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The Newport Asylum for the Poor: A Successful Nineteenth-Century Institutional Response to Social Dependency

Anthony S. Nicolosi

The first quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginnings of a movement in America directed at resolving problems of social deviancy and dependency through institutionalization. The movement was founded on a new belief that the deviant and dependent represented serious aberrations in a well-ordered society and that society bore the responsibility for their care and rehabilitation. Indeed, the thesis held that the real fault for degeneracy lay with society and, in particular instances, with the family unit, which failed to train its young in discipline and obedience and thereby nurtured in them criminal and pauper mentalities.¹

This proposition stood in marked contrast to the prevailing notions of the eighteenth century, which characterized dependency and deviancy as parts of the norm and acknowledged the place of the needy in the hierarchical structure of community life. Further, society (i.e., the community) was in no way responsible for the conditions of such persons; rather, their plight was more likely the result of original sin or of just retribution for certain innate failings. And while it was certainly true that the community was under obligation, in terms of both Christian compassion and tradition, to provide for basic needs, this did not extend to reform and correction.²

The challenge to the philosophy of the past,

which was led by philanthropists and socioeconomic leaders, was manifested throughout the land by a phenomenal increase in facilities for the destitute, the insane, the criminal, and the orphan. Centered first in the large cities, the new thinking rapidly spread to smaller urban areas and finally to the sparsely settled countryside. Subsequently the more progressive state legislatures took action to create state-run facilities. The private sector too became involved, opening orphanages and hospitals for the insane.³

The nature of the new institutions, like their names, varied widely. The most conspicuous difference was between the institutions in large cities and those in small urban areas. In the former, there were separate facilities for paupers, the criminal, and the insane; in the latter, one facility usually housed all dependent persons and, in some instances, certain deviants as well.

While many of the institutions survived for the duration of the nineteenth century—and, indeed, the concept is with us still—their actual effectiveness has been questioned by twentieth-century social scientists and historians. The consensus among contemporary authorities is that the institutional approach failed, that it created serious problems which are still largely unresolved.⁴ However, these same sources cite nineteenth-century authorities who commented

Anthony Nicolosi is director of the Naval War College Museum in Newport.

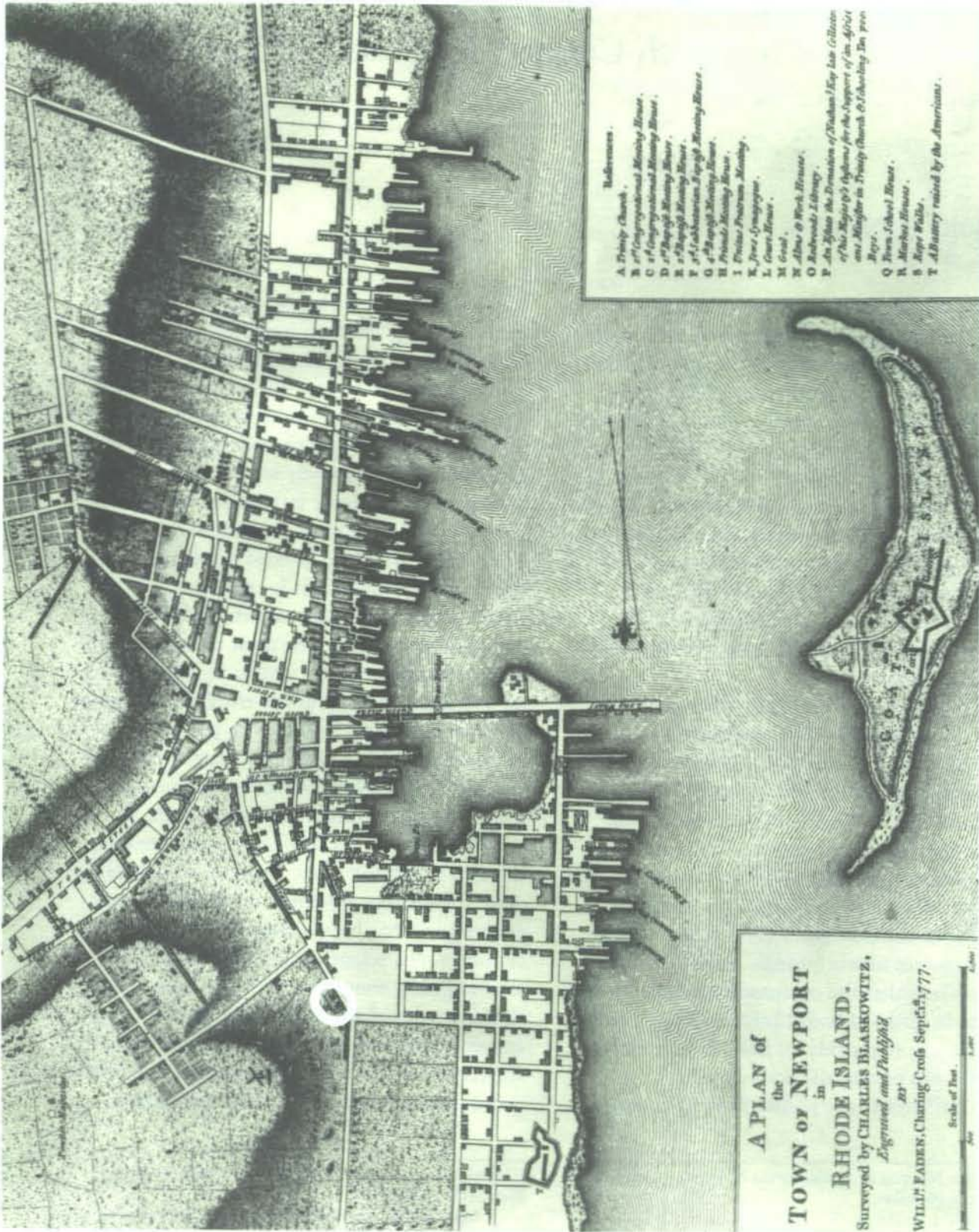
1. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), xiii–xxi, 70–73, 112, 165–66.

2. *Ibid.*, 1–10. For a treatment of the Anglo-American concept of local responsibility, see also Margaret Creech, *Three Centuries of Poor Law Administration: A Study of Leg-*

islation in Rhode Island (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), xxiv, 112.

3. In Rhode Island, Butler Hospital for the Insane was established in 1844. Thomas R. Hazard, *Report on the Poor and the Insane in Session, 1851* (Providence: Joseph Knowles, 1851), 66–67.

4. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, chap. 11; Creech, *Poor Law Administration*, xv, 165.



A Plan of the Town of Newport in Rhode Island, surveyed by Charles Blaskowitz, 1777, shows the location of the "Alms & Work Houses." Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society.

favorably on certain experiments in the smaller communities.⁵

One outstanding example of this type of institution was the Newport Asylum for the Poor, which was established on Coasters Harbor Island in Narragansett Bay in 1820 and continued in operation there until 1884. This was not Newport's first experiment with institutionalization; an almshouse had been built in 1723, and it was thriving up until the time the Newport Asylum was founded. However, the earlier institution, unlike its successor, was a place not of refuge and rehabilitation but rather of last resort, where conditions were purposely hard as a discouragement to prospective tenants.⁶ The very location of the facility bespoke its intent: it was next to the town workhouse and bordered on the pauper burial ground—where, it was said, the unfortunate poor realized the only rest they ever knew.⁷

But not all of Newport's needy entered the almshouse. On the contrary, the institution and associated workhouse appear to have been for specific types of persons, that is, the totally destitute without family, the vagrant, and the insane.⁸ Respectable longtime residents who "came on the town" were provided with outdoor relief, a small regular allotment paid directly to them or to relatives or neighbors who assumed responsibility for their care.⁹ If some of these "worthy poor" did end up in the infamous almshouse, they were the exception rather than the rule.¹⁰

This compassionate side of poor relief was commonplace in eighteenth-century America. Individuals who were long-term residents and who came on hard times were normally deferred to and not deprived of their property and personal dignity.¹¹ In light of this policy, it appears that these individuals were also exempt from the other popular methods used to deal with the poor.

Only a few communities had poorhouses, but all resorted to "binding out" and "contracting out." Binding out amounted to a kind of indentured service whereby an able-bodied dependent was placed with a family or business and obliged to perform routine labor in return for room and board. Contracting out, also referred to as "letting out," was a method in which the town paid someone to take in the poor. Since all communities were anxious to pay as little as possible, the poor were awarded to the lowest bidder, not infrequently in auction-style competitions. While the potential for abuse was inherent in both approaches, the strictly business character of contracting out was by far the worse.¹²

The obvious intent on the part of the towns was, of course, to keep the cost of poor relief down, and in this regard they also employed preventative measures, particularly "warning off." The objective here was to provide only for those having establishment rights. Those who were not legal, long-term residents and who might become chargeable to the town were sought out by the overseer of the poor, examined before the town council, and sent back (at the town's expense) to their last place of legal residence, with a stern warning not to return. The practice became popular beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, when poor costs rose sharply everywhere, and it was made legal by acts of colony and state.¹³

Despite these usages, which continued for a good part of the nineteenth century, poor relief remained a considerable local expense. In Newport, taxpayers resorted to still more drastic measures: occupants of the almshouse who were able to get around were obliged to beg on the city streets, and a 1750 ordinance required all those receiving public assistance to wear a mark of de-

5. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 200–202.

6. Samuel Green Arnold, *History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1859), 2:74. See also Edward Peterson, *History of Rhode Island* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1853), 277–78.

7. Peterson, *History of Rhode Island*, 278.

8. *Ibid.*, 177.

9. The relatives were those other than immediate family

members who were by law responsible for care. Creech, *Poor Law Administration*, 113.

10. *Ibid.*, xv.

11. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 25–26, 30–31, 36.

12. Creech, *Poor Law Administration*, ix–x. See also Hazard, *Report on the Poor*, 85–86.

13. Bruce C. Daniels, "Poor Relief, Local Finance, and Town Government in Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 40 (1981): 77, 79.



