“DEEP INVESTIGATIONS OF SCIENCE
AND EXQUISITE REFINEMENTS OF TASTE”:
THE OBJECTS AND INSTITUTIONAL FURNITURE OF EARLY
HISTORICAL SOCIETIES AND REPOSITORIES IN
EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material
Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Massachusetts Historical Society (1791), the Boston Athenaeum (1807), the American Antiquarian Society (1812), and the Pilgrim Society (1820) make up a group of libraries, historical societies, and repositories founded in the span of three decades that present intriguing similarities and differences. These institutions modeled themselves and their collecting goals after British learned societies, but established American identities by collecting objects that spoke to the history of America before European settlement and in the colonial period. Case studies of examples from these cabinet collections elucidate how these objects contributed to the mission of these institutions. Once these organizations began to collect, they faced an immediate need to obtain furnishings like bookcases and cabinets for display and storage and chairs and tables to support the study of the collection. The object collections of these four organizations reveal how these communities interrogated the world around them. Institutional furniture was vital to the function of these societies and since it often blended into the background of the ordinary, offers access to the unremarkable, daily activities of these communities, which are the most difficult to uncover.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Non-domestic American furniture, meaning furniture made for contexts other than the home or that came to serve a purpose in a non-domestic space, has not received much study. Most of the work that focuses on non-domestic, public spaces are works of architectural history like Gretchen Townsend Buggeln’s *Temples of Grace: the Material Transformation of Connecticut’s Churches, 1790-1840*, Peter Benes’s *Meetinghouses of Early New England*, and Martha J. McNamara’s *From Tavern to Courthouse: Architecture and Ritual in American Law, 1658-1860.* These studies analyze extant architecture as well as records and drawings of non-extant buildings and interiors, placing them into the context of complex social structures that shaped peoples’ lives. Some individual pieces of furniture, like Benjamin Bucktrout’s Masonic Master’s chair, the pulpit from Boston’s Brattle Square Church, and a fiddler’s throne from a New Hampshire tavern, have been the subject of study. A few


known pieces of furniture survive with provenance linking them to churches and public buildings in Boston. It is not surprising that no sets or assemblages of furniture are known to survive from institutional or public spaces due to several conditions that apply to institutional furniture and make it a difficult subject to confront.

First, the category of “institutional furniture” is a difficult one to define. It best describes furniture made or purchased to serve the purposes of an organization. Throughout the history of many institutions, however, some pieces are given to or brought into the organization through no official decision-making channel. In the case of historical societies and learned institutions, some pieces that enter originally as collections objects eventually served as storage or display furniture.

Second, because such institutional objects as display cabinets, desks, and chairs mainly exist to serve a utilitarian purpose, it was not a priority to record information about the maker or provenance. Occasionally there are references in the Trustees’ or Treasurer’s Records to furnishings, but these are few and far between and are often non-specific. When there are no references, it is sometimes because an individual, a director, officer or trustee, was charged with furnishing a space. A sum of money reimbursing the responsible party may appear in the Treasurer’s reports along with a committee assignment in the proceedings, but there is little additional information since the task was delegated.

Third, where there are references to furnishings, the pieces themselves are often not extant since these furnishings were mainly utilitarian and easily replaced. Many of these institutions moved around between temporary locations in their early lives, discouraging the use of the same pieces for very long unless they were very portable and sometimes not even then. It seems that most of these pieces survived by chance or because they served a new use.

The Massachusetts Historical Society is the earliest of four eastern Massachusetts institutions with long histories and extant examples of early furnishings addressed in this thesis. The others include the Boston Athenaeum founded in 1807, the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester in 1812, and the Pilgrim Society formed in 1820. While all of these institutions survive today and many of them are well known for excellent document-based collections, this thesis focuses on extant institutional furniture from their early histories (within the first fifty years after founding) and their comparatively lesser-known object collections. Chapter Two provides the European and American context for object collections, cabinets of curiosities, and the earliest museums followed by a discussion of the beginnings of these institutions, focusing especially on the intentions to collect objects. Chapter Three presents case studies of specific objects in these cabinet collections while contextualizing them according to categories that emerge. Chapter Four examines the extant furniture from the early histories of these four societies, drawing conclusions from construction, provenance, and usage.

This thesis combines furniture and object collections with documentary and visual evidence in an effort to explore how considering the intentions and operations of these four collecting institutions adds a valuable framework to understanding extant
institutional furniture. Style progressions and producer-consumer relationships that governed what residents of Boston, Worcester, and Plymouth used to furnish their homes did not necessarily apply to what the communities of these institutions acquired and encountered. It is an exciting time to be studying and reconsidering Massachusetts Furniture, thanks to the Four Centuries of Massachusetts Furniture Project, a collaborative consortium of twelve institutions supporting the continuing study of Massachusetts furniture from the sixteenth century to the present. This thesis engages with cabinet collections and institutional furniture in the spirit of building upon the work and methodologies of material culture and decorative arts, while pushing forward into new areas of investigation.
Chapter 2
BEGINNINGS: THE SOCIETIES FOUNDED

Cabinets of curiosities existed centuries before the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston Athenaeum, American Antiquarian Society, and Pilgrim Society. The tradition of collecting was bound up with the practices of learning and study, which encouraged the development of communities to assemble collections and exchange ideas. These four Eastern Massachusetts institutions modeled their goals and operations after European learned societies, sometimes explicitly evoking them in founding documents. This chapter explores the European and American background that led to the foundation of the four institutions.

Cabinets of Curiosities and European Collections

The predecessors to the cabinet collections in Eastern Massachusetts and elsewhere in America were the studioli that Italian nobles assembled in the late fifteenth century.³ Nobles, princes, and wealthy antiquaries filled small, impressively decorated chambers with art and curiosities, both old and new and from near and far. The tradition eventually spread through Germany into France, England and Northern Europe [Figure 1]. German terms for this type of collection, Kunstkammer (art chamber), Wunderkammer (wonder chamber), and Kunstschrank (art cabinet), traveled

across language barriers and remained associated with this collections tradition. “Cabinet” or “cabinet of curiosities” in English could refer to a single piece of furniture intended for displaying a collection or to a whole room of objects.

While some cabinets were arranged and labeled to allow for easy study, they also were designed to impress - to dazzle with the sheer variety and amount of objects arranged in a custom-built and decorated environment. 4 These collections were extremely exclusive; access was often limited to royalty and nobles. As expeditions to the New World left Europe in increasing numbers beginning in the fifteenth century, natural and artificial items from the Americas joined the collections of objects from Asia, Africa, and other far off corners of the globe.

Cabinets of curiosities transitioned in the seventeenth century from being exclusive playthings of the wealthy to study collections at academies, universities, and learned societies. Collectors classified these assemblages into the broad categories of naturalia, artificialia, and scientifica. Naturalia, the products of nature, included preserved specimens of animals, vegetables, and minerals as well as hand drawn and printed images. Artificialia, the products of man, and scientifica, objects revealing man’s continued quest to understand and control nature, are closely related and often overlapped.5 Artificialia comprised art and objects valued for aesthetic reasons as evidence of man’s efforts to imitate nature, while scientifica encompassed models, machines, and designs. Art and science were two sides of the same coin to both

4 Mauriès, Cabinets of Curiosities, 66-67.

Renaissance scholars and American antiquarians at the turn of the nineteenth century, since many of the visual and technical skills required to produce a good drawing or sculpture overlapped with the drafting, measuring, and mathematical skills necessary to design and create a model or machine. Humans and their efforts to depict, contain, and discover the world around them were bound up with nature and its products.

**Creation of English Learned Societies**

Though America had severed its political ties to England by the time these four societies were formed, cultural ties remained strong, especially in prosperous port cities like Boston. Not surprisingly the men who founded the Massachusetts societies used European learned societies as a model. Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, looked to such organizations as the Society of Antiquaries of London. Founded in 1707, the Society of Antiquaries was recognized on the same level as the Royal Society and the Royal Academy and even shared space with these other bodies in Somerset House. The organization grew to be a prestigious force in the British cultural world by the last decades of the eighteenth century. The Society’s three operations were holding meetings for its members, keeping a library and cabinet, and contributing to the intellectual environment through publishing, all of which were goals of early historical and learned societies in America.

