

## NEIGHBORHOODS

# It's a wonderful life at the Top of the Hill

This area in Newport has a concentration of Victorian cottages

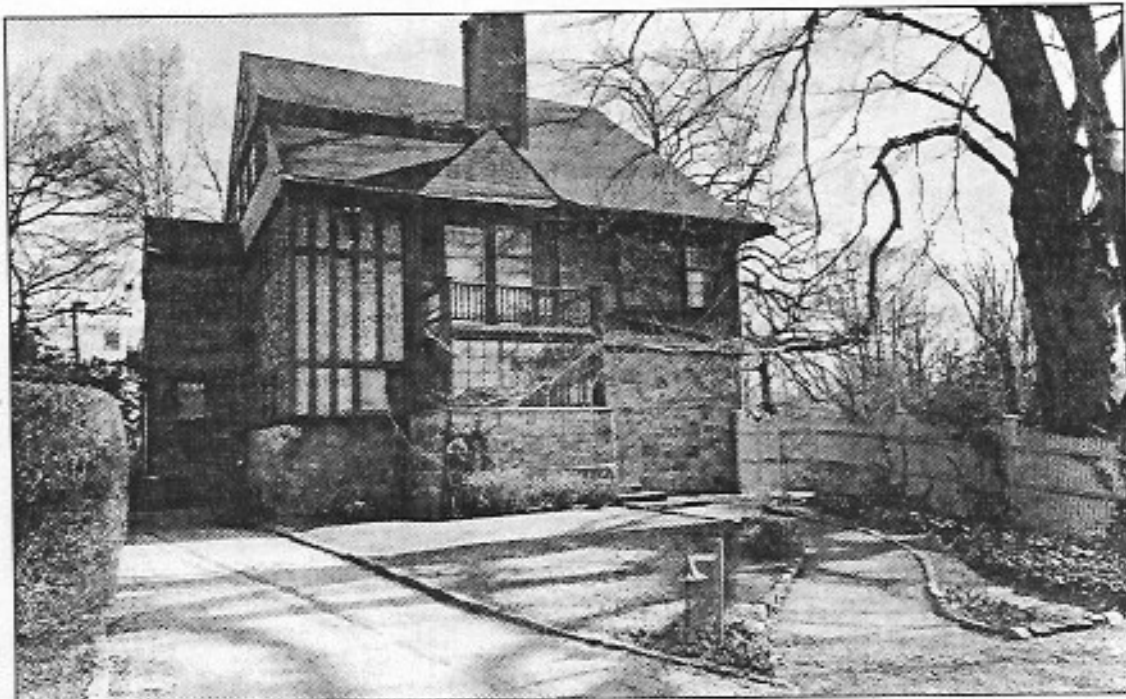
By KATHERINE IMBRIE  
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

It's one of the charming aspects of Newport that the city has so many different architectural faces to show visitors. There's Colonial-era Newport, with its boxy wooden 18th-century houses set close to each other on the streets of the Historic Hill and the Point, and there is turn-of-the-century Newport, with its hulking stone mansions strung out on their estate lawns on Bellevue Avenue and Ocean Drive.

Linking these two distinct eras is the Victorian period, comprising the years from about 1830 to 1890, a time when dozens of houses were built in Newport as summer places for the wealthy Southerners who began to flock to the city for its climate and natural beauty in the boom period before the Civil War.

LESS WELL-KNOWN than Newport's other historic areas, the neighborhood that contains the greatest number of these elaborately designed Victorian cottages has been dubbed Top of the Hill because it occupies the crest of the Historic Hill that slopes down to Newport Harbor. On a street map, Top of the Hill includes the area from Memorial Boulevard to Kay Street and from the northern stretch of Bellevue to Gibbs Avenue overlooking Easton's Point.

