

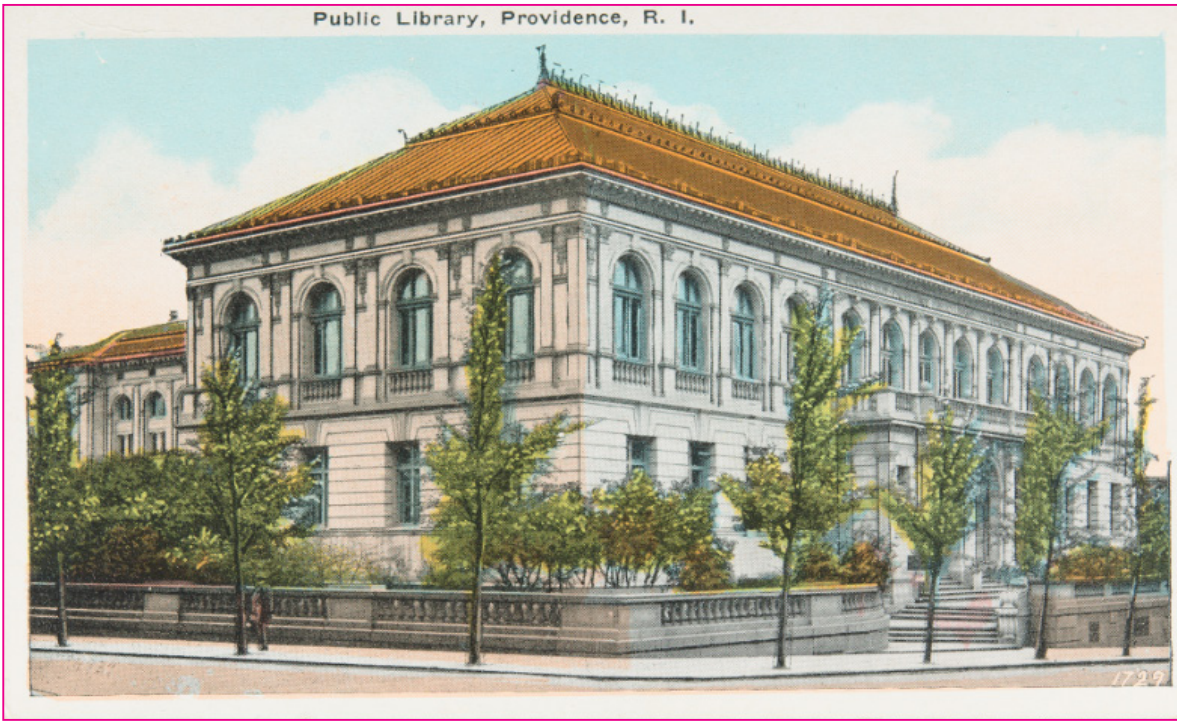
# Providence Public Library

A brief history of the library and its art and architecture





Public Library, Providence, R. I.



Providence Public Library differs from public libraries in most American cities in that it is privately governed and supported, but it serves the people in the best “public” sense of the word. It is owned and governed by a Board of Trustees whose members are elected for four-year terms by the Corporation.

The origins of the Providence Public Library date to June 1871 when representatives from The Franklin Society, the Rhode Island Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry, The Franklin Lyceum, and the Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers first met to form a Free Public Library, Art Gallery, and a Museum of Natural History. The group planned that the libraries of each society would be merged for the free use of the members and for general reference by the public.

A charter was granted by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1874, but it soon became evident that the proposed institution was too comprehensive. A new charter granted in April 1875 provided solely for a public library and is the one under which the Providence Public Library operates today.

The Library first opened its doors to the public in February 1878. It was located on the second floor of the Butler Exchange in what is now Kennedy Plaza. In two short years, larger quarters were secured on Snow Street between Westminster and Washington Streets.

