Out of the Attic

Weather observations at the Alexandria Museum

Alexandria Times, August 30, 2018

Image: Weather observations from August 1838.

As we reach the warmest time of year, we might commiserate with Alexandrians past, who sweated through the dog days of summer without air conditioning or refrigeration. Accounts of sweltering summer heat in days past aren’t rare, and an elegant record exists in the Alexandria Museum meteorological observations published from August 1826 through July 1845.

Major Timothy Mountford observed weather conditions from the museum, located on the third floor of the Market House, where city hall stands today. He recorded temperature and wind direction, and made remarks on the condition of crops, the Potomac River, migrations of birds and fish, atmospheric conditions and general health of the community. A brief report appeared daily in the Alexandria Gazette, with a summary published monthly.

From July 1838: “The weather, this and the two previous months, has continued with a few exceptions, inflexibly warm – and much more so, than is within the recollection of our oldest citizens. Owing to the severe drought and unexampled degree of heat, vegetation, generally, is in a perishing condition. … Dog days will end on the first Sunday in September. This we note in conformity with ancient custom.”

Contrasting with Mountford’s measured tone were published accounts such as this New York Gazette quote that ran in the Alexandria Gazette on July 13:

“The climate is hot enough to hatch chickens in all the fresh-laid eggs, and we believe the phenomenon has occurred! At any rate, all the ice has become lukewarm, and if we should have a hail storm within a day or two, every stone, we take it, will scald as it falls. It is even too hot for the musketeoes, and we saw one of the most venerable of the class give up the ghost last evening from mere exhaustion.”

A New Hampshire native and Freemason, Mountford joined the Alexandria Washington Lodge No. 22 around 1809, and there advocated for the creation of a museum. With the Lodge’s support, Mountford became the curator of its collection of George Washington’s relics and other items, to which he added his own collection of rarities, animal skins and birds.

Years after Mountford’s death, the Washington Evening Star recalled of him and of the museum:

“A little room there contained his domestic furniture and his fiddle, and there he lived, sometimes poorly enough, and there in 1846 he died. He was in manner a gentleman of the old school, generally courteous and urbane, but sometimes irritable and violent. His figure was well known in the market as the..."
town clock itself, and few of the dealers that attended market but had heard his store of anecdotes time
and again until they came to know them as well as he did himself.”

Mountford played the fiddle for museum visitors, and offered annual free admission days for the
city’s poorer residents. In an aviary screened in on the upper porch, above the butchers’ stalls, Mountford
kept several live eagles. Market-goers could hear them calling overhead, and the butchers would feed
them scraps of meat.

Though most of his Alexandria Museum legacy perished when the Market House burned down in
1871, his lasting legacy of scientific observation offers us a glimpse of Alexandria’s environment nearly
two centuries ago.

From the end of July 1845: “Throughout, for the space of ninety days, we here, have experienced
the longest continuation of severe drought and extreme heat, on record, that ever came to my knowledge,
which has produced many sudden deaths, in the northern cities.”

That month, the highest temperature Mountford recorded was 100° Fahrenheit, and the average
of the daily high temperatures he recorded was 89.8°. For comparison, in five of the last twenty years, the
corresponding July temperatures recorded at Reagan National Airport have equaled or exceeded these
values. By present-day standards, then, the extreme heat wave of 1845 would barely register. Even
today’s young city residents can recall hotter summers.

“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.

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