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BOOKS FOR PIONEERS

The Minneapolis Athenaeum

BETTY L. ENGBRETSON

THE EARLY FORMATION of private subscription libraries and literary societies on the heels of settlement was characteristic of many colonial and frontier communities in America. Minnesota was no exception. The oldest existing private subscription library in the state—the Minneapolis Athenaeum—came into being as early as 1859, a year after Minnesota achieved statehood. Chartered as a corporation in 1860, the Athenaeum continued its activities as a separate private subscription library until 1885, when it became associated with the newly created Minneapolis public library board. In co-operating with the infant public library, however, it retained its autonomy and its character as a private library. Thus, it represents an interesting fusion of the old and the new, the literary society and private subscription library of the past with the public library system so characteristic of the present.

The Athenaeum was not unique in early Minneapolis and St. Anthony. Such other early libraries as the St. Anthony Literary Society and the Mechanics Library were founded in the 1850s, enjoyed active but brief careers, and passed out of existence. How the Athenaeum managed to survive is

a story not only of the work of dedicated individuals and the acumen of its members, but also of a Minnesota community's desire for books.

In 1859 Minneapolis was a typical frontier community. The United States census of the following year was to list its population as 5,830. Minnesota had no railroads, and although stage lines connected some of the area's more populous centers, its principal artery of communication was the Mississippi River. The effects of the panic of 1857 were still evident, and the times did not appear auspicious for the launching of a new literary society.

Early in the spring, however, the famous world traveler Bayard Taylor announced that he would tour the Northwest and lecture before any literary society that would pay his expenses and give him a small fee. The balance of the proceeds would go to the society sponsoring his appearance. Even though an "unkind observer once remarked that Taylor had traveled more and seen less than any man alive," a group of Minneapolis citizens met on May 16 to organize a library association so that they might take advantage of Taylor's proposition. On May 18 they met for a second time, adopted

a constitution, and took the name of "The Young Men's Library Association of Minneapolis." Taylor's lecture for its benefit, given at the Methodist church on the evening of May 25, was entitled "Life in the North." It was a financial success. Total proceeds of the lecture were \$141.75, from which the sum of \$58.25 was paid to Taylor and a balance of \$83.50 realized as profit by the newly formed library association.¹

IN July, 1859, the association met, adopted a new constitution and by-laws, and changed its name to the Minneapolis Athenaeum. The constitution stated that the Athenaeum's "primary object . . . shall be the formation of a library; and, secondarily, whenever it may be deemed expedient, to provide lectures and debates." On August 19 the *Minnesota State News* reported that the reorganized institution was open for business and that a "large number of valuable books have already been donated by the citizens of Minneapolis."²

The new organization soon took steps to secure a charter. At a meeting on January 3, 1860, a draft was presented, and the group voted to send it to the legislature for enactment. This was done, but the charter was returned and the Athenaeum informed that the granting of such special charters was unconstitutional and unnecessary, since

the general statutes provided "for the organization of scientific and educational societies, including libraries." Another meeting was then held and "a charter, drawn in accordance with the general act, was presented, read, and adopted."³

The document was similar to those of other such organizations of the period and was specifically modeled on the charter of the Providence, Rhode Island, Athenaeum. It provided for capital stock of ten thousand dollars, to be divided into 1,130 shares. Seventy-five shares were offered at one dollar, fifty shares at three dollars, fifty-five shares at five dollars, and the remaining nine hundred and fifty shares at ten dollars. The charter also called for a board of directors to conduct the organization's business, "direct the purchase of books, make by-laws, and regulate all affairs of the institution not otherwise provided for by the corporation." The directors were ordered to "present at the annual meeting a detailed report of the state of the library, and of the general concerns of the Corporation."

Other articles outlined the duties of the officers, provided for quarterly and annual meetings, and set quorums. Article 12 stated that "Each shareholder shall be entitled to one vote by himself, his attorney, or proxy, on every share by him held, at all meetings of the Corporation, subject to the restrictions specified by the by-laws; and shall be liable for all assessments voted by the corporation, provided the same do not exceed five dollars per annum."

