



Salem Athenæum Statement on the Phillips Library

09 January 2018

The Salem Athenæum is a venerable institution whose history is inextricably bound up with that of the Phillips Library. Plummer Hall, which until 2011 housed the Phillips Library, was originally built for the Athenæum and served as its home for six decades. The vast collections of the Phillips Library, the bulk of which was assembled by the Essex Institute, include source materials concerning the history of the Athenæum, and materials from the Athenæum's collections are on deposit at the Phillips Library.

While the Athenæum was founded first (in 1810), the Essex Institute became, over time, significantly larger than the Athenæum. This was the direct result of its charter, which was to maintain the historical records of Essex County. The Essex Institute pursued this goal tirelessly for a century and half, actively soliciting personal, business, government, church, and organizational materials, to create as complete as possible a record of life in Salem and Essex County. Many of these materials were solicited and donated with the explicit understanding that they would remain in Salem in perpetuity and be made accessible there to those who wished to see them.

While the Athenæum and the Phillips Library have different areas of focus, their purposes overlap in important ways. Both institutions are charged with preserving historical documents and artifacts; with publicly displaying their collections; with making their collections available to scholars and interested members of the public; and with serving as cultural institutions with a particular interest in promoting public awareness and appreciation of local history.

By virtue of both its history and its mission, then, the Athenæum has a duty to advocate for whatever course of action most closely adheres to these purposes. Strictly interpreted, this would mean advocating for retaining the library buildings and their entire collection in as close to their original condition and location as possible. The Athenæum recognizes, however, that this would involve significant practical challenges, in particular as concerns the storage of such a large volume of historical material under appropriate conditions of climate control and security.

The Athenæum is hopeful that a solution can be worked out that would honor three points in particular: first, the continued public use of as much of the Phillips Library building as possible, in particular the continued use of the Plummer Hall reading room as the place where physical access to the library's collections is provided; second, the physical retention in Salem of those materials most important to its history as well as those most likely to be of interest to Salem residents; and third, a schedule of exhibitions with both local and visitor interest that promote awareness and appreciation of the library's materials.

Salem Athenæum

The Athenæum wishes to express its strong support for the Peabody Essex Museum and for its outstanding efforts to create a unique contemporary cultural institution. In doing so, the museum has also helped to raise the profile of Salem and its rich and unparalleled history, and to enhance Salem's prominence as a place on the world map. While it is clear that the city, and indeed the state and the region, benefit from the presence of a museum with an international profile in ways far beyond what any institution of strictly local focus could match, we believe there is significant value in continuing to honor the mission of the Phillips Library as fully as possible.

The library's collections are a unique and valuable asset — one whose active utilization, through exhibitions and other programs, has the potential to enrich the experience of residents and visitors while also defraying stewardship costs. We therefore applaud all efforts in this direction on the part of the Peabody Essex Museum.

The Salem Athenæum welcomes the opportunity to participate in the discussion surrounding this issue and looks forward to the development of a solution that equitably addresses the various interests of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem's other institutions, and the interests of Salem's citizens and visitors — past, present, and future.