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American Museums and Cabinet Collections

When Jeremy Belknap (1744-1798) founded the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791, he continued a tradition began sixty years before in Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin and some associates founded the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731, a subscription library that also supported a private cabinet of natural and artificial objects meant to encourage learning in tandem with the literary collection. Thirty years later, in the late 1760s, Franklin also had a hand in the creation of the American Philosophical Society and its own cabinet of objects.

By the end of the eighteenth century, there was already a tradition of museums in America. The Charleston Museum in Charleston, South Carolina was formed in 1773 as an arm of the Charleston Library Society and was the first to apply the label “museum” to a collection or cabinet in America.7 Museums of the eighteenth century in Europe and America were open to the public in varying degrees. The Charleston Museum’s collection was available to the city’s elites until the entire collection was almost completely destroyed by fire in 1778.8 In this way, the Charleston Museum’s function was more like that of a private learned society. These institutions assembled impressive cabinet collections for their members.

The idea to create an institution with a collection that would be available to a more general public came to fruition in Philadelphia. Pierre Eugene du Simitière, an emigrant from Switzerland who settled in Philadelphia in the 1770s, opened his


8 Orosz, “Curators and Culture,” 36.
private collection of natural and artificial curiosities to the public in 1782, calling it his “American Museum.”\(^9\) The collection was small, but comments from visitors, both Americans and visiting Europeans, were positive. Du Simitière died prematurely in 1784 and his American Museum closed and its collections were divided and sold. The American Museum was short-lived and plagued by financial difficulties, but it was the first time that the owner of a collection in America had opened it to the public and spoken of intentions to form a national museum.\(^10\)

Charles Willson Peale was very familiar with the American Museum and, while he spoke condescendingly of du Simitière’s effort, there is no doubt that he took it into account when he created his Philadelphia Museum, which operated from the 1790s until the 1840s.\(^11\) Peale’s collection focused on natural history, with specimens arranged according to the Linnaean classification system. As an artist, it is not surprising that Peale would emphasize the study of nature and its relevance to life, since art in this period was still treated mainly as a way to investigate and experiment with nature. Peale commented that the Linnaean system, which allowed specimens to be arranged in order of increasing complexity, would reveal “Nature’s productions,

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\(^10\) Orosz, “Curators and Culture,” 73.

\(^11\) Peale’s Museum, which he left to his sons after his death in 1827, eventually failed due to lack of funding and his collection was sold, partially to showman P.T. Barnum. For further information about Peale’s Museum, see Charles Coleman Sellers, *Mr. Peale’s Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* (New York: Norton, 1980).
manifesting the most perfect order in the works of a great Creator." For Peale, that Creator was Nature, and his well-known museum presented the incremental study of nature, along with entertainments like moving pictures, to Philadelphians and visitors from elsewhere.

The Massachusetts Historical Society was not the first organization to form a cabinet in the Boston area, nor was it the first learned society. Harvard College’s cabinet in Cambridge originated with the gift of a telescope from John Winthrop in 1672. A devastating fire on January 24, 1764 destroyed nearly the entire cabinet, but the disaster sparked a renewed interest in rebuilding the collection through donations from residents of Boston and elsewhere.

Inspired by the example of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, John Adams founded the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston in 1780. The organization’s charter states the purpose of the organization “to promote and encourage the knowledge of the antiquities of America, and of the natural history of the country,… to cultivate every


art and science, which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity and happiness of a free, independent and virtuous people.”

This ambitious discourse was also present in the founding documents of the four societies examined in this thesis. This language helped these organizations establish themselves conceptually and socially within the tradition of collecting and education.

**Foundations and Intentions**

The Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Pilgrim Society were founded over a thirty-year span. They all share elements with British learned societies, but also display differences that resulted from adapting the model to America. While the four organizations stated their missions and visions in elevated, ambitious language infused with patriotism, these discourses reveal more about the founders and early members than they do about their actual operation. The founding documents of these four groups function on multiple levels: as statements on education and learning, and their status in Eastern Massachusetts and America, as a program for the future (albeit often ambitious and aspirational), and as institutional advertisements to attract suitable members. Despite some differences in emphases, all four of these societies formed collections of literary materials and objects that were central to their stated missions.

Jeremy Belknap, a Boston minister and amateur historian, saw that the state of Massachusetts lacked an institution to collect and preserve historical materials. Well aware of the precedent set by the British learned societies, Belknap was especially

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motivated to establish “an Antiquarian Society” to ensure the preservation of historical documents. In addition to the Harvard College fire in 1764, a fire had also destroyed the courthouse in Boston in 1747, resulting in the loss of many valuable records. Events leading up to and during the Revolution, including the sacking of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson’s house in Boston, contributed to the destruction or dispersal of historical records and collections as well. Belknap was an active member of Adams’s Academy of Arts and Sciences and knew firsthand that the Academy focused on scientific pursuits. The Massachusetts Historical Society was the result of his efforts. By the first meeting on January 24, 1791, the name had shifted from the Antiquarian Society to “the Historical Society” in order to emphasize the group’s focus on history over new scientific discoveries.

The Massachusetts Historical Society’s founding documents cast a wide net over all facets of American history, all framed within the goal “to promote the historic knowledge of our country.” Its preamble set forth the purpose of the organization and defines its broad interests. “The preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts,

16 Tucker, The Massachusetts Historical Society, 8-9. See the Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to find the Academy’s published papers, which heavily favor scientific discoveries or reflections.

17 Jeremy Belknap founded “the Historical Society” in 1791, which did not become “the Massachusetts Historical Society” until its Act of Incorporation was passed by the Massachusetts Legislature on February 19, 1794. See a reprint of the Act of Incorporation in “Meetings of 1794,” Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 1 (1791-1835): 62-64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25079092. To avoid confusion, I refer to the Massachusetts Historical Society as such from the beginning.

and records, containing historical facts, biographical anecdotes, temporary projects, and beneficial speculations” was the Society’s first priority, for they would allow them to “mark the genius, delineate the manners, and trace the progress of society in the United States.”

While Belknap’s personal focus was on documents, the Society also pursued “a collection of observations and descriptions in natural history and topography, together with specimens of natural and artificial curiosities.” Essential for the Massachusetts Historical Society’s broad historical interests, the cabinet received its first contribution at the second meeting of the organization: “Two pieces of Massachusetts coinage bearing the figure of a pine-tree, dated 1652” from James Sullivan. Both the cabinet and library benefitted from donations received from far-reaching locations in America and Europe after the Society sent out a “Circular Letter” in 1791 and 1795 explaining its purpose and soliciting contributions. The letter listed desired demographic, political, topographical, economic, natural, and historical information that the Society sought to collect. It also included a call for objects for the cabinet, attaching instructions for preserving natural specimens of all kinds. While it is unknown if the gift of the first curiosities from abroad was a result of the Letter, the cabinet acquired “a hat, cloak, and mantle of the natives, several pieces of cloth


manufactured there from the bark of trees, and other artificial and natural curiosities of that part of America.”

Both the library and cabinet collections had formed solid foundations by the end of the first year of the Massachusetts Historical Society’s existence and continued to expand.

William Smith Shaw (1788-1826) of Haverhill, a Harvard-educated lawyer and man of letters, played a leading role in founding the Anthology Society, predecessor to the Boston Athenaeum. The Society began meeting in 1804 with fourteen members, including Shaw, when the group took over a failing publication and published papers on a range of philosophical, scientific, and historical subjects. The Society was first and foremost a literary club, explicitly based on small associations in Britain. In January 1807, the Anthology Society’s trustees, a mix of ministers, lawyers, businessmen and men of letters similar to the Massachusetts Historical Society’s member demographic, produced a document outlining their intentions for the organization, which they endeavored to make “a foundation in this metropolis of an establishment similar to that of the Athenaeum and Lyceum of Liverpool in Great Britain.” The organization would combine the “advantages of a public library, containing the great works of learning and science in all languages…with a reading or


24 Katherine Wolff, Culture Club the curious history of the Boston Athenaeum (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 18.

news room, furnished with all the celebrated political, literary, and commercial journals of the day.”

By the time what began as the Anthology Society was incorporated as the Boston Athenaeum in April 1807, it had accumulated an impressive array of literary materials and would soon address creating a cabinet collection.