Writing in **The Providence Public Library: An Experiment in Enlightenment**, in 1937, the Library’s second chief librarian Clarence E. Sherman noted that it was in those quarters for the next 20 years that William E. Foster (the Library’s first librarian, who served from 1877 – 1930) “developed a public library whose methods and practices were observed with interest by the entire library world.”

The Library’s use increased, necessitating a new, more spacious building. Ground was broken in 1896 on the Library’s present location on Washington Street, and with an extraordinary gift totaling \$268,500 from Rhode Island philanthropist John Nicholas Brown (at right), the classic Renaissance building was completed at a final cost of \$387,000. It was opened in March 1900 with 93,000 volumes and 39 employees.





While establishing Providence's first "free public library" in 1878 was a monumental accomplishment taking decades to realize, erecting a proper building befitting the Library's growing role and importance in its community less than two decades afterward proved an herculean undertaking.

After enduring more than 15 years in cramped quarters unsuited to the Library's needs, Library Trustees were particularly concerned that its new home be spacious enough to accommodate its growing collections and that access to materials be as direct as possible.

The building committee desired a building that was more than a monument with shelves. Architects were to submit plans for a building that would be well designed both inside and out, with the goal to produce an efficient, modern library.

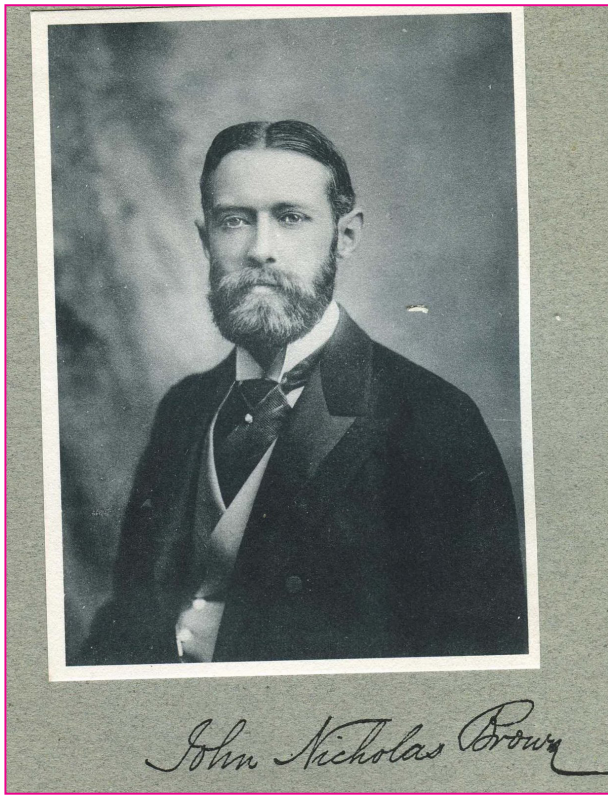
In 1893, with funds in hand, the Library purchased five lots of land bordered by Washington, Greene, and Fountain Streets for \$88,000. Local architects were invited to draw and submit plans. The firm of Stone, Carpenter & Willson was chosen.

The Library struggled over the next few years to secure adequate funding to move ahead with architects' plans for the T-shaped building; finally, ground was broken in August of 1896.

After much uncertainty as to whether the building could be built as planned, the dream of a permanent home for our public library became a reality thanks to one of our state's most generous and celebrated philanthropists John Nicholas Brown -- whose total gift of \$268,500 for the purpose of building a Rhode Island treasure. (His initial offering of \$200,000 swelled when it was determined that the planned structure would not otherwise be possible.)

Upon his untimely death only six weeks after the newly-built Providence Public Library opened, John Nicholas Brown was hailed as "a large-minded and whole-souled man who believed in deeds, not words." By this most noble gift of about a quarter of a million dollars, Mr. Brown has made it possible for the City of Providence to have a fit and worthy building for one of the most widely influential of its public institutions, and received the unstinted gratitude of its citizens.





