



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Early Alexandria and refrigeration

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Image: The restored ice well at the corner of Cameron and Royal Streets. Office of Historic Alexandria

The return of hot weather brings up an old subject for historians of Alexandria. Did you know that in the 18th and 19th centuries, people prized salt more as a preservative than a seasoning?

Indeed, salt packed the barrels of many of Alexandria's exports, including fish.

The lucky few in our city had ice wells. One of the fortunate (and by fortunate, we mean wealthy) owners of such a luxury was the City Tavern, now known as Gadsby's Tavern Museum. First built in 1793, the ice well was restored in 2012, and you can visit it today on the corner of Royal and Cameron Streets.

Designed by owner John Wise in 1792, the ice well was a major feature of the City Tavern, including during the period when Wise leased the hotel to John Gadsby, a name that might be more familiar to readers. The ice well was large for its day, more than 17 feet in diameter, and held more than 60 tons of ice. While it required a major investment in time and labor to stock the ice well by Gadsby and his enslaved workforce, the ice well gave him another revenue stream, the retail of ice for eight cents a pound in 1805 currency.

By forming all of the ice harvested during winter into one mound, and then covering it with straw, Gadsby and his workforce were able to use refrigeration all year long. The City Tavern used its well to store perishable foods, including the luxury of ice cream that caught the attention of 18th-century Virginia elites. While many wealthy estates had private ice wells, the ice well at Gadsby's Tavern Museum is one of the few remaining ice wells built for commercial use.

The tavern was not the only ice cream seller in town, though. For example, an 1821 article in the *Alexandria Gazette* mentions that Louis Beeler "had commenced making ice creams for the season." Beeler later advertised other exotic goods in the same publication, including "Malaga grapes" and "pine apples."

At the time, ice cream was not necessarily sweet. For instance, contemporary recipes included instructions for the making of asparagus ice cream. By 1845, however, tastes seem to have changed





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

from savory ice creams to sweet, as evidenced by Christian Schaefer's advertisement in the Gazette that year announcing his ability to make ice creams.

Hot weather has been a feature of Alexandria's long history. Newspaper advertisements and the presence of the Gadsby's Tavern ice well give us an idea of how some of the residents of our city sought to combat the heat more than two centuries ago.

"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 and invited guests.