



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Phrenology at Lyceum Hall

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Image: Nelson Sizer illustrated in "Sizer, Nelson, Forty Years in Phrenology; Embracing Recollections of History, Anecdote, and Experience, New York: Fowler & Wells., Publishers, 1888."

The Lyceum Company, founded in 1838 to promote education in Alexandria, partnered with the Library Company to build Lyceum Hall in 1839. Lyceum Hall, now the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, hosted lectures, debates, concerts, meetings, displays and demonstrations until 1868, when it was purchased and converted into a private home.

Science was a popular topic for lectures and demonstrations – sometimes valid science and sometimes fields of pseudoscience like phrenology, the study of the shape of people's heads to determine their character and prospects in life.

A recent review of digitized editions of *The Alexandria Gazette* reveals 19 separate lectures, debates or demonstrations related at least in part to phrenology that happened at Lyceum Hall between 1840 and 1854. Additionally, the Lyceum Company's first debate, held in Mechanics Hall as they had yet to build Lyceum Hall, addressed the question, "Is the science of Phrenology calculated to have a beneficial effect upon Society?" A little over a year later, in Lyceum Hall proper, they wondered, "Is Phrenology (as explained by Combe and Spurzheim) calculated to have a beneficial effect on Society?"

That same evening, March 30, 1841, the debate followed a lecture by former President John Quincy Adams, who spoke about civilization. The newspaper accounts of his lecture do not record if Adams shared his thoughts on phrenology during the debate, but in a letter published in the *Alexandria Gazette* on June 25, 1839, he wrote of phrenology, "I have classed it with alchymy [sic], with judicial astrology, with augury [an ancient form of fortune telling], - and, as Cicero says, that he wonders how two Roman augurs could ever look each other in the face without laughing, I have felt something of the same surprise, that two learned phrenologists can meet with out the like temptation." If Adams joined the debate, he almost certainly weighed in against phrenology.

Earlier that same March, Pishey Thompson, Esq. lectured on "The Moral and Metaphysical results and tendencies of Phrenology." Amid these academic lectures and debates on phrenology, Messrs. Buell and Sizer offered a free course in phrenology on March 25, 1841. They promised "experiments will be made at the close of the lecture" – in other words, they would give readings of people's heads.

Phineas T. Buell and Nelson Sizer offered another free lecture on April 7 addressing the harmony between phrenology and revealed religion. They passed a hat for donations afterward. The two free lectures had been offered to drum up interest in a course of paid lectures that began on April 9. On May 29 they lectured on "Courtship and Marriage" – a popular topic for phrenologists. In 1843 Buell and Sizer





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published “A Guide to Phrenology,” which was intended to share the philosophies of phrenology in an easy to understand tome – or as they put it, “the authors have aimed at perspicuity and utility.” Sizer went on to work for the most famous phrenologists of the day – Fowler and Wells Company in New York City – and recorded that he conducted more than 300,000 individual readings of heads in his career.

Phrenology also had its detractors. In 1842 and 1845, comedian Dr. Valentine offered “Droll Doings and Diversions” at Lyceum Hall. He played many different stock characters, but the ads for 1845 performances show him as “Amaniah Trotabout, the Yankee Phrenologist.” While he likely portrayed a variety of characters in his Alexandria shows, as Trotabout, Valentine skewered phrenology by doing comic readings of prop heads made of wood and papier-mâché.

Finally, some of the lectures and demonstrations explored elements of phrenology amid other topics. In 1843, a Mr. Johnson lectured on “Animal Magnetism and Phreno-Magnetism” and William R. Massey lectured similarly on “Phreno Magnetism.” In 1846 Dr. Ellis, “the Chinese Phreno-Physiognomist” lectured on “The Temperaments, Cerebral Organs, and Character;” gave a “Grand Lecture on Courtship and Marriage,” and concluded with a “Grand Examination Lecture,” which included a “Public Examination of Heads and Characters.” He promised more than 100 readings.

In 1853, Dr. Marshall Bayless offered a course of three “Phrenological Lectures.” But after 1853, phrenology lectures and programs stopped appearing at Lyceum Hall. They continued, however, at other locations, including Sarepta Hall and Stewart’s Hall on King Street.

“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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