The official Act of Incorporation of the Boston Athenaeum lists the formation of the library as the institution’s first operation and priority, then expresses the “further design” of the Athenaeum “to form a museum of natural and artificial curiosities and productions, scientifically arranged” when financially stable. The non-literary collections of the Athenaeum would also eventually include an “apparatus” for experiments in natural philosophy and geography, “models of new and useful machines,” and “statues, paintings, and other objects of the fine arts.”

Reverend John Thornton Kirkland, a minister and eventual president of Harvard University from 1810 to 1828, drafted a memoir as trustee of the Athenæum of its short history and status to date in 1807. Kirkland elaborated on the kinds of objects that would make up the cabinet, which included “specimens from the three kingdoms of nature, scientifically arranged; natural and artificial curiosities, antiques, coins, medals, vases, gems, and intaglios.” A separate “Repository of the Arts” would house


mechanical models, “drawings, designs, paintings, engravings, statues” and other fine arts.29

The American Antiquarian Society formally incorporated in 1812, through the efforts of its founder, Isaiah Thomas (1749-1831). A printer and businessman from Boston, Thomas wrote a history of printing in the Old World and New World, collecting sources as he worked.30 When the book was completed, Thomas decided to form an “American Antiquarian Society” to preserve these materials and others that he believed to be in danger of being lost due to ignorance of their existence and their importance. Having been an active member of the Sons of Liberty leading up to and during the Revolutionary War, Thomas valued public service and saw his Antiquarian Society as a vital agency for the preservation of sources relating to the history of America and the interests of scholars. Thomas chose to place his Society in Worcester, the most prominent city in central Massachusetts, situated at a crossroads of land routes linking the major areas of New England to areas farther west and south.31 In addition to the city’s centralized location, Thomas believed that keeping the collection there would remove it from the threat of flooding and fire that it would face in urban,


31 Gura, The American Antiquarian Society, 16.
coastal Boston. The Society maintained close ties to Boston, however, as many of its members were Bostonians and two of the three annual meetings took place there.

Thomas’s petition to the Massachusetts State Legislature for incorporation stated that the Society would work to

“discover the antiquities of our own Continent, and by providing a fixed, permanent place of deposit, to preserve such relics of American Antiquity as are portable, as well as to collect and preserve those of other parts of the Globe.”

The foundation of the American Antiquarian Society’s collection was Thomas’s personal library, but donations soon poured in once the institution incorporated. A significant early gift to the society came from Hannah Mather Crocker, author and granddaughter of Cotton Mather. Crocker had inherited the Mather Family library including mostly seventeenth and eighteenth century religious, philosophical, and scientific books along with works by the Mathers, and gave part of the collection to the American Antiquarian Society. In addition to the library materials, Crocker gave objects associated with the famous Mathers including a whetstone that originally


35 Crocker had already given certain volumes to the Massachusetts Historical Society and some individuals. See Gura, The American Antiquarian Society, 2-3.
belonged to Increase and which his son Cotton used later “to make the pens that wrote the Magnalia [Cotton’s 1702 work of New England history titled *Magnalia Christi Americana]*.”

Crocker also presented a tobacco box that Increase had given to New England Governor William Phips and which had supposedly, but unlikely, belonged to Sir Walter Raleigh.

The Pilgrim Society formed in 1820, an appropriately symbolic year marking the 200th anniversary of the landing of the Mayflower and the founding of Plymouth Colony. In a published announcement, the Society listed its purposes: to support the annual December 22nd celebration of Forefather’s Day, the anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, and to “erect an edifice in the town of Plymouth, provided with halls and other apartments, suitable to the festive occasion, and a Depository for such appropriate portraits and antiquities, as can be procured.”

Though the Pilgrim Society’s description emphasized Pilgrim history, specifically “the first Governors of the late Old Colony,” it also intended to support a more general regional and national memory, incorporating “other ancient worthies of New England together with those of Washington, and his compatriots.” Membership in the Society was not limited to Pilgrim descendants, though early Plymouth history was undoubtedly an important focus.

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37 “Pilgrims,” Box 1, Pilgrim Society Archives, Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, MA.
The Pilgrim Society’s directors purchased land on Court Street in the Spring of 1822 and commissioned designs from the architect Alexander Parris. The builders broke ground on September 1824 and the building was completed (but without its portico) in time for Forefather’s Day the December following. The two-story brick building faced in stone included a “lower room, for the public entertainment of the Society and others, and the public celebrations” and an upper level with “a handsome, appropriate assembly room.” Pilgrim Hall served its purpose as a social space well, as the numerous accounts of the annual Forefather’s Day celebration describe. The Pilgrim Society made the spaces available for rent as well.

Parts of these spaces were used to store and display the collections of the Pilgrim Society. Dr. James Thatcher, the first Librarian and Cabinet Keeper, oversaw the beginning of the collection and its development until his death in 1844. Thatcher kept a record of donations to the library and cabinet, both of which received important

38 Corresponding Secretary’s Records, Box 3, Pilgrim Society Archives, Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, MA, 23.

39 William T. Davis, Plymouth Memories of an Octogenarian (Plymouth: Memorial Press, 1906), 17, http://books.google.com. For this reference and many others about the history of the Pilgrim Society and Pilgrim Hall, I am indebted to the access I was granted to a draft of an article by Jane Port about the history of Pilgrim Hall.


41 Issues relating to furnishings and the rental space are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.
works and objects concerning the history of Plymouth and of the nation more broadly. The first two objects recorded on the list are “an arm chair belonging to Governor Carver, brought in the Mayflower” and “a pewter dish which belongs to Captain Miles Standish.” While objects with Pilgrim provenance would be expected at Pilgrim Hall, the cabinet was also given natural and artificial curiosities similar to the objects that formed the collections of the other three institutions.

These four institutions overcame initial hurdles to their existence by attracting interest in the form of members and trustees, forming object and document collections for the study and edification of its membership and interested parties, and encouraging the exchange of ideas through meetings. European collections and learned societies provided successful models, but the Massachusetts institutions did not simply replicate their old world forebears. The Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston Athenaeum, American Antiquarian Society, and Pilgrim Society were American institutions that placed equal, often greater, emphasis on acquiring collections that reflected the history of the young United States and the colonies that came before it. Founding documents and proceedings defined the identities of these American organizations, but objects in the cabinet collections made them a physical reality.

Chapter 3

ASSEMBLING A MICROCOSM: OBJECT COLLECTIONS CASE STUDIES

When John Thornton Kirkland linked the phrases “deep investigations of science and exquisite refinements of taste” in the Boston Athenaeum’s “Memoir,” he invoked the interrelated subjects of science and art that were the foundations of the institution’s object collection.\textsuperscript{43} The Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston Athenaeum, American Antiquarian Society, and the Pilgrim Society all collected objects for study that fit into these two broad categories and illustrate how these institutions assembled their collections as microcosms of the world. In building their collections and studying them, these societies positioned themselves within the lineage of learned societies in Europe and also as American cultural authorities. Though they represented a combination of scientific or historic classifications, the objects making up each collection were complementary, each building upon the other to offer a way to access information about the world and marvel at it simultaneously.

The object collections of these four institutions can be grouped into three thematic categories that reveal how the directors and members of these societies situated themselves within the world and constructed identities. The first category, “Cultural Heritage,” includes objects from Europe and the ancient world, which grounded these institutions in a history that stretched back centuries. The “Wider

“World” encompasses objects from areas outside the Western world, some of which were newer areas of contact at the turn of the nineteenth century while others, the Near East for example, had been connected to the west for generations. The third category, “American History and Identity,” includes collections with American provenance, specifically Native American and Anglo-American. In this last category, these institutions added the recent history of the young country to the long narrative of Western history and asserted its worthiness of attention and study. Understanding these categories and why they were important is necessary in order to examine the meaning of the institutional furniture that supported such collections.