At the time, the Library represented the aspirations of the people for creating a place where all could achieve their education goals...a true “people’s university.”

The original 1900 building is a richly articulated, two-story, granite-and-brick sheathed structure of Venetian Renaissance inspiration and capped with a low, copper-clad hip roof.

The Library is set back from Washington Street on a high terrace with a sweeping double stairway and balustrade leading to a triple archway entrance centered on the 13-bay Washington Street façade.

Embodying the Italian Renaissance of the 16th century, the building materials were selected for their beauty and durability; muted gray Roman brick placed on a granite base and trimmed with Indiana “Bedford” limestone. The effect is compelling, causing many a patron to pause and admire the elaborate decoration flanking the great front doors.

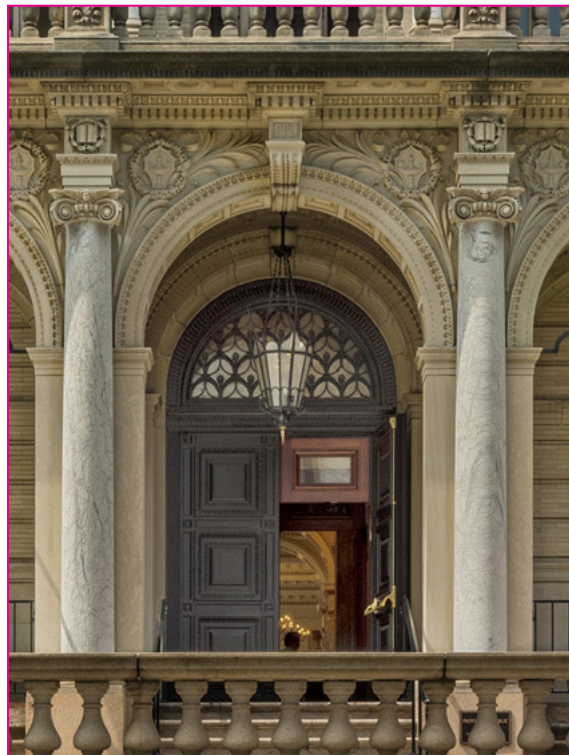
The first story is rusticated and the tall, round-arch second story windows are framed with Corinthian pilasters. Considerable Sienna marble was used in the foundations for pillars and pilasters.

The original building has a granite base course and granite balustrade fabricated from Red Westerly Granite.

An illustration of the attention to details which characterizes the building is the frieze, which runs entirely around the main building. It will be noticed that among the heads of the cherubs, which appear in the capitals of the pilasters again and again, there are no two which are precisely alike.

The five Ginkgo trees lining the building’s Washington Street front were planted in November 1963.

The Library’s original wall along Washington and Greene Streets was partially removed and replaced as part of the city’s rerouting of Greene and Fountain Street traffic in the 1960s.



Forming the most striking architectural feature of the Library's interior, the materials used to construct the Grand Marble Staircase, which ascends from the foyer, include Sienna and Comblanchien marbles and beautifully variegated Scagliola composition (the walls of the stairwell and landings covered in a veneer of Pavonazzo.) The risers of the staircase are of Sienna and the treads are of Comblanchien marble.

The staircase's striking iron work elegantly incorporates the Library's initials (PPL).



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The bulk of the wall paneling adjacent to the stairway, as well as of the pillars and pilasters, is of the composition known as Pavonazzo, which is a handsome and effective imitation of the vari-tinted and streaked marble.

### **Making the Marble, called Pavonazzo**

Through a process called Scagliola, devised by Italian monks in the 15th century, skeins of colored silk are soaked in a special cement and then removed. Once colored, the cement is applied to the walls and columns and finally, polished. The resulting surface is as smooth as marble from the most renowned quarries of the world, but more deeply hued. Pavonazzo lasts for centuries, as it has in the churches of Italy.

