Notes from
Gadsby's Tavern Museum Ice Well
by Stephanie Oman

1. Stephanie Oman was a summer intern at Gadsby's Tavern Museum for 2007. One of Stephanie's duties over the summer was researching Gadsby's Ice Well. This presentation is a summary of her work.

2. For some general background information, the ice well can be described as a subterranean brick-lined shaft that is located directly next to Gadsby's Tavern underneath the corner of Royal and Cameron Streets. It was constructed around 1793 by John Wise, who built what is today known as Gadsby's Tavern. This ice well is architecturally significant as one of the few remaining urban ice wells. It is also unusual because it can be viewed by the public from the street. The well was restored and excavated for the Bicentennial celebration in 1976.

3. Here you can see the excavation process where they removed the modern-day fill.

4. To make the well visible from the street, a section of the circular dome was cut away and reinforced with steel rods so that visitors could look into the well. Here you can see an image of the well before the section of the dome was removed.

5. This picture shows how the interior of the dome looks today with a section of the bricks removed.

6. Here you can see the cut-away section as it appears on the street level.

7. Before John Wise built his new "City Tavern" building in 1792, he leased the "Alexandria Inn and Coffee House" from Thomas Herbert from 1788-1792. This building is now known as Wise's Tavern, which is on the corner of N. Fairfax and Cameron Streets.

8. It is interesting to note that Thomas Herbert listed an icehouse as a valuable asset in the lease advertisement. He writes, "The tenant may be accommodated with every species of house and kitchen furniture of the best kind, belonging to the estate of the deceased, for which a credit, will if required be given, and also with the use or privilege of a complete ice-house, for some years on reasonable terms." As you can see, he placed quite an extensive ad, which also lists other outbuildings, but this ad is significant because it shows that icehouses were considered an integral part of inn keeping before Wise constructed his own tavern. The icehouse no longer

exists, although the newspaper advertisement makes a fairly good argument for why Wise may have constructed his own well.

9. After enjoying the convenience of an ice well for four years, he most likely wanted to bring that convenience back with him to his own newly constructed tavern. An ice well would certainly ensure that his guests enjoyed everything of the finest while staying and dining at his premiere establishment. Here you see Wise's "City Tavern" which he constructed in 1792.

10. It was no easy task for Wise to build his ice well, especially because he made the unusual decision to place his well beyond his property line and underneath the street. He had to apply to the Alexandria Common Council for this permit in 1793. Although the well is covered by sidewalk today, before the 1976 restoration project, the ice well was directly under the constant rumble of traffic. Wise designed his well to be accessible from the basement of the tavern through a brick-lined vaulted passageway and also included access by way of a removable panel from the street level. Here you see images of both the vaulted passage and the access panel.

11. Here you can see the access tunnel from the basement of the tavern into the well. This tunnel is still used to get into the well.

12. One of the reasons that this ice well is so impressive is its scale. The diameter varies between 16'11" and 17'3" and is approximately 11'9" deep at the lowest excavation point. Although comparable with the size of ice wells on large estates, the other extant urban ice wells in the area are much smaller. The ice well could hold approximately 68 tons of ice when filled to the tavern access door form the current excavation point. Obviously, there was a large demand for ice in the late 18th – early 19th century.

13. The construction of the well is fairly typical of a drywell, which does not require mortar. It was necessary to use mortar in the brick vault for stability purposes. In the image to the left you can see the dividing line between the drywell and the mortared-brick vault.