

William Ellery Channing, c. 1820-1867, marble, Gift of Albert G. Greene, 1867

Unitarian preacher and theologian William Ellery Channing [1780-1842] was a strong proponent for the advancement of children education – a passion shared by the Athenaeum. This commanding bust of Channing visually demonstrates the Athenaeum’s goal to encourage early reading among its youngest members, while also evoking the abolitionist beliefs of prominent Athenaeum members.

Busts of prominent literary and cultural figures line the main room of the Athenaeum, where Channing sits next to Benjamin Franklin – another proponent for education and abolitionism.¹ While the artist is unknown, the object’s estimated date of creation is 1820-1867 and follows the typical neoclassical trend of this time period; the bust mimics Roman portraiture in style and shape. Roman portrait sculpture utilized representations of the head, shoulders, and chest to meet a specific narrative or honorary purpose. The naturalistic depiction of Channing is remarkably similar to ancient Roman portraits, which strived to exactly resemble the model. Constructed out of creamy white marble, Channing is depicted at the prime of his life. Amid the mild wrinkles around his nose and the mouth, hints of youth can be discerned. He has full cheeks, and is clean-shaven.

Born in Newport, Rhode Island, Channing descended from an illustrious family; his grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence, and participated in Congress, and both his father and his grandfather attended Harvard College.² Following in their footsteps, Channing studied at Harvard from 1794-1798. After Channing graduated, he spent a summer tutoring the children of David Meade Randolph of Richmond, Virginia for supplemental income.³ In Richmond, he witnessed the inhumane treatment of slaves, an experience that drew Channing to the campaign for human rights and to religion; as he wrote to his uncle, “I have now solemnly give myself up to God.”⁴

Channing’s new sense of purpose dictated his return to Harvard to study theology and the ministry under Professor David Tappan. By 1802, Channing was licensed to preach by the Cambridge Association, and the following year, he was called and ordained by Boston’s Federal Street Church. Channing was especially dedicated to the educational and spiritual development of children. He declared: “There is no office higher than that of a teacher for youth, for there is nothing on earth so precious as the mind, soul, character of the child.”⁵ Channing was a leading member of the Sunday School movement. Furthermore, Channing worked closely with education reformers, such as Elizabeth Peabody and Horace Mann.⁶ Channing was the voice of the

¹ Citizen Ben—Abolitionist, Benjamin Franklin, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/>

² Arthur W. Brown, *A Biography of William Ellery Channing: Always Young for Liberty* (New York: Syracuse University, 1956), 3

³ William Ellery Channing, Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://uudb.org/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Ellery Channing, Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://uudb.org/>

⁶ *Ibid.*

American Unitarianism movement; he wrote of Unitarian theology in several Boston periodicals, such as *The Christian Disciple*.⁷ Channing delivered several sermons on his religious positions, including 1819 address “Unitarian Christianity” and his seminal oration in 1830, “Likeness of God”.

Towards the end of Channing’s life, he became more actively engaged in the abolitionist movement. In 1831, he wrote *Slavery*, a pamphlet designed “to aid the reader in forming a just moral judgment of slavery”.⁸ He would continue to pen abolitionist articles and documents until his death. Furthermore, Channing was involved with the Massachusetts Antislavery Society. Channing died in 1842, a leading Unitarian clergyman and theologian and abolitionist advocate.

The Athenaeum—while never openly abolitionist as an institution—had several notable abolitionist members. One of the founders of the Providence Library Company (the precursor organization to the Athenaeum) was Moses Brown, a Quaker and abolitionist.⁹ Brown donated numerous gifts to the Athenaeum, including the land where the present building currently stands. He additionally gave the library a set of abolitionist pamphlets. However, the Athenaeum Board decided to sell them in 1950. They noted:

“100 years ago Athenaeum shareholders were undoubtedly as concerned about slavery and what it meant for the future of our country as we are today about communism, yet this year the Board authorized the sale of a collection of pamphlets on slavery as no longer useful to the Athenaeum. Let us hope that in 2050 the Board will feel the same about books on communism.”¹⁰

Another noteworthy abolitionist member was Thomas Dorr, of the Dorr Rebellion fame—a tumultuous period of Rhode Island history when Dorr declared himself governor and lead armed men to seize property and arms.

Since the library’s commencement in 1838, the Athenaeum has always strongly promoted the educational growth of children. In the early twentieth century, the Athenaeum became better equipped to serve young readers. Erected in 1912, the Norman Morrison Isham addition included the library’s first children’s room. It existed where the Reference Desk currently stands. The extra space of the Isham addition allowed children to explore and discover the library experience and the joys of reading. The children’s library and programs proved to be wildly popular, and a staple in the Providence community. In 1979, the Athenaeum expanded through a three-story addition designed by Warren Platner [American, 1919-2006]. The enlargement allowed the library to continue and build children’s services, with the Sayles Gorham Children’s Library.

⁷ Arthur W. Brown, *A Biography of William Ellery Channing: Always Young for Liberty* (New York: Syracuse University, 1956), 115

⁸ *Ibid.*, 229

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁰ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1953* (Providence: Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 9

The Athenaeum received the bust of Channing in 1867 from Albert Gorton Greene [1802-1868]. Born in Providence in 1802, Greene attended Brown University and graduated in 1820.¹¹ He then studied law in the office of John Whipple, and was admitted to the bar in 1823.¹² He practiced law for ten years, and held a variety of governmental positions in Providence. In addition to civic service, Greene was a noted poet. He wrote several popular poems, including “Old Grimes” and “The Militia Muster.” Greene greatly admired Channing, and owned several of his sermons, discourses, speeches, and memoirs.¹³ Deeply affected by Channing’s death in 1842, Greene wrote “Ode on the Death of William Ellery Channing,” which was published in the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*.¹⁴ Greene’s verse reveals the level of respect for Channing, he writes:

How calmly he uttered his beautiful thought;
How meekly he ore all the honors it brought;
How bravely he spoke to oppression and wrong;
In that calmness; that meekness, that courage, how strong!

As a member of the Athenaeum, dedicated civic servant, and passionate admirer of Channing, it is no small wonder Greene-donated the bust to the library.¹⁵

While Channing speaks towards the abolitionist mindset of noted and influential Athenaeum shareholders, he completely embodies a principal cause of the library—the education of children. The bust of Channing was originally perfectly situated to observe the bustling activity of the library’s first children’s space. From his vantage point on the second story balcony, Channing gazes off towards the left towards the reference desk, where the former children’s library space existed in the nineteenth century. SC.

¹¹ Albert Gorton Greene, *Lawyers and Poetry*—University of Virginia, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://myweb.wvnet.edu/>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Catalogue of the Private Library of the Late Hon. Albert G. Greene to be Sold by Auction, at the Sales Rooms of Bangs, Merwin, & Co. March 29, 1869 (New York: Bangs, Merwin & Co., Auctioneers, 1869), 173

¹⁴ Albert G. Greene, “Ode on the death of William Ellery Channing,” *The Liberator*, November 11, 1842, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.accessible-archives.com/>

¹⁵ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 197