

History on the Rocks: Gadsby's Historic Ice Well

World Famous Guest Blogger Post #2

Our second guest blogger is Dwight Young, former Senior Communications Associate of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, world traveler, collector of mini buildings. Favorite cocktail: top-shelf margarita with, appropriately enough, lots of ice.



Dwight in the Big Apple

If you've been following (as I have) the nail-biting, thrill-a-minute saga of Gadsby's Tavern Museum's Awesome Melting Ice Block over the past several weeks, you may feel that you know pretty much all you need to know about this particular subject and are therefore with ice wells. Not so fast, bucko. A singularly important question remains to be asked and answered: OK, so there's a really old ice well under Cameron Street in downtown Alexandria but so what?

Before we deal with that query, let's review what we've already learned. First, the Gadsby's Tavern ice well is an impressively significant historic artifact, since there simply aren't that many 18th century ice wells; especially commercial ones left in the United States. Second, even though it's considerably more than two centuries old, the ice well still works as it was intended to a fact from which I draw enormous hope, encouragement and inspiration as I approach my own 200th birthday. And third, the good folks at Gadsby's need a little help; some \$250,000 worth of help, in fact, to keep the ice well intact so that we can keep visiting it and learning from it.

Which brings me back to that fundamental question: So what? Why should we care about the ice well, it's interesting past and its problematic future? Why, to paraphrase a compelling recent tagline from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, does this place matter?

By way of answer, I offer a couple of metaphorical paradoxes. Here's one, for starters: In the strictest, most literal sense, the ice well is just a hole in the ground but it's

also a window. Here's another: The ice well is a dark place, but it also sheds light. You probably can see where I'm going with this, so before the fancy prose piles up any deeper, here's the bottom line in simple, no-nonsense terms: The Gadsby's Tavern ice well is worth preserving, it because it tells us stuff about our past (and, more important, about the people who populated it) that we might otherwise ignore, overlook or forget.

I don't always agree with the current mania for knocking heroes off of their pedestals, but I do believe it's important to remember that the people we idolize are or were human. From clothing to modes of transportation, from technology to life expectancy, from amusements to knowledge of the world, many things separate us from the men and women who enjoyed John Gadsby's hospitality in the early days of the American republic. But despite these and countless other differences, most of those long-ago people from the squire of Mount Vernon to the shopkeeper on Alexandria's King Street were much like us, after all, in plenty of meaningful ways. Like us, they enjoyed gathering with their friends in a convivial setting like Gadsby's Tavern. Like us, they found it hard to pass up a dish of freshly churned ice cream. Like us, they gloried in the refreshment of an icy drink on a hot day. Pleasures like those, shared across the centuries with people I've never met, are what the ice well suggests to me, and what makes it a place worth saving and celebrating.