Initially the location of the Library circulation desk and "Delivery/Receiving Room," today's stately marble-paved Grand Hall is the

Library's magnificent centerpiece space just off the formal grand Washington Street entrance.

The present-day Atrium with "sweetheart" staircase to the lower level Garden Courtyard was created during the Library's 1988 renovation. From that time through 2004, the Grand Hall was home once again to the main circulation desk. Prior, the circulation desk was located in the newer "Empire Street" building added in 1954 and that is where it is located today.

The Hall's original clerestory windows and skylights create a dramatic light-filled space. With the addition of the '50s building, the clerestory windows on the north side were removed. With the "Opening Doors" restoration, the inside windows above the atrium were restored and treated to recreate the original hall's window-lined architecture.

The Grand Hall is now home to the Library's Steinway Grand Piano Model B, a gift in 1953 in memory of Library Trustee Frederick C. Freeman donated by Mrs. Freeman. The piano had resided in the 3rd floor Auditorium.







*Photo courtesy of John Woolf*

## **The Grand Hall/Atrium Chandelier**

During the 1988 renovation, the Library installed a chandelier in the new Atrium. Subsequently, the chandelier that was bought in 1987 from Ardvark Antiques in Newport was found to be one that had hung in Brown University's Alumnae Hall built in 1926 as the social hall for Pembroke College.

In November 1989, the chandelier was returned to Brown, and the University donated the similar chandelier cast by Brass Works, which remains today.

Originally the Library Reference Room and following the 1988 renovation the Children's Library, and even more recently a program space, the new Ship Room is now home to the Library's Alfred S. Brownell Collection of Atlantic Ship Models donated during the 1950s and 1960s along with a naval architecture collection.

## **Alfred S. Brownell Collection on Maritime History**

The Alfred S. Brownell Collection on Maritime History consists of 320 printed books, 550 blueprints and technical drawings, several prints and photographs and most notably, the 11 ship models of Atlantic Coast fishing vessels largely made by Mr. Brownell, which are displayed here in the Library's newly renovated Ship Room.

Mr. Brownell gave his collection of ship models during the 1950s and the remainder of the Maritime history collection was presented to Providence Public Library in 1963. The collection is strong in books on ship model building and naval architecture, and there are also a number of scarce, early books on rigging and artillery as well as dictionaries of nautical terms.





## Brownell and His Collection of Atlantic Coast Ship Models

Mr. Brownell was a marine historian and one of the most highly regarded model boat builders in this country.

The distinct types of fishing craft were evolved as early as the Colonial times to meet the needs of men fishing in such diverse areas as the sheltered waters of Long Island Sound, the stormy ocean off the Maine Coast and the shallow oyster beds of the Chesapeake Bay.

The introduction of power in about 1900 marked the end of an era and it was for the reason that it seemed important to Mr. Brownell to produce this collection while the memory of these boats remained fresh and while a number of the originals could still be found. Many thousands of hours were required to prepare scale drawings and to produce each model. Basswood was used for the hull, white holly for the decks, pear wood for the planning and lemon wood for the masts. Anchors, rigging, blocks and other parts were intricately fashioned to scale with a host of woodworking and machine tools, some of which were specially constructed.

The fishing fleet now permanently berthed in the Library's new Ship Room consists of the following models, with the name of their builders.

### NAME OF MODEL | *BUILDER*

Block Island Double Ender | *Alfred S. Brownell*

Chesapeake Bay Bugeye | *Robert B. Easton*

Chesapeake Bay Skipjack | *Alfred S. Brownell*

Colonial Fishing Schooner | *Alfred S. Brownell*

Eastport Pinky | *Alfred S. Brownell*

Friendship Sloop | *Robert B. Easton*

Gloucester Sloop | *Alfred S. Brownell*

Maine Pinkey | *Alfred S. Brownell*

New Haven Sharpie | *Lester Rowe*

Quoddy | *Alfred S. Brownell*

Tancock Whaler | *Alfred S. Brownell*



## The Rhode Island Room

The restored and newly named Providence Journal Rhode Island Room was originally the Library's Periodical Room. Following the 1988 renovation, the room served as the location of the Library's music collection.