This "South West View of Newport," drawn by Samuel King in 1795, shows the town as it would look for the next several decades. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 213).

pendency on their persons, a kind of scarlet letter.¹⁴

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, conditions in Newport worsened. The Revolutionary War left the economy in a shambles, and efforts at revival achieved only partial success. The Jeffersonian Embargo, the War of 1812, and a postwar business depression put the finishing touches on the whole dismal process, leaving the town impoverished and with a substantial annual expenditure for poor relief.¹⁵ Some efforts were made in the private sector to succor the needy, but these were neither sufficient nor sustaining.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the citizens at town meetings rejected out of hand all proposals to raise taxes to help improve the lot of those in the notorious almshouse.¹⁷

This was the situation when yet another pro-

posal was put before the annual town meeting in March 1819, this time for a new poorhouse.¹⁸ The proposal's sponsors were respected members of the community, men of substance and reputation. Typifying this group was its leader, Stephen T. Northam, a successful shipping merchant and owner of a local distillery, who was active in civic and church affairs. Sometime earlier Northam had collaborated with other men of business to revive the town's depressed banking industry.¹⁹

For such a distinguished group, the citizens had the patience to listen. After all, the proposal promised to reduce taxes, and the backers stood to lose most, both in terms of money and prestige, from an ill-conceived venture.

In general, the proposal called for the complete abandonment of outdoor relief, which it was said

14. Peterson, *History of Rhode Island*, 277. See also *Newport Mercury*, 1 June 1918.

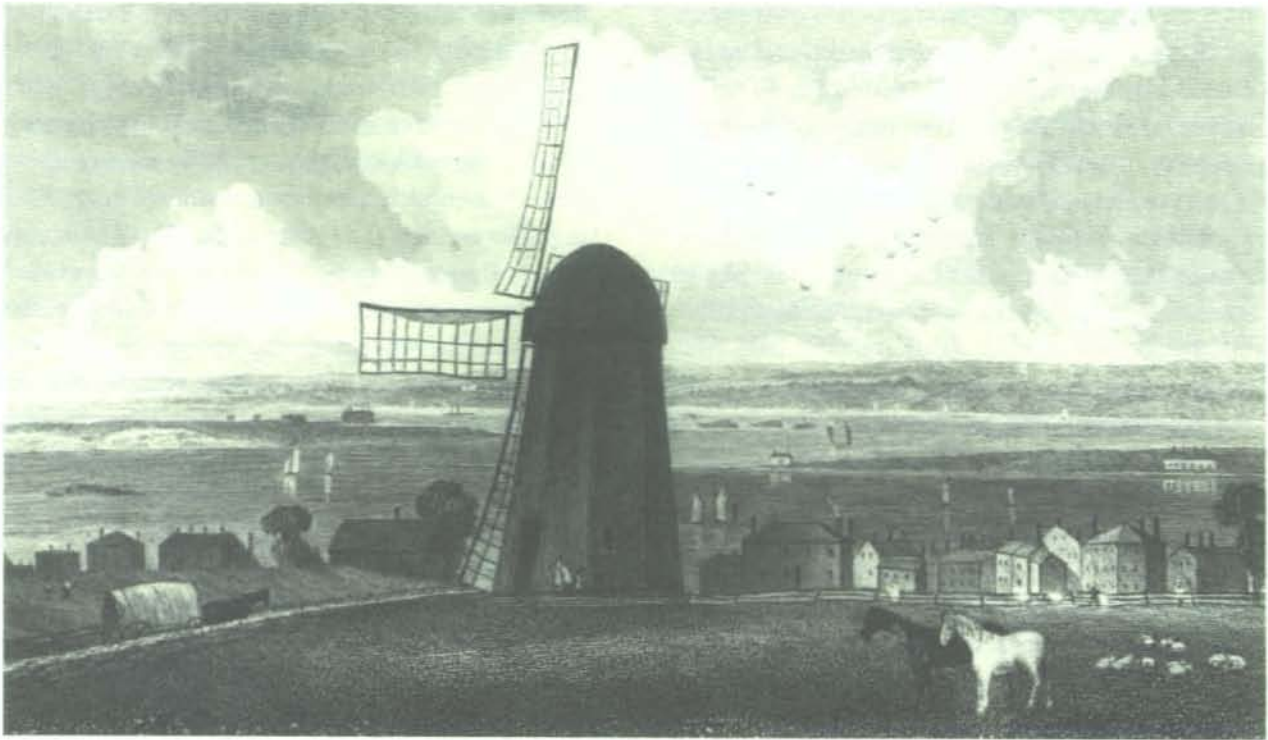
15. John R. Dix, *A Handbook of Newport and Rhode Island* (Newport: C. F. Hammett, Jr., 1852), 123–24.

16. *Newport Mercury*, 9 Feb. 1805; "Physicians Help Poor, 1816," research file, Newport Historical Society. See also Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century*, 3 vols. (Boston: Mason Publishing Co., 1902), 3:401.

17. Field, *State of Rhode Island* 3:401.

18. Copy of extract of Newport Town Meeting minutes for 1 Mar. 1819 in Minutes, 2 Mar. 1819, of the Committee Appointed by the Town of Newport to Contract for, and Superintend the Erecting of a Building on Coasters Harbor Island to be called the Newport Asylum for the Better Accommodation of the Poor, Newport Historical Society (hereafter, Committee to Contract for the Newport Asylum, NHS).

19. Peterson, *History of Rhode Island*, 277.



The Newport Asylum for the Poor is visible at the far right of this 1832 engraving. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6194).

was abused,²⁰ and for the establishment of a management-efficient institution in which the inmates would be largely responsible for much of their own upkeep. One immediate result would be to rid the streets of beggars and make the town more attractive for residents and visitors. The long-term dividends would be the restoration of many to socially responsible and productive lives—this to be accomplished through implementation of scientific methods and close supervision.

From an economic point of view, the project was very attractive. However, economics was not the sole motivating factor. It was universally acknowledged that conditions in the old almshouse were deplorable, and the paternalistic instincts of the community's leadership made the matter weigh heavily on their Christian con-

sciences. It was this concern, in combination with the prevailing climate for reform, that made change possible. Consequently the project was unanimously approved, and a committee of the sponsors headed by Northam was commissioned to build the new poorhouse and to devise a plan for its proper administration.²¹

Having done much of the groundwork in advance, the committee responded quickly. The site selected for the new facility was Coasters Harbor Island, situated two miles north of the center of town and separated from it by 900 feet of mostly shallow water. The ninety acres of generally fertile land that constituted the island was the property of the town, with only a small portion under lease.

In certain respects Coasters Harbor Island was uniquely qualified for its new role. In the eigh-

20. Creech, *Poor Law Administration*, 173. The board of outpensioners was dissolved 1 July 1820. Minutes, 1 Oct. 1821, Newport Town Council Records, Newport

Historical Society.

21. Minutes, 2 Mar. 1819, Committee to Contract for the Newport Asylum, NHS.

teenth century it had been used as a quarantine station for ships coming from abroad and as the site of a smallpox hospital. During the Revolution the British had used the island for their sick, and several British maps of the time identified it as "Pest Island" and "small pox island."²² Hospitals for contagious diseases, generally small wooden structures, continued to operate on the island in the nineteenth century, the last built in 1873.²³

With such a reputation, it is no surprise that the island was never sought-after property and that no objection was raised when it was recommended for the poorhouse. Indeed, its relative isolation—it could be reached from the town only by boat—had a definite appeal to the townspeople who had had their fill of street beggars and preferred not to be reminded of their obligation to the poor. In part, this attitude was reflected in the response to the proposal to build a bridge to connect the island with the mainland. The managers of the asylum recommended the project soon after the building was completed, but the town took no action.²⁴ The issue surfaced again, but it was not until the 1850s that the connection was made, and then entirely with island resources, with no assistance from the town.²⁵

Apart from its somewhat unappealing history, Coasters Harbor Island was admirably situated. It had a commanding view of the lower bay, with its southern portion facing Newport's inner harbor and the main channel leading to the ocean beyond. It was here, on a high point of ground, that the poorhouse was built.

Construction began in April 1819. The exterior was completed in November, the entire project

in March 1820. Constructed entirely of fieldstone from the island, the building was of a typical Early National Period institutional design, with a center section of three stories and two wings of two stories each.²⁶ Perimeter walls measured three feet thick at the basement level and tapered to twenty inches at the eaves. The first and second floors contained rooms for inmates, a sickroom, and a commissioners' meeting room. The third floor of the center section consisted of one large assembly room, which would be used for Sunday religious services. A kitchen, dining room, and storerooms were in the basement.²⁷

In accordance with the building contract, a barn, outdoor privies, a cistern, and a well were also provided. The total cost came to just under \$7,000, the limit specified by the town.²⁸ The money was borrowed from Newport's banks and was paid back with interest over a five-year period.²⁹

While construction was in progress, Northam and his group prepared "a plan of government" for what would hereafter be known as the Newport Asylum. The document, which was incorporated in a recommendation to a special town meeting, called for the creation of an autonomous board of commissioners. Based on the practices of "several secular establishments in the states," the proposal declared:

The committee are of the opinion that the great utility contemplated by the establishment can only be attained by good regulations, strictly adhered to and carried faithfully into effect;—and they are also of the opinion that to attain the end desired, the management and direction of the establishment ought in every particular to be committed to a Board of Commissioners appointed by the Town for that purpose—and they are further of the opinion that for the interest and

22. Photostat copies nos. 68, 102, and 104 of the Clinton Collection maps in the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, produced for the Newport Historical Society, Map Collection, NHS.

23. Thomas J. Williams, *Coasters Harbor Island and the U.S. Naval Training Station* (Newport: Training Station Press, 1937), 1–3; Arnold, *History of the State of Rhode Island* 1:136, 2:58.