Kay and Catherine Streets and Old Beach Road are the main arteries through the neighborhood, with Rhode Island Ave-



Journal-Bulletin/PREDA SQUIRES

**THE SAMUEL** Tilton House at 12 Sunnyside Place was built in 1882 by McKim, Mead & White in the Shingle Style.

nue running crosswise connecting Broadway with Memorial Boulevard. The entire area is residential, with wide, quiet streets overhung with shade trees, many of which were planted when the neighborhood saw its busiest period of building in the mid-

1800s.

The majestic scale of the houses and the variety and richness of their ornamentation sets this area apart. The occasional Cape Cod or ranch stuck in among the great sprawling Queen Annes and Shingle

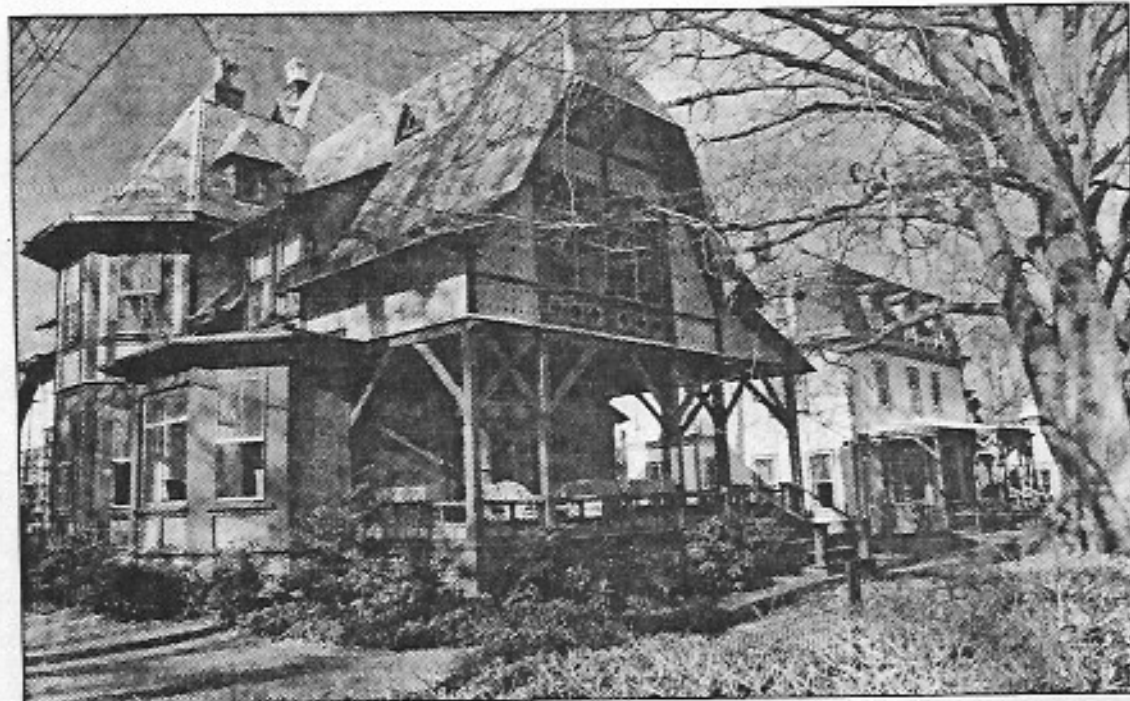
Style houses seems as out of place as a house cat in a pride of lions. After all, these ornate "cottages" were the precursors of the far grander mansions which would later line Bellevue Avenue farther south.

Originally built as summer places for wealthy families and their servants, many of the elegant houses in the Top of the Hill neighborhood have been converted into apartments, a fact that fortunately is not apparent by looking at their exteriors. There are also several bed-and-breakfast inns in the area, which is attractive to summer visitors because it is within walking distance of both Thames Street and First Beach.

UNTIL THE EARLY 19th century, the Top of the Hill was farmland, the only commercial businesses being 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 Street 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.