With its restoration, the richly appointed room now serves as a traditional research room that features and showcases the Library's cornerstone special collection -- the highly used and unique Rhode Island Collection -- and makes it more accessible to the public.

## The Rhode Island Collection

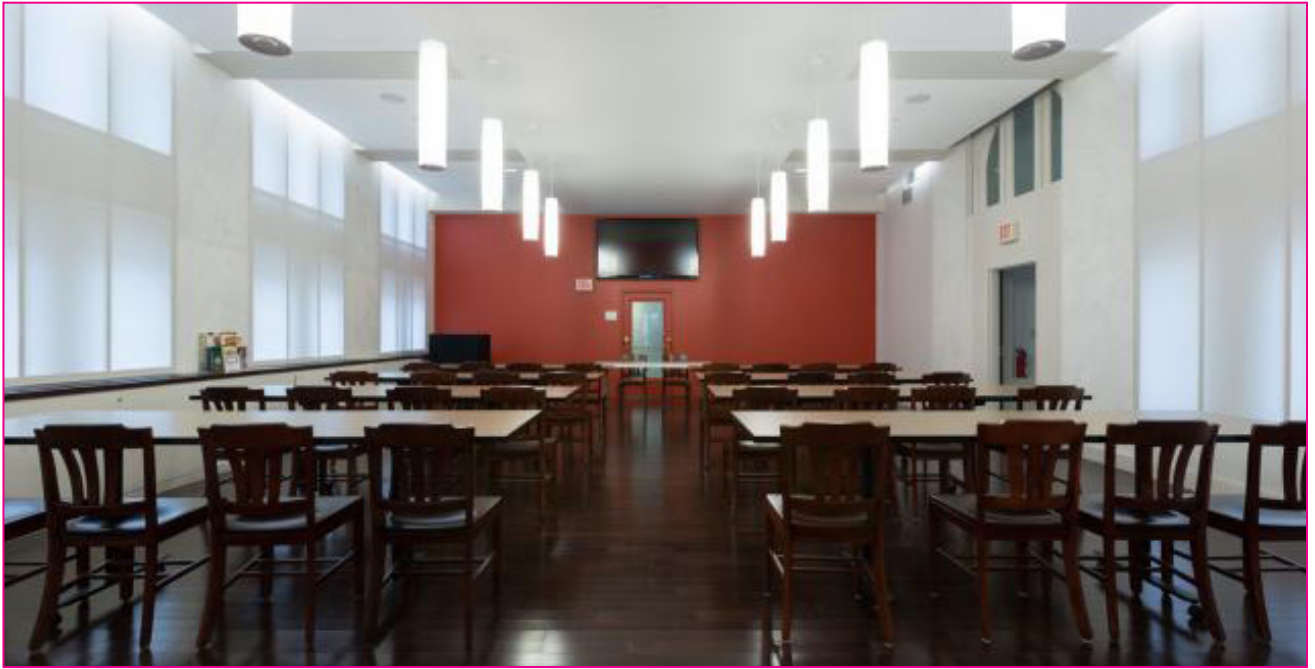
The Rhode Island Collection consists of several thousand items, including Rhode Island maps, microfilm, photographs and postcards, books, vital records, ephemera, as well as the true treasure of the collection and one of the state's most valuable state/local history indexes -- the Rhode Island Index to all the materials in the collection, as well as to the Providence Journal-Bulletin newspaper dating back to the late 1800s.

The Providence Journal Rhode Island Room is home to one of the Library's notable Rhode Island Collection items:



A bust of George Henry Corliss -- the marble bust on pedestal was executed by Franklin Simmons in 1874 and received by the Library in 1929 as a gift from the Estate of Miss Maria L. Corliss.





