

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, 2016.

Federal Grecian Sofa, Mahogany and flame mahogany, H. 3 ft. 4.25 in. (102.2 cm) W. 7 ft. 5 in. (226 cm.) D. 1 ft. 11.5 in. (59.7 cm.) Gift of Mrs. G. Granville Benedict, 1979.

Tucked beneath the staircase of the Athenaeum's reading room is this rather imposing, Federal-style Grecian sofa – a piece once owned by a distinguished member of the Providence community. The sofa's neoclassical style demonstrates the popularity of Greco-Roman references in the era of the Athenaeum's founding in the early nineteenth century-

Discoveries in Italy's newly-excavated Herculaneum and Pompeii in the late eighteenth century sparked revived interest in classical antiquity in Great Britain, Europe, and America.¹ This renewed fascination with Greco-Roman architecture and culture led to the popularity of what became known, in the United States, as the "Federal" style – so named for the new nation (and lasting approximately from the 1790s until the 1830s). As European emigrants and travelers journeyed to the United States, the style was continually adopted and modified in its American context.² Architects, cabinetmakers, chair makers, and silversmiths were additionally inspired by the newly available array of books describing elements of classical architecture and antique decorative objects were available. Individuals or private libraries owned such books; it is entirely plausible the Athenaeum owned one or two.³ The development of a national consciousness in the United States led to the full-hearted embrace of the Federal style, one often imbued with motifs that celebrated the new nation: including Phrygian caps, eagles, and stars. Indeed, it was the increased American appetite for Federal style furniture, along with and a developing economy that led to the widescale creation of commercially produced furniture. Providence in particular, had a flourishing furniture market and many skilled craftsmen.⁴ As citizens of a new democracy, Americans regarded the Roman Republic as the quintessence of civic virtue and an ideal for the United States to strive towards, both politically and artistically. Americans' taste for classical style can be observed in the Greek Revival architecture of the Athenaeum itself, and in much of its art collection.

The sofa possesses a shiny and rich mahogany frame, with an arch back and leaf carved rams-horn terminals. Its detailed ornamental elements include delicately scrolled armrests, and legs carved with fruit and cornucopias, ending in flared paw feet. The piece is upholstered in an elegant, burgundy fabric with a delicate floral pattern, and features soft cushioning on the back and the seats. The overall design is symmetrical and well balanced.

¹ Meyric R. Rogers, *American Interior Design: The Traditions and Development of Domestic Design from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1947), 91

² Edgar deN. Mayhew and Minor Myers, Jr. *A Documentary History of American Interiors from the Colonial Era to 1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 78

³ Wendy A. Cooper, *Classical Taste in America 1800-1840* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1993), 105

⁴ Elizabeth Bidwell Bates and Jonathan L. Fairbanks, *American Furniture: 1620 to the Present* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981), 197

This piece exemplifies America's rapt fascination with classical antiquity in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Elements of the Federal-style sofa are derived directly from Greco-Roman culture. For example, the graceful curves of the arms and back of the Federal-style sofa evoke the scroll back of the Greek *klismos* chair, which can be observed on several Greek monuments.⁵ Furthermore, Greek and Roman furniture—namely, thrones, couches, and tables—commonly featured animal leg and paw supports.⁶ For instance, furniture with animal legs and paw feet are featured on a Greek *kylix* in the Villa Giulia Museum in Rome and on a Roman votive relief from the Athenian Agora in the Agora Museum.⁷

Originally, this imposing piece belonged to an equally formidable owner, Judge John Pitman (1785-1864), a prominent political figure in Rhode Island with strong ties to the Athenaeum.⁸ Pitman had a distinguished law career; practicing in a variety of cities from New York to Providence; and from 1821-24, he served as United States Attorney for the District of Rhode Island. The judge was deeply involved with the Athenaeum; not only was he one of the owners of the library's original shares, but he also served as the President of the Board of Directors from March 9, 1836 to September 22, 1856.⁹ In addition, Pitman was a Brown University Trustee from 1828 to 1834, and served as the President of the Rhode Island Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry for ten years.¹⁰

After Pitman's death, the journey of the Federal Grecian sofa is unclear. The piece is signed by N. David Scotti (1941-2008) – a Rhode Island auctioneer and collector, rather than the sofa's maker and was donated to the Athenaeum in 1979 by Mrs. G. Granville Benedict in 1979.

Like many Americans, Pitman greatly admired classical civic ideals of democracy and equality. His appreciation is demonstrated in his long-term commitment to public service, and visually manifests in his taste for Greco-Roman inspired decoration. Pitman certainly would have been worthy of Roman citizenship—a privilege bestowed upon a free individual who faithfully followed the law and demonstrated a vested interest in government.¹¹

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⁵ G.M.A. Richter, *The Furniture of the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans* (London: The Phaidon Press, 1966), 13

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55 and 104

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Report by Associated Appraiser, Inc. of Providence, RI on October 1, 1979, The Providence Athenaeum Inventory.

⁹ Historical Catalogue of Brown University, Rhode Island Historical Society, (Providence: Brown University, 1905), 1

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Donald L. Wasson, "Roman Citizenship" Ancient History Encyclopedia, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.ancient.eu/>