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Alexandria Community Media

‘The forces awaken’ at The Lyceum

Join veteran science educator and historian Dean Howarth Nov. 12 for an evening of historical science called “The Forces Awaken!”

See Howarth conduct 19th-century experiments, much like those conducted at Lyceum Hall, now the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, in the 1840s and 50s. Enjoy astounding and shocking – sometimes literally – demonstrations that teach us about the invisible forces that surround us.

The Lyceum Company, founded in November 1838 to promote education in Alexandria, partnered with the Library Company to build Lyceum Hall in 1839. Lyceum Hall hosted lectures, debates, concerts, meetings, scientific displays and occasional variety shows through the 1840s and 50s.

The Lyceum Company sponsored lectures and debates from December 1838 through February 1847. Of 103 lectures documented in digitized versions of the Alexandria Gazette, 34 focused on scientific topics, with another 11 on social sciences. Topics included light, geology, astronomy, anatomy, chemistry, meteorology, zoology and more.

Some lecturers illustrated their presentations with posters and props while others included scientific experiments. For example, on Feb. 19, 1839, Caleb Hallowell lectured on “The Science of Pneumatics, with experiments on the air-pump.” Most, but not all, of The Lyceum-sponsored lectures were given by local experts and educators.

One exception was nationally known meteorologist James Pollard Espy, also known as “The Storm King,” who lectured for the Company on “The Philosophy of Storms.” Espy illustrated his lectures with large illustrations and a globe.

When the Lyceum Company was not hosting its own lectures and debates, they rented the hall for events including lectures and displays by people touring the country. Of the 211 such lectures and displays documented in the Alexandria Gazette, 49 touched on scientific topics and 44 on social sciences.

Among many examples are the demonstrations in February 1840 by James Russell of a “Transparent Celestial Sphere … calculated to represent the movements of the heavenly bodies, as seen from the earth in any given latitude.” In January 1844, Irish scientist, writer and lecturer Dionysius Lardner lectured for four nights on astronomy.

His topics included “The Moon,” “Are the Planets Inhabited,” “The Stars” and “The Comets.” He also displayed several dioramas, most having nothing to do with science, but including “a selection of views of the Moon and the SELENORAMA or moving panaroma [sic] of Scenery on the Moon” and “The grand URANORAMA or moving panorama of the heavens.” Lardner’s dioramas were dramatically illuminated by two stage lights called Drummond lights, aka limelights.

In April 1855, Ann Preston gave a course of six lectures “to the Ladies of Alexandria, on the Laws of Life, and the Means of Preserving Health … illustrated by various Anatomical Plates and Preparations: a Skeleton and a Manikin just imported from France, of which the Muscles, Heart, Brain, &c., can be completely dissected, exhibiting the Internal Structure, Arteries, Veins, Spinal Marrow, &c.”



PHOTO/JAMES POLLARD ESPY

The above illustration is from James Pollard Espy’s book, “The Philosophy of Storms,” published in 1841.

Howarth continues the Lyceum Hall tradition of scientific demonstrations Nov. 12 at 7 p.m. at the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum. Come and enjoy demonstrations of 19th-century experiments illustrating the invisible forces that surround us.

Tickets for “The Forces Awaken!” are available at alexandriava.gov/shop.

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