Comments made at the First Anniversary of the American Antiquarian Society on October 23, 1813 support these classifications. Members of the Society gathered at King’s Chapel in Boston to hear from distinguished members and honored guests. In his address William Jenks, a member of the American Antiquarian Society, minister, and Professor of Oriental Languages at Bowdoin College, offered a description of the growing collection of objects. The collection included what Jenks called “Civil Antiquities,” which referred to “the European accessions of population in America,” objects from the “ancient Indian nations of our continent,” and from “the early European settlements,” encompassing the early history of what would become the United States.44

Cultural Heritage

A plaster cast of the Portland vase given to the Boston Athenaeum in 1831 represents the Cultural Heritage category [Figure 2].\footnote{Stanley Ellis Cushing and David B. Dearinger, \textit{Acquired Tastes: 200 Years of Collecting for the Boston Athenaeum} (Boston and Hanover, NH: Boston Athenaeum and the University Press of New England, 2006): 357-358.} It is a rare eighteenth-century cast by James Tassie from the original glass vase produced in Rome in the first century B.C.\footnote{Tassie was asked to produce sixty casts, but he is not believed to have completed all sixty. Only around a handful, if that, are known to have survived.} The original was rediscovered during the Renaissance and became well known as a marvel of technical success in glassmaking. Already familiar to antiquaries in the United Kingdom, it left a private collection in Italy and came to the private collection of a Scottish architect in 1780, after which it passed through the hands of a few other collectors before entering the collection of the British Museum in 1810. Unfortunately, after the original became part of the British Museum’s collection, it was smashed into pieces by a drunken man in an unfortunate accident in 1845. It has since been repaired multiple times, but the Tassie casts were thankfully taken before the vase was broken and are important references to its original condition. The community of the Athenaeum and of the other three institutions would have been familiar with this famous example of the taste and skill of the Ancient World, and its addition to the collection illustrates the intellectual and physical connections that these societies maintained with Europe and, indirectly, with the ancient world.

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The Wider World

Records and donation books from the four institutions include many references to objects from beyond Europe and America. As the institutions moved away from collecting anthropological material in the middle and second half of the nineteenth century, however, they gave away most, if not all, objects in this category. By this time, there were natural history and encyclopedic museums for which they seemed more appropriate. Examples of these objects include “six yards of native cloth made from the bark of a tree,” from present-day Hawaii, which probably refers to kapa, a ritually- and culturally-significant cloth woven from the bast fibers of certain trees.47 Pilgrim Hall was given a “South Sea Island spear,” in the early 1820s, establishing a link with a culture far removed from Pilgrim ancestors, but tied to the ever-expanding nineteenth-century world.

American History and Identity

Part of constructing a national identity was physically and symbolically asserting control of the land over Native Americans. Raids and skirmishes were common in all regions of European settlement as colonists swept west, further into the territory occupied by Native Americans. One of the bloodiest and longest engagements was King Philip’s War, fought throughout New England from 1657 to 1678.48 The death of the leader of the Wampanoag Native American group, known as


48 For a more in-depth treatment of King Philip’s War, see Eric B. Schultz and Mike Tougias, King Philip’s War: the History and Legacy of America’s Forgotten Conflict (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 1999).
“King Philip” brought victory to the English and an end to the war. The spoils of battle became important symbols of these trying times for many who fought. A bowl [Figure 3] in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society made from a hollowed elm burl is inscribed “A Trophy from the Wigwam of King Philip When he was Slain in 1676 by Richard.” The bowl was purchased for the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1803. These four institutions all collected natural and artificial objects with Native American provenance, offering them for study of American history and as symbolic representation of how the earliest English settlers in New England had claimed ownership of the land. These four institutions situated themselves within the story that received its beginnings with the Pilgrims, and continued as the groups drew upon the past to form their own identities.

A cast iron pot [Figure 4] belonging to Miles Standish given to the collection of Pilgrim Hall in 1824, the year the building was completed, was one of the earliest items donated to the collection. The name “Miles Standish” has become so ingrained in the story of the Pilgrims that it is more likely to connote images like this one including hats made from newspaper or construction paper and acting out a mostly facetious but often repeated First Thanksgiving story. Standish, an English military officer, traveled on the Mayflower and was vital to the defense and administration of the colony. His cooking pot contributed to the physical reminders of the founders that existed in the collection of Pilgrim Hall on multiple levels. This pot evokes humanity in a way that other objects may not have since it was used to prepare food, a physical necessity for sustaining life that was a constant concern of the early Plymouth settlers. It connects the humanity of Standish to that of the other founders, from which the Pilgrim Society and the Pilgrim descendants drew a line to themselves. Even before
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1858 poem “The Courtship of Miles Standish” published a romanticized version of Standish, memory played an important part in the establishment of an American identity.49

Objects like Standish’s cooking pot, tea leaves collected from Boston Harbor after the Boston Tea Party, which exists in the collection of both the MHS and the American Antiquarian Society, and a piece of George Washington’s tent used during the Revolutionary War are the intersection of memory and history that contributed to the process of constructing an American identity, in which these four institutions participated. The cabinet collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the American Antiquarian Society, and Pilgrim Society required space and fixtures to house and display them. All four institutions quickly attracted the interest of donors to their collections, which required the organizations to address the issue of space and furnishing. The following chapter addresses the furniture that encased, displayed, and supported these institutions’ interrogation of the world around them.

49 For a discussion of memory and its function in the context of several objects in the collection of the Pilgrim Hall Museum, see Benjamin Colman, “Recalling the past: memories and antiquarian objects in the former Plymouth Colony, 1692-1824” (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 2012).
Chapter 4

DISPLAY AND STUDY: INSTITUTIONAL FURNITURE

Once these four societies incorporated and began collecting objects, their attention turned to acquiring permanent homes and furnishing them. With the exception of the Pilgrim Society, which built Pilgrim Hall just four years after the organization’s start, institutions occupied temporary locations initially, making the survival of early institutional furniture less likely. Yet, examples do survive. These fall into two categories. The first consisted of cabinets and shelves for display and storage. Chairs, tables, and desks were essential for encouraging the study of these collections and form a second category of institutional furniture worthy of attention. Both types of furniture offer insights into the objects themselves, the institutions that they served, and the challenges of studying institutional furniture.

At the first meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society in January 1791 at the house of William Tudor the officers charged the Standing Committee with finding a permanent location.50 In order for the Society to attract membership and donations and to store what it was given, it needed a home. The fledgling Society moved into an upper room at the Massachusetts Bank Building, located within sight of the Common at the intersection of Hamilton Place and Tremont Street. According to the terms of the agreement, the Society assumed responsibility for furnishing the room, and the

Treasurer was authorized at the third meeting on June 30, 1791 (the first meeting at the Bank Building) to purchase “twelve chairs (Windsor green, elbow); a plain pine table, painted, with drawer and lock and key, inkwell, etc.” One of these Windsor chairs, discussed at greater length later in this chapter, survives in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society today.

After a year in the Bank Building, the Society moved to a room in the attic of Faneuil Hall in July 1792. Despite the prominence of Faneuil Hall and the presence of a large, second-floor room often used for town hall meetings and the office of the city’s selectmen, the bustling market on the ground floor made it an inconvenient place for the Society. Two years later, the Society was offered a room in the Tontine Crescent. A letter from Charles Bulfinch, the designer of the Crescent, and his two Boston associates was presented to the officers and reproduced in the Proceedings. The proposal provided an upper apartment to the Society for its perpetual use for five shillings and specified that the Society was responsible for furnishing the space. In the same meeting at which the officers readily accepted the offer and voted to establish a committee was authorized to “attend to the furnishing of the said apartment


55 Tucker, Massachusetts Historical Society, 21.
in a plain, economical style.” Unfortunately, the records lack further elaboration. The Society had moved its collection from Faneuil Hall to the Crescent by June 1794. The room in the Tontine Crescent provided a site in what was promised to be the most fashionable development in Boston. The active pace of donations to the Library and Cabinet in the years after the move testifies to the Society’s stature as a cultural leader, attracting donations from local as well as distant sources. A disorganized, varied collection of library materials and historical and natural artifacts quickly filled the Society’s apartment. The officers and trustees worried about the constant threat of fire, especially after some of the Society’s significant holdings were lost in 1825 when the law office of James Savage, then Treasurer of the Massachusetts Historical Society, burned to the ground. Savage had borrowed certain works from the Society, a common practice for members and especially officers, and kept them at his office. The two most serious losses included a volume of Governor Jonathan Trumbull’s manuscripts and the second volume of three of Governor John Winthrop’s “The History of New England.” Savage had been working on a history of New England based on these important early accounts, but the ill-fated fire destroyed them. Alarmed by the Tontine Crescent’s increased susceptibility to fire and rapidly outgrowing the space in the apartment, the Society began looking for a new location. By March 1833, the Society had raised sufficient funds to acquire property at 30


The officers and trustees viewed the move a few blocks to the west to the new location, near the Massachusetts Historical Society’s first home, as a symbolic move toward the cultural and historical center of the city and back to the noble origins of the Society. The Massachusetts Historical Society remained at Tremont Street until the 1890s, when construction began on its current building on Boylston Street in Boston’s Back Bay.60

The Anthology Society moved into its first home on Congress Street in what was called “Joy’s Building” in December 1806.61 By the end of summer 1807, after the organization had incorporated as the Boston Athenæum, it had moved to Scollay’s Building at the intersection of Tremont Street and Court Street, just a short walk up Tremont Street from where the Massachusetts Historical Society had begun, though the Society had moved to the Tontine Crescent by the time the Athenæum incorporated. This proved to be another short-term solution, as the Athenæum moved again in March 1809 just a block down Tremont Street to a house that had formerly belonged to Rufus Amory and overlooked the King’s Chapel burying ground.

