



F. 10 THE BELLEVUE HOTEL IN THE 1850'S
FORMERLY ON CATHERINE STREET

A SHORT HISTORY OF NEWPORT'S "TOP OF THE HILL" NEIGHBORHOOD

Abridged from "It's a Wonderful Life at the Top of the Hill"
By Katherine Imbrie, Providence Journal-Bulletin, Sat. Feb. 11, 1995

Until the early 19th Century, what we know as the "Top of the Hill" neighborhood in Newport was farmland. Its only commercial businesses were a windmill and some ropewalks where cordage for ships was made. Some of the sites of these long, straight ropewalk sheds eventually became streets, including the southern end of Kay and the section of Catherine between Greenough and Rhode Island Avenue.

According to a report by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, the area began to attract summer visitors around 1830, when several hotels were built. The main house on the Gibbs Farm (for which the present street is named) was converted to a sportsmen's lodge, and before long a network of alleys and back streets was laid out to serve the several large hotels which were clustered near Bellevue.

It was an era when the healthful effects of "saltwater bathing" were much sought after, and so Bath Road, now Memorial Boulevard was put through to carry hotel guests to Easton's - or First - Beach.

Eventually, the popularity of the hotels declined as more and more people opted to buy their own summer cottages. The premier architects of the day - Richard Morris Hunt (architect of the stick style Griswold House, now the Newport Art Museum) and the firm of McKim, Mead, and White (Newport Casino) - were hired to design and build houses in the exuberant, ornate styles that were cutting edge for their day: Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Modern Gothic, Stick and Shingle Style.

Local architects of Boston and Newport whose work is amply represented in the neighborhood are Clarence Luce, George Champlin Mason, and Dudley Newton.

Compared to the high society types who would later build their ostentatious palaces down the road, the people who summered at the Top of the Hill and the northern end of Bellevue were “members of the nation’s cultural elite”. Scientists, classical scholars, artists, actors, physicians and writers included Clement C. Moore, Sarah C. Woolsey, Henry James and Julia Ward Howe. All either lived in or were frequent visitors to the Top of the Hill, setting an intellectual tone.

By 1890, building in the Kay/Catherine/Old Beach neighborhood had virtually ceased, as the big lots filled up and people with serious fortunes turned their attention to the southern end of Bellevue and Ochre Point. Today, with the addition of a few more modern houses due to lot subdivisions, the Top of the Hill is a compact and self-contained collection of some of the finest Victorian architecture to be seen anywhere in the country.