

## RI HISTORY

# The women who helped build Newport, R.I.

Fascinated by trail-blazing women, Catherine Zipf wondered: “Could there be a history that is not often told, that women are participating in?” She found answers in the neighborhoods of Newport’s Gilded Age.

By [Carlos R. Muñoz](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 13, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



Matilda Lieber hired architect Dudley Newton and builder J.D. Johnston to design and build the cross-gable-roof Queen Ann House at 69 Rhode Island Ave. Once women were legally able to own property, the houses they arranged to build reshaped Newport, R.I. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

NEWPORT, R.I. — Strong women have always had a place in Catherine Zipf’s heart.



Catherine Zipf, Executive Director of The Bristol Historical & Preservation Society. CATHERINE ZIPF

As a child, she devoured the autobiographies of trailblazing women, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who fought for social reform and the abolition of slavery, Dorothea Dix, who helped advocate for the treatment of the mentally ill, and Lucretia Mott, an American Quaker, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist.

“I remember being fascinated with them,” said Zipf, the executive director at Bristol Historical and Preservation Society. “It wasn’t until college when I got to take a women’s

history course with a fabulous professor that got me started. Could there be a history that is not often told, that women are participating in?”

While Zipf was an associate professor at Salve Regina University from 2003-2012, she began researching homes like those that Newport socialites Alva Vanderbilt and Martha Codman had a hand in building, picturing a “cute” 10-chapter book that could also earn her tenure. But as she looked deeper into Newport’s architecture, she began to understand how significantly women had shaped the city’s landscape.

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"Elm Tree Cottage" at 336 Gibbs Avenue in Newport, R.I., was built by Mary Channing Eustis who hired renowned architect William Ralph Emerson of Boston to build the 2½-story, cross-gable-roof shingle-style house with a low stone foundation around 1882. The home is included in the Kay Street-Catherine Street-Old Beach area known as "The Hill," which is on the National Register of Historic Places. Mary Channing Eustis (1818-1891) is the daughter of prominent Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), and was the widow of Frederic Augustus Eustis (1816-1871). She built this house as a summer retreat from her home in Boston, according to the US Department of Interior historic registration form. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF



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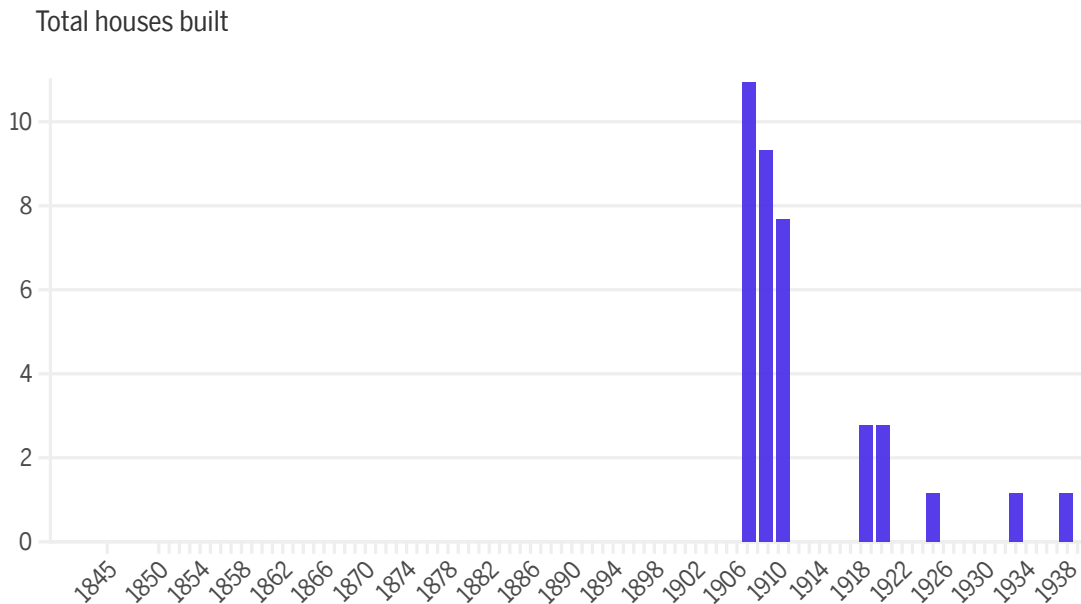
Zipf, who holds a doctorate in American architectural history from the University of Virginia, became a research scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which provided some funding. Researchers Chelsea Dodd and Martha Ginty worked with Zipf to dig through property records in Newport.

