

History on the Rocks: Gadsby's Historic Ice Well

The Beginning: February 18, 2011

It all started in 2006 when we wanted to help answer the question, “What is down those stairs at the corner of N. Royal and Cameron Streets?” Most folks think a) the Gadsby's Tavern Restaurant, b) a groovy underground bar, c) a secret tunnel to China or d) stairs? What stairs? None of these are the correct answer; it is really e) a c. 1793 ice well.

To give the quick 5 minute history – the Museum is comprised of two buildings, a c. 1785 tavern and 1792 City Tavern and Hotel. When local business man John Wise built the City Tavern, he also built a subterranean ice well which provided the tavern business with a ready supply of ice. Harvested from the frozen Potomac River in the winter, ice was hauled by cart to the City Tavern and stored in the ice well. Ice was formed into a solid mound and covered with straw to preserve it for use through the summer months.

Fast forward 200+ years to the 1970s. After accepting the site from American Legion Post #24 who purchased the buildings in 1929, the City launched a major restoration effort. During this work, the ice well was excavated and stabilized. A concrete cap was placed over the ice well to cover and protect the historic feature. A section of the ice well was then removed to make the interior visible to the public.

The ice well needs some love after 35+years. It's got plant growth, cracking in the brick, moisture, the list could go on and go. The Museum is in the process of raising the money to restore it and bring a renewed awareness to this awesome, yet often overlooked feature.



1970s excavations

That brings us back to today. As a fundraiser and educational experience, we decided to put a large block of ice down into the ice well and see if it really would last for a long time. We know John Gadsby was able to sell ice in June, so why not try ourselves? And when you buy a raffle ticket, you guess the melt date, you win! Prizes include diamonds, crystal or icy drinks!

To keep track of the ice block's progress, watch it on the webcam and follow this blog! Let's meet the team:

- Gretchen Bulova –Director; 20+ year veteran on all thing Gadsbys; must have perfectly manicured nails; Favorite cocktail - cosmopolitan
- Liz Williams – Assistant Director; Color commentator; Loves tourist tchotchkes; Favorite cocktail - sweet tea vodka and lemonade
- Danny Smith - Science Geek; Engineer; favorite cocktail - very dry Beefeater Gibson, up, extra cocktail onions
- Guest bloggers

So buy a chance at diamonds, and be a part of the ice block's journey, and learn some great things about history of all things ice along the way.