

HISTORIC ROOTS

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FAIRBANKS MUSEUM & PLANETARIUM

By SELENE COLBURN



Fairbanks Museum

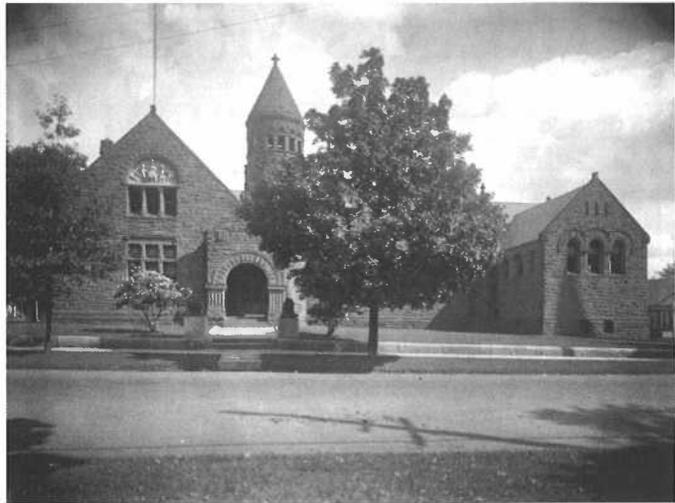
Fairbanks Museum founder Franklin Fairbanks as a young man.

On Main Street in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, stands a large building. It is made of red sandstone. There are arches over the windows and a tower stands in the middle. Brass lions guard the entrance. Inside the building, with its arched ceilings and grand staircase, are stuffed animals, rocks, minerals, fossils, and much more. This is the Fairbanks Museum. It was started from the collections of one man, Franklin Fairbanks.

Franklin Fairbanks was the son of Erastus Fairbanks, one of the founders of the E. and T. Fairbanks Scale Manufacturing Company.¹ Erastus' brother, Thaddeus, invented the platform scale. This scale made it possible to weigh freight without taking it out of the vehicles or containers it was packed in. The invention made the Fairbanks family very rich.

Franklin always worked for the scale company. He became its president in 1888, when he was 60 years old. But from childhood on, he had other interests as well. He was interested in

¹ Erastus Fairbanks also served two terms as governor of Vermont.



Fairbanks Museum

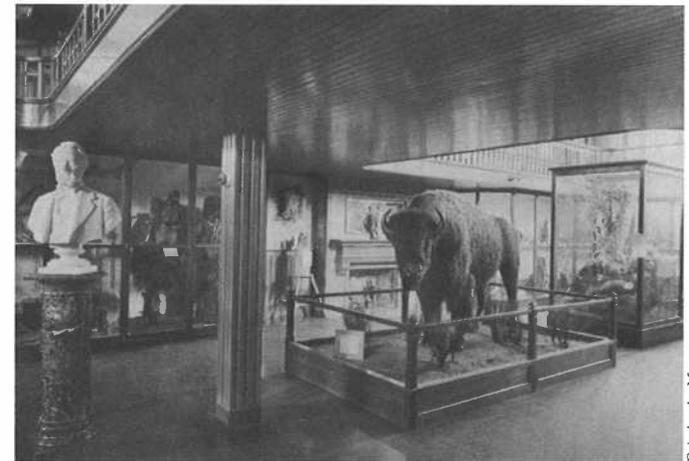
An early view of the Fairbanks Museum.

science and in the world around him. As a young boy, he collected rocks and minerals. He also collected items of artistic interest from other lands and of historic interest from the local area. When he was grown, he opened his house on Sunday afternoons so townspeople could come and look at what he called his “Cabinet of Curiosities.” By 1889, his collections took up too much room to stay in his house. He decided to build the Fairbanks Museum of Natural Science.

The museum building opened on December 15, 1891. Franklin Fairbanks spoke that day to the children of St. Johnsbury. “I want you to understand from this time on, this building is to be yours, and that you are to carefully guard its interests.”

The museum has grown since then. It now houses more than 160,000 objects. Other people from the area have also contributed objects they collected nearby and in their travels. For a while, the museum housed a “live museum,” which sheltered rescued and injured animals. The planetarium was built in 1962. Its sky shows attract children and adults from far and near.

Franklin Fairbanks kept detailed records of the weather. After the museum opened, he set up an observation station at the museum and shared his information with the National Weather Service. Local weather radio broadcasts began years later, in the late 1940s. Now, with state-of-the-art facilities, the museum houses the Northern New England Weather



Fairbanks Museum

An early view of the exhibits.

Center. Meteorologists Mark Breen and Steve Maleski now provide up-to-the-minute information to radio stations, ski resorts, and private businesses and reach more than 3 million people.

Education has remained a focus since the museum's opening day. Children still learn about the plants and animals of the Northeast Kingdom through museum exhibits and summer astronomy camp. Lectures and exhibits teach visitors of all ages about the environment and the history of the area. Objects from around the world open visitors' eyes to the beauty and creativity of people the world over. The wide interests and generosity of Franklin Fairbanks and his community have created a museum that mirrors their time and our own.



The main exhibition hall.



Carvings over a Fairbanks Museum window.

The Fairbanks Museum is located at 1302 Main Street in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. It is open daily, except for New Year's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For information about times and for directions, please call 802-748-2372.