After funding ran out in 2012, Zipf took about five years off from the project to care for her father, wrote a book on Frank Lloyd Wright's [Fallingwater](#), and co-led a project about "[The Green Book](#)," an old African American traveler's guide.

"The time away was very good because I was able to see the project with fresh eyes," Zipf said. She's now back at it. "I'm sketching out chapters and focusing on the women themselves. It's really exciting and gratifying to see it starting to take shape."

Thus far, Zipf had studied about 500 properties and pinpointed more than 300 homes constructed with the involvement of Newport women, greatly expanding the scope of the book she'd envisioned.

## Houses built by Newport women 1845 to 1940



Source: Catherine Zipf

 A Flourish chart

Many of the houses are part of Newport's "Gilded Age," during which mansions including The Breakers and Rosecliff were built by the city's wealthiest residents. Some were designed by McKim, Mead & White, famous for designing the [Rhode Island State House](#), the main campus at [Columbia University](#), and the [Brooklyn Museum](#).

Many of the homes Zipf found were clustered in newer, rich neighborhoods. They were used as full-time residences, summer homes, and rentals. And the first of the homes in

Newport commissioned by women were built around 1850 — something researchers and historians note is not a coincidence.



Matilda Lieber hired architect Dudley Newton and builder J.D. Johnston to design and build the cross-gable-roof Queen Ann House at 69 Rhode Island Avenue. Lieber was the widow of Francis Lieber (1800-1872), a prominent political scientist and rules-of-war formulator, according to the US Department of Interior. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF



Matilda Lieber hired architect Dudley Newton and builder J.D. Johnston around 1882 to design and build the cross-gable-roof Queen Ann House at 69 Rhode Island Avenue. Lieber was the widow of Francis Lieber (1800-1872), a prominent political scientist and rules-of-war formulator, according to the US Department of Interior. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Rhode Island's [Married Women's Rights Act of 1852](#) gave women the ability to own property. Before then, women were bound by coverture, a legal status that put married women under their husband's protection and authority. In a 2022 essay titled "[Liberty A Better Husband](#)," Nancy Austin, a research historian at Brown University with a doctorate in the history of industrial design, engineering, and architecture, called coverture "legal invisibility" and the "gut punch of systematic injustice."

Being legally able to own property — and, later, their own earnings as well — gave women a tool for financial stability, allowing them to look out for themselves and for other women. In her 1859 will Lydia Allen Dorr, the wife of Rhode Island politician and rebellion-leader Thomas Dorr, included language about leaving her inheritance to her daughters, something that would not have been possible before the Married Women's Rights Act.



At that time, “other things are happening in the business world that position women to do better,” Zipf said. “Not just for women’s rights. There are changes in the way businesses are structured.”



Margarette and Anne Stevens hired architect Clarence S. Luce of Boston, and J.D. Johnson around 1881 to build the suave three-bay single-style Colonial Revival house at 73 Rhode Island Avenue. Mrs. and Ms. Stevens were the wife and daughter of John Austin Stevens (1827-1910), a businessman, Civil War advisor to President Lincoln, and founder of the Sons of the Revolution, according to the US Department of Interior. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Zipf said Newport deeds show women passed land to their daughters, and to other women. Fathers transferred estates to female heirs.

Deeds read, “For \$1 and a lifetime of happiness” or “For \$1 and other considerations,” said Zipf. She described the women’s movement in Newport as a “rich women’s movement,” but said her research has also found that the ability to own property helped less-wealthy women, who were also able to build homes in the city.

About a third of the women in Zipf's research were widows or unmarried. About two dozen of them were immigrants. Many of these women, who were far from the Gilded Age riches, built in smaller homes in Newport's fifth ward, along the [southern edge of Newport Harbor](#).

Their homes include the Margeret Murphy house at 17 Bacheller St., the Katharine McMahon house at 32 Hammond St., and the Catharine Sullivan House at 38 Hammond St. — all Vernacular Greek Revival homes without a lot of decoration, Zipf said.

