

History on the Rocks: Gadsby's Historic Ice Well

Let them eat ice cream cake

Ice Well Temp: 46: Alexandria Temp: 48

Do you still have ice? Answer: Yes, yes we do. Now it might be the size of a large ice cream cake that is quickly being eaten by sugar-crazed 5 year olds at a birthday party, but that is beside the point. Have ice, will blog.

So apparently when John Wise built his ice well in the late 1700s, he was soooo last century. Europeans had been using ice wells and ice houses years and centuries before. One fun tidbit - many of the ice wells built in England were used as WWII air raid shelters. But I want to focus on France. Now if you remember back to my post, *Ode to an Ice Well*, Charles II, while exiled in France between 1651 -1654, totally fell in love with this cool architectural feature. (Get it - cool. Like super groovy and chilly. Yes, I am on a roll today.) A few years later in 1661, Louis XIV started the transformation of his family's small hunting lodge at Versailles to uber palace. What was the Sun King also building: Glaciers or Ice Houses.

By 1688, records indicate the existence of 13 royal icehouses at [Versailles](#) and in the surrounding area. Paid workmen and sometimes gardeners were hired to fill the ice houses during the winter from ice blocks taken from local ponds as well as the Grand Canal and the Swiss Ornamental Lake on the property. Water was thrown on these blocks to fill in the cracks - it froze on contact since this was during the height of the little ice age - to create the ice mound. Straw was packed around the ice and then lastly boards were laid on top to compress everything down.



Glaciers at Petit Trianon

Fast forward to the famous Marie Antoinette. When her hubby Louis XVI gave her [Petit Trianon](#) as a gift, she also made sure Glaciers were included. And look how cute they are! These date to the early 1780s when the other thatched, norman

cottages were being built by Richard Mique. Quite possibly, the ice well below this cottage dates from the early 1750s when the site was used as Louis XV's dairy farm. They needed to keep all that milk, cheese and other items cold. Case in point; there is one account in the summer of 1777 where Marie-Antoinette got sick from having consumed too much iced cheese.

So next week we will report back on our diminishing ice mound and an exciting opportunity the first weekend in May for all you ice well lovers out there....

Thanks to Philippe Halbert for research on this blog!

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