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Legal Beagle's Post

July 5, 2019

What is an Athenaeum?



July 5, 2019

In this summer's continuing series of posts about Rhode Island history, today's post is about the athenaeums of Rhode Island. If you have never heard the term "athenaeum" before, it is really just an old and fancy way to say "[library](#)."

New England has several well-known libraries with the term "athenaeum" in the title. Massachusetts has at least four, the [Berkshire Athenaeum](#), the [Westfield Athenaeum](#), the [Salem Athenaeum](#), and the [Boston Athenaeum](#). New Hampshire has one called the [Portsmouth Athenaeum](#) and Vermont has one called the [St. Johnsbury Athenaeum](#).

Connecticut has the [Wadsworth Athenaeum](#), but confusingly, it is an art museum, not a library. There is a library on the premises called Auerbach Art Library.

Rhode Island has two institutions with athenaeum in the title. The Providence Athenaeum is located a block or so from the RI Supreme Court and [is one of the oldest libraries in the](#)

[country](#). Well known authors, creators, historians, and intellectuals often visit to give talks and those [talks are then available on their website](#). For a real treat, see this talk by the creators of the podcast [Crimetown](#), Marc Smerling and Zac Stuart-Pontier.

The other athenaeum in Rhode Island is the Redwood Library & Atheneum in Newport. [According to its website](#), the library began in colonial Rhode Island, “[t]he Company of the Redwood Library was established in 1747 by Abraham Redwood and 45 colonists with the goal of making written knowledge more widely available to the Newport community.” In 1962, the [Redwood was designated a National Historic Landmark](#). For more information about the Redwood, see <https://redwoodlibrary.org/>.

July 19, 2019

A Mini-History of Court Robes



July 19, 2019

Have you ever given a stray thought to the subject of judicial robes? In academia, academic robes have a [long history](#). Have you wondered about when judges started wearing them? Have you wondered if it is the same in all states? When did robes become the norm for Rhode Island judges?

In the United States, the tradition generally comes from England where the judges wore robes. English judicial robes were colorful, but Chief Justice John Marshall of the Supreme Court of the United States [elected to wear a black robe](#) and set the standard for judges in the United States. The founding fathers had already decided to [ditch the powdered wigs](#) favored by English judges.

In Rhode Island, robes were adopted by the highest court in 1900. (See Rhode Island District Courts Adopt Robes, R.I. Bar Journal (Jan. 1960), at 3.) An [editorial](#) discussing the impending change in Rhode Island judicial attire noted that the judges in Rhode Island would “set a good example for judges all over the land to follow” and that Massachusetts judges did not wear robes. The editorial concluded with “...there is no reason why the least objection should be made to the proposed departure, and there are many reasons why it should receive the approval of those who believe in doing all things ‘decently and in order.’”

While it may seem strange today that there was ever any need to discuss whether the Supreme Court of Rhode Island should adopt robes, it should also be noted that the Superior Court adopted robes even later and the last Rhode Island court to adopt robes as standard judicial wear was the District Court in 1960. (See Rhode Island District Courts Adopt Robes, R.I. Bar Journal (Jan. 1960), at 3.)

At [the federal level](#), “It is believed that by 1801, when John Marshall became chief justice, the justices were in the habit of wearing black.” However, Sandra Day O’Connor further explains, “There are no rules that dictate what judges or justices must wear on the bench, nor is there even a common source for Supreme Court robes.” However, the [word on the street is](#) that many of the justices get their robes from a company called Bentley & Simon.