24. Minutes, 24 July 1828, Records of the Commissioners

of the Newport Asylum, 1820–54, Newport Historical Society (hereafter, Bd of Comm Records, NHS).

25. *Ibid.*, 28 Dec. 1852, 7 Sept. 1855.

26. See illustrations of institutions in Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*.

27. Minutes, 25 Mar. 1819, Committee to Contract for the Newport Asylum, NHS.

28. *Ibid.*, 23 Mar. 1819.

29. *Ibid.*, 8 Mar. 1819.

well management of the Institution the Board of Commissioners so appointed, ought not to be frequently changed.³⁰

The plan was approved in town meeting on 16 March 1820, and nine commissioners were chosen, with three new members to be appointed each year. The board was empowered to employ a keeper, a physician, and other officers as required, and to formulate rules and regulations for staff and inmates. One or more commissioners were required to visit the asylum each week and to report on conditions at weekly meetings of the board. Every March a full report of operations would be submitted to the town government for presentation to the town meeting, along with a request for appropriations for the next fiscal year.³¹

The provisions of the plan were enacted into law in May 1820.³² An interesting part of the legislation related to the overseer of the poor, an agent of the town council, "who would cease to exercise all such powers and duties as are or may be transferred by the Town to said commissioners; and in all things appertaining to the government of and the management of the Asylum . . . shall be under the directions of said commissioners."³³ The shared responsibility for the care of Newport's poor would, for the most part, work well.

In other particulars, the law specified that the overseer, with warrants from the town council, could commit persons to the asylum and bind out others, children included. But the board of commissioners, which was a creature of the town meeting and not the council, was free to dismiss whomever it wished, at any time and without the concurrence of any public officials.³⁴

The poorhouse building was ready for occupancy in the summer of 1820, at which time thirty-seven inmates from the old almshouse were transferred there.³⁵ The move was antici-

pated by the employment of a keeper and the preparation of the rules and regulations that he was required to enforce. A strict regimen was envisaged, whereby the inmates would be rehabilitated both for their own good and for the good of society as a whole. Consequently, conformity and the work ethic were the key elements, and aside from the sick and the insane, there was no room for exceptions.

The inmates were required to rise early, prepare themselves properly, and proceed directly to assigned tasks. They were expected to behave themselves "with decency and sobriety" and avoid making unnecessary noise. Meals, consisting of a rather bland though substantial diet, were announced by the ringing of a bell, to which all had to respond quickly and "in good order." Another bell sent the inmates back to their labors. Certain individuals were charged with sweeping all spaces every morning and washing them once a week. Laundry was collected and washed weekly in a small building located nearby. With few exceptions, all of the duties associated with running the poorhouse were carried out by the inmates under the watchful eye of the keeper and his wife. Those not engaged as cooks or cleaners worked in a small manufacturing room or on the poor farm, which comprised most of the land to the north of the asylum.³⁶

Contact between the sexes was strictly forbidden, and violators were punished; so too were those using profane language, refusing to work, or acting in a disorderly manner. Punishments were initially left entirely to the discretion of the keeper, with extended periods in solitary confinement on bread and water reserved for "highly criminal conduct." The inmates were not permitted to leave the confines of the island except by permission of the keeper, and then

30. Minutes, 11 Mar. 1820, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

31. *Ibid.*

32. "An Act Relating to the Overseer of the Poor and to the Asylum, in the Town of Newport," *The Charter of the City of Newport, R.I., and the Special State Law Relating Thereto, together with the Ordinances for the Government*

of the City, Published by Order of the City Council [Newport: Coggeshall & Pratt, 1858], 23–27.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. Minutes, 6 July 1820, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

36. *Ibid.*, 24 Mar. 1820.



John Joe was a long-term resident of the Newport Asylum. His background is shrouded in mystery. As a young boy, he was found by Newport mariners far out at sea, adrift in a small boat. The experience affected his mind, but during his adulthood the condition was not severe, and he was acknowledged by all who knew him to be a gentle and proud person with a strong community spirit. Joe died in 1864 at the age of eighty-one. Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society.

only with explicit instructions to return at a set time. Friends and relatives could visit once a week; inmates who were sick were allowed to receive visitors more often.³⁷

Rules and regulations are only as good as their enforcement, and in this regard the keeper was the key administrator. The commissioners were keenly aware of the importance of the post, and every effort was made to secure the best possible

person. Originally the sole qualifications for the position were industry, efficiency, and skill in farming. The relationship between the commissioners and the keeper was in actuality strictly a business one: the keeper was allowed a certain fee for each inmate and the use of the island and inmate labor for his personal profit, in return for which he was to enforce the commissioners' rules and regulations. The arrangement, therefore, was essentially a contracting out, and the position of keeper was awarded to the lowest bidder.³⁸ With the passage of time, however, the relationship changed, and the keeper became a salaried employee compensated by something over \$300 a year, free board in the poorhouse building, and provisions from the farm.³⁹

From the very beginning the asylum appears to have achieved the objectives intended by its sponsors. Economically, it accounted for a substantial reduction in cost to the town, since outdoor relief was discontinued and the products of the asylum's farming and manufacturing were applied to its operations.⁴⁰ The farm was a particular success. Just a few short years after the poorhouse opened, more than half of the island was adapted to agriculture, and the resultant produce was used both for in-house needs and for sale in the town market.⁴¹ Eventually the enterprise would earn a wide reputation for excellence.⁴²

The circumstances of the inmates were also much better than they had been at the old almshouse. The enforcement of standards of cleanliness, dress, and conduct improved the general atmosphere, and the daily schedule of work in the building and on the farm gave purpose to an otherwise drab existence. Life was far from the ideal, but it was not devoid of purpose, as it had been in the almshouse. The asylum was a sturdy building with clean apartments, the island a pleasant and healthy environment; the food was wholesome, and although lacking in refinement

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, 22 Mar. 1820.

39. *Ibid.*, 3 Dec. 1820.

40. *Ibid.*, 4 Apr. 1828. See also Dix., *Handbook of Newport*, 124.

41. Minutes, 29 Mar. 1821, 20 Apr. 1827, 26 Mar. 1830, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

42. *Newport Mercury*, 21 June 1879.

as far as its preparation was concerned, in time it became more varied.⁴³

Most importantly, the inmates were accorded a close attention that they were previously denied, and although it never led on to respectability, it did nurture self-worth and hope. A physician visited them regularly, and the sick were treated in a hospital room staffed by a specially hired nurse. A school for children was established and a qualified teacher employed. On Sundays religious services were conducted by a minister from one of Newport's many churches. Thanksgiving and Christmas were the occasion for special dinners and visits of caring friends and relatives. While the stricture of being isolated from the town probably weighed heavily on some, the board's leave policy for those who were capable and cooperative was a liberal one. The asylum's facilities, moreover, were constantly upgraded.

What made this all possible was the routine and efficient management of the board of commissioners. The board held weekly meetings at which the keeper reported in detail on all happenings. The weekly visiting committee inspected the premises and talked with inmates. Special operations committees dealing with facilities, agriculture, manufacturing, and other matters were also active.

While most keepers performed well, the board was quick to reprimand negligence or excesses.⁴⁴ Gradually the board accrued to itself much of the responsibility for decisions relating to the inmates directly. For example, the keeper's right to punish was curtailed to the extent that the board expected satisfactory explanations of the punishments decreed.⁴⁵ Similarly, all requests for leave came before the board for review.⁴⁶

The strictness of the control was also self-imposed, for every March the board submitted a detailed report, along with a financial statement,

to the town council. In June the mayor, the council, and other town officials were formally invited to visit the farm. Originally the visit was the occasion for a modest refreshment, but in time the ritual took on more elaborate proportions and was anticipated by all concerned.⁴⁷

As successful as the asylum was in many ways, that success was, of course, relative. In the context of the times, the Newport poorhouse was certainly better than most; yet it did have its problems, some of which were quite serious. There was, for example, the matter of the inmates themselves. In keeping with traditional usage and the prevailing definition of the poor, these consisted of an assortment of types, including the destitute without family, the orphan, and the insane.⁴⁸ To these were added, generally for short periods, those guilty of minor crimes: the drunkard, the disturber of the peace, the wayward minor, and the vagrant who could expect to be warned off.

In effect, then, the asylum was much more than a poorhouse. It was an institution for both social dependents and social deviants, and in this regard it was not unlike its predecessor. In part this is reflected in a state report of 1850 on Rhode Island's poor. In a description of some seventy inmates, the report classifies eighteen as adult destitute, twenty-nine as insane, seven as drunkards of less than six months' residency, and sixteen as children under twelve years of age.⁴⁹

While the detail included in this report is the exception, and statistics are not readily available for other years, it appears that the aged poor were a small minority among the asylum's inmates. The abandonment of outdoor relief may have forced some elderly with establishment rights onto Coasters Harbor Island, but for the most part families continued to care for their own. Although the first year of operations saw the in-

43. Peterson, *History of Rhode Island*, 278.

44. Minutes, 13 June, 19 June 1828, 10 Feb. 1843, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

45. *Ibid.*, 14 Nov. 1834.

46. Minutes, 27 June 1856. Board of Commissioners of the

Newport Asylum Records, 1855-84, Newport City Hall [hereafter, Bd of Comm Records, NCH].

47. Minutes, 7 June 1844, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

48. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 4.

49. Hazard, *Report on the Poor*, 10-12.

mate population nearly double, and likely some of the new people were elderly who had been kept by neighbors, the increase was attributable to other types as well.⁵⁰ In the following years the number of permanent inmates increased only slightly, reflecting the slow growth of the town.⁵¹ This small increase suggests that there was no strong inclination on the part of the citizenry to view the institution as anything other than a place for the totally destitute and the abandoned.