The by-laws offer insight into the functioning of a private subscription library, for they set up routines and provided for a librarian. The first by-law stated that shareholders or the immediate members of their families could take out two books for two-week periods. They might be renewed at the discretion of the librarian, and a fine of two cents was to be charged for each day that the book was kept beyond the specified time. The fourteenth by-law permitted nonshareholders to use the reading room and to take one book at a time from

¹ For published accounts of Taylor's lecture, see John T. Flanagan, "Bayard Taylor's Minnesota Visits," in *Minnesota History*, 19:399-403 (December, 1938); *Historical Sketch of the Minneapolis Athenaeum*, 5 (Minneapolis, 1876); and *Minnesota State News* (Minneapolis), June 10, 1859. On the organization of the library association, see the minutes of its meetings for May 16, 18, 1859. Financial results of the lecture are given in the Athenaeum's annual report for February 5, 1861. These and other manuscript sources used in the preparation of this article are in the possession of the Minneapolis Athenaeum.

² *Historical Sketch*, 5; Library Association, Minutes, July 8, 1859.

³ Board of Directors, Minutes, January 3, 24, 1860; *Historical Sketch*, 5, 11, 13, 15. The latter contains the complete text of the charter and the by-laws referred to below. The original charter, in manuscript form, is in the possession of the Athenaeum. For the territorial law chartering libraries, see *Minnesota, Public Statutes, 1849-58*, p. 286 (St. Paul, 1859).

the library upon the payment of a deposit of two dollars and a fee of ten cents a week or a dollar for three months. By-law 15 said that "Shareholders may be allowed to transfer the use of their shares by giving notice thereof in writing to the librarian; they being responsible for the observance of the by-laws by the person to whom the use of the share is transferred."

Important, too, in launching the Minneapolis Athenaeum was the interest and support of Thomas Hale Williams, the owner of a Minneapolis bookstore. Williams had previously served as librarian of the Athenaeum in Providence, Rhode Island, and in drawing up its charter the Minneapolis committee had relied greatly upon his judgment. Williams served as the Athenaeum's first librarian, and its survival during the first seven years of its existence was due in large measure to his work. During that time, he served without salary, and housed the library's collection in his bookstore, charging a small rental fee for this service.⁴ On April 7, 1860, the *State News* reported Williams' appointment as librarian and noted that there were over three hundred volumes in the library.

The organization's principal income came from assessments on shares. The minutes of the first annual meeting held on February 7, 1860, show that the assessment was set at two dollars a share. Later records list 66 shareholders in 1861; 132 in 1866, 113 in 1867, and 191 in 1868. In 1869, thirty-two shares were forfeited for nonpayment of assessments. During these early years, practically all the receipts could be used for the purchase of books. Although the revenue was not large, the collection grew steadily, and by 1865 it had reached a total of 1,137 volumes.⁵

IN THAT YEAR the stockholders launched their first major financial undertaking in acquiring a lot and planning a new Athenaeum building in the Centre Block, located in what is now Gateway Park in the lower loop area. The strategic location of

the new library in the business center of the city was no doubt a factor in its growth and in its increasing use. Although in later years the reports mention the inconveniences resulting from the noise and dust on the streets below,⁶ it is interesting to note that experts in library planning today favor the heart of the business district as the ideal setting for a library building.

The price of the lot purchased by the Athenaeum was \$1,500, and the building, which was completed in 1866, cost \$8,900.⁷ The *Minneapolis Chronicle* of July 21, 1866, termed the venture a "most laudable enterprise," and commented that the building "when completed will be a lasting ornament to our city and reflect much credit upon the enterprise of our public spirited citizens."

