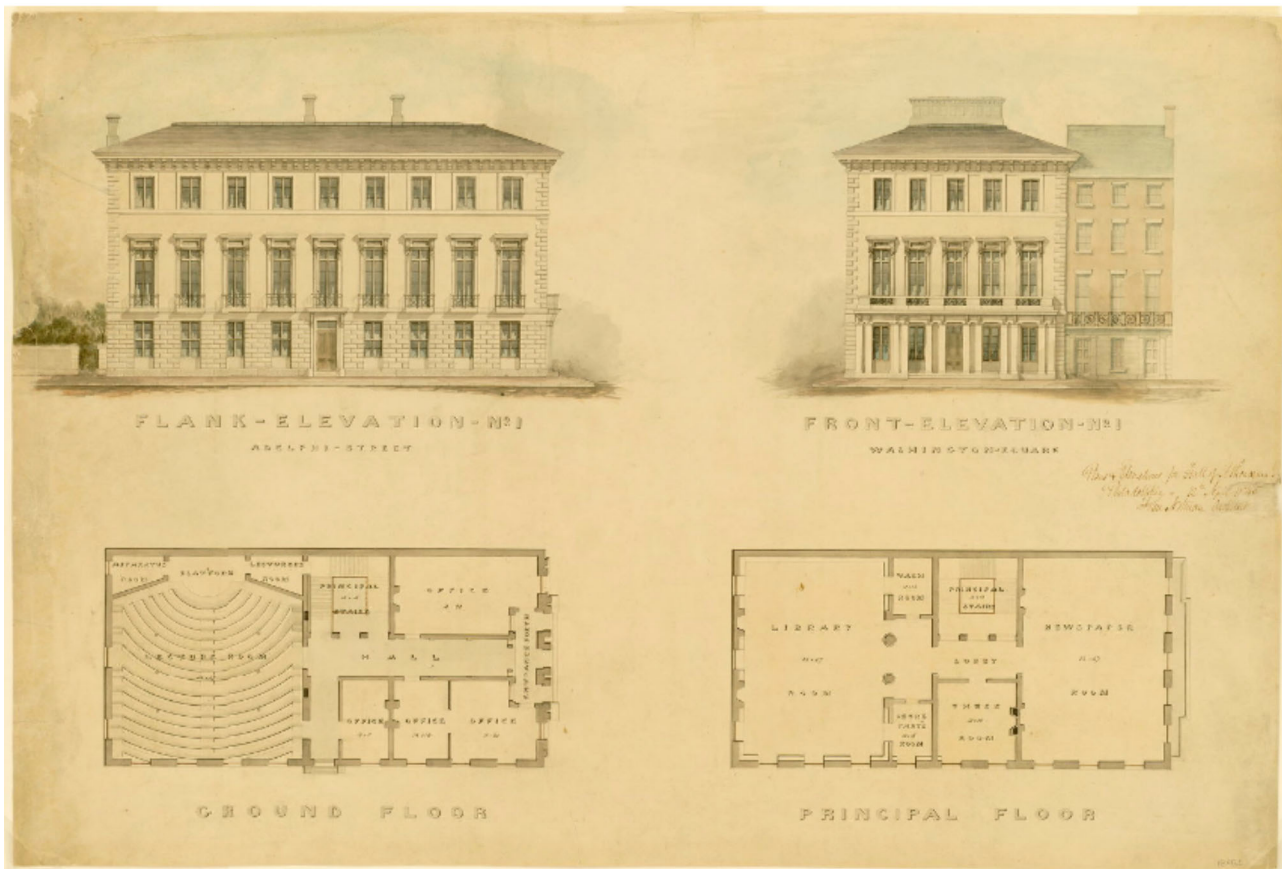


The Athenaeum of Philadelphia at 219 S. 6th Street after recent exterior renovations. | Photo: Joseph E.B. Elliott via The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

After occupying several different locations, including a period within the American Philosophical Society, in 1847 the Athenaeum established its current home on Washington Square. Architect John Notman received the commission over notable contemporaries William Strickland and Thomas Ustick Walter. In the prior decade, Notman had planned [Laurel Hill Cemetery](#), the first rural cemetery in the United States designed by an architect, and many tombs and monuments within it. After the

Athenaeum, he designed several Episcopal churches of diverse styles, including St. Mark's Church at 16th and Locust Streets (Gothic Revival), Church of the Holy Trinity on Rittenhouse Square (Romanesque), and St. Clemen's Church at 20th and Cherry Streets (Romanesque Revival).

