



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

What I did this summer: Travelogues at the Lyceum

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Image: Professor Romeo Elton lectured at the Lyceum in 1846. Courtesy, Brown University.

In 1839, The Lyceum Company, which promoted education in Alexandria, partnered with the library to build what became known as Lyceum Hall. Now Alexandria's History Museum, Lyceum Hall was the intellectual and cultural center of the city for its first two decades.

The Lyceum Company hosted lectures and debates. The hall was also rented out for musical performances, additional lectures, meetings, scientific displays and fundraisers. Among the many lectures were travelogues and tales of far off, and to Alexandria audiences, exotic places. Some were simple lectures, others were illustrated with paintings or dioramas, and all contributed to entertaining curious Alexandrians.

In the first such lecture, in February 1840, Alexandria native Charles Alexander shared "A Day in London," which was "listened to, with delight, by a crowded audience," according to an account in the *Alexandria Gazette*. Alexander's lecture was published in the paper over two days in February and it filled nine full-page columns.

Alexander shared "impressions made upon my own mind by a recent sojourn within [London], mingled with reflections as the subject may naturally suggest." Alexander spoke twice more about his travels, sharing "Recollections of Paris" in January 1841 and "A Pilgrimage to Penhurst" later that same year. In 1842, The Lyceum Company elected him as the organization's second president.

Another Alexandria resident, civil engineer Maskell C. Ewing, lectured on "Naples and its environs" in November 1841. Ewing, originally from Pennsylvania and a 1926 graduate of the United States Military Academy, spent time in Europe during his military career and later worked for the Georgetown-Alexandria Canal as an engineer.

As surveyor for the city of Alexandria, Ewing created a plan of the city and several charts of the Potomac as well. Ewing's map of Alexandria sold at Bell & Entwisle's shop (color \$1; plain \$.75), but his 1841 lecture at Lyceum Hall focused on Italy.

While Ewing likely spoke at length about Pompeii and Herculaneum as part of Naples' "environs," Professor Romeo Elton, formerly of Brown University, lectured for three January nights in 1846 specifically on those ruins. Ads for the lectures noted that "Each Lecture will be illustrated by large paintings."

After the first lecture, a writer to the *Alexandria Gazette* noted that people were so familiar with the topic that "we do not know that the Lecturer taught us much," but added that because of Brown's first-





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hand experience, “we followed him willingly, and with fond recollections of our early studies, and with renewed pleasure, because he has been an eye witness to what he describes.”

Other speakers passing through Alexandria shared their adventures with willing audiences at Lyceum Hall and often found different ways to bring them to life. Dr. Boyd Reilly, in April 1846, shared his experiences of living in Constantinople – dressed in an “ancient costume,” sharing “Turkish curiosities” and closing with “a specimen of Turkish poetry and vocal music.”

In 1844, Dr. Dionysius Lardner lectured for four evenings on astronomy, but concluded each lecture showing dioramas of Rome, Jerusalem, Constantinople and various other exotic locales. Lardner lit his dioramas with limelight, developed less than a decade earlier, to add drama to his displays. Even the science crowd appears to have been drawn to the lure of faraway places.

In February 1855, W.G. Dix lectured on the “Climate, Scenery, and Productions of the Andes of South America.” A commenter in the Alexandria Gazette noted the lecture was “instructive and interesting” and that Dix “interspersed his discourse with pleasing anecdotes,” implying that he had visited the region.

In December 1855, Rev. John Morris of Baltimore shared his “Personal Adventures in the Alps” in a free lecture for the Young Men’s Christian Association. He illustrated his lecture with “beautiful paintings of the various scenes through which [he] passed.”

Over the years, lecture topics varied at Lyceum Hall and renters used the hall for a wide range of activities. But tales of travel to exotic foreign locales, often illustrated to bring them to life, gave Alexandrians a chance to visit London and Paris; explore Pompeii and Vesuvius; climb the Alps and the Andes and discover other distant places without ever leaving the confines of Lyceum Hall.

“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.