To finance the new building more than a hundred citizens subscribed a loan to the Athenaeum which, in turn, issued certificates of indebtedness to the subscribers. The certificates were secured by a trust mortgage on the organization's lot and building. In 1867, the directors expressed the hope that the income from rents would leave a sufficient balance to pay off both principal and annual interest of seven per cent within fifteen years. "We believe, moreover," they wrote, "that the holders of these certificates who were thoughtful and generous enough to tender their money as they did to make the Athenaeum what it is, will never be hard creditors toward this their child."⁸

On February 19, 1867, Williams described

⁴ For biographical information on Williams, see Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912*, 862 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14); obituary notices in the *Minneapolis Times*, March 13, 1901, and the *Minneapolis Journal*, March 16, 1901. See also Board of Directors, Minutes, February 20, 1867; Annual Reports, February 2, 1869, and February 1, 1870, for information on Williams' services.

⁵ Athenaeum, Annual Reports, February 5, 1861, February 7, 1865, February 6, 1866, February 5, 1867, and February 2, 1869.

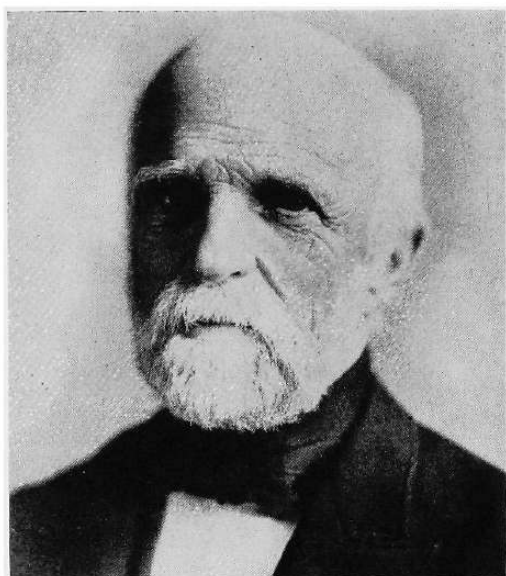
⁶ See, for example, Annual Report, February 1, 1881.

⁷ Annual Report, February 5, 1867.

the project in a letter to his younger brother, Nathan. "A year ago last August I drew a plan for a Library Building," he wrote, "and soon afterward commenced obtaining subscriptions for money to erect it. The work was commenced last July and was finished so that I could move in June 12th."⁹

Williams then went on to speak of the new building and its tenants. "There is a basement, of two rooms," he said, "which is rented for an 'Eating House',¹⁰ at five hundred dollars. On the first floor is the Post Office on the left, rented for six hundred—on the right the 'Bank of Minneapolis' rented for five years at six hundred dollars per annum. On the second floor there are two rooms: the one over the post office, which the Athenaeum does not need at present, is rented to the 'Young Men's Christian Association' for two hundred and fifty dollars. I don't know as I ever gave you the ground plan. The lot is forty-four feet wide—35 feet long on one side—and 45 on the other."

Williams then sketched for his brother a vivid word picture of the Athenaeum's new quarters. "The Library room is 38 feet on one side—42 the other—23 feet wide—and 17 feet high," he wrote. "There are three windows in front and three in the rear—all ten feet high. . . . I sit at the table nearest Hennepin Avenue. There is room on the shelves for three thousand volumes—when these are filled we shall put up more against the center partition, and build along between the windows." The librarian added with understandable pride, "I think I have done very well the last year. It is not every person who sees a library grow from one book to 1409—and from a little shanty to fine brick and stone



THOMAS Hale Williams

building—with plenty of room for the books and renting for over two thousand dollars."

IN MEETING its financial problems in this period, the Athenaeum continued to rely upon special assessments on shares and on receipts from payments made by persons, other than shareholders, who used the library. The first mention of the profit involved in permitting nonshareholders to make use of the library appears in the annual report of the board of directors for February 6, 1866. The board noted that "The Library has been well patronized during the year; not only the shareholders but many others have availed themselves of the privilege granted by vote of the association; and we doubt not that many an hour has been whiled away in pleasant communion with our 'thousand authors' that might otherwise have hung heavily in the hands of the strangers sojourning for a season within our gates." The directors reported that \$48.68 had been realized "from this source" during the year, and concluded that "the wisdom as well as the benevolence of the policy" had been demonstrated.

⁹ Board of Directors, Minutes, January 8, 1865; Annual Report, February 5, 1867.