Homes built by wealthy, prominent women were more ornate. [Sophia Harrison Ritchie](#), daughter of US Congressman Harrison Grey Otis, the first secretary of the US Senate, built Fairlawn at 518 Bellevue Ave., on what is now the site of the Pell Center for International Relations at Salve Regina University. [Susan James Weaver](#), who was involved in creating waterworks for the city, built a home at 59 Kay St. Frances Sheldon Whitehouse, a relative of US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, built hers at 22 Prairie Ave.



Ellen P. Wilks built a 1½-story bungalow at 43 Hunter Avenue in Newport, R.I., around 1920. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF



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Zipf mapped the [Kay Street-Catherine Street-Old Beach Road Historic District](#), which is on the National Register of Historic Places, for a [Newport walking tour](#) inspired by her research into ownership of homes by women.

“I think in the end, when you look at this, you can’t deny that women made a contribution to the Gilded Age in a way that was unexpected,” Zipf said. “There’s a lot of social pageantry. ... The Gilded Age architecture set the stage for that.”

“These little houses that were built by women are like their opera boxes from which they’re going to be seen,” she said. “They’re little seats of power where they can have parties and invite who they want and control their environment and be themselves.”

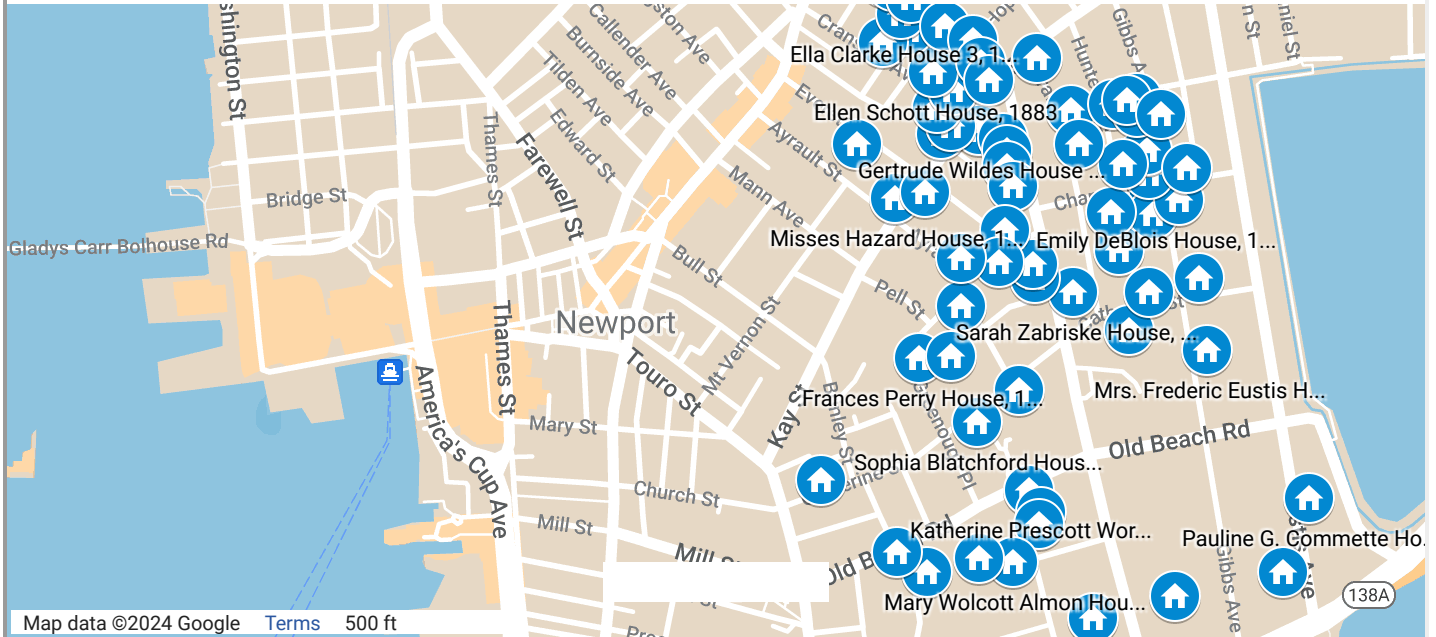


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