



Alexandria Times

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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 musketoes, 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

METEOROLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS Taken at the Alexandria Museum, August, 1838. BY T. MOUNTFORD.				
Days.	Therm.		Principal Winds.	Remarks on the Weather, &c.
	S. A. M.	P. M.		
1838	77	90	S	Clear, fair, lively breeze
274	80	84	N	Fair
372	82	85	do	Clear, sr 64°
476	84	86	S	Fair, brisk wind
530	86	89	SW	Fair, Full moon
684	80	92	S	Clear, eas. atm.
787	91	93	W	Fair, sr 83°
880	86	90	NW to S	Fair
989	89	91	NE	Cloudy, fair, show'ry
1086	91	93	NW	Fair; Aur. borealis in
1182	93	96	S	Fazy, fair, eas. atm.
1281	86	86	NW	Fair; L. qr. moon
1374	82	84	do	Fair, pleasant
1470	77	80	do	Idto
1574	78	80	SE	Fair, hazy, sultry
1678	80	80	S	Cloudy, hazy, humid
1772	81	82	NW	Clear, fair; al. sh. 1 n
1874	82	85	do	Fair; hot sun
1978	84	86	do	Clear, New moon
2078	84	87	E to SE	Fair, Martins gone
2177	81	85	S	Clear, elastic atm.
2279	86	90	do	Idto
2384	88	90	do	Fair, clear
2478	84	90	do	Clear, lively breeze
2582	87	90	do	Fair
2674	81	88	NW	Clear, brisk wind
2778	80	86	S	Clear, First qr. mn.
2884	77	76	SW to N	Fair, cloudy
2971	79	82	NE to E	Clear, fair
3077	87	88	NW	Hazy, clear, li. breeze



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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.

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