¹⁰ The Williams letter, quoted in this and succeeding paragraphs, is in vol. 10 of the Minneapolis Public Library's autograph collection.

¹¹ This restaurant was operated by George E. Weston and Martin V. Pratt. A lease dated December 1, 1866, is in the Athenaeum's files.

The annual report, dated February 5, 1867, stated that more than a hundred dollars was taken in for the rental of books, and went on to say that "through the co-operation of the Young Men's Christian Association, all the books are open, both day and evening, to the free use of the public, at the Library room, together with a fine reading room adjoining containing the leading newspapers and periodicals of the day." The directors felt that the library's new accommodations were "so ample and attractive" that they should again make clear "that the purpose of the Athenaeum is not merely to accumulate books and keep them unharmed." Rather, the organization desired that "the men, women and children of the town shall wear out our books by reading them; and that any person having a half hour of leisure by day or evening shall find our Library room a pleasant place for quiet literary or social exchange."

By 1874, there were 207 active shareholders, and the assessment of three dollars for each share, which had been levied for "several years past" was reduced to two dollars. By this time, only shares selling for ten dollars were available. The directors were instructed to draft an amendment to the charter to reduce the price of shares to five dollars. After discussion of this proposal at a special meeting of the board of directors on May 19, 1874, however, "further consideration was indefinitely postponed." According to the annual report of February, 1874, receipts from the rental of books amounted to \$101.35 in 1873. The minutes of the Athenaeum's annual meeting, held on February 1, 1876, contain the observation that "While it is not literally a free library, its regulations are such that no lover of good books nor inquirer in any department of knowledge has been debarred from its use. For ten cents, the price of one good cigar, any person can have the privilege of the library for six days, and by the payment of one dollar, for three months. A deposit of two dollars is also required,

which is refunded by the Librarian when the term of the transient reader expires."

THE DIRECTORS also attempted to raise funds for the library through lecture courses. In their report of February 7, 1865, they confessed their failure "to secure the services of some eminent lecturers" to "replenish our treasury." The report concluded that "until we have direct railroad connection with the East, we cannot expect to enjoy this privilege." For the next few years, the Athenaeum relied mainly upon local speakers. On July 17, 1867, the *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* offered the Athenaeum a bit of advice. "We don't presume to dictate to the officers of the Athenaeum," the paper stated, "but would suggest as a belief, founded on experience, that by a little energy, and the addition of some new books to the library, the readers . . . may be doubled before winter sets in; and then, with a good course of lectures and a considerable *blowing*, funds for a thousand new volumes may be raised during the winter."

In 1867, Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Minnesota on a lecture tour, and he accepted the invitation of the society to speak at Harrison Hall on the evening of February 2. According to the *State Atlas* of February 6, 1867, the lecture was well attended, as was a second one given at the Universalist church the following evening.¹¹

The Athenaeum continued its lecture series during the years that followed. Profits from lectures in 1869 amounted to only \$56.15. In 1872 the directors summarized their experiences with lecture series. "Our society ought to support a course of popular lectures every winter," they commented. "These lectures should be instructive and at least pay for themselves." By experience, the directors had found, however, that home talent lacked "one very essential

¹¹ For a description of Emerson's lecture, see Hubert H. Hoeltje, "Ralph Waldo Emerson in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 11:145-148 (June, 1930).

feature—it will not draw.” Lecturers of national reputation also presented problems, for they were “farmed out by Lecture Bureaus, and unless a sufficient number of engagements on the way to our city or within the state can be secured in advance for such names, our desires go unheeded.” The directors “after a good deal of correspondence and no little vexation,” made arrangements for a series of five lectures during the winter of 1872. They reported that a “compact crowd” greeted General Judson H. Kilpatrick, who gave the first lecture in the Academy of Music on February 3, 1872. “If the people are not deceived,” commented the directors, “they will turn out.”¹²

During the season of 1873–74, six lecturers appeared under Athenaeum auspices. George S. Boutwell, secretary of the treasury under President Grant, spoke on “The Treasury Department and the Civil Service System.” The second lecturer, identified only as Mr. Parton, may have been James Parton, a popular writer of his day and the author of a biography of Horace Greeley that brought him national recognition. Parton’s subject was “Who Are the Vulgar?” Dr. Isaac I. Hayes, surgeon on the second