The Athenæum’s expanding collections soon grew too large for the Amory House, and the officers began to consider another relocation, but this time in a purpose-built structure. Such a place had been a goal of the founders of the

59 Tucker, Massachusetts Historical Society, 49. Tucker provides a useful summary of the MHS’s successful collection of subscriptions to fund the move. See footnote number 66 on page 49 for specific references to the process in the Proceedings.

60 See Chapter 10 in Tucker for a detailed account of the construction of the Boylston Street building and the establishment of the MHS at its current location.

61 Catharina Slautterback, Designing the Boston Athenæum: 10 ½ at 150 (Boston: The Boston Athenæum, 1999), 8.
Athenaeum. However, financial difficulties as a result of the War of 1812, as well as differing opinions within the leadership, deterred the Athenaeum from proceeding. The architect Alexander Parris prepared plans for the structure.\textsuperscript{62} Instead, an unexpected offer in 1821 precipitated the Athenaeum’s next move to a location on Pearl Street, just a few blocks east. James Perkins, a member and former Trustee and Vice President of the Athenaeum, presented his mansion and property to the growing organization.\textsuperscript{63} The mansion was one of the grandest in Boston and stood on Fort Hill, a quieter residential neighborhood than the busy commercial district surrounding the Amory House.\textsuperscript{64} The Athenaeum was installed in its new home on Pearl Street by June 1822 with more than enough room to expand its collections, especially its fine art and artifacts. The move inspired thoughts of another kind of expansion and thanks again to the generosity of the Perkins family (James’s son and brother) and also of other wealthy Boston elites, by the spring of 1826 the Athenaeum had received enough funding to erect an addition on an adjacent lot of land.\textsuperscript{65} The three-story brick building was completed by the fall of 1826 and included a Lecture Hall and multiple rooms for the fine arts and artifact collections.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{62} Slutterback, \textit{Designing the Boston Athenaeum}, 10. Parriss’s front elevation, floor plan, and perspective drawing are currently still in the collection of the Boston Athenaeum.

\textsuperscript{63} Quincy, \textit{History of the Boston Athenaeum}, 70.

\textsuperscript{64} Slutterback, \textit{Designing the Boston Athenaeum}, 11.

\textsuperscript{65} Quincy, \textit{A History of the Boston Athenaeum}, 96-97.

\textsuperscript{66} Slutterback, \textit{Designing the Boston Athenaeum}, 14.
Isaiah Thomas established the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, but planned that two of the three annual meetings would be held in Boston at the Exchange Coffee House at Congress Street and State Street. Designed by Asher Benjamin, the Exchange Coffee House was completed in 1809 and located across the Old State House. It occupied a well-selected position on a main commercial and political thoroughfare that led from Long Wharf, past the Old State House, to Tremont Street just north of the Common. Early meetings in Worcester were held at Sikes’s Tavern on Main Street until Thomas himself donated the funds to build the first Antiquarian Hall, completed in 1820.67 The Cabinet was located in a first-floor room at the back of the Hall.

The officers instructed a committee at the December 1821 meeting “to construct such alcoves and other accommodations, in Antiquarian Hall, for the use of the Library and Cabinet.” Organization of the collection, however, did not immediately follow. A description from a visitor to Antiquarian Hall in 1824 gave high praise Thomas and the Society for the well-appointed building and library, but noted that “on requesting a view of the cabinet of curiosities and antiques,” he was “informed that no admission had been allowed for more than a year” due to the disarray of the collection.68 References to the organization, or more often lack thereof, of collections appear in the records of the four institutions. The problem at the American Antiquarian Society was quickly addressed and by October 1826, visitors

67 Gura, American Antiquarian Society, 32.

were admitted to the Cabinet. William Lincoln, the Librarian and Cabinet Keeper at the time, reported at the October 26th meeting that “specimens illustrating the antiquities and history of the country...have been placed in order on the shelves of the cabinets previously procured for their reception...each volume and specimen may be conveniently found and examined.”

The American Antiquarian Society continued to attract donations and visitors, the majority of the latter coming to view the Cabinet rather than study the Library collections. More space was needed. At his death in 1831, Isaiah Thomas left funding to add a wing to either side of the Society’s building, a project that was completed the next year. This expansion undoubtedly included ordering additional furnishings to accommodate the growing collection, but no surviving examples have been identified. The Antiquarian Hall served as the home of the Society until the second Antiquarian building was completed in 1853.

Although Pilgrim Hall, the Pilgrim Society’s permanent location, was completed just four years after the Society incorporated in 1820, its function as a public and private meeting space meant that furniture was often transitory. As noted earlier, Pilgrim Hall occupied a prominent place in the annual Forefather’s Day festivities, hosting speeches, a dinner, and a ball. Correspondence in the records of the Pilgrim Society indicates that those appointed to organize the festivities probably


70 Gura, American Antiquarian Society, 99. The current building housing the Reading Room and collections of the AAS was built in 1910, the interior having been renovated in the twentieth century.
contributed furniture for the occasion. In a letter from Joseph Bartlett to the Trustees of the Pilgrim Society in December 1830, Bartlett reminded the group that, as undertaker of the Celebration years earlier, he had contributed the required furnishings including “temporary tables, benches, and all furniture” and a chandelier.\(^71\) He frustratingly informed the Trustees that two men had been appointed to appraise the furniture after the Pilgrim Society expressed interest in keeping it, but the appraisal had not yet occurred and Bartlett was still waiting to be reimbursed.

Arrangements like this one were probably common since the Hall served a dual purpose as storage for the Pilgrim Society’s collections and as a meeting place for hire. James Thatcher, the first Librarian and Cabinet Keeper, expressed concern and frustration in an 1841 letter to the Society at the use of the Hall by “a shaking quaker” who “raised the windows of the [upper] hall & hoisted in two of the largest benches from below & having displaced several articles & placed burning lamps within less than two feet of the large picture [Sargent’s Landing of the Pilgrims] commenced dancing.”\(^72\) While this seems to have been an especially alarming episode, Thatcher cited other occasions when the rental of the hall put collections at risk and prevented members of the public from viewing them.

The furnishing of Pilgrim Hall involved the participation of many members of the public. One significant donation came from a group of Plymouth women. They organized a fair in May 1853 and donated a chandelier, “grates [sic], fenders, fire setts

\(^71\) Joseph Bartlett to the Trustees, 22 December 1830, Pilgrim Society Archives, Box 1, Pilgrim Hall Museum.

\(^72\) James Thatcher to the Trustees, 31 May 1841, Pilgrim Society Archives, Box 1, Pilgrim Hall Museum.
[sic], mason work, carpenters work, papering, painting, window shutters, railing to protect the picture” and “sundry articles of furniture to be placed in the hall and rooms to be used…at the celebrations of the anniversaries.”73 The Pilgrim Society reimbursed the women for certain expenses and thanked them for their donations. The contributions of so many different people to the furnishings of Pilgrim Hall hamper efforts to generalize about the kind of furniture present at any given time, but scattered references and a few surviving pieces of furniture do hint at the display techniques within the building.

