



Exterior of Gadsby's Tavern Museum. The buildings known today as Gadsby's Tavern Museum consist of two 18th century taverns constructed by John Wise and made famous by John Gadsby. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photo by Anna Frame.)

## STOPPING BY THE TAVERN

By Gretchen M. Bulova

*I found elegant accommodations at Gadesby's hotel. It is observable that Gadesby keeps the best house of entertainment in the United States.*

*Travels of John Davis, 1801*

Since Alexandria was founded in 1749, a tavern has stood on the lot at the corner of Royal and Cameron Streets. This tavern's story, however, begins in 1785. Gadsby's Tavern Museum consists of two buildings, a ca. 1785 tavern and the 1792 City Tavern, constructed by local tavern keeper and entrepreneur John Wise. The buildings were named for John Gadsby who operated the tavern from 1796 to 1808, and raised the level of tavern keeping in Alexandria to new heights. As the premier establishment in early Alexandria, the City Tavern was known by travelers far and wide for its fine accommodations, elegant parties, and useful amenities. The history of Gadsby's

Tavern serves as an exemplar of the tavern as the social and business center of our emerging nation.

Taverns, in their most basic role, provided food, drink, lodging, and the news of the day to patrons. The menu or "fare" of a tavern varied depending upon whether its location was rural or urban and what foodstuffs were available during the season. A tavern's location in a port such as Alexandria meant ready access to fresh seafood and imported items, including spices from the East, English cheeses, teas, coffees, West Indian rum, lemons, oranges, limes, pineapples, raisins and dates. Because of this variety of ingredients, a tavern keeper in Alexandria could offer a fine selection of food and drinks, including the most popular drink of the day - rum punch.

The courts regulated the cost of a basic meal, the cost of tavern drinks, and the price of a night's lodging. However, the amenities a tavern keeper could offer in

addition to the basic tavern services elevated a tavern keeper's reputation and increased his profit potential.

Surviving records show that John Wise was a licensed tavern keeper in Alexandria as early as August, 1782. In the spring of 1785, he began the construction of a new tavern building, intentionally creating a large and spacious room for entertainments, balls, and social gatherings. In the November 10, 1785 issue of the *Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser*, the following was advertised:

*The Gentlemen of Alexandria who are desirous of to become subscribers to the assemblies for the approaching season, are requested to meet me at the coffee-house this evening at 6 o'clock, to form regulations for the same – It is intended that the assemblies commence on Thursday the 17th instant at Mr. Wise's New Room.*

In this "new room," a variety of public entertainments were held. A September 20, 1787 advertisement announced "Mrs. Kenna's Lecture, &c. will be exhibited To-Morrow Evening at Mr. Wise's Ball Room, as will be expressed in the Bills" and a December 6, 1787 notice informed the public that "There will be a Ball this Evening at Mr. Wise's Assembly Room. It is given by the Gentlemen who compose the Light Infantry Company." John Wise also advertised public book sales, theater tickets for purchase, and other services in addition to the basics of food, drink, and lodging.

As the United States grew and prospered, travelers in greater numbers began to pass through Alexandria and other towns on expanding travel routes. By 1790, Alexandria was an affluent and thriving seaport. When boundary stones for the new Federal City of Washington were laid out in 1791, Alexandria became part of the Federal City. John Wise was just one of the many astute businessmen in Alexandria to see the potential for wealth from Alexandria's new status in our nation.

In 1792, John Wise undertook the construction of an adjacent tavern, the larger of the two Gadsby's Tavern buildings today. The new tavern building was four stories tall and featured 14 sleeping rooms, coal burning fireplaces, an enormous and elegant ballroom with a musician's gallery, multiple dining rooms, and its own ice well. Wise's "City Tavern" symbolized a new era in Alexandria's lodging industry. It must have been an impressive and towering sight on the streetscape. And when John Wise opened his new City Tavern on February 6, 1793, he promoted it by announcing that "he has laid in a large stock of good old Liquors."