Arctic expedition of Elisha K. Kane in 1853 and a member of two later Arctic expeditions, lectured on “Arctic Adventure and Discovery.” In appraising the situation after these three talks, the directors unhappily admitted that not only had attendance been poor, but that the series had resulted in a loss of money to the society. “All these lecturers are men of national reputation,” the directors stated in their annual report of February 3, 1874. “The last lecture was upon a subject of romantic interest; the first was upon a subject of immediate and practical importance to every citizen of the United States. . . . The few hearers who were present were well repaid for their outlay of time and money.” The board noted that three lectures remained to be given, and it recommended that at their conclusion, since “the lectures result in a loss to the society and do not interest the public sufficiently to secure a decent attendance,” the Athenaeum should “in the future . . . leave the cultivation of the lecture field to others.”

Appearances by Mrs. Mary Livermore and Thomas Nast followed the announcement. A third lecture was to have been given by William Parsons on “George Stephenson and the Invention of the Locomotive Engine.” Neither newspapers nor Athenaeum records make any reference

¹² Treasurer’s Report, February 1, 1870. Quoted material is from the Annual Report, February 6, 1872.

THE Athenaeum (center)
in the 1880s





*Washington Avenue
with Dr. Spencer's
white house, 1857*

to the event, which may mean that it did not take place or that the public was not impressed. Mrs. Livermore, a reformer and leader in the woman suffrage movement, spoke on March 4, 1874. She had been preceded in Minneapolis by another feminine lecturer, Mrs. Victoria Woodhull, whose somewhat scandalous reputation as well as her remarks on women's rights had offended some of her listeners. Following Mrs. Livermore's talk, *The Citizen*, a journal of the evangelical churches of Minnesota, remarked in its issue of March 5, 1874, that she had taken "the curse from the name of her sex. The air is purer since the advent of a pure representative woman upon the platform so lately dishonored and defiled by impure speech and shamefully gross doctrines."

Nast, noted cartoonist and illustrator for *Harper's Weekly*, drew the largest audience of the season when he appeared in the Academy of Music on April 18. The *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* of April 19 described him as "a medium-sized, rather stout man, with black hair, moustache and goatee." Nast gave what the *Tribune* writer called a "desultory talk, and interspersed his remarks with the drawing of cartoons."

ONE OF THE most far-reaching events in the history of the Athenaeum, and one that helped assure its future, occurred in 1870 when the library received a bequest from Dr. Kirby Spencer. Little is known of Dr. Spencer's background save for the fact that he settled in Minneapolis in the 1850s, and practiced dentistry there until shortly before his death in 1870. The *Minneapolis Tribune* of March 11, 1870, in reporting his demise, described him as "a very peculiar old gentleman," and went on to say that "He was very eccentric and although known on that account by a large number but few people *really* knew him. By some unknown cause he seemed to have become soured at the world, and seldom if ever took anyone into his confidence, and never that we know of told any of his secrets, so it is not known where he is from, only that he formerly lived in Florida, or whether he was ever married nor anything in fact about his past. It is supposed that he was a native of New York." The paper added that "He was a remarkably well read man and possessed a great amount of scientific information."

Dr. Spencer's will was a detailed and eccentric document. It specified, for example,

that for two days after his death his body was "to be left in the place and position" in which it was found. "I do not wish my body to be inspected or cleansed," stated Dr. Spencer, "as I shall be clean enough for the lap of Mother Earth. I wish to be decently apparalled in dress clothes and then placed in a large wooden case; the sides and top and bottom shall be made parallel to each other."¹³

More pertinent to Athenaeum affairs, however, was Dr. Spencer's provision that after payment of certain specified legacies and bequests he wished to "give and bequeath the rest and remainder of my property of whatever name and nature remaining" to be set aside in trust for the Athenaeum. He directed his executors to invest this property "in any manner which in their discretion shall seem most profitable, and yet safe, and shall yearly . . . pay in the rents, profits, and interests thereof, to the trustees, or executive committee of the Minneapolis Athenaeum association." He specified that the Athenaeum's trustees should "use and expend the moneys, rents, profits and interests so to be paid to them . . . in the purchase of periodical magazines, treatises, or works, or essays on mineralogy, botany, chemistry, zoology, geology, astronomy, biology, human and comparative anatomy, psychology, ethnology, conchology, mathematics, geography, history, biography, mechanical philosophy, designing, architecture and the belles lettres, and for no other purpose whatever."

