



by Gayle Hargreaves

# Redwood Library and Athenaeum

Collections Spanning  
Centuries Secured for Future

At the Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, Rhode Island, rare books, portraiture, sculpture, furniture, and decorative arts representing almost three centuries of the collective interests of its founders and members are secure for the future with the completion of a \$6.8 million expansion and restoration project. The Redwood (Fig. 1), America's first neoclassical public building, dating to 1750, and the country's oldest continuously operating lending library, reopened in January 2006, offering more access than ever to its collections.

The Redwood's original collection of 750 titles in 1,339 volumes was purchased in London in the late 1740s with £500 sterling donated by Abraham Redwood. Redwood and forty-five members of the Company of the Redwood Library, chartered in 1747, composed a list of desirable titles with the objective of procuring "useful Books suitable for a Publick Library." (The library was "public" in the sense that it was open to the public, but was not "free." Like other social libraries of the time, the Redwood was and continues to be, supported in part by membership fees.) The original collection sheds light on the mindset of a group of cultured, educated colonial gentlemen, and distinguishes the Redwood from other early membership libraries, whose collections were primarily



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**Fig. 1:** Redwood Library and Athenaeum exterior, Peter Harrison (1716–1775). Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island. Harrison, America's first architect, probably derived the design for the Redwood Library, a Roman Doric temple with portico and wings, from Edward Hoppus's 1735 edition of Andrea Palladio's *Architecture, in Four Books*. Though it appears to be constructed of stone, the original structure, completed in 1750, was built with wood carved to appear like blocks and columns of marble or granite.

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**Fig. 2:** Teapot, Samuel Casey, South Kingstown, RI, circa 1745. Silver. H. 6½ in. The earliest monogram on the teapot is that of Sarah Pope (1742–1819), who married William Redwood in 1757. Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island; gift of Miss Ellen Townsend in 1883, great-niece of Sarah Redwood.

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**Fig. 3:** *Mary Ward Flagg*, Robert Feke (1707–1752), 1749. Oil on canvas, 49¼ x 38½ inches. Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island; gift from descendants of Countess László Széchenyi, daughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt. Feke was one of America's earliest native colonial painters. He established a reputation as a portrait painter but settled in Newport after marrying the daughter of a prominent Newport tailor. Mary Flagg (1713–1781) was a direct descendant of Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island.







pulled from existing personal holdings.

Many of the original 750 titles disappeared during the War of Independence, when the building was used as an officers' club by the British, but in the 1950s the library began systematically identifying and replacing missing volumes. "We have been able to replace approximately 90 percent of the lost books—the same volumes and editions—because we have the original list," says Lisa Long, the Ezra Stiles Special Collections Librarian.

As a thriving colonial town and later, a summer resort colony for wealthy families from the South, Philadelphia, New York, Providence, and Boston, Newport attracted generations of noted authors, artists, philanthropists, politicians, scientists, and historians, many of whom had close ties to

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**Fig. 4: Self Portrait at Twenty-four, Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828), circa 1778.** Oil on canvas, 16½ x 12¾ inches. Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island; gift from Louisa Lee Waterhouse. Stuart was born in Narragansett, Rhode Island, studied with Benjamin West in London, and settled in Philadelphia in 1792. This work was painted in 1778 while working in West's studio.

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**Fig. 5: Self Portrait, age 70, Charles Bird King (1785–1862), 1856.** Oil on canvas, 44½ x 34 inches. Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island. An accomplished portraitist and one of the most significant still life painters of the nineteenth century, King was born in Newport in 1785. Although he eventually settled in Washington, he always summered in Newport and upon his death made the Redwood his principle heir, bequeathing his own library and extensive collections of drawings, prints, and paintings.

the Redwood Library. Beginning in 1747 with Dr. John Brett's donation of a bible printed in 1488, the collections have grown organically through donations by members and artists, their families (Fig. 2), and other supporters. The organization's collections evolved with the culture of the nation.

The Redwood's holdings now include over 200,000 books in addition to periodicals, manuscripts, ephemera, photographs, prints, drawings, maps, artifacts, and the nation's premier collection of printed works relating to the history of Newport. Selections from these collections are on display throughout the year. Although only members can borrow books, anyone may use the library's holdings within the building, including volumes from the original collection.

The library is also known for its impressive collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits, most of which are on permanent exhibit. Of particular note are portraits by Robert Feke (1707–1752) (Fig. 3), Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) (Fig. 4), John Smibert





(1688–1751), Joseph Blackburn (active in America 1754–1762), and Charles Bird King (1785–1862) (Fig. 5).

The Redwood's Cynthia Cary Collection includes nearly 200 English and related continental pattern books of furniture (Fig. 6), decoration, and ornament ranging from the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. A superb card table built by renowned eighteenth-century cabinetmaker John Townsend is the centerpiece of the Redwood's furniture collection. Other items of interest to collectors and researchers include a book of moral maxims written by a very young Louis XVI of France; the oldest flag known to have flown in the Rhode Island English colony; a rare 1728 William Claggett clock that indicates the time of high tide as well as the time of day; and the earliest documented set of Windsor chairs in New England (Fig. 7).

The recent expansion and restoration project has produced three main benefits, according to Long. A new climate control system creates the proper environment for the preservation of materials and expands the institution's exhibition capabilities. The new Slocum Scholars' Room provides additional

workspace for visiting researchers. And with the opening of the Van Alen Gallery the library has gained a new space for changing exhibitions. "Because this is primarily a library, the art work has always been shown in a nineteenth-century gallery style which is up above the high shelves," says Long. "For the first time in modern Redwood history, many art works can now be seen at eye level."

The Redwood's displays, lectures, performances, seminars, and other educational activities are open without charge to the

public. The library is open to qualified scholars, researchers, and those making occasional use of the collections. Tours are offered throughout the year. For more information contact the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, 50 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI, 401.847.0292, or visit [www.redwoodlibrary.org](http://www.redwoodlibrary.org). @

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**Fig. 6:** Furniture-Maker's Catalogue, English, late-18th/early 19th century. Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island. An unusual example of a manuscript sample catalogue of fancy chairs featuring fourteen chairs in the oriental style, with stylized bamboo details and caned seats. A numbered inscription may indicate that this was part of a series of sample catalogues used by this manufacturer, suggesting mass production at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

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**Fig. 7:** Windsor armchair, Newport, RI, 1764. Part of the earliest documented set of Windsor chairs in New England; purchased in 1764 for use in the library.