In 1796, John Gadsby leased the new City Tavern from owner John Wise. At 30 years of age, Gadsby was a gifted businessman, who had come from England in 1795 and managed a subscription tavern along the Alexandria waterfront. In establishing his new business as a premier destination, Gadsby patronized local merchants to furnish the tavern, such as cabi-



Above: Assembly Room. John Wise built the largest room in Alexandria in 1785 to accommodate social functions, entertainments, and meetings. At right: Private Dining Room. Local organizations, such as the Saint Andrew's Society, the Golf Club, the Jockey Club, and Trustees of the Alexandria Academy, held private meetings and dinners at the tavern. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photos by Anna Frame.)



netmaker John Muir and merchant William Hodgson. The best rooms at the City Tavern featured luxury items such as fashionable silver plate serving pieces, silver table and teaspoons, mahogany dining tables, feather beds, and coal grates. A room by room inventory taken by Gadsby in 1802 provides a glimpse into the appearance and furnishings of Gadsby's City Tavern.

Soon after Gadsby assumed the lease for the City Tavern, the establishment came to be known as "Gadsby's Tavern." Often, the name of the tavern keeper became the name of the tavern. However, Gadsby himself referred to the business as the "City Tavern" – a traditional name of fine taverns all across cities and towns in America and a name which indicated to travelers that this establishment was the best in town. By March 1798, Gadsby decided to add "Hotel" to the name, which further elevated its status. Many establishments between 1790 and 1800 adopted the French word "hotel" into their title to appeal to the growing affinity for all things French and to denote a "house for genteel strangers or lodgers." The term announced an awareness of style and appealed to an increasingly fashion-conscious population.

Without a doubt, Gadsby worked to achieve a high standard of hospitality. On March 13, 1798, Gadsby boasted of his accommodations:

*THE CITY TAVERN is supplied with every article requested for the comfort and convenience of those who honor him with their custom. And, as it is his wish that every attention should be paid to TRAVELLERS, it shall be his peculiar study to merit their favours, by preserving order and propriety.*



Top: East Bedchamber at Gadsby's City Tavern & Hotel offered travelers elegant and more private accommodations than the average tavern. Bottom: Taproom of Gadsby's Tavern Museum (detail). Travelers and townspeople came to the tavern to eat, drink, discuss politics, and receive the news of the day. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photos by Anna Frame.)

Through traveler accounts, we can see that the public was generally satisfied with their stay at Gadsby's, though sometimes finding it costly.

*Richard Parkinson, 1797*  
*The next day we landed in Alexandria. General Washington's steward had recommended me to the inn kept by Mr. Gadsby, an Englishman. Here the stables were floored with boards; for in many parts of America, as there is not straw enough produced to litter the horses with, this is the practice. We put our horses, cattle, pigs & c. into these rooms. The charges were very high; and in about 21 days our bill amounted to 70 pounds currency; we had moved our horses and cattle some days before, or it would have been much more.*

*Reverend Cutler, 1802*  
*We went in the ferry boat to Alexandria and lodged at Gadsby's Hotel. This is said to be the first public house in America, and equal to most in Europe. We supped on Canvas-back duck.*

*Captain Henry Massie, 1808*  
*New York is a gay and lively place – the houses large, the shops splendid – there are many great taverns kept there, none of them though in my opinion superior to Gadsby of Alexandria.*

Mr. Gadsby did everything in his marketing power to elevate his establishment to become the

finest in the area, but it was his reputation for throwing a great party that sealed his success. Gadsby was known for entertaining George Washington for dinners, and especially for his elegant celebration of Washington's Birthnight. This special Birthnight celebration was initiated in Alexandria by John Wise as early as 1787, but General and Mrs. Washington attended this important community event in person in both 1798 and 1799. Gadsby also entertained President John Adams in 1800 and hosted a lavish inaugural banquet for President Thomas Jefferson in 1801. A lengthy newspaper account noted that the event "reflected the highest credit on the taste and industry of Mr. Gadsby."