Dr. Spencer's bequest was not an unusually large one. Yet, for the struggling Athenaeum, it was fortuitous. His property was located near the present site of the Milwaukee depot, and it increased tremendously in value as the years went by. Since the library received some additional in-

come from the rental of portions of its building, the proceeds from the Spencer fund could be used advantageously to purchase books as specified in the will.

WITH its own building, space for expansion, and an adequate book fund, the Athenaeum in 1870 seemed assured of an untroubled future. Minneapolis, however, was growing out of its pioneer stage. In 1872, it united with neighboring St. Anthony. Since the Athenaeum library was the principal source of books in the community, it soon found itself in the center of a controversy stemming from the increased need for its services and from the nature of its organization as a private subscription library. Williams and his supporters believed that the Athenaeum must of necessity limit its clientele, and restrict its buying of books and periodicals to substantial and scholarly publications. Thomas B. Walker, a prominent Minneapolis lumberman, and others felt that its resources should be made available to a wider public.

The first indication of controversy appears in the annual report of the directors for February 3, 1874, which told shareholders that "In the execution of the trust committed to us by you, we have aimed to carry out the purposes of your organization as expressed in your articles of association. To that end, we have been content to pursue the policy long followed by our predecessors in office, uniformly approved by the shareholders, and ratified by you at your last annual meeting. At that meeting while some were of the opinion that radical changes in the organization and purposes of the society were essential to its well being, the necessity for such changes was not apparent to the majority of the shareholders." The board conceded that "In the lapse of time some changes in the policy of the Athenaeum toward its shareholders and toward the public may become necessary," but it felt that "as recipients of Dr. Spencer's bounty, we are under a moral if not a legal obligation not to depart

¹³ Dr. Spencer's will, quoted in this and succeeding paragraphs, was probated March 17, 1870. It is filed as number 832 in the records of the Ramsey County Probate Court at St. Paul. The Athenaeum has a copy.

widely, except in a case of urgent necessity, from the course which has won his confidence and which prompted his liberality."

The agitation for the popularization of the library continued, however, and reached a climax in a proxy battle at the annual meeting of February 1, 1877. Judge Isaac Atwater, an Athenaeum stockholder, said that the "movement originated" with Walker, "who for some time prior to the annual meeting consulted with numbers of the old original shareholders, and, with the hearty approval of nearly all who were consulted, received their proxies with which to elect a board of officers favorable to the most liberal policy consistent with the welfare of the library." According to Atwater, the popularizing movement was opposed by Williams and "a few adherents, who attempted to procure proxies enough to counteract the movement and prevent the consummation of what he then considered a revolutionary scheme." But Walker's proxies, "together with the direct votes of the shareholders who attended the meeting, very largely outnumbered" those of Williams and carried the day.¹⁴

THE ANNUAL REPORT of February 5, 1878, reveals the extent of the changes instituted by the new board. The directors reported that they had "found the library to consist of 6,000 well selected volumes piled two deep on the shelves of a narrow dark room, forming one-half of the second floor of the library building." Their first task had been "to make the books accessible and the room in which they are kept attractive, and at the same time provide ample space for the large additions to the library which the present condition of the Spencer fund renders possible. This has been accomplished by removing the partitions and closets which divided the second floor of the library building, throwing the entire space into one large well lighted room. . . . This room has been brightly frescoed, carpeted throughout, furnished

with chairs and tables, and the kerosene lamps replaced with gas." The new directors also opened the reading room to the public, and remarked that "How far this may be consistent with the general plan of a well conducted library the directors do not feel called upon to discuss." The library's winter hours were extended from five to nine o'clock in the evening, and the report states that "the response has been large and is steadily increasing." The reading room was also kept open on Sunday.

