

Alexandria Times

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Ice wells in Alexandria

The recent cold weather in Alexandria has been an unwelcome inconvenience for many residents. Did you know that in the 1790s, one of Alexandria's iconic businesses relied on cold weather to propel itself above its competition?

In 1792, John Wise built the City Tavern as the finest lodging facility in Alexandria. Today, City Tavern is known as Gadsby's Tavern. Wise included the construction of an icehouse underneath the corner of Royal and Cameron Streets in his design plans for the hotel. The public can view the restored icehouse at that same location today.

Ice harvesting was not an easy endeavor at the time. Hotel workers cut the ice from the frozen Potomac River in the winter months and hauled it to the City Tavern by cart. After placing the ice in the well, Wise, his employees and enslaved people formed the ice into a solid mound and covered it with straw to keep it usable through the summer. The ability to preserve ice allowed City Tavern to chill beverages, preserve perishable foods and make the dessert that had recently come into favor: ice cream.

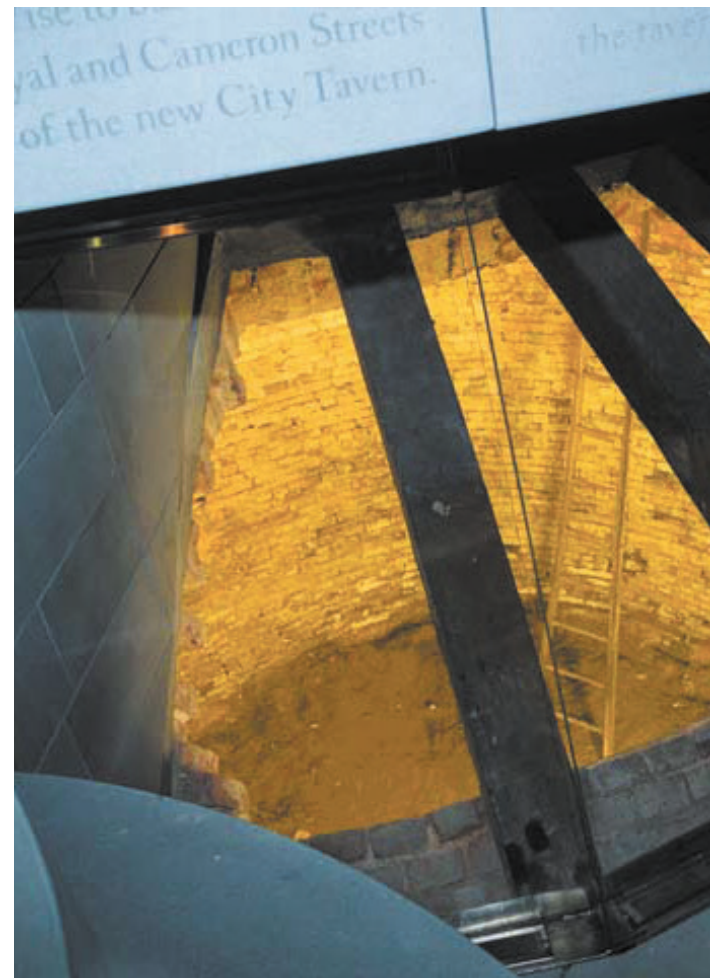
The icehouse allowed the City Tavern to distinguish itself from competitors unable

to provide guests with the same amenities. A later operator of the Tavern, John Gadsby, advertised his willingness to sell ice from the well to the general public in 1805.

Other ice wells in Alexandria were exclusive to wealthy, private owners. The ice well built at Royal and Cameron streets is much larger than most privately owned ice houses, expanding to 17 feet in diameter and more than 11 feet deep at its deepest point. At capacity, the ice well held 68 tons of ice, more than enough for the use of a hotel throughout a year.

The American Legion donated Gadsby's Tavern Museum to the City of Alexandria in 1972. Along with restoring the museum, the city excavated and stabilized the ice well. The restoration effort included placing a concrete cap over the ice well and removing a section of the well to allow the public to see the interior through a glass cutout.

In 2013, Gadsby's Tavern led the restoration of the ice well. The restoration stabilized the ice well's interior, reduced moisture accumulation and improved ventilation. The restoration also improved the visitor's visual experience, installing new viewing windows and open-plan seating to allow



PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

The restored ice well outside of Gadsby's Tavern.

the public to view the interior day and night.

Today, pedestrians can view an historical artifact unique to the history of hospitality and the development of commerce in Alexandria. Those operating the City Tav-

ern and its successors would probably have wished for even colder weather than we've experienced this winter.

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.