Gadsby understood the importance of good customer service and staying on the top of the hospitality curve. For example, he offered personal laundry service to his patrons. Gadsby advertised the following on September 10, 1799, in the *Columbian Mirror* and *Alexandria Gazette*:

*A Washerwoman Wanted  
A person that can be well recommended to take*

*the Gentleman's clothes from the City Tavern, and return them agreeable to promise, in good order, may by application have the work above house.*

Some of the tavern's amenities were marketed to the local residents as well as tavern patrons. Gadsby capitalized on the City Tavern's large ice well, for example, which when filled to capacity during the winter months, provided a ready supply of ice year round. On June 20, 1805, he advertised,

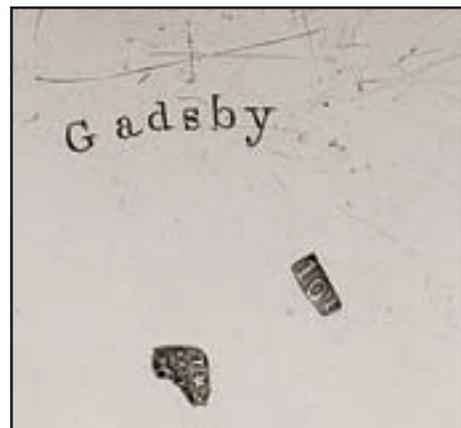
*Ice for Sale  
Persons may be supplied with ICE at eight cents per pound, on application to John Gadsby*

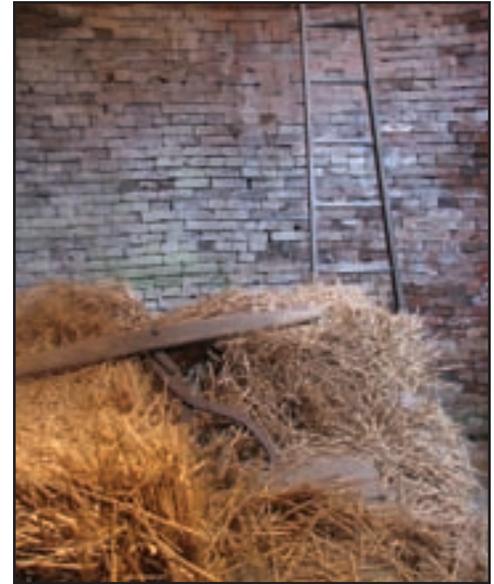
Gadsby also offered his carriages for hire to attend his events or social functions in town. In addition to these transportation services, he established stage coach lines out of the tavern between Alexandria and Georgetown and between Alexandria and Baltimore. This guaranteed a steady stream of customers to the tavern.

In 1802, John Gadsby took over the lease of the smaller tavern next door and operated it as a subscription Coffee House. Until this time, the smaller tavern, while still owned by John Wise, had been leased to a series



*Top left: This 1801 billhead from John Gadsby's City Tavern & Hotel is one of only two known bills from Gadsby's. Bottom left: Detail of the "Gadsby" stamp on base of monteith. Bottom right: Fused silver plate monteith which is one of the few remaining Gadsby possessions in the collection of Gadsby's Tavern Museum. A monteith was filled with ice and used to chill wine glasses during elegant dinners and parties. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photos by Anna Frame.)*





Above left: Ballroom. George Washington's Birthnight Celebration and Thomas Jefferson's Inaugural Banquet were held in the Ballroom of Gadsby's Tavern. At right: ice well interior. In 1793, the Alexandria Common Council granted permission for John Wise to build an ice well at the corner of Royal and Cameron Streets as part of his construction of the new City Tavern. The well could store up to 62 tons of ice, enough to supply his tavern and the citizens of Alexandria. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photos by Anna Frame.)

of other tavern keepers. While little information remains about Gadsby's coffee house business, other than a series of ads requesting subscribers and payments, we do know that Gadsby subscribed to numerous newspapers for the business. Between 1804 and 1807, Gadsby offered at least 32 newspapers as amenities for his patrons. Some of these papers included the *Baltimore Federal Gazette*, *The Virginia*, *Washington Federalist*, *National Intelligencer*, the *New York Herald*, and the *New Hampshire Gazette*.