In 1957, the building was added to the [Philadelphia Register of Historic Places](#), the same year its immediate neighbor to the south, the Dilworth House, was built for then-Mayor Richardson Dilworth. In 1999, both buildings were listed on the local register as contributing structures within the [Society Hill Historic District](#). The National Register of Historic Places included the Athenaeum in 1972, and four years later it was designated a National Historic Landmark.



Architectural drawings of the exterior of 219 S. 6th Street by John Notman from 1845. | Image courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

When the Athenaeum moved into its current building in 1847, the institution occupied only the second floor. “In the 19th century there were tenants on the first and third floors,” said executive director Beth Hessel. “The American Institute of Architects occupied offices on the third floor. The back room on the first floor was an auditorium that the School District of Philadelphia rented. The National Education Association was founded here in 1857. The American Catholic Historical Society was also founded here in 1884.”

Notman’s design for the Athenaeum was especially noteworthy for both its style and materials. “It was one of the first brownstone buildings in Philadelphia. Notman was known for moving Philadelphia away from the brick it was known for,” said Noah Yoder, conservator with Kreilick Conservation, LLC. “He introduced Italianate Revival into Philadelphia architecture, and it became a very common style here.”

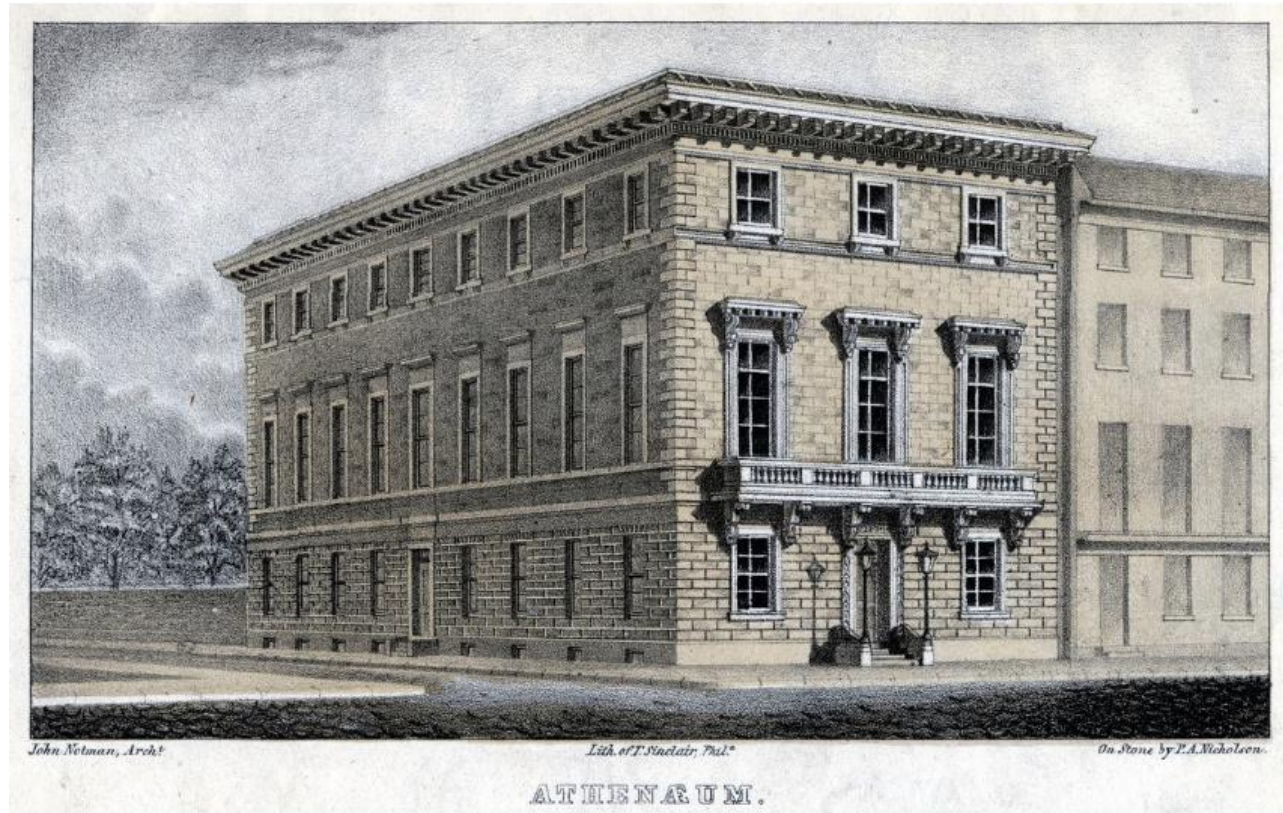


A sign for the American Institute of Architects when the organization shared 219 S. 6th Street with The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. | Image courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

While planning the Athenaeum, Notman's innovation didn't stop at the main building. He is also credited with designing a brick privy in the garden at the back of the yard. According to the Historic American Buildings Survey, "This unusual privy is of masonry construction and contains six private compartments, each with access from the exterior. The slatted compartment doors are of particular interest." Unfortunately, the privy was destroyed in 1962 by a falling tree.