The situation of the insane was different, for while some families continued to maintain them at home,⁵² others—and these were in the majority—elected to place them on the island. As a result, a high proportion of the permanent residents (on the average, over one-third) were persons of varying degrees of mental instability. The most serious cases were quartered in specially constructed apartments called “coops,” originally located in the main building. Subsequently an annex in the rear of the building was used. In 1858 a separate building was constructed, and in 1867 it was enlarged.⁵³

Evidence suggests that the treatment of those poor unfortunates confined to the coops was at first bad. The coops were cramped quarters, poorly ventilated in summer and without heat in winter, and quite naturally inmates suffered from extremes of temperature. Further, they lived lives of virtual solitary confinement, isolated almost entirely from contact with the outside world.⁵⁴ The less severe cases, those not likely to harm themselves or others, were treated like other inmates—they occupied regular apartments, observed the rules, and performed tasks

in the building and on the farm.⁵⁵ Beginning in the 1840s some of the insane were routinely sent to the new Butler Hospital for the Insane in Providence. Selections were made by the asylum physician on the basis of the prospects for improvement or cure.⁵⁶ Not until the creation of a state facility in the 1870s would the poorhouse be totally relieved of the requirement for maintaining the community's mental cases.⁵⁷

Besides its heterogeneous nature, the population of the asylum was in a constant state of flux. In the course of a year a considerable number of people entered the establishment, and many left after relatively short stays.⁵⁸ This condition was disruptive to the intended structured regimen of the permanent inhabitants, and it was of obvious concern to the commissioners.

In large part the condition grew out of another problem: that is, the use of the institution as a prison for persons guilty of misdemeanors. Newport had a small jail, built in colonial times, but it was not meant to serve as a place of incarceration for extended periods. In the nineteenth century the number of crimes requiring more than just a few days of confinement increased, and the town fathers turned to the new asylum as a suitable alternative. The first offenders entered the poorhouse shortly after it opened its doors, and the practice continued throughout most of its history.⁵⁹

Originally the numbers involved were small and the stays, generally in the coops, were short.⁶⁰ However, by the 1840s the problem of crime became more pronounced as a consequence of the influx of aliens, mainly Irish, into

50. The number of inmates rose from thirty-five in July 1820 to fifty-nine in March 1821. Minutes, 29 Mar. 1821, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

51. The population of Newport rose from 7,907 in 1810 to 9,563 in 1850. The average annual population of the poorhouse up to 1860 was approximately sixty-five inmates.

52. Hazard, *Report on the Poor*, 11.

53. Minutes, 31 Aug. 1832, Bd of Comm Records, NHS; *City Documents*, 1859–60 [Newport: Coggeshall & Pratt, 1860], no. 13, p. 91.

54. Hazard, *Report on the Poor*, 97.

55. *Ibid.*, 98.

56. Minutes, 19 Nov. 24 Dec. 1847, Bd of Comm Records, NHS; Minutes, 23 Aug. 1867, Bd of Comm Records, NCH.

57. An informative article on the state farm at Cranston appears in the *Newport Journal*, 3 Feb. 1883.

58. For example, from July 1820 to March 1821 eighty-two persons were admitted; of these, fourteen were discharged, five died, three ran away, and one was taken by the sheriff. Minutes, 21 Mar. 1821, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

59. *Ibid.*, 27 Oct., 16 Nov. 1820.

60. In September 1828 the board notified the keeper “that hereafter if any vagrant should be taken up and sent to the Asylum for drunkenness or improper and vicious conduct, such person shall be immediately committed to the Coop and put in close confinement, until released by the Board.” *Ibid.*, 26 Sept. 1828.



Butler Hospital for the Insane, Providence, 1848. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 98).

the town. And it is at this time too that the records reflect a substantially higher numbers of vagrants and drunkards admitted to the institution.⁶¹

At first the town warned off the foreigners, sending them back to where they had come from, that is, to their points of entry into the country. However, this was not a satisfactory solution to the problem, since these persons were not legal residents of New York or Boston, and for Newport to assume the burden of transporting them across the Atlantic was unthinkable. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that many aliens had been encouraged to come to the area as cheap labor, and for a time, at least, they had been gainfully employed. In due course it would become obvious to all that warning off was not the answer. It was this awareness that opened the way for the breakdown of the heretofore rigid doctrine that community assistance

should be provided only for those with establishment rights.

After 1850 the character of the asylum population changed radically for the worse. This change was due to the influx of a greater number of violators of the town's peace, including "infamous women" who were attracted to Newport by its new-found tourism. In addition to the "cottages" of the very rich, several large hotels and summer residences were built, principally for upper-middle-class use. This development was paralleled by an increase in the number of private clubs, saloons, and brothels, as well as an increase in incidents of street crimes.⁶²

From this time on, Coasters Harbor Island became a great concern of the town government administration, and appeal after appeal was made to annual town meetings for the construction of a house of correction there.⁶³ While these efforts were at times vigorous and convincing, the citi-

61. *Ibid.*, 24 Apr., 19 June 1835, 26 Oct. 1849.

62. Minutes, 26 Oct. 1855, Bd of Comm Records, NCH.

63. *City Documents*, 1855, no. 1, p. 6; 1856, no. 1, p. 8; 1858, no. 41, pp. 191-93; 1858-59, no. 42, p. 219.



Washington Square, with the Colony House doubling as City Hall, was the scene of debates between the board of commissioners and the town council over separating the jail functions from the asylum. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6195).

zens demonstrated an unshakable determination and rejected all proposals. As a result, the issue remained current until the 1870s, by which time Newport had a new police station, and a state prison became available.

Meanwhile the town fathers had to content themselves with an increase in the number of coops in the poorhouse. The building annex was demolished and a separate building was constructed in its place in the late 1850s. Several years later it was enlarged.

Although the town government's expressed concern for the welfare of the "innocent poor" in the poorhouse may well have been sincere, it is also quite true that a suitable town jail was desperately needed and that the poorhouse was neither adequate nor appropriate for this purpose. Control of the institution, after all, was the province of the board of commissioners, which was responsible to the town meeting and not the

mayor and town council. As a result, there was no guarantee that a person sent to the facility would be kept there for the prescribed period. The board always resented the use of the asylum as a prison, and while it complied with the wishes of the town government in this regard, it did so reluctantly and not infrequently discharged lawbreakers earlier than the government would have liked.

The commissioners never fully abandoned the concept of the poorhouse as a place of rehabilitation and relative comfort for deprived classes, and they refused to accommodate more inmates than was possible to achieve these ends. Accordingly, while the problems of dependency and deviancy increased after 1840, the poorhouse population rarely exceeded ninety inmates in any one year, and the average number of permanent residents was much less.

The prospect of overcrowding was responded

to quickly in one way or another. Collaboration with the overseer of the poor for binding out inmates was routine,⁶⁴ and when it was possible to get a lawbreaker out of town, this was done too. Such was the case, for example, with one Thomas C. Allen, who was given the choice of sixty days in a coop or "discharge before the expiration of said sixty days, on condition that he consent to go to sea, the voyage to be decided by the commissioners."⁶⁵ But despite its best efforts the board could not always find a satisfactory solution, and it was forced to turn many undesirables back on the streets, much to the chagrin of the town.

The situation pointed up what was perhaps the most serious problem of the Newport poorhouse. This was a political problem. When the town approved the plan of administration in 1820, it did so with no serious objections. The question of caring for the poor, in particular the unworthy poor, was a bothersome one, the sponsors of the new project were substantial citizens, and crime was not a serious problem. Vesting complete autonomy in a board of commissioners, therefore, aroused no great concern.

For two decades the arrangement worked admirably. The tendency of the town to use the poorhouse as a house of correction was tactfully parried by the board, which made quite clear its standards of operations and its expectations. Close collaboration with the overseer of the poor, the government's agent, made early releases palatable, and efforts directed at strengthening the authority of that officer and at using the old almshouse as a place of short-term incarceration seemed promising.⁶⁶ However, the increased crime of the 1840s and 1850s strained the relationship between the commissioners and the town government to the breaking point.

The situation was exacerbated by the greatly increased value of Coasters Harbor Island and its obvious potential for tax revenues. In this regard

the town government proposed to the town meeting in 1853 that the property be sold to wealthy buyers as a site for building summer residences, and that the revenues realized be used to build a new poorhouse and a house of correction in another part of the town.⁶⁷

Nothing came of the proposal, but a new town administration in 1855 vigorously attacked the board of commissioners, charging it with the "over issue of pauperism about the city" because of a too rigid adherence to standards of operations. It recommended a reduction in the board's authority to internal operations only and the vesting of complete control over the admission and release of inmates in the mayor and town council.⁶⁸

Strong words were followed by deeds when a new mayor, William J. Swinburne, challenged the board directly and on his own authority demanded the release of a certain poorhouse inmate. When the board demurred, he took matters into his own hands. In a bizarre episode the mayor and an entourage invaded Coasters Harbor Island, chopped down the door of the said inmate's apartment, and dragged the unfortunate person before the justice of the peace.⁶⁹

Despite this precipitous action, the board remained immovable. In a lengthy treatise to the town council and the public at large, it charged the mayor with a violation of the state law that made the release of inmates its prerogative.⁷⁰ The consensus was that the board was right, and no changes were made in the asylum's administration.

Subsequent town administrations were more accommodating, allowing matters to rest while continuing to press for a house of correction on the island.⁷¹ Meanwhile the board of commissioners exhibited somewhat more restraint, permitting undesirables to remain longer in the poorhouse.

Things remained substantially the same until

64. Minutes, 29 Feb. 1840, Bd of Comm Records, NHS; Minutes, 10 Oct. 1856, Bd of Comm Records, NCH.

65. Minutes, 6 June 1860, Bd of Comm Records, NCH.

66. Minutes, 16 Nov. 1820, 3 June 1834, 6 Mar. 1835, Bd of Comm Records, NHS.

67. *City Documents*, 1853, no. 3, p. 17.

68. *Ibid.*, 1855, no. 1, p. 6; 1855, no. 8, pp. 44-45.

69. Minutes, 26 Oct. 1855, Bd of Comm Records, NCH.

70. *City Documents*, 1858-59, no. 42, p. 218.