**Furniture Supporting Display and Storage**

Pilgrim Hall retains an early display cabinet [Figure 5]. It stands in a storage room filled with paper cups, tablecloths and the like. The cabinet was made for display and eventually relegated to storage after being replaced by newer furniture. Thankfully, it was not discarded. It stands is about seventy-two inches high, seventy inches wide, and fourteen and a half inches deep. Its primary wood is a conifer, most likely white pine and, unsurprisingly for an object that has been repurposed, shows signs that it has changed over the years. The reason for the outside of one door having been painted white is a mystery, especially since the other door shows evidence of grain-painting, a deliberate decorative finish [Figure 6]. The panels of the door are painted to resemble burl while the rails and stiles are painted to resemble rosewood. The panels are recessed on the outside of the cabinet and fielded on the reverse inside the cabinet [Figure 7]. Most visible on the inside of the doors, the canted rail stile joint

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73 James Thatcher to the Trustees, 16 December 1837, Pilgrim Society Archives, Box 1, Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth MA.
is an unusual sign of the sophistication of the cabinet’s construction [Figure 8]. Based on the evidence of the size of the lights in the doors, the muntins, the grain painting, and the presence of large hand-planed boards nearly twenty inches wide in the back of the cabinet, it probably dates to the first third of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the early history of Pilgrim Hall.

The interior of the cabinet suggests its original use. The cabinet’s interior space is divided in half where the two doors meet with multiple shelves fitted on each side. In the upper portion of each side of the cabinet, ghosts of previous slanted shelves are visible [Figure 9]. These shelves are evidence of use for display rather than simply for storage. The slant would have allowed documents or small objects to be installed in the upper part of the cabinet in order to be viewed.

A stereopticon image of Pilgrim Hall’s upper hall [Figure 10] shows a light-colored cabinet in a corner, but a look at the number of panes in the doors reveals that the cabinet in the image is not, in fact, the same as the extant example. It does, however, provide evidence of a certain look for the Hall’s display cabinets that can be applied to the extant example. The cabinet comes with no information about provenance, but the Treasurer of the Pilgrim Society recorded a credit to Winslow Drew in March 1838 for making bookcases.74 This record is ten years after the Hall opened, and perhaps that was the date of a refurnishing scheme, which may have included this cabinet.

74 The Pilgrim Society Trustees records credit William J. Drew for miscellaneous “Repairs to Hall” totaling $120.05 in March 1852. The work of these two carpenters (who are most likely related in some way) calls for further study.
The Boston Athenaeum’s collection includes a mahogany coin and medals storage cabinet [Figure 11]. It is very much in keeping with the more restrained Boston interpretation of the late classical style with two pillars supporting the flat pediment and top. Its flattened ball feet [Figure 12] especially evoke Boston manufacture. Mahogany is the primary wood and is also present as a secondary wood in the drawers, a fairly common practice of cabinetmakers in Boston.\textsuperscript{75}

The cabinet was designed specifically for the secure storage of coins and medals, which have formed a part of the Athenaeum’s collection from its beginning. The two columns of the cabinet lock into place, preventing any of the slim drawers from being opened [Figure 13]. When unlocked, the columns swing out on their hinges, allowing the drawers to be pulled open [Figure 14]. The records of the Trustees reveal their ongoing anxiety about the safety of the coins and medals. The small size of these objects made them easy targets to steal. The Trustees repeatedly made requests for the coins and medals to be cataloged so that thefts could be detected right away. They also called for the key to the room where this collection was stored, Room 12, to be locked at all times with access granted only to the Trustees and the Librarian and Cabinet Keeper.\textsuperscript{76} Even with all of these precautions, someone forcibly entered Room 12 in July of 1825, confirming the concerns of the Trustees and possibly serving as the motivation to obtain a cabinet like this one.

\textsuperscript{75} Cabinetmakers who are known to have used mahogany as a secondary wood include Isaac Vose in Boston and Duncan Phyfe in New York, among others.

\textsuperscript{76} Records of the Trustees of the Boston Athenaeum,14 October 1822, Special Collections, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA.
The Athenaeum’s Trustees’ records, along with records from the other three institutions and visual sources, also contain tantalizing references to cases and shelves that are no longer extant. The Massachusetts Historical Society possesses assorted invoices that mention certain furnishings, including “a Cabinet Compleat” made by Hayward and Blake in January 1792 [Figure 15] and a receipt from Russell and Clap, a Boston auction firm, in August 1792 for “3 book shelves” [Figure 16]. In January 1812, the Athenaeum’s Trustees records note that a committee was directed to “designate a place for the Cabinet of Natural History and to provide suitable cases for…donations to the institution.” When discussing preparations in 1822 to move to a new location on Pearl Street, another committee was charged with making “such alterations, repairs and arrangements both as to fixtures & Shelves.” These references to furnishings for display and storage hint at the ways in which these pieces established physical and conceptual boundaries for the collections of these institutions.

77 Receipt from Hayward and Blake issued to the Massachusetts Historical Society, 30 January 1792, Box 26, Treasurer’s Papers (1791-1902), Massachusetts Historical Society Archives, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Receipt from Russell and Clap issued to the Massachusetts Historical Society, August 1792, Box 26, Treasurer’s Papers (1791-1902), Massachusetts Historical Society Archives, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

78 Trustees Records, 6 January 1812, Boston Athenaeum Archives, Boston Athenaeum.

79 Trustees Records, 3 January 1822, Boston Athenaeum Archives, Boston Athenaeum.
Furniture Supporting Study

In addition to display furniture, examples of furniture that supported the study of the collection deserve attention because they too illustrate some of the challenges and rewards in studying institutional furniture. A secretary and bookcase and a blockfront desk and bookcase remain in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society. The decorative details and the craftsman’s careful wood choice in making the stylish secretary bookcase [Figure 17], contradict the usual image of institutional furniture as mostly utilitarian and often lower grade. Its primary wood is mahogany and it includes mahogany as a secondary wood also, in the drawers, while the backboard behind the pigeonholes in the desk has the appearance of chestnut or potentially Spanish cedar. The geometric pattern of the window muntins is similar to Thomas Chippendale’s designs and is only occasionally seen on American bookcases. The drawer front opens on a quadrant hinge to reveal a central prospect door with two pigeonholes and three drawers to either side [Figure 18]. The doors are veneered with figured mahogany from the same flitch of wood. The pigeonholes are capped with skillfully executed fretwork that, while not the same design, creates a stylistic link to the fretwork on the broken pediment [Figure 19]. Evidence from the secretary itself and the Society’s records point to a few potential places of origin. The well-crafted fretwork, extremely thin dovetails in the drawers, and glazing design led Wendell Garrett to identify this piece as English. These attributes, however, along with the use of mahogany as a secondary wood, also appear in New York furniture. Microscopic wood analysis of the backboard would likely help pinpoint the origin of the secretary.

80 Many thanks to Greg Landrey for reviewing both this secretary and the blockfront desk and bookcase with me and offering his expert opinion.
Garrett was responsible for associating a possible provenance with the desk. The Society’s Proceedings record the gift of “a cabinet desk” in 1836 from Thomas L. Winthrop of Boston, then the president of the Society. The donation record mentions further that the desk had originally belonged to Governor Jonathan Belcher, who served as the governor of Massachusetts from 1730 to 1741. It is quite possible that Winthrop believed that he was giving an important object with connections to Massachusetts’s history. Certain features of this secretary, however, argue that it was actually made decades later than Winthrop believed. Its glazing design, broken pediment, restrained amount of carving, and quadrant hinge suggest that it dates later in the eighteenth century, likely in the 1770s. Though the desk entered the Society as a collections object and not explicitly to serve as institutional furniture, it and another desk in the American Antiquarian Society’s collection exemplify a complexity in interpreting this object. Pieces like this secretary could have been displayed for their important associations that made them desirable to these Societies, but had the potential to become useful as furnishings. Furniture that became institutional did not always enter that way.

It is not known exactly how a mahogany blockfront desk and bookcase [Figure 20] came into the Society’s collection. It is a stylish example that speaks to the skill of Boston craftsmanship in its decorative details. Its white pine secondary wood

81 The collections at the Winterthur Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston include several examples of desk and bookcases with Boston and Massachusetts provenance dating to the 1760s to 1780s that share characteristics with this example. The shape double ogee-like design in the door panels, the carved columns on the outer edges of the doors, the tympanum design, and the blockfront form are found in examples attributed to Boston makers like John Cogswell, Nathaniel Gould, and George Bright.
represents a common wood choice in Boston furniture. The fall front reveals an ornate desk interior [Figure 21] featuring fan carving on the prospect door, columns with finials on either side that conceal secret storage compartments, and double ogee-shaped outer drawers. The inside of the bookcase [Figure 22], like the cabinet at Pilgrim Hall, shows evidence of change over the years. The upper shelves are intact, but newer shelves have been added in the lower portion of the bookcase. The only real clue to the potential history of the piece is a metal plate affixed to the outside of the desk lid engraved with the name “Leverett” [Figure 23]. The plate may refer to Thomas Leverett Nelson. Born in 1827, Nelson had ties through his mother, a member of the Leverett family, back to the beginning of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He studied law in Worcester and eventually served as a judge for the U.S. District Court in Massachusetts. He was elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1878.82 Nelson may have given the desk and bookcase to the Antiquarian Society before his death in 1897 or directed it to them in his will.

