

Master builder James Nutter's work lives on

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Editor's Note: The Athenaeum at 200 series celebrates the 200th anniversary of the Portsmouth Athenaeum by highlighting unique items, photographs and artifacts in its collection.

The Athenaeum building retains the workmanship of some of Portsmouth's leading craftsmen of the period and illustrates the high level of the building arts at the beginning of the Federal period, according to Athenaeum Proprietor James Garvin, who served 24 years as New Hampshire State Architectural Historian..

"Several skillful joiners fashioned the building's woodwork," Garvin writes. "Chief among them was James Nutter (1775-1855), soon to emerge as 'the head of his craft' in Portsmouth when he served as master builder of St. John's Church in 1807 and as the designer of the Portsmouth Academy building (now Discover Portsmouth) in 1809."

In March 1805, the New Hampshire Fire and Marine Insurance Company paid Nutter \$160 for "Finishing the Fire & Insurance Office Chamber."

"Now the old Athenaeum Reading Room, this chamber was originally an impressive first-floor meeting place for officials of the company, individual underwriters and customers," Garvin writes." Although later remodeling has removed one fireplace and embellished the other, the room retains much of Nutter's work in its elaborate cornice and in the detailing around the impressive front windows."

From the first, the room served as a pleasant meeting place and reading room used by the insurance company. Some of the stockholders of the company, in fact, became so attached to this

beautiful chamber and so “desirous that it should ever be used for the same purpose” that they joined forces with the fledgling Athenaeum to acquire the building after the insurance company decided not to renew its charter in 1823, Garvin writes.

The Portsmouth Athenaeum is open to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1 to 4 p.m., and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information on the nonprofit membership museum and library, go to www.portsmouthathenaeum.org or call 603-431-2538.

– *Compiled by Sherry Wood*