71. Minutes, 26 Oct. 1855, Bd of Comm Records, NCH.



With the popularity of Newport as a summer resort putting pressure on land values along the water, the asylum land was much coveted for its fine view and location. This 1853 panorama from a site near Fort Adams captures the sweep of hill and harbor that visitors found so attractive. RHIS Collection (RHi X3 6196).

after the Civil War, when new and dramatic changes occurred in the community and in the state. A more adequate police station was established and an orphanage supported largely by private funds got under way. Most important of all, however, was the establishment in Cranston of a state farm, a complex that included prisons, an insane asylum, and a poorhouse.⁷²

The better jail facilities in Newport's new police station diverted those charged with minor offenses from the poorhouse, while the orphanage relieved it of caring for innocent minors. The state facilities, meanwhile, were available for nonestablishment paupers, the insane, and the criminal.⁷³

Newport quickly availed itself of the opportunity that the state facilities offered,⁷⁴ and by the end of the 1860s all of the insane and non-resident inmates had been moved to Cranston. The obvious consequence was a significant decrease in the population of Coasters Harbor Island. Moreover, this population became more homogeneous, consisting principally of native and largely aged inmates.

The removal of the criminal, the insane, and the nonresident was followed by a heightened interest in the asylum on the part of the town. In 1878 large-scale renovations were carried out, aimed at making the poorhouse more comfortable. The interior of the main building was converted into fewer but larger apartments, and kitchen and dining areas in the basement were modernized. The building in the rear was also renovated. The coops were eliminated, a large chapel with a modern organ was created, and a comfortable sitting room was fashioned on a lower floor for the male inmates. Steam heating was installed in both structures, and exteriors were improved and painted.⁷⁵

Meanwhile the townspeople became personally involved. Some routinely attended Sunday services in the new chapel. School classes provided the inmates with entertainment, and casual visits of individuals and groups to the island occurred with increasing frequency.⁷⁶

The circumstances of the inmates had also changed. Without disruptive elements in their midst, they enjoyed greater peace and security.

72. *Newport Journal*, 3 Feb. 1883. See also Field, *State of Rhode Island* 3:411.

73. Creech, *Poor Law Administration*, 211-13.

74. *City Documents*, 1871, no. 5, p. 23. By 1879 all of the insane were gone.

75. *Newport Mercury*, 21 June 1879; *City Documents*, 1878-79, no. 25, pp. 54-55; *History of the State of Rhode Island* (Philadelphia: Hoag and Wade, 1878), 203.

76. *Newport Daily News*, 1 Apr. 1919; *Newport Mercury*, 15 Nov. 1879.



The workhouse and house of correction at Howard Farm in Cranston about 1873. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6197).

The asylum's code of conduct had become less rigid over the years, and life was neither arduous nor repressive. There were still rules and regulations, but under a gentle and caring keeper the atmosphere was more casual and relaxed. It was of this period that one prominent Newporter wrote:

When I first knew the place it was more picturesque than it is today. . . . It was a quiet, lovely islet, with one solid building used as the Almshouse. There was a certain room with a window looking seaward that I had always meant to claim as my bedroom in the event that I came upon the town.⁷⁷

But for all of its improvements the institution was still a home for paupers, and vestiges of its grimmer past were very much in evidence. For some, perhaps, the new interest in the asylum was motivated by perverse curiosity, but for others the plight of the inmates was cause for

genuine compassion. Reflecting on his contact with the place as an impressionable youth at this time, another Newporter wrote:

It was a time-honored custom for people to go over to the "Harbor" on Sunday mornings for Divine services. Two other children and myself once went. We walked over the bridge and found our way to the chapel upstairs in the building. I shall never forget the hopeless faces of those poor people, some of them of good families, brought there by misfortunes; and when a woman attendant showed the visitors "round" after service and pointed out one after another of the inmates, telling their names and history, some of whom we knew and pitied, I could have cried in sympathy and righteous rage. Was it not bad enough to be poor and live in cold and misery, and eat out of tin dishes set on a hard table and sit on hard benches without being held up on exhibition?⁷⁸

Although conditions on Coasters Harbor Island had unquestionably improved, the eco-

77. Maud Howe Elliot, *This Was My Newport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mythology Co., 1944), 247.

78. *Newport Daily News*, 1 Apr. 1919.



This 1834 engraving is the earliest-known full view of the Newport Asylum for the Poor. Courtesy of the Naval War College Museum.

conomic picture had not. The cost to the town for poor relief had risen steadily during the post-Civil War period. While the island farm was truly a success, its products yielded only a modest return in an inflationary environment.⁷⁹ Further, the sundry improvements to the asylum were costly, and there were the routine outlays for those committed to state institutions. Most importantly, however, relief dispersed by the overseer of the poor had risen sharply. By 1870 this form of outdoor assistance was being provided to 1,350 persons and amounted to \$8,000.⁸⁰ Consequently the poorhouse on Coasters Harbor Island was no longer the bargain for the town that it had been in the past.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the town was disposed to consider ways to redress matters. Such an opportunity appeared in 1878, when the

U.S. Navy demonstrated an interest in Narragansett Bay as a site for recruit training. Since the enterprise promised to bring in considerable revenue, the town responded quickly. Coasters Harbor Island was offered to the federal government unconditionally and at no cost. Considerable politicking on state and federal government levels reaped complete success, and in 1883 the Naval Training Station, the first shore-based recruit training command in the country, was permanently established on the island.⁸¹ The town's effort to secure the facility was supported by a persuasive campaign by both of Newport's newspapers, the circulation of petitions, and a referendum that endorsed the project overwhelmingly.⁸²

As part of an arrangement with the state for having given the island up, Newport was granted \$20,000 for relocating the poor. However, this

79. The poorhouse manufactory had ceased operations in the years before the Civil War. *City Documents*, 1862-63, no. 19, pp. 76-77.

80. Creech, *Poor Law Administration*, 213.

81. Anthony S. Nicolosi, "Foundations of the Naval Pres-

ence in Narragansett Bay: An Overview," *Newport History* 52 (Summer 1979): 70-71.

82. *Newport Mercury*, 4 Dec., 11 Dec. 1880; *Newport Journal*, 18 Dec. 1880.



The gunnery and aiming drill shown here was held at the Naval Training Station after it took over the asylum property. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6201).

task was not easy to accomplish. Four separate proposals to establish a poorhouse in populated sections of the town were decisively defeated in special referenda. Approval was finally secured for a large house in a rural setting on the northwestern fringe of the town, just one mile from Coasters Harbor Island.⁸³

In the summer of 1884, exactly sixty-four years from the time the poor were moved onto the island, an almost equal number departed for their new quarters.⁸⁴ Among other things, the event signaled the end of the board of commissioners. In its place the town government created the Board of Overseers of the City Asylum, composed entirely of elected officials of the town.⁸⁵

If success can be measured in terms of accolades received, then the Newport Asylum for the Poor was an unqualified success. The annual inspections by the town government routinely produced glowing reports to town meetings on the condition of the inmates and the operation of the farm. The comments of social welfare authorities, historians of the state, journalists, and casual observers were likewise without exception laudatory. Indeed, for all of its sixty-four years, the institution had no known detractors.

The achievement is all the more striking when one recalls that institutionalization generally,

and especially in large urban areas, had worked poorly or not at all. Most institutions—whether almshouses, penitentiaries, or insane asylums—were subject to overcrowding, mismanagement, and decay, and they quickly became agencies for custody rather than for reform. Perhaps Newport's relatively small size and slow population growth helped account for the difference. Then too, this difference may have had to do with the isolation of the poorhouse on Coasters Harbor Island, an isolation that made possible the implementation of a management program free from outside interference.

Nonetheless, although neither of these factors should be discounted, it appears that the success of the asylum was attributable chiefly to the board of commissioners and its firm commitment both to social and moral ideals and to efficiency. Free from political pressures, the autonomous board was able to maintain high standards of operations and to achieve creditable results while consistently demonstrating restraint and tact in dealing with an increasingly sensitive and ultimately an acquisitive local government.

With the poorhouse managed by able and dedicated commissioners, Newport satisfied much of its obligation to the poor in its midst, and it did this more economically and more humanely

83. *Newport Mercury*, 14 June 1884.

84. *City Documents*, 1884, no. 37, p. 66. See also *Newport Journal and Weekly News*, 14 June 1884.

85. "The City of Newport, An Ordinance to Provide for

the Government of the Asylum for the Poor, Passed May 6, 1884," clipping, Overseers of the City Asylum Records, 1884-89, Newport City Hall.



*Founders Hall, the home of the Naval War College Museum, as it appeared in 1984, the centennial of the college. The former Newport Asylum was the original site of the Naval War College from 1884 to 1889 and the principal administration building of the Newport Naval Station from 1904 to 1973. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan prepared his epochal *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* here while serving as the War College's second president. The building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1984. Courtesy of the Naval War College Museum.*

than had previously been the case. When conflict did arise, it did so not over these issues, but rather over the use of the poorhouse as a prison and the prerogative of the duly elected government.

But what of rehabilitation, the other major motive besides economy for a new home for the poor? Did rehabilitation in fact occur? It would appear that within the context of the poorhouse the imposed discipline resulted in the inmates' leading healthier and more purposeful lives. However, it cannot be said with any certainty that inmates were actually restored to responsible and contented places in the community. Indeed, although the population of the institution

was in a constant state of flux, there was always a nucleus of permanent inmates, not all of whom were insane or physically infirm.

In all fairness, though, true rehabilitation was made all but impossible by this flux in population and by the integration of numerous low criminal types, especially after 1840. The resulting instability frustrated procedures for rehabilitation, so that the focus on reform weakened in favor of custody, a change experienced by institutions everywhere. However, largely because of the constancy and excellent supervision of the board of commissioners, the change was gradual and occurred much later in Newport than in other places.