While the two desks came to the Society as collection objects, they both served as book storage for the Antiquarian Society. The secretary, with books stored in it, is just visible in a 1910 image [Figure 24] of the Librarian’s Office. The blockfront desk and bookcase is in a photograph [Figure 25] of the other half of the same room, likely being used for storage as well. The sharp line that separates collection objects from utilitarian ones today did not exist for these institutions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The distinction between these two categories is blurry if not

nonexistent. These two pieces bridge the gap between domestic and institutional furniture.

The Boston Athenaeum’s collection includes an octagonal library table [Figure 26] that has been serving its purpose since at least 1855, when it appeared in a daguerreotype of the Second Floor Library Room [Figure 27], part of the original structure built at the Athenaeum’s present location at 10 ½ Beacon Street.83 The table is simple in form, with three saber legs extending from a central pillar on which rests the large octagonal table top and frame. It is likely a vernacular piece made and designed by someone who was not a cabinetmaker by trade, but another kind of craftsman with some knowledge of furniture making.84 The table’s central pillar is not substantial enough to support the large top and structure beneath including four drawers and four spaces for storage, and the weight of the top and drawers has caused the structure to sag. A trained cabinetmaker would have included a larger central pillar or added legs down from the top structure. The saber legs and pillar was a common attribute of smaller center tables, dropleaf tables, and others, but these would not have been expected to support a top as large and heavy as the Athenaeum’s library table.85

83 The table may have entered the Athenaeum in the 1820s with the move to the Pearl Street location in 1822. No specific references to the table are known to exist and nothing about the table itself rules this out.

84 I thank Robert Mussey for his expert eye and willingness to share his opinions about this table.

85 Center tables, especially ones produced beginning in the 1840s, sometimes had marble tops, but they would have been made with extra supports to carry the weight of the top.
Its primary and secondary woods, mahogany and white pine respectively, make a New England provenance likely.  

The table’s design, though it fails the test of physics, shows that its maker or designer was thinking about function. Its top sits on supports similar to ball bearings that allow it to turn on top of a frame with four drawers and four alcoves for storage [Figure 28]. The table’s rotating top would be an ingenious feature for a library table if the central pillar supported the top better. The user could make use of the entire table top without having to move his seat or rearrange the materials placed there for study. The top may have rotated easier soon after it was made, but the top is currently very difficult to rotate without threatening the table after decades of the small central pillar struggling to hold the weight of the top.

In addition to desks and tables, spaces within the four institutions included benches and chairs. A receipt [Figure 29] for a set of twelve chairs survives in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The set was ordered from Hayward and Blake in September 1791, when the Massachusetts Historical Society had moved into a room on an upper floor of the Massachusetts Bank Building and needed to furnish it. Cabinetmakers John Hayward and William Blake had formed a partnership by 1793 according to a note in the Boston tax assessors’ “Taking

86 It's primary wood is mahogany, but it is very light in color, probably having been bleached by long exposure to sunlight. The daguerreotype image shows the table next to a large window and sunlight exposure while placed there could be the cause of the bleaching.

87 Receipt from Hayward and Blake issued to the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1 September 1791, Box 26, Treasurer’s Papers (1791-1902), Massachusetts Historical Society Archives, Boston.
They were first taxed individually in 1788 and 1791 respectively. The evidence of this receipt suggests that they were working together before they Taking Books first note. Happily, one of the Windsor chairs is still at the Massachusetts Historical Society. The survivor is a Windsor sack-back armchair [Figure 30] consistent with known examples made in Boston.\(^8^9\) A set of Windsor chairs was a smart choice for the young Society. They were cheap, durable, and easy to move, all considerations for the young Society inhabiting its first temporary space. They were also readily available through a local Windsor chairmaking industry that had blossomed in the late 1780s.\(^9^0\)

We can relate the Massachusetts Historical Society’s Windsor chairs and two Hitchcock-type chairs [Figures 31 & 32] that once furnished the upper hall at Pilgrim Hall within the context of industrialized chairmaking. The Windsor chairs represent the beginning of mass production in the chair industry, and the Hitchcock chairs are examples from a later stage in the process. At its height in the 1820s, Lambert Hitchcock’s two-and-a-half story factory in Hitchcocksville, Connecticut, produced tens of thousands of chairs a year. The form became popular enough to inspire imitations and were mass-produced, cheap, popular seating good for institutional use. The chairs at Pilgrim Hall have been painted a number of times and are still currently


\(^{89}\) The surviving chair was published in Nancy Goyne Evans’s Windsor Chair-Making in America (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 414.

used as institutional furniture at the museum. We know that Pilgrim Hall was
furnished with these chairs and others like them because they appear in the same
stereopticon image of the upper hall as the white cabinet [Figure 33]. The Hitchcock-
type chairs along with these long benches served as seating for visitors as they
contemplated their Pilgrim ancestors.

The energy surrounding the foundation of these societies led to the rapid
expansion of collections, making space, location and the organization of the
collections a constant concern for trustees and officers. With the exception of the
Pilgrim Society, which completed its own permanent location just four years after
incorporation, these organizations moved between locations a number of times in their
early histories. These moves had implications for the kinds of furnishings,
representing different forms and various levels of craftsmanship, that the societies
accumulated and ordered. The furniture surrounding these objects and the
circumstances that brought them to these communities are interwoven with the ways
in which these institutions operated as collectors, consumers, and cultural authorities.
CONCLUSION

The library and object collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston Athenaeum, American Antiquarian Society, and Pilgrim Society (now at the Pilgrim Hall Museum) are still some of the most well known resources for studying American history. The stories of the development of these institutions become more complex and intertwined throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they expanded on the foundations, both literally and figuratively, laid by their visionaries and early officers. These societies eventually evolved to focus on materials pertaining to American history. Object collections declined in importance compared to library materials. The institutional furniture of these societies, both extant examples and references to non-extant furnishings in records, has received little or no attention, though it presents a fascinating avenue for expanding knowledge about these specific organizations and institutional furniture in a broader sense. As these four institutions continue to serve as repositories of valuable sources supporting communities of learning, examining their collections in a broader sense fulfills the collecting visions of the founders and contributes to the study of decorative arts and material culture.

Studying these societies’ institutional furniture from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century is a challenge because few pieces are extant, documentary sources that would begin to fill the gaps in what survives are few and far between, and attitudes toward institutional furniture are, and were, different than those pertaining to domestic furniture. There may be further information to be gathered about institutional furniture from diaries and writings of people who used it, but it mostly falls into the category of the everyday details that become unremarkable. These pieces were often
unremarkable in their time, a status that makes them worthy of attention and discussion because ordinary events are the most constant details of life.

The cases, chairs, tables, and desks used at these institutions cannot easily be assigned a specific context of use and location. This thesis examines evidence from the first few decades after the founding of these societies, but evidence from later in their histories remains to be examined and added to the narrative. Photography allowed spaces in these institutions to be preserved at a single moment. A 1910 image [Figure 34] of the reading room in the American Antiquarian Society’s Antiquarian Hall includes an assortment of institutional furniture and objects on display: a desk and chair in the middle of the room (most likely for a librarian), a large table and chair for consulting materials, a table top display case with the hilt of a sword visible along with hints of other objects, and prints, portraits, and sculpture installed on the walls and around the room. A photograph [Figure 35] taken around 1925 of Pilgrim Hall’s upper hall includes some iconic objects in the collection like Sargent’s *Landing of the Pilgrims*, the Brewster chair, the Peregrine White cradle, the Standish chest, and others. Cases, benches, and tables furnish the space as well. Momentary glimpses at the furnishings offer the opportunity to examine the institutional furniture and object collections.

