

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, 2016.

Unidentified artist, *Cyrus Butler*, n.d. Oil on Canvas, H. 27in x W.22in. In frame. Gift of Alexander Duncan, 1849

Cyrus Butler [1767-1849] was one of the wealthiest men in Providence during the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ The artist of Cyrus Butler illustrates Butler as seated in front of pulled curtain that reveals his Providence Arcade and the city's bustling port that transformed Providence from a humble, New England town to a center of commerce and trade.

Butler's connection to the history of Providence and the Providence Athenaeum runs deep. As described by John Russell Bartlett, Butler's bookkeeper, bank teller, and dear friend, Butler "possessed no knowledge of the world other than what he read in newspapers and in books".² This passion for reading, combined with his successes in business, allowed him to pursue such lofty architectural, intellectual, and philanthropic projects as the establishment of the Providence Arcade in 1828; the Providence Athenaeum in 1831, prior to its merger with the Providence Library Company; and Providence's Butler Hospital for the Insane, which opened in 1847.

One of Providence's leading bankers in the early nineteenth century, and known for his sharp business acumen, Butler directed the Bank of America on South Main Street.³ Due in part to a sense of obligation to his employees, Butler would financially aid Bartlett in the establishment of the Providence Athenaeum in 1831– an institution that he believed would allow young men like his bank clerks to socialize and uphold a certain moral ideal,⁴ "govern[ing] their behavior according to principles that had traditionally defined genteel character",⁵ which explained why a man, like Butler, who was an "active, intelligent businessmen of the country" merited higher respect than "any other class of men in the world"⁶. In 1831, Butler was one the original subscribers to the Athenaeum's fund and was one of the four members of the library whose name appeared in the Charter as representatives of the Athenaeum.⁷ When the Athenaeum and the Providence Library Company merged in 1836, Butler's name appears in the records of the library as one of its members sponsoring the unification of the two libraries.⁸

In celebrating the entrepreneurial spirit of an emerging industrial America – and for his own profits – Butler built the Providence Arcade in 1828 and owned both entire east and west side of the building, allowing businesses to rent space within the Arcade. A monumental expression of the fashionable Greek Revival style, the Arcade was the first such work by architects Russell Warren [American, 1783-1860] and James C. Bucklin [American, 1801-1890], and one of the

¹ Jerry E. Mueller. *Autobiography of John Russell Bartlett, 1805-1886*. (John Carter Brown Library, Providence, 2006). P. 14

² *Id*

³ [Rhode Island Historical Society]

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 40

⁵ Thomas Augst. *The Clerk's Tale* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). P. 79

⁶ Mueller, p. 16

⁷ *The Athenaeum Bulletin*, Vol. 17, No. 1. June, (Providence Athenaeum, 1944)

⁸ *Id*

first commercial shopping centers of its kind in the United States.⁹ On its second story on the west side of the Arcade housed the 1831 incarnation of the Providence Athenaeum from 1831 to 1838 as well as the offices of the Rhode Island Historical Society, The Franklin Society – a group devoted to scientific and philosophical investigation – and many shops. This unusual blending of cultural and commercial concerns – a fitting reflection of Butler’s own passions – earned the building its nickname, “the temple of trade”.¹⁰ Butler agreed to let the Athenaeum reside within the Arcade, because Bartlett convincingly articulated that “it would carry a great many people to the Arcade”.¹¹ Butler subscribed twelve thousand dollars towards the library and the reading room, and encouraged stock holder in the Arcade to subscribe one hundred dollars each to commence the work of the collection of books.

After the 1836 merging of the Providence Athenaeum and its sister institution, the Providence Library Company (founded in 1753), the newly constituted library – known henceforth by the former’s name alone – moved to its current location on 251 Benefit Street in 1838. Although Warren produced an early design for the library’s new home, the commission ultimately fell to William Strickland, the best known Greek Revival architect of the era.¹² Completed in 1838, this imposing Greek Revival edifice echoed the classical severity of the library’s former home downtown; equally familiar was the presence of the Rhode Island Historical Society and Franklin Society, which both moved (at least temporarily) into the new quarters on Benefit Street, as well. Providing an additional link between the Arcade and new Athenaeum, Warren extensively remodeled the interior of the in 1841.¹³

Three months after Butler’s death, on November 5, 1849 Butler’s executor and nephew-in-law Alexander Duncan, wrote John Pitman, the President of the Athenaeum, stating that Butler believed the Athenaeum to be the “most beneficial influence on the character of the inhabitants of this city, more so than any secular institution in operation, excepting the free schools.”¹⁴ Also included in this letter was the welcome news that Butler, had made an astounding \$10,000 bequest to the Athenaeum.¹⁵ \$6,000 from the bequest was added to the library’s permanent fund, while the remaining \$4,000 paid off its debt to the Franklin Society and initiated, “the improvement of the basement in connection with a convenient reading room.”¹⁶ The bequest allowed, as well, for the creation of Butler’s portrait, a tribute that the Directors ordered “to be ever kept in the rooms of the Athenaeum, as a memorial of one of most distinguished benefactors”.¹⁷

Though the artist of *Cyrus Butler* has not been identified, he or she has fittingly portrayed Butler in the neo-classical style of the Arcade and Athenaeum buildings themselves. There were several

⁹ Robert Alexander. “The Arcade in Providence”. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. Vol. 12, No. 3 (Published by University of California, October, 1953). P. 14

¹⁰ *Id*

¹¹ Mueller, p. 18

¹² Connelly, P.79

¹³ Lancaster, P. 55

¹⁴ *Report Made to the Providence Athenaeum at the Fifteenth Annual Meeting*. (September 23, 1850). P. 7-8

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 8

artists working at that time in Providence who specialized in portrait painting, including Francis Alexander, James Sullivan Lincoln, and Henry Cheever Pratt, all of whom are represented in the Athenaeum collection, and who might have painted Butler's portrait.¹⁸ The sitter appears in stylish, contemporary clothing most notably his black, frockcoat and white vest with a high collar. Butler sits prominently in front of a dramatically draped red curtain that pays homage to the classical past in the form of the Arcade itself - whose massive Ionic columns would have been instantly recognizable to any Providence viewer. In addition, faintly behind the Arcade, the artist has rendered the bustling port that attests to Providence's emerging commerciality. This subtle inclusion of the Arcade and the business of the port reflects Butler's love for the Arcade, the Athenaeum, Providence's emerging commercial industrialization, and the classical culture that served as an inspiration for them both.

¹⁸ Providence Business Directory. [Rhode Island History Society].