Another innovation of the new board in 1877 had been the initiation of a system of selling regular ten-dollar memberships on the basis of three dollars in cash and the remainder in annual installments of a dollar each. The practice of selling shares on time aroused considerable opposition, and at the annual meeting on February 1, 1880, its legality was questioned by opponents of the new management. As a result, the installment system was abolished, and the stockholders authorized instead the issuing of nonvoting certificates priced at four dollars each.¹⁵

THESE changes in Athenaeum policy received attention in the city press off and on from 1877 through 1880, and the *Minneapolis Tribune* was outspoken in its support of the new board. At the annual meeting of February 4, 1879, the Williams faction regained a majority on the Athenaeum board. On the following day the *Tribune* concluded that there was "no good in further disguising the fact that the great body of the stockholders are opposed to the efforts that have been made to popularize the library." Moreover, the editor thought it plain that "any further effort to popularize the institution . . . may as well be abandoned," and recommended that "the energies of the friends of a public

¹⁴ Isaac Atwater, *History of the City of Minneapolis*, 286 (New York, 1893).

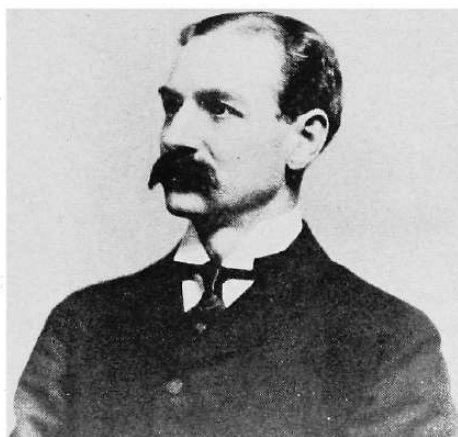
¹⁵ Annual Meeting, Minutes, February 1, 1877; Board of Directors, Minutes, June 12, 1879; letter from T. B. Walker in *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 11, 1880.

library be devoted to the establishment of an independent institution, unhampered by charter provisions." In the same issue, the *Tribune* also sharply criticized Walker, whose votes at the meeting had made possible the election of Williams.

The precarious alliance of the Walker and Williams factions ended at the annual meeting of the stockholders on February 3, 1880. Williams was not re-elected to the board of directors, and the *Tribune* of February 10 reported: "It was clearly evident that Mr. T. B. Walker, who wields the power of seventy shares, and Mr. Thomas Hale Williams . . . who has as regularly noted proxies to the number of forty-five, had . . . severed their relations."

The extent of the break became more apparent when the new board of directors, meeting on February 9, 1880, resolved that "Thos. Hale Williams be employed for not more than three and one-half hours per day in general superintendence of the library, at a salary of \$500 per annum." Williams, who previously had been serving as full-time librarian at a salary of a thousand dollars a year, promptly resigned. On February 11, 1880, the *Tribune* remarked that the action of the directors had "undoubtedly called forth the opposition of friends of the policy of which Mr. Williams had been the foremost exponent" and that it had "awakened considerable feeling among the friends of that gentleman."

The *Tribune* on February 10 also printed what it described as "an interesting interview" with Walker, who outlined forthcoming changes in policy and stated his position in Athenaeum affairs. The library, he noted, would hereafter be open evenings throughout the entire year. Walker was quoted as saying that the drastic action of the board in relieving Williams of his duties as full-time librarian was taken only "after



HERBERT Putnam, *Athenaeum* librarian

three years of just as sincere effort as I know how to make to effect a compromise." The point had been reached, he said, when "the best interests of the library should no longer be jeopardized out of regard for Mr. Williams."¹⁶