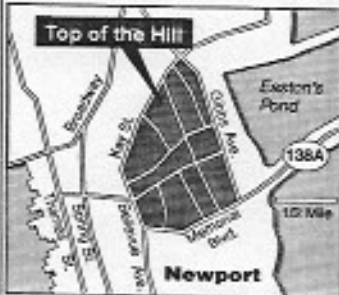
It was an era when the healthful effects of "saltwater bathing" were much sought after, and so Bath Road (now Memorial Boulevard) was put through to carry hotel guests to Easton's (or First) Beach.



**THE HENRY** Swinburne House at 97 Rhode Island Ave. was built by architect Dudley Newton in the Modern Gothic style.

### Top of the Hill

Location: Newport  
 Price of available housing: \$139,900 to \$369,000  
 Tax rate: \$20.90 per thousand at 100% valuation  
 Commute to Providence: 40 minutes



Journal-Bulletin

Eventually, the popularity of the hotels declined as more and more people opted to build their own places. The premier architects of the day — including Richard Morris Hunt and the firm of McKim, Mead and White — were hired to design and build houses in the exuberant, ornate styles that were cutting edge for their day — the styles that today are variously called Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Modern Gothic, Stick or Shingle Style.

Hunt designed the impressive Stick Style building that now houses the Newport Art Museum at the corner of Old Beach Road and Bellevue.

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

Sam Barker, a 10th-generation Newporter and former president of the Newport Historical Society, has owned the Clarence Luce house at 11 Francis St. for decades and has developed a deep appreci-



Journal-Bulletin/PHIL DA SOUTER

**SAM BARKER'S** house at 11 Francis St. was built by Clarence Luce in 1881 for Mrs. D. Archie Pell in the picturesque Queen Anne style.

ation for the Victorian way of building: "To me, though I like to look at them, the Colonial-type houses seem fragile and confining. But a house like this one, well, it does take some upkeep, but you can do so much more with it to make it livable."

Even subdivided as it has been into three comfortably spacious apartments, Barker's house retains the elaborate interior and exterior details that were described in an admiring article in the Newport Mercury newspaper when the house was completed for Mrs. D. Archie Pell in 1881: "It

has a picturesque and broken outline, and is diversified by bay windows, projecting gables, piazzas, etc. . . . The first story is clapboard and the second, shingled, while the gables are finished in cement and glass."

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 end of Bellevue were "members of the nation's cultural elite," according to the Statewide Preservation Report. Scientists, classical scholars, artists, actors, physicians and

writers including Clement C. Moore, Sarah C. Woolsey, Henry James and Julia Ward Howe all either lived in or were frequent visitors to the area, setting an intellectual tone.

By 1890, building in the 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 only a few intrusions of inappropriate 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.

Susan McCoy, a real estate agent with Carey, Richmond & Viking who lives in the neighborhood, is co-president with her husband Dennis of the 200-member Top of the Hill neighborhood association. She describes the area as having a year-round population, with some greater influx in summer. "There are a good number of retired people who live here, as well as people who work in Newport or Providence, and military officers who are at the War College or in the Coast Guard."

"IT'S A GREAT neighborhood because you can walk everywhere — to restaurants and shops, the Tennis Hall of Fame, the art museum, the beach and Cliff Walk. Kids can walk to their local elementary or junior high school, or to the private school St. Michael's, which is right in the neighborhood."

The neighborhood association is primarily social in function, says McCoy, but it also has united members in such missions as getting the city to erect stop signs to slow traffic on Rhode Island Avenue. The Top of the Hill is part of Newport's Historic District, which strictly limits exterior alterations to houses.

The multiple listing service currently shows seven houses for sale in the Top of the Hill neighborhood, ranging in price from \$139,900 for a five-bedroom Colonial on Kay Street to \$369,000 for an historic Victorian designed by Stanford White at 6 Red Cross Avenue.



**THE GOTHIC** Revival Daniel Swinburne House at 6 Greenough Place was built in 1862. Swinburne was one of the chief developers of Newport as a summer "cottage resort."