The real success of the Newport Asylum related to the community as a whole and its fulfillment of social obligations that in the first half of the nineteenth century, at least, could not be handled satisfactorily in any other way. The institution solved the chronic problems of dependency and, to a large degree, of deviancy as well. The asylum was urgently needed, and once under way, it was widely appreciated—so much so, that when a controversy developed over administrative control between the town government and the board of commissioners, the townspeople demonstrated their unqualified support for the asylum's continued operation under the management of the board.

Ironically, however, success in this regard actually worked to prevent the construction of a much-needed town prison in the 1850s. The many appeals of the town council for a house of correction on Coasters Harbor Island were supported by the board of commissioners, which was not happy with drunkards, violators of the town's peace, and prostitutes in the midst of its wards. Consequently, despite their obvious differences over administration, the council and the board were as one in their advocacy of a separate facility for lawbreakers. To the townspeople, however, the lack of a jail was of little or no importance. Besides their reluctance to bear the expense associated with such a facility, they con-

sidered the poorhouse perfectly suitable for both the poor and the criminal, at least the type that they were accustomed to dealing with. As a result, while they might endorse increasing the number of coops in the asylum, under no circumstances would they approve building a house of correction.

This public perception of the poorhouse appears to have altered somewhat in the 1870s, when a more adequate police station and the state farm at Cranston siphoned off undesirables, but it never completely changed. The newfound interest and show of compassion of the townspeople during this time was very likely rooted in pangs of Christian conscience, curiosity, and community pride in a successful enterprise. But if the poor were indeed more acceptable to Newport's Victorian society than previously was the case, it was an acceptability accorded them at arms' length. The reality was that the stigma of social dependency of any kind remained, perhaps more firmly rooted than ever before. There is no better illustration of this fact than the frustrating attempts made at relocating the poorhouse in a populated part of the town after the navy acquired Coasters Harbor Island in the early 1880s. To many—perhaps, indeed, to most—the poorhouse was still what it always had been: a place of last resort.

The Resort of Pure Fashion: Newport, Rhode Island, 1890–1914

Barbara A. Schreier and Michele Majer

"What does Newport stand for today?" Julia Ward Howe wrote in her diary. "A summer city of unique beauty, built up of pure fashion." Patronized by the Four Hundred, Newport was a powerful symbol of social stratification during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Unlike some other resorts that welcomed the tide of middle-class summer tourists, Newport retained its position as the playground of the prominent rich. When residents such as the Vanderbilts, the Astors, and the Whitneys opened their summer "cottages," they entered an enclave where exclusivity was prized, artificiality was expected, and common social values were nurtured.

Yet the isolation that protected Newport from the encroachment of the middle class created its own set of complex rituals and self-determined patterns. Secluded in their resort haven, the elite rejected the simple pleasures of country life and exhibited, instead, a "mania for social distinction." Members of this relatively homogeneous group jockeyed for positions of dominance and leadership while outsiders followed the contests with avid interest. As a result, competition pervaded all social exchanges.

As the rich scrambled for ways to distinguish themselves from everyone else, fashion assumed new prominence as one of the highest expressions of material prosperity. As one commentator put it, "everything in Newport is measured by the scale of millions." The successful ward-

robe was measured in terms of novelty, variety, and great expense. Women spent months preparing for the ten-week fashion show in Newport each summer, trying to ensure that their clothing would meet every standard of elegance and every caprice of style. Given the diversity of amusements and the forceful competition, it was a formidable task. Yet the formalized order of Newport accepted nothing less than total adherence to its rules, and costume reigned as a symbol of monied power and social dominance. Transparently competitive displays of fashion were carried on wherever the Four Hundred came together during the summer season. This paper will examine these displays at three Newport settings: the dinner dance or ball, Bailey's Beach, and the Casino.

Acceptance at Newport was considered the last test of a secure social position, but criteria for admission were not easily defined. Established wealth, certainly, was an essential requirement; as Mr. Dooley, a fictitious social and political commentator, noted, "In th' first place ye must have th' money and ye must have th' look as though it belonged to ye. That last's th' hardest thing iv all." However, money alone could not assure success, as some of the most opulent families discovered. Good breeding, a fashionable wardrobe, and refined manners were looked upon with favor, but many social climbers who possessed these attributes could still be found lacking by the inner circle. Although

Barbara Schreier is an associate professor in the Division of Home Economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Michele Majer is a research assistant with the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum

of Art in New York.

1. Robert H. Russell, "Mr. Dooley: On Life at Newport," *Harper's Weekly*, 19 Aug. 1901, 818.



The entrance doors of *The Breakers*, looking northwest. H.A.B.S. photo by Jack E. Boucher, 1971. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6198).

Gouverneur Morris, in his defense of Newport, would have had us believe that "the society of Newport is no more exclusive than any other society," he still had to admit that "one would not, naturally, armed with only these qualities land upon the long wharf and be immediately invited to dine on Bellevue Avenue."² A *New York Times* journalist writing in 1908 explained that "there is generally some reason for exclusion satisfactory to the leaders."³ Yet these capricious standards only intensified the allure of this pleasure resort. Every year dozens of hopeful aspirants willingly endured the torments of being

ignored and slighted as they patiently awaited the decision of the fashionable set.

Competition for admission was fierce, but for the victorious few it was just the beginning of an endless series of social contests among carefully chosen opponents. No one went to Newport for rest and relaxation. Instead, the residents battled for social supremacy, using profigate spending and theatrical gestures for their artillery. Newporters did not "devote themselves to pleasure regardless of expense," but rather they "devoted themselves to expense regardless of pleasure."⁴ As a result, a season in Newport was hard work. Beginning in July and ending in early September, the cottagers followed a relentless social schedule.

Numerous observers noted that the hectic pace in Newport was so regimented that it was not unlike life in the army. The principal difference was that "the majority of the rank and file, and all of the officers are women" who wore "regimental uniforms designed by Worth and others."⁵ Women were the core of Newport society and certainly the fiercest competitors in the "warfare for supremacy and recognition."⁶ As the stakes increased, the rivalry grew mercilessly intense. Women became entrapped within this distorted social reality, where every gesture and change of appearance was publicly scrutinized, and the struggles took their toll on the principal players. "I know of no profession, art or trade that women are working in today as taxing on mental resource as being a leader of society," said Alva Vanderbilt.⁷

The intensity of the competition was exacerbated by the close proximity of the very rich within this self-contained resort. In 1900 one reporter spoke of "the huddle of palaces, testifying to the queer gregariousness of the plutocrats . . . who are so devoted to the society of one another that, having enjoyed it in New York all winter,

2. Gouverneur Morris, "Newport the Malignant," *Everybody's Magazine*, Sept. 1908, 312.

3. "The Leader of Society," *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1908.

4. Montgomery Schuyler, "A Newport Palace," *Cosmopolitan*, Aug. 1900, 362.

5. Gilson Willetts, "Society in Camp at Newport," *Metropolitan*, Oct. 1897, 229-32.

6. Hartley Davis, "Magnificent Newport," *Munsey's Magazine*, July 1900, 480.

7. Barbara Goldsmith, *Little Gloria . . . Happy at Last* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 90.



A "hunt ball" in the 1870s. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6202).

they must welter in it in Newport all summer."⁸ From all accounts, it is clear that the cottagers never confused exclusivity with privacy; they longed to occupy center stage, and their exploits were always played to a larger audience—the "dear public." Their daily activities instantly became fodder for society columns and weekly journals such as *Town & Country*, which dutifully recorded the drama of "society's theater." "Their every action is narrated in the newspapers, they walk in the garden with reporters taking notes from the walk, they breakfast upon the porch with the 'society editress' making notes of their toilets."⁹ The phenomenon of private resort as public spectacle prompted one reporter to

wryly note that Newport "is about as secluded as the cups and saucers at an afternoon tea."¹⁰

In their unceasing struggle for social distinction, the cottagers expended boundless energy and endless sums of money. Novelty was highly prized in Newport, and entertaining meant choreographing one dazzling pageant after another. The dinner dance or ball provided one of the best opportunities for competitive display, since it required elaborate and expensive props: gowns, jewelry, favors, floral decorations, lighting, and entertainment. Because of the sheer numbers of parties that enlivened the Newport scene, the resort habitués became easily bored with a ball that was "without special features." It became

8. Schuyler, "Newport Palace," 371.

9. *Town & Country*, 15 July 1900, 138.

10. "Newport Society," *Harper's Weekly*, 30 Sept. 1893, 930.



Coaching on Bellevue Avenue. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6203).

necessary not just to entertain but to "devise something new to amuse the jaded and blasé."¹¹ Lavish attention was given to every detail; hostesses seized upon any idea that was innovative and expensive.

At the homes of the Astors and the Vanderbilts, where the desired effect was what Thorstein Veblen termed "an unremitting demonstration of ability to pay," guests were treated to unusual party favors, amongst which were numerous accessories of dress. During the 1891 season the ladies were presented with scented chatelaines, decorated gauze and Meissonier painted fans, doves' wings in pink and blue, jeweled hatpins, gold necklaces, watchguards, and bracelets. The

men received silk slipper bags, silver watch chains, cigar lighters, and scarf pins in the shape of hearts, wishbones, and knots.¹² The obligatory novelty favors for men and women included mechanical creeping babies and lizards, performing monkeys and rabbits, and clown and harlequin heads. "Was it any wonder," asked the *Newport News* the day following one of Mrs. Astor's balls, "that there was no difficulty in securing sufficient dancers for the german?"¹³ In the flamboyant style typical of Newport, "large artistic and costly" favors were often specially commissioned and imported from Paris at a price sometimes totalling \$5,000.¹⁴

Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish made her mark in New-

11. Davis, "Magnificent Newport," 479.

12. *Newport News*, 12 Aug. 1891.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Cleveland Moffett, "Luxurious Newport," *Cosmopolitan*, Aug. 1907, 352.