## The Barnard Room

The newly renovated Meeting Room on the Library's third floor was originally named the Barnard Club Library and served as an "education study-room." During the course of time, it also became the home of the Library's Foreign Department. More recently the room has been known as the Barnard Room and has largely served as the site for many public programs, lectures, meetings and events of the Library and other groups.

The Library's beautifully appointed Trustee's Room features gold leaf accents and a stately fireplace of Westerly marble. With the 2012 restorations, the Trustee's Room is now also available to bridal parties and other groups and features a welcoming sitting area, as well as dressing and rest rooms.

Among items of note featured in the room are:

The Library's original Honduras mahogany Trustee's table and chairs, refurbished. A discerning eye will note the sculpted corners of the table which mirror the four corners of the room.

Two bronze statues by French sculptor Louis Valentin Elias Robert which rest on the fireplace mantel. One of Mercury – the Roman Messenger God, and the other of Fortuna, the Roman Goddess of Chance, which were originally owned by Emperor Maximilian who ruled as Emperor of Mexico



*Photo courtesy of John Woolf*



from 1864 to 1867. They were given to the Library by Mrs. William Davis Miller, whose father, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, received them from the Emperor.



A “Williams” Clock – Made by Joshua Harrocks, Lancaster, England (circa 1780). The Library received it in 1905 from the Estate of Charles C. Hoskins. (The clock formerly belonged to Mrs. Samuel Elliot (Mrs. John R. Bartlett’s aunt) and was sold by her daughter-in-law Mrs. Albert Elliott to Mrs. J.B. Hoskins, from whom it passed to her son, Charles.)

Varied artwork reproductions from the Library’s Special Collections, including prints from Alexander Wilson’s American Ornithology, grace the walls.

A Terrestrial World Globe – Made in Scotland by W. & A.K. Johnston, Ltd. The globe’s elaborate cradle has a horizon ring around the equator which lists months of the year with their astrological counterparts.

## Special Collections

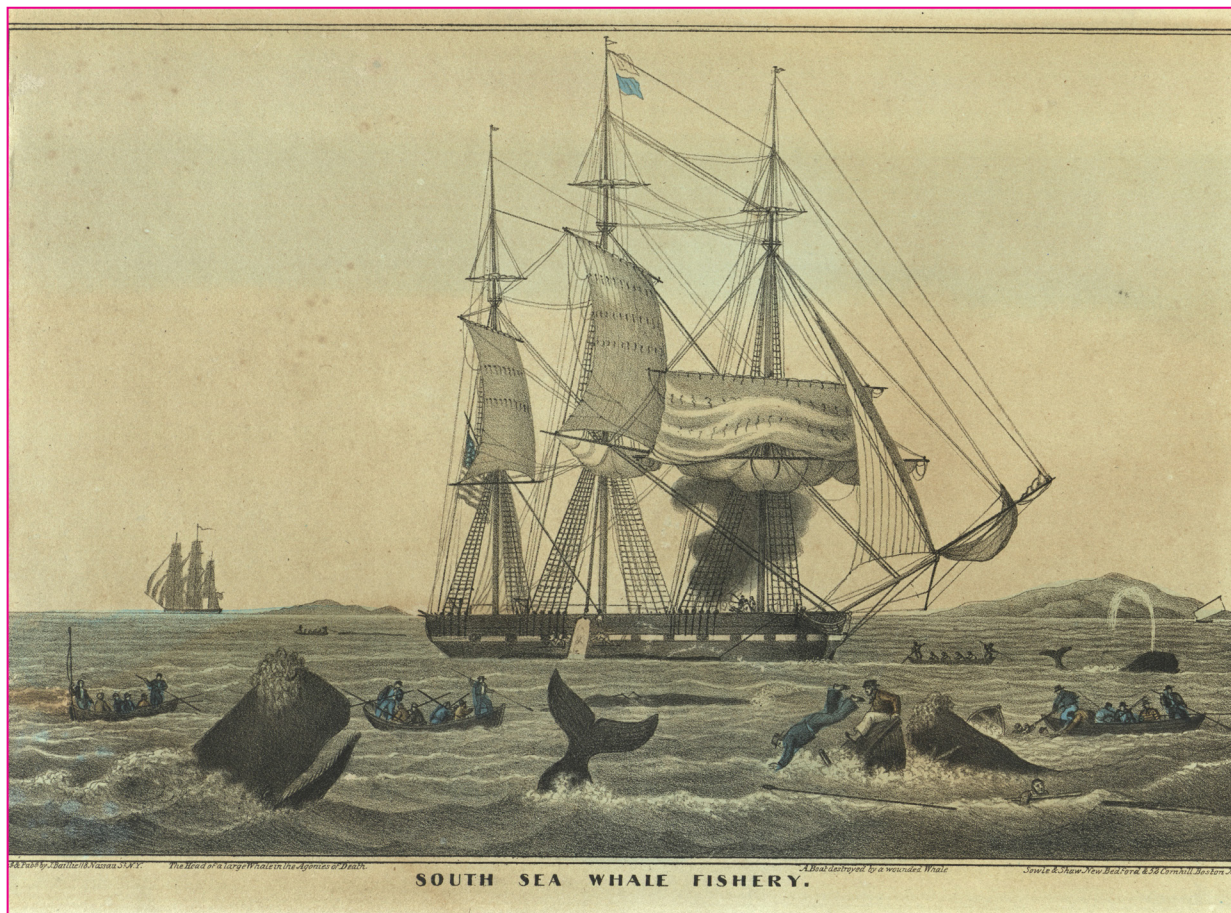
Originally the Library’s Lecture Room, the room currently home to PPL’s Special Collections served as the “Boys & Girls Reading Room” during the 1930s and it was during that time that the hand-painted murals currently gracing the walls came into being.

