



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

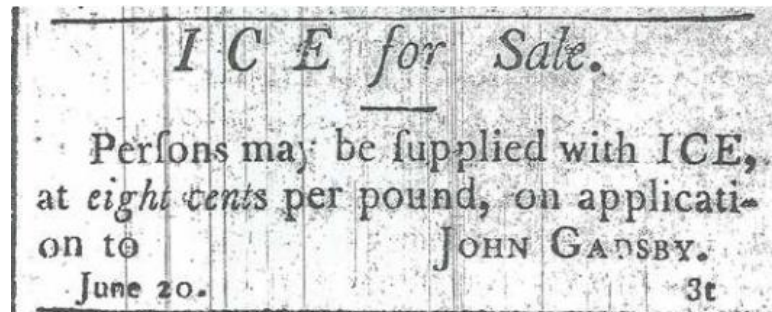
## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria's ice well was a cutting edge amenity

*Alexandria Times, January 25, 2018*

Image: Advertisement, Office of Historic Alexandria.

The winter weather Alexandria has experienced this past month certainly would have been welcome to 18th century residents who did not have ready access to ice at their local food store. Luckily for guests to the City Tavern — now known as Gadsby's Tavern — ice was just around the corner thanks to the subterranean ice well.



The story of the ice well began in 1792 when local businessman John Wise included it in the design for his new large tavern. He knew this would be needed as Alexandria became part of the new Federal City. To secure the tavern's prominence, Wise sought to provide the finest amenities of the time, including a ready supply of ice. This would enable him to chill beverages, preserve perishable foods and even make a new popular dessert of the day: ice cream.

The Alexandria Common Council granted Wise permission to build an ice well underneath the corner of Royal and Cameron Streets in 1793 as part of his construction. For the previous four years, Wise had leased the Alexandria Inn and Coffee House at 201 N. Fairfax Street, which included an on-site icehouse. Perhaps this convenience influenced Wise's design decision for his new venture. He knew this extra touch would make his City Tavern the modern day equivalent of a five-star hotel.

Getting the ice to the ice well, however, was an expensive and time-consuming process. It was cut from the frozen Potomac River in the winter and hauled by cart for storage. Linked directly to the Tavern basement by a brick-walled and vaulted tunnel, the ice well was also accessed by the tavern's enslaved labor force through a small hatch at street level. Once in the well, the ice was formed into a solid mound and covered with straw to preserve it for use through the summer months.

The City Tavern's well is large, measuring more than 17 feet in diameter, and could store more than 60 tons of ice, enough to supply the tavern and even the citizens of Alexandria. In 1805, when John Gadsby was leasing the tavern from John Wise, Gadsby advertised the sale of ice from the well for 8 cents a pound.

In 1972, after the American Legion donated Gadsby's Tavern Museum to the City of Alexandria, a major restoration effort was launched. During this work, the ice well was excavated and stabilized. A section of the ice well dome was then removed to make the interior visible to the public through a glass cutaway section. In 2012, the museum undertook another restoration, making the ice well more accessible to visitors day and night.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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As travelers ventured to the new Federal City, Gadsby's Tavern set the standard for the nation's emerging hospitality industry – thanks in part to this subterranean structure made of brick and mortar. It is a reminder to 21st century residents and guests that something we can run to the store to pick up any time we want – a ready supply of ice – was a scarce luxury in Alexandria's early years.

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*