Gadsby's City Tavern & Hotel, with its large ballroom and private dining rooms, was no doubt the site where many Alexandria social, political, and business endeavors were launched. Local organizations such as the St. Andrew's Society, the Jockey Club, the Potomack Company, the Washington Society, and the Mutual Assurance Society advertised and held their meetings at Gadsby's. The tavern also became a place for others to conduct business and offer a variety of services, such as itinerant merchants, craftspeople, and entertainers. At Gadsby's, you could purchase a ticket to see a hot air balloon, have your teeth fixed, take dance lessons, select the latest and most fashionable jewelry items, or learn about upcoming house sales.

March 22, 1803

*Dr. Fendall, Operator Upon Teeth – may be seen and consulted at Gadsby's Tavern. Dr. Fendall cures the scurvy in the gums... fastens loose teeth... renders teeth white and beautiful... fills up those that are hollow with gold*

*or lead... makes and fixes artificial teeth...*

July 22, 1803

*The Members of the Epsom Jockey Club are desired to meet at Gadsby's Hotel on Saturday. Members will take notice, that on this day several gentlemen wishing to become members will be balloted for. Gentlemen Sportsmen of Maryland are solicited to attend.*

July 26, 1803

*Ventriloquism*

*Mr. Ranne, The Ventriloquist has just arrived – being his first appearance in this town – he intends displaying his ventriloquist powers on Friday Event, 29th inst. At Mr. Gadsby's Ball Room. Those who will honor him with their patronage he hopes will experience no disappointment.*

Of course, neither John Wise nor John Gadsby's successful enterprises could have run without a large labor force. This labor was mostly enslaved. In 1802, Gadsby owned 11 slaves who supported the operations of the City Tavern. We can see from ads in the paper that Gadsby was purchasing, selling, and renting slaves – especially slaves that possessed specialized skills that would ensure high-quality services and accommodations for his customers. Among Gadsby's many enslaved workers, hostler James Lewis was willing to risk running away to obtain freedom. On August 30, 1808, Gadsby ran an ad in the

*Virginia Journal* and *Alexandria Advertiser* for the return of his long-time stableman.

John Gadsby ran the City Tavern & Hotel until July 1808, when he moved his tavern operation to the Indian Queen Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, at the other end of his stage coach line. He continued to advance the hospitality industry in new directions as he opened the National Hotel in Washington, DC in 1827 and continued to entertain Washington society. In September 1836, at the age of 70, Gadsby retired from the hotel business. The *National Intelligencer* announced Gadsby's retirement by saying, "This gentleman so well known throughout the country as proprietor of the hotel which bears his name, having acquired a handsome independence by his exertions, has retired from the hotel business." Back in Alexandria, John Wise continued to own a series of taverns, selling the City Tavern in 1815, just prior to his death. The City



Portrait of John Gadsby painted in 1840 by his grandson, local artist, John Gadsby Chapman. This portrait originally hung in Gadsby's National Hotel in Washington, DC. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photo by Anna Frame.)

Tavern & Hotel, which was known as the City Hotel for most of the 19th century, continued to prosper as a hotel through the turn of the 20th century and was often visited as a tourist attraction for having been the site frequented by the founding fathers.

*If the history of Greece is in its temples, that of the United States is in its hotels.*

— Gene Fowler, an American journalist who lived between 1890 and 1960

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At left: These archaeological fragments from the courtyard of Gadsby's Tavern reflect the types of tablewares used by patrons during the Gadsby years, 1796 to 1808. Bottom right: Blue shell-edge pearlware plate shards were excavated from the Gadsby's Tavern site in the 1970s. The museum actively collects pieces such as this pearlware plate to match shards that were found archaeologically. (Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Photos by Anna Frame.)