The great hall of *The Breakers* was the scene of many elegant gatherings. H.A.B.S. photo by Jack E. Boucher, 1971. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6199).



Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, renowned in Newport for her theme parties, makes an entrance. Courtesy of Brown Brothers Stock Photos.

port society with her fancy-dress theme parties. Invitations to these parties were highly coveted because, as *Town & Country* reported, “no one ever complains of a dull moment when Mrs. Fish is Hostess.”¹⁵ At her Harvest Dance in 1900, the women were instructed to dress as French peasants and carry baskets with vegetables or a live animal; the men came as farmers. Decorations included sheaves of wheat, two full-sized hay stacks, and three yoke of oxen on the lawn. The favors continued the harvest theme: tiny rakes, scythes, watering pots, and reaping machines; badges adorned with miniature agricultural implements; silk sunflowers and toy animals.¹⁶ At

her Mother Goose Ball in 1913, Mrs. Fish presided as the fairy godmother of her house, which had been “transformed into a dramatic nursery”; reporting the event, *Town & Country* applauded “the cleverness that took the place of ostentation [and] appealed to people of all classes.”¹⁷

These elaborate parties also exacted a heavy price from the guests, particularly the female guests. Women were expected to adorn themselves in sumptuous gowns and expensive jewelry, or what the *New York Herald* referred to as “Poems in Silk and Fortunes in Diamonds.”¹⁸ Included in the press’s detailed descriptions of these gala entertainments, “where everybody

15. *Town & Country*, 17 Aug. 1907, 31.

16. “Mrs. Fish’s Harvest Ball,” *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 1900.

17. “Mother Goose Comes to Life at Mrs. Stuyvesant

Fish’s Ball,” *Town & Country*, 9 Aug. 1913, 30.

18. “Queen Astor at Beechwood,” *New York Herald*, 25 Aug. 1891.



Mrs. Stuart Duncan as Little Bo Peep at Mrs. Fish's Mother Goose Ball in 1913. Courtesy of Town & Country magazine.



Gertrude Vanderbilt (Mrs. Henry Payne Whitney) in her Parisian costume about 1915. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6200).

who was anybody in the social world" was present, were the impressive toilettes of the hostess and leading socialites. In accord with Veblen's observations, the requirements of dress (in this case, evening dress) for a summer season of fashionable competition in Newport fulfilled the "conspicuous" functions of reflecting expense, leisure, and the latest styles.¹⁹ A woman needed as many as twenty new gowns, costing up to \$10,000 each year, in order not to turn up at a ball in last year's model.²⁰ The labor-intensive work evident in a silk-embroidered, beaded, sequined, and otherwise lavishly trimmed dress, intended to be worn but a few nights, both

demonstrated the wearer's "abstinence from productive employment" and immediately established her social and economic worth.²¹

Not only did the price strike some observers as excessive, but the styles themselves aroused comment. Paul Bourget criticized the lack of fashionable restraint and noted that although the dresses were often made in Paris, they reflected the American predilection for the ostentatious. French dressmakers, he noted, created "gowns not of today but of to-morrow. . . . They say we will try the new designs first on the foreigners—then we shall weed them out for the Parisian women."²²

19. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 172.

20. Moffett, "Luxurious Newport," 352.

21. Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 170-71.

22. Paul Bourget, *Outre-Mer: Impressions of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 51.

While the dinner dance was a favorite showcase for evening elegance, the daytime fashion parade was an integral part of the smart set's social calendar. Within this realm, sport was a focal point. Numerous forms of physical activity that met the Four Hundred's criteria of exclusivity and fashionability were scheduled into the daily regimen, and the cottagers pursued these sports with a relentless passion and costumed themselves accordingly. As more than one observer noted, the hectic pace demanded a hearty constitution and a superabundance of energy. Reporting on the feverish Newport schedule in 1907, *Town & Country* stated that "even the athletic maidens have to be agile to keep up with this daily program."²³ The social order demanded that the wealthy actively control the setting as well as the sport; in Newport, Bailey's Beach and the Casino ministered to this need.

One of the great attractions of Newport was its coastline, and swimming was a favorite sport of cottagers and townspeople alike. The society nabobs, however, did not wish to mingle with the natives. In their quest for physical isolation, the sporting rich set their stamp of approval on Bailey's Beach. In the elaborate battle for social acceptance, entrance into the closed ranks of the Spouting Rock Beach Association, the organization that owned the beach, represented the pinnacle of success. The fortunate few who passed the test were allowed to purchase bathing apartments in the pavilion, thereby securing the right to bathe with the "swellest of the swell."²⁴ The *New York Times* reported in 1896 that "some of these apartments cost their users \$3,000, but it is understood that this possession of them is permanent, unless they choose to dispose of them in a manner satisfactory to the other holders."²⁵ Watchmen positioned at the entrance further protected the subscribers from the "unclubbable elements," who were forced to swim at Easton's Beach, known to everyone as the "Common Beach."

From eleven o'clock in the morning to one



Bailey's Beach, Newport. Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society.

o'clock in the afternoon, Bailey's was a whirl of social and physical activity. Safe from the profane eyes of onlookers and the camera's intrusive lens, the subscribers practiced the gospel of play. From all accounts the scene was noisy and animated, yet it bore the unmistakable impress of Newport society. Apparently even the Atlantic Ocean was not enough to quell the Four Hundred's eccentric behavior or competitive fashion consciousness. Spectators on the pavilion's veranda had no trouble distinguishing James Van Alen from the other bathers; his monocle, white straw hat, and Havana cigar made him a readily identifiable figure. The formidable Alva Belmont "invariably made her appearance under a green parasol and 'carried it belligerently into the water.'"²⁶ Reminiscing in *This Was My Newport*,

23. *Town & Country*, 27 July 1907, 19.

24. "Newport Sees the Circus," *New York Times*, 5 July 1896.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Richard O'Connor, *The Golden Summers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 264.

Maude Howe Elliot recalled a bather at Bailey's who was "strikingly picturesque, dressed in a black velvet bathing suit, wearing a string of pearls, and with her glorious auburn hair floating around her."²⁷ Ava Astor preferred to command attention by "performing czardas in short skirts and tights that revealed her exceptionally shaped legs."²⁸ This unconventionality, however, did have its limits. Despite the perennial Newport cry for something novel, society did not like to be startled or surprised.²⁹ Any breach of conduct was sure to cause displeasure, as one unfortunate socialite found in 1913 when she shocked the crowd at Bailey's with her bare legs.

Even for those untempted by water sports, Bailey's Beach was the place to be at noontime. At the center of the pavilion was a roofed piazza where the more sedate or torpid members could sit and watch the spectacle unfold. Although protected from the general public, sports-minded men and women still had to bear the scrutiny of their peers. In his defense of Newport in 1908, Gouverneur Morris humorously suggested that the behavior of the swimmers, studied judiciously, could provide crucial insights into the nature of their character:

Bailey's Beach is the nearest that society will ever get to trial marriage. . . . The possibility of hitching one's star to a cork leg or a cloven hoof is done away with. The man who continuously leaps into the air and enters the water stomach first is pretty sure to be good natured; the woman who doesn't mind getting her hair wet will put up with greater trials; and those who literally bask in that frigid water, hour after hour, can of course stand anything.³⁰

Observers frequently commented upon the casual spontaneity of the midday beach scene; yet it must be stressed that this playfulness was carefully timed and regulated. Bathing, like all other Newport activities, had to fit into the rhythms of the larger social order. At 1:00 p.m. the clock watchers changed clothes and moved

on to the next event, leaving the beach free for the male swimmers who preferred to swim nude.

Another crucial setting for Newport drama was the Casino. Although participation in activities could not be as tightly controlled there as it was at Bailey's Beach, the physical setting of the Casino met the requirements of picturesque isolation. Walking through the latticework arch, visitors entered a world of graceful sport and elegant ritual. "Just to walk through the grounds sets one to dreaming of gallantry and chivalry, of romantic encounters, of beginnings and endings of life-long loves, of everything that is romantic, that is beautiful and gentle and true."³¹

Commissioned by James Gordon Bennett in 1879, the architects Charles McKim and Stanford White created a private world of "darkly-colored piazzas" and "parti-colored awnings" that resonated with the sound of accumulated wealth. It became a locus of amusement where status could carefully be measured and like-minded tennis players could perform in a theatrical setting.

During the 1890s tennis was truly a leisure pastime, as far removed from vigorous sport as it was from work. As a result, it was ideally suited to the Newport temperament. Its ancestry appealed to the passion of the affluent for all things British, and the players disported themselves in a gracious and courtly manner. Additionally, the special facilities and equipment and the velvet-like turf requiring constant maintenance met the criteria for an upper-class sport. The elite exploited tennis as a fashionable pastime, and tennis clothing became an important symbol of heightened class consciousness. The outfits on view at the Casino mirrored the latest fashions of the times. Men played in immaculate white flannel trousers, while their female counterparts graced the courts in tight-fitting bodices and sweeping draped skirts. Matches were punctuated by the "genteel pat of the ball against lan-

27. Maude H. Elliot, *This Was My Newport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mythology Co., 1944; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1975), 222.