Views of objects installed around the rooms or in cases like in the two images mentioned above depict organization of objects. Another circa 1925 photograph [Figure 36] shows a table top case at Pilgrim Hall just large enough for Miles Standish’s cooking pot. A sword, a dish, and what appears to be a stoneware jug populate the case along with other items. Paper labels, which unfortunately are unreadable, and accompanying photographs are alongside the objects. Images like this
one are tantalizing clues to the display of these objects and how Cabinet Keepers and visitors conceptualized these collections. Though there is much work left in studying the interaction of the objects and institutional furniture of these societies, it is clear that they afforded countless opportunities for engaging with the past and bringing it into the present. The founding documents and proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Pilgrim Society exude confidence that their members were participating in a vitally important process to preserve documents and objects. They were correct, but what they may not have anticipated is that the furnishings they chose to surround and encase these collections would also become rich source for studying a chapter in American history and culture.
Figure 1  Engraving of Ole Worm’s Museum Wormarium. Ole Worm (1588-1674), a Danish physician and antiquary, opened his collection to students for study. “Musei Wormiani Historia,” Museum Wormarium (Leiden: ex officina Elseviriorum, 1655), http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/wonderbound/crocodiles.htm.
Figure 3  Bowl attributed to the Wampanoag. Elm burl. 1655-1675. Gift of Isaac Lothrop, 1803. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
Figure 4  Cooking pot belonging to Miles Standish. Cast iron. England. 1600-1650. PHM #111. Gift of John Watson, 1824. Courtesy of the Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, MA.
Figure 5  Display cabinet. White pine. 1820s-1830s. Pilgrim Hall Museum.
Figure 6  Detail: Faux graining on outer door of display cabinet.
Figure 7    Interior of door on display cabinet.
Figure 8  Detail: Canted stile joins viewed on interior of display cabinet door.
Figure 9  Interior of display cabinet showing shelf ghosts below each current shelf.
Figure 10  “Interior of Pilgrim Hall.” Stereopticon image. William S. Robbins. Plymouth, MA. ca. 1870s. Courtesy of the Pilgrim Hall Museum.
Figure 12  Detail: View of flattened ball feet on coin and medals storage cabinet.
Figure 13  
Detail: Top of column with hole for key in locked position.
Figure 14  Detail: Top of column with lock in unlocked position.
Figure 15  Receipt of payment from the Massachusetts Historical Society to Hayward & Blake for “a Cabinet Compleat.” 30 January 1792. Original manuscript from the Massachusetts Historical Society Archives. Massachusetts Historical Society.
Figure 16  Receipt of payment from the Massachusetts Historical Society to Russell & Clap for “3 Book Shelves.” August 1792. Original manuscript from the Massachusetts Historical Society. Massachusetts Historical Society.
Figure 17  Secretary and bookcase. Mahogany (primary) and possibly chestnut or Spanish cedar (secondary – backboard behind pigeonholes). 1770-1780. Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 18  Detail: Interior of secretary showing pigeonholes and drawers.
Figure 19  Detail: Fretwork on broken pediment of Secretary.
Figure 20  Blockfront desk and bookcase. Mahogany (primary) and pine (drawer bottoms and sides). Likely Boston. 1760-1780. Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 21 Interior of blockfront desk work space.
Figure 22  Upper case interior of blockfront desk.
Figure 23  Detail: Metal plate engraved “Leverett” on exterior of desk and bookcase’s fall front panel.
Figure 24  Photograph of the Librarian’s Office (showing secretary). E.B. Luce. 1910. American Antiquarian Society Archives. American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 25  Photograph of the Librarian’s Office (showing blockfront desk and bookcase). E.B. Luce. 1910. American Antiquarian Society Archives. American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 26  Octagonal table. H: 32 in. TOP: 63 x 61 ½ in. Mahogany (primary) and white pine (secondary). c. 1820s-1853. BA accession number: UU.1822.2. Collection of the Boston Athenaeum.
Figure 27  Daguerreotype image of Second Floor Reading Room at the Boston Athenaeum. The library table is in the left of the image beyond the table in the foreground. “Boston Athenaeum, interior view,” ca. 1855, daguerreotype, 21.5 x 16.5 cm, full plate, 74:0193:1116. Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.
Figure 28    Library table from side with rotation mechanism and storage visible.
Figure 29  Receipt of payment from the Massachusetts Historical Society to Hayward & Blake for “twelve chairs for Society”. 1 September 1791. Original manuscript from the Massachusetts Historical Society. Massachusetts Historical Society.
Figure 30  Sack-back Windsor armchair. White pine (seat). Hayward & Blake (Boston), 1791. Massachusetts Historical Society.
Figure 31  Hitchcock-type side chair. Painted white. Likely New England. c. 1820s-1840s. Pilgrim Hall Museum.
Figure 32  Hitchcock-type side chair. Painted green. Likely New England. c. 1820s-1840s. Pilgrim Hall Museum.
Figure 33  “Interior of Pilgrim Hall.” Stereopticon image. William S. Robbins. Plymouth, MA. ca. 1870s. Courtesy of the Pilgrim Hall Museum.
Figure 34  View of the Reading Room in Antiquarian Hall. Worcester, MA. 1910. American Antiquarian Society Archives. American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 35  Photo of Pilgrim Hall Museum Interior. ca. 1925. Plymouth, MA.
Courtesy of the Pilgrim Hall Museum.
Figure 36  Close up view of a case at Pilgrim Hall. ca. 1925. Plymouth, MA. Courtesy of the Pilgrim Hall Museum.
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*Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* XII (October 1897-October 1898).
http://books.google.com

Boston Athenaeum


Massachusetts Historical Society


Pilgrim Society and Pilgrim Hall

Corresponding Secretary’s Records. Pilgrim Society Archives. Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, MA.

Joseph Bartlett to the Trustees. 22 December 1830, Pilgrim Society Archives, Box 1, Pilgrim Hall Museum.

Joseph Bartlett to the Trustees. 16 December 1837, Pilgrim Society Archives, Box 1, Pilgrim Hall Museum.


Records of the Librarian and Cabinet Keeper of the Pilgrim Society, Pilgrim Society Archives, Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, MA.

Miscellaneous


**SECONDARY SOURCES**


Appendix

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All the best,

Nan

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Hina Hirayama <hirayama@bostonathenaeum.org>  
To: Caryne Eskridge  
Cc: Patricia Boulos <boulos@bostonathenaeum.org>  

Caryne:

My colleague, Pat Boulos, has forwarded your query to me regarding the photographs you took of two pieces of furniture here at the Boston Athenæum.

We give permission for you to include in you M.A. thesis the photos you took. Please include the citations that you already received from me, and add “Collection of the Boston Athenæum” to them at the end. If you ever wish to publish these images in any forms other than your M.A. thesis, you will need to obtain professional photographs as well as the Athenæum’s permission.

Thank you very much.

Hina

******************************************************************************

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******************************************************************************
From: Caryne Eskridge  
Sent: Wednesday, April 10, 2013 10:15 AM  
To: Patricia Boulos  
Subject: Image permissions for M.A. thesis

Hi Pat,

Thanks again for all of your help with photo permissions a few weeks ago. I'm working on finalizing image permissions for my thesis and I have a question about a few images that I would like to include. On one of my visits to the Athenaeum, Hira showed me some pieces of furniture in the collection and allowed me to take photos. My thesis currently includes four photos of a corn cabinet (UU.1822.1) and two photos of an octagonal library table (UU.1822.2). Is this enough information to obtain permission or is there more that I need to provide?

Thanks! Let me know if I can clarify anything.

Best,

Caryne

Caryne Eskridge  
Lois F. McNeil Fellow  
Winterthur Program in American Material Culture  
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Receipt of payment from the Massachusetts Historical Society to Hayward & Blake for "twelve chairs for Society," 1 September 1791. Original manuscript from the Massachusetts Historical Society Archives. Massachusetts Historical Society.

April 13, 2013

To: Caryne Eskridge, Lois F. McNeil Fellow
Winterthur Program in American Material Culture

Permission is given to Caryne Eskridge to reproduce images from the collections of Pilgrim Hall Museum for her Master’s thesis. The images include five images of a nineteenth century display cabinet and two images of nineteenth century Hitchcock chairs, photos taken by her. Also included are images of the Standish pot from the object collection, an interior view of the Museum from a stereopticon card, and two interior views of the Museum from photographs. Permission is also given to quote freely from manuscript materials in the institutional archives collections.

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Associate Director/Curator of Collections