As the Athenaeum prepared to mark its 175th anniversary in the building on Washington Square, it embarked upon major renovations, both interior and exterior. The latter project was what brought Yoder and his colleagues at Kreilick Conservation to the site, although it was hardly their introduction to the Athenaeum. "I loved this building long before we were brought in to restore it," he explained.





An engraving by P.A. Nicholson based on a drawing of 219 S. 6th Street by John Notman from 1847. | Image courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

A roof replacement in 2021 led to the full renovation of the exterior, a \$1.3 million project to repair deteriorated stone and stucco, restore rotted wooden elements, and clean the facade which was soiled from exposure to pollution and weather. Lighting was added to both highlight the building's architecture and to deter vandals. The front entrance's brass railings were stolen in 2018.

“The physical work took about six months,” Yoder said. “The campaign was a lot of planning, getting all of the groups involved on the same page.” Those groups included masons with Premier Building Restoration, structural engineers Keast and Hood, the carpenters at 18th Century Restorations, and Sun Precast Company, which provided the cast stone.



An early photograph from 1901 of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. | Image courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

In some cases, previous repairs were replaced, either because the work done was failing or not in keeping with the building's architecture and materials. "We replaced the water table at the lower level with cast stone. In 1974, it had been repaired with a sandstone that didn't match the building's original brownstone," Yoder explained, referring to the lower section of the exterior walls, which can serve to divert rainwater from a building or can be decorative. "It's like a wainscot on an exterior. You'll see a water table on many Philadelphia buildings, often a marble water table on a brick building. In this case, it is stylistic."

Two of the building's most prominent features, the stone balcony and the wooden cornice, required complete disassembly to repair. "We

reassembled the front balcony, which had suffered a lot of damage,” said Yoder. “It has a lot of detail, which increases the surface area and exposes it to more damage.”



The Athenaeum during facade renovation in 2022. | Photo courtesy of Premier Building Restoration, Inc.

The cornice at the top is made of wood. “It had sand pressed into the paint, which is a fun faux way to make it look like stone,” Yoder noted.

They removed rotted elements and had a look inside. “It provided an opportunity to take a close look at how the building was made, which hadn’t been documented before. When we took apart the cornice, we discovered it was done with a mixture of 18th and 19th century construction methods, representing a transition period between the two. It must have depended on which carpenters worked on which parts.” After the repairs, the cornice was painted to match the existing brown paint.

The results of that disassembly, repair, and reassembly may go unnoticed by the average eye, but one aspect of the renovation, the cleaning of the facade, stands out. The Athenaeum’s extensive collection of old photos from several decades show dark stains on the facade, which was badly soiled by vehicle exhaust and the elements.





The Athenaeum's west entrance after exterior renovations. | Photo: Photo: Joseph E.B. Elliott via The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

“As the facade became clear, the choices and placements of individual stones became obvious,” noted Christina Doe, the Athenaeum’s building supervisor. “All of these patterns and striations became visible,” agreed Hessel. “Now you can see the details. It was a stunning building when it was erected. The renovation has brought that back.”

“Patching the brownstone became complex, particularly in trying to match the materials,” said Yoder. “We ended up using about 20 different colors. And it is important to make sure the contemporary materials are compatible with the original materials.” Doe expressed appreciation for the level of detail that went into the work. “It was a bunch of sweaty people bending over stone, saying things like ‘it needs seven percent more yellow.’ The result is that it looks good, so it looks effortless.”



The completed facade renovation at dusk with new exterior lighting. | Photo:
Photo: Joseph E.B. Elliott via The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

That attention to detail, and reverence for their subjects, is a highlight for conservators. “It can be daunting to encounter something so significant, and it gives one pause. You have to take a moment to revere it,” Noah

Yoder said. “One of the fun things is that you get to be involved in all this wonderful history and objects. It becomes personal.”

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Kimberly Haas is a staff writer for Hidden City Daily. She is a long time radio journalist, both nationally and locally with WHYY and WXPB. In particular, she enjoys covering Philadelphia’s neighborhoods, culture and history, as well as urban sustainability and public policy, in both print and audio.