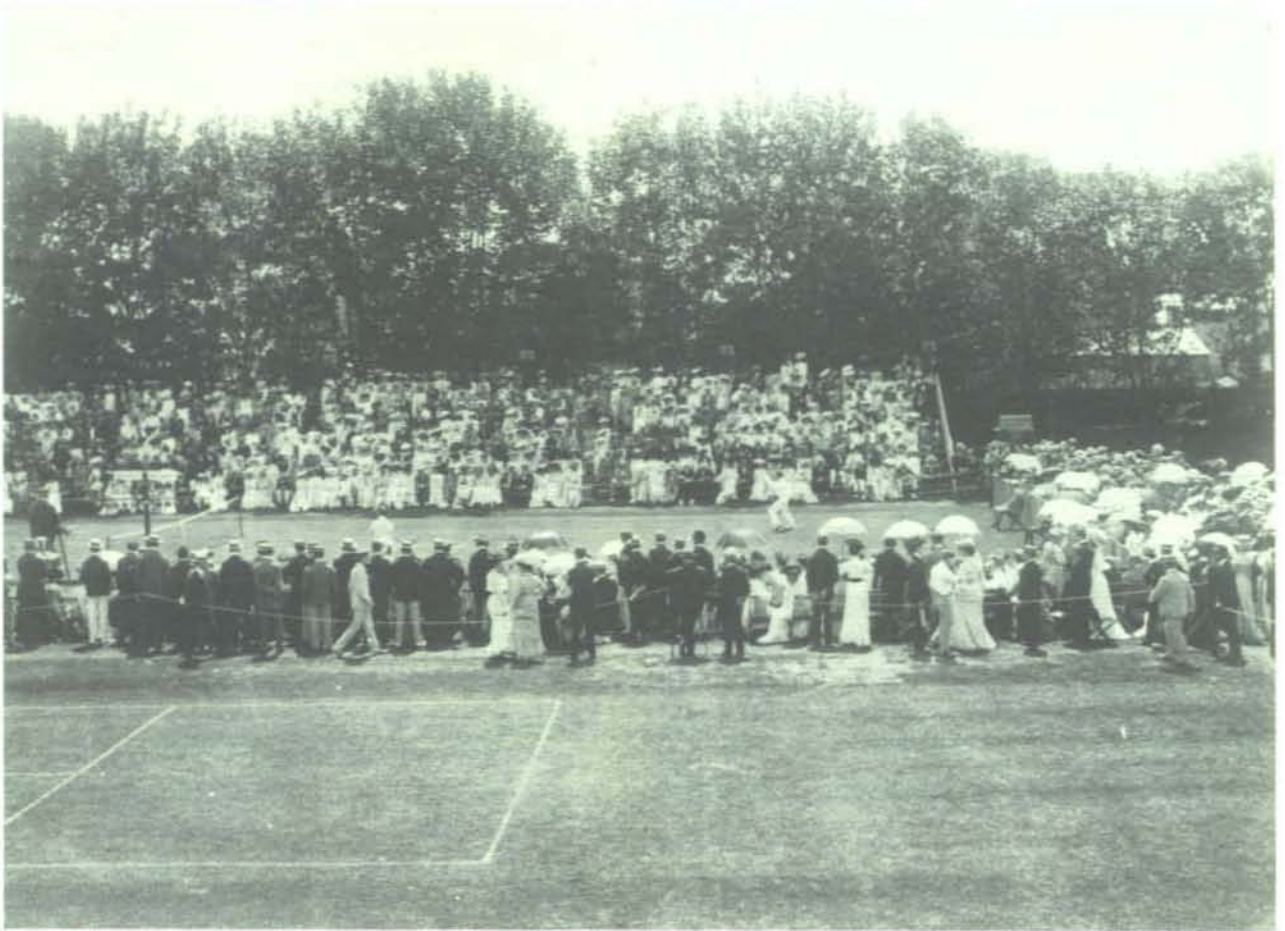
28. Lucy Kavalier, *The Astors* (New York: Dodd, Mead &

Co., 1966), 144.

29. "Newport Society," 930.

30. Morris, "Newport the Malignant," 328.

31. "Newport Society," 930.



A lawn tennis match at the Casino between H. L. Doherty and Clarence Hobart, about 1895. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2776).

guid strings" and the sound of music drifting down from the balcony.³² This was Newport at its most sublime. Tennis champion Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman would later write that "there had never been music connected with tennis matches anywhere else I had been."³³

"Can anything be lovelier than the Casino Lawns at Newport during tennis week?"³⁴ This was the question *Town & Country* posed to its readers in 1907 about one of the highlights of the Newport season. Held in the third week of August, the tournament was a notable sporting and social event. By 1890 the games had attained na-

tional prominence and spectators from all over the country came to watch the action. To accommodate the swelling numbers, the Casino's board of governors purchased and installed a grandstand from the Barnum and Bailey Circus. (It was affectionately dubbed the "giant typewriter" because of the conspicuous letters imprinted on the backs of the rounded chairs.)

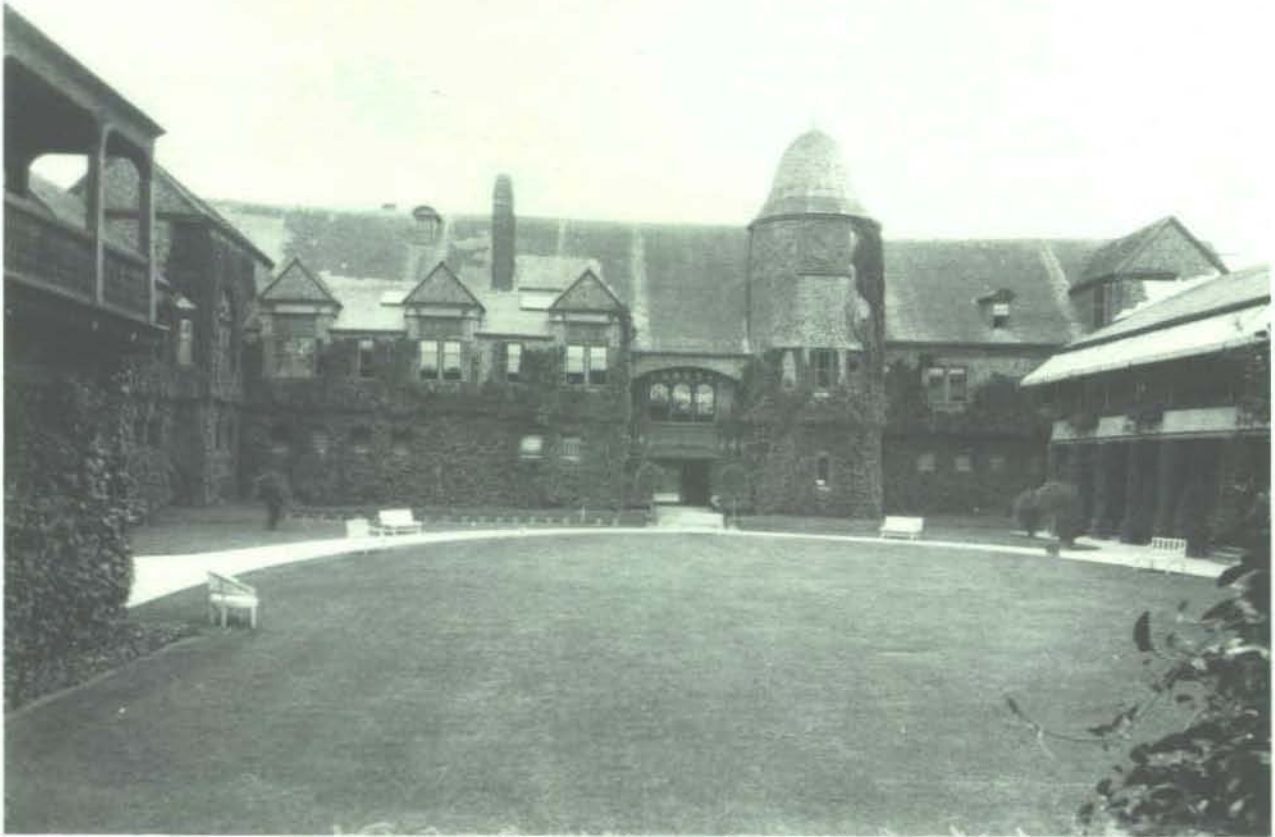
The smart set was lukewarm about this invasion, so they contrived a system by which groups were sorted out by social class. In this artificial hierarchy, the best grandstand seats were the benchmark of success. Assignments were based

32. Donald Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 125.

33. Helen Allen, "Tennis at Newport, Then and Now," in

The International Tennis Hall of Fame (Newport: National Tennis Foundation, n.d.), 11.

34. "The National Tennis Tournament," *Town & Country*, 31 Aug. 1907, 17.



The Newport Casino. RIHS Collection (RHi A334 414).

on pedigree, not price, and "year after year, the Belmonts, the Astors, the Goelets, the Vanderbilts occupied the same seats, which they claimed by right of birth."³⁵

It must be remembered that the Casino was more than a sports arena. In addition to the prominent place it held in the tennis world, it was the site of Thursday night dances and Sunday dinners. Above all else, however, it was the fashionable place to meet. In 1907 one well-known player wryly noted that "there was everything but tennis up at the Casino."³⁶ While tennis matches were occurring on the court, the more crucial sport of jockeying for social position was played out in the gallery. Court play might have been gentle, but here the competi-

tion was fierce. The crowd was always in motion, even during tennis week, as groups gathered, drifted apart, and gathered again. *Town & Country* reported weekly on the Casino's shifting reception lines:

No two days are alike, there is a constant change in the tableaux presented each morning. . . . As one enters the . . . lane from the veranda, a group of men and women talking vivaciously to a seated matron make a picture that first impresses one. A little nearer and the erect matron holding her court is seen to be Mrs. Maturin Livingston. Her 'court' changes quickly, for there is always some one waiting to greet her.³⁷

The Casino nurtured the elegant pretensions of the Newporters and catered to their inexhaust-

35. O'Connor, *Golden Summer*, 146.

36. "National Tennis Tournament," 17.

37. *Ibid.*



Spectators at a lawn tennis match at the Casino, about 1904. Photo by Frank Warren Marshall. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2433).

ible need for display. Its manicured lawns and well-trained Japanese ivy created a splendid backdrop for the social lionesses' sumptuous finery. In his travels to Newport, Paul Bourget took note of the Casino's daily fashion parade:

Around the players are gathered a concourse of women, for the most part in light-colored costumes, with that profusion of dainty ornament which makes their toilette as evidently perishable as costly. Their costumes look as if made to be worn a single hour.³⁸

The styles were so elaborate that even some of the players lamented that points were lost because their eyes were "on a