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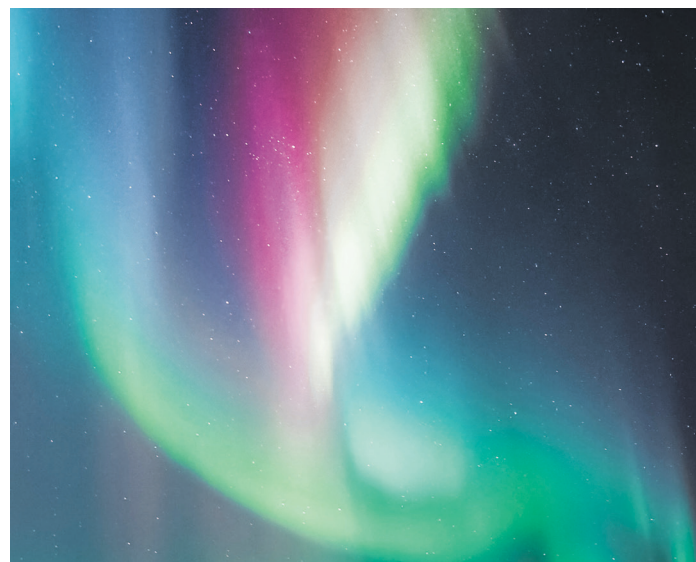
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The Northern Lights and Alexandria: a very brief history

NORTHERN LIGHTS.—Last night there was, in addition to a bright full moon, a most magnificent display of the “aurora borealis” or northern lights, the flames of which were peculiarly brilliant, stretching in broad bands or streamers from the northern horizon to the zenith. The display began at about 6½ o’clock and lasted nearly an hour, illuminating the whole northern heavens with electric light. The aurora was almost vermillion in its brilliant hues, and attracted a great deal of attention, reappearing about midnight, and continuing almost until morning.

PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

The announcement in the Oct. 15, 1872 Alexandria Gazette of sightings of the Northern Lights in Alexandria.



FILE PHOTO

The Northern Lights.

Last month provided Alexandria residents with a rare sighting of the Northern Lights, or Aurora Borealis. Though this was not the first time that they were visible this far south, for many years, Alexandria residents only knew of the phenomenon through newspaper accounts written in other cities. There are two instances, both in the 1870s, that indicate the Northern Lights being visible in our city.

Early references to the Northern Lights in the Alexandria Gazette show up as reports filed by correspondents

in other cities. For instance, the Dec. 17, 1818 edition includes a description of the Aurora Borealis filed from Liverpool, England. The Aug. 23, 1828, issue quoted the Boston Statesman’s description of the phenomenon as “the appearance of large banks of clouds lightened by the most intense heat of the sun. At 2 o’clock, yesterday morning, the light was nearly sufficient to read by.”

It was not until Aug. 20, 1870, that the newspaper described being able to see the Northern Lights in person here in Alexandria. The newspaper

chronicled that:

“The western, eastern and northern horizon was vividly illuminated by a succession of rapidly changing colors of all hues of the rainbow.”

Two years later, on Oct. 15, the Gazette reported:

“The display began at about 6 ½ o’clock and lasted nearly an hour, illuminating the whole northern heavens with electric light. The aurora was almost vermillion in its brilliant hues...”

Sightings like the one that just occurred in March are rare at this latitude. The Washing-

ton Post from March 24 of this year noted that the most recent prior G4 geomagnetic storm was in 2017.

The Alexandria Gazette articles from the 1870s remind us that these weren’t the first times Alexandria residents saw the Aurora Borealis for themselves. Our forebears of 150 years ago were also treated to the miraculous sight of the Northern Lights over our city’s landscape.

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.