

## The Hypotenuse House

33 Catherine Street

Newport, RI



The aptly named Hypotenuse House sits diagonally to the intersection of Catherine and Greenough and is exemplary of the rich history of the Top of the Hill. It hails back to a period when the neighborhood was developing as an intellectual enclave for scholars, artists and writers.

It was once owned by Richard Morris Hunt who, around 1870, moved it to its current location. Mr. Hunt was later to be the architect for The Breakers, Marble House, Ochre Court and Belcourt Castle among others. The Hypotenuse House was extensively remodeled by Hunt and actually presents many features that he was experimenting with during this period. These would be the bonnet gable caps, the jigsaw patterns of the eave skirts, bracing struts and half timber effects similar to those seen at the nearby Griswold House (now the Newport Art Museum), which was his first significant commission in Newport.

Mr. Hunt never lived in The Hypotenuse House, residing instead at his "Hilltop" cottage located on Bellevue between Church and Touro, where the Viking Hotel now stands. He first rented out and then sold the Hypotenuse House to his good friend Colonel George Waring.

Colonel Waring is known for dedicating his life to the study of scientific pursuits for public benefit. To name a few of his many accomplishments he designed and supervised the construction of the drainage system for Central Park in New York City. In Memphis, Tennessee he reengineered the sewage system thereby putting an end to many years of cholera and yellow fever epidemics and, later, when he was the Director of the Street Commission for New York City he effected a major clean up of living conditions there.

The Colonel was most noteworthy in the neighborhood for his actively entertaining many Newport intellectuals and artists at the Hypotenuse House. He was a founding member of the Town and Country Club and hosted many of their meetings. This club was formed in 1871 by Julia Ward Howe, the famed author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a writer, former abolitionist and colonel of a black regiment in the Union Army together with many others. There was a concern as Newport increasingly became a popular summer vacation spot. Ms. Howe's comment was, "lest the Newport season should entirely evaporate into the shallow pursuit of amusement." Thus the club was formed to provide a space where people could gather together "to combine reasonable social gatherings with work and study." Meetings were never conducted without a purpose, many times featuring outside speakers, and ending with tea and conversation.

There were well known people who would attend these meetings. Some of them were the elder Henry James, father of novelist Henry James, George Bancroft, a historian now famous for the twelve volume history of the United States, Harvard classics professors George Land and William Goodwin, journalist and lecturer Kate Field, author Bret Harte, poet Emma Lazarus and on one occasion Mark Twain.

It has been said that many if not all of Newport's most interesting people were entertained at the Hypotenuse House. One can only wonder what it was really like to be a resident of the Top of the Hill and to witness so many talented and famous people walking the streets and mingling at the Hypotenuse House.