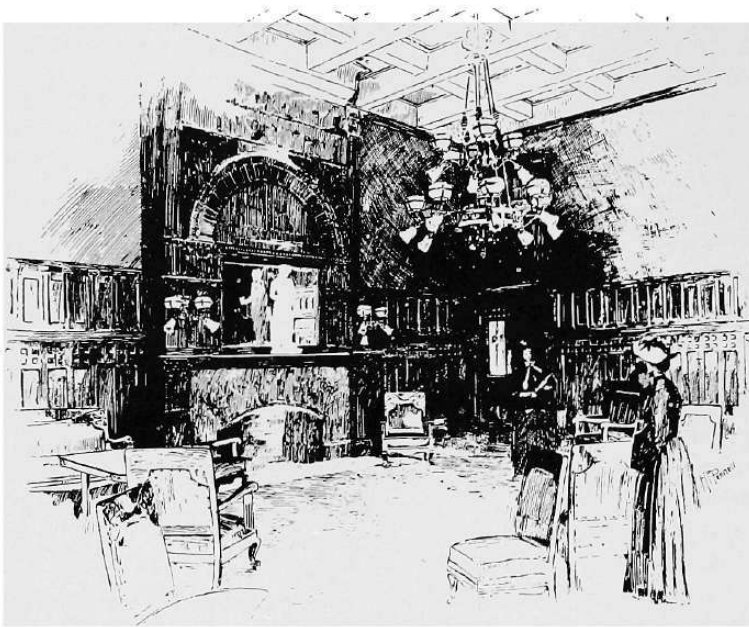
Williams' resignation marked the end of an era in Athenaeum affairs. He had served the institution well during the first twenty years of its existence. Had not the demands of a growing city conflicted with the purposes of the Athenaeum as he saw them, his career probably would not have come to such an abrupt close.

WILLIAMS was succeeded by Richard W. Laing, professor of history and French in the University of Minnesota, who served on a part-time basis until a full-time librarian could be secured. This arrangement continued until 1884 when Herbert Putnam took over the post of Athenaeum librarian. His appointment signaled the beginning of a new phase in the organization's development, for he was to serve also as the first chief librarian of the Minneapolis Public Library. A graduate of Harvard University, Putnam went to Minnesota in 1884 to continue his law studies, but friends persuaded him to accept the library post.¹⁷

The year following his appointment, the Athenaeum entered into a ninety-nine-year

¹⁶ For Atwater's version of this affair, see his *History of Minneapolis*, 288.

¹⁷ For information on Putnam, see Upham and Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 619; *Who's Who in America 1954-55*, 2178 (Chicago, 1954).



LADIES' reading
room, Minneapolis
library, 1890

contract with the newly formed public library board of Minneapolis. Upon the completion of its building in 1889, the Athenaeum collection was moved into the Minneapolis Public Library, where it has been, and continues to be available under the same conditions as that institution's collection. Under the terms of its contract, the city library houses, insures, and catalogues Athenaeum books, pays the Athenaeum for lost copies, and pays the salary of the Athenaeum librarian. The Athenaeum, on the other hand, contributed eight thousand dollars to the library's building fund and brought into the new structure a collection of more than twenty thousand books of a miscellaneous character, including some fiction.¹⁸

It was Putnam's hope that the Athenaeum would be almost exclusively a reference library, and that the city would furnish books for circulation, but as the city grew and the calls upon the resources of the library increased, it seemed impossible to hold to such a clear-cut alignment. Over the years the Athenaeum has continued to provide many reference books, as well as fine, expensive, or rare books, but

it has also bought many volumes for circulation. At times of great stress, it has diverted funds to purchase books of general interest needed by the public library.¹⁹

The Athenaeum continues to exist as a private corporation with its own stockholders, officers, and board of directors. At present it has about ninety-seven thousand bound volumes, which have been selected to complement the holdings of the public library. Its collection includes outstanding works in the fields of natural history, art, bibliography, music, and American history. Thus it would seem that both organizations, as well as the reading public, have benefited from the association over the years of a private subscription library, whose roots go back to the city's pioneer period, with a large municipal public library, designed to serve the needs of the modern world.

¹⁸ A copy of the contract is in the possession of the Athenaeum. See also Board of Directors, Minutes, February 4, 1890.

¹⁹ Athenaeum, *Seventieth Annual Report*, 8 (Minneapolis, 1930).

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