

Newport's First Neighborhoods

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Newport's fascination is that her past generations remain on display in the many silhouettes of the city's architecture. Every building tells a story about the architect, the builder, the owner, and about the economic times and what was considered important.

The mysterious Old Stone Mill, the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House, the White Horse Tavern, the Redwood Library, and the Brick Market are remarkable remnants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; but as interesting as their separate stories is how they are placed together on the landscape connected by streets that were well-worn pathways, along edges of a township that has since changed and evolved but was always known as Newport.

The excitement of Newport is not just one building but rather its historic districts. Newport, more than any other city, has benefited from island isolation in bad times contrasted with the lavish attention paid to it in good. Like a vacation home the island simply shut down in the lean years waiting for the riches to return; and blessed as Newport was with a superb summer climate, the wealthy returned again and again. Since 1974 the

Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission has prepared three seminal surveys of Newport's architecture: The Kay-Catherine-Old Beach Road area, the West Broadway area, and the Thames Street area. These documents uncovered what many of us have felt for a long time: that the context of the major buildings in each district, along with its neighborhood roads and landscape, created a milieu that is quite distinctly its own. Prior to these surveys, historical analysis focused exclusively on individual buildings and their architects and rather lightly glossed over the frame of reference of their setting.

The Kay-Catherine-Old Beach Road neighborhood came into existence between 1850 and 1890, as Newport was growing from a town into a city. Originally a rural area on the outskirts of town, it was divided into large estates and tracts of farm land. From 1876-1883 an unprecedented building boom took place: more than forty-two houses were erected by a group of summer colonists and Boston intellectuals who had been introduced to the city through its large hotels on Bellevue Avenue and Catherine Street.

These homes were built to be enjoyed

and lived in. They are revered for their generous size and elaborate detailing; but above all they represented the genesis of a new bold architecture that mixed Colonial Revival details with expressive Queen Anne massing: the Shingle Style. The architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, which formed its partnership in New York in 1889, is credited with creating the Shingle Style and in fact evolved much of its seminal thinking on this style from 1876-1888 in Newport as seen in six houses built within a one block area from Sunnyside Place to Red Cross Avenue south of Old Beach Road, four of which are pictured here. All of the pictured homes are situated with living spaces oriented toward south facing gardens and anchored with sculptural stairs displayed through large expanses of leaded glass on the opposing north facades. In every case the houses have been set close to the north lot line in a conscious effort to increase the openness of the gardens to the south. All projects have received historic certification from the United States Department of the Interior.