Pawtucket native Edward Dubuque produced the set of five murals under the auspices of the Federal Emergency Relief Association (FERA) as an art project, and they were formally dedicated on April 23, 1935. Dubuque went on to produce backdrop sets for MGM.

The five murals extending around three walls of the main room represent characters and incidents from well-known literature for boys and girls. Read more about the Dubuque Murals.



Today, PPL’s Special Collections Department is comprised of several distinct collections of more than 40,000 books, manuscripts, pamphlets, ephemera, newspapers, maps, broadsides, art, and artifacts, representing over four thousand years of human history and culture. All materials are non-circulating, and must be used in the department (with the exception of the Rhode Island Collection).



The Library's notable Special Collections include:

***Checkers & Whist***

***Children's Books***

***Civil War and Slavery***

***General Collection***

***History of the Printed Book***

***Irish History and Culture***

***Law and Legal History***

***Magic***

***Rhode Island History***

***Whaling and Maritime History***

### **Third Floor Balcony**

The third floor balcony area at the top of the Library's Grand Marble Staircase and the corridor connecting the Trustee's and the Special Collections rooms arguably comprise the Library's most ornate spaces.

The corridor and the walls on either side are supported by massive pillars of Sienna marble and Scagliola. From the ceiling hang electric lights, the fixtures and globes highly ornamental. The decorative lighting of Beaux Arts design featured in the spaces are original.

Notable items in the area include:

A Grandfather Chime Clock -- donated by Henry D. Sharpe in 1953

A Statue of Terpsichore -- the Greek Muse of dancing and choral song. The full length bronze statue was cast in Paris by Barbedienne. The Library received it in 1921 from William Binney, Jr. as a memorial gift in honor of Mrs. William Binney.





Photos courtesy of John Woolf

**Images on this page (clockwise, from top):**

**Above:** The third floor balcony with a view of the staircase and windows.

**Below:** The grandfather chime clock, The statue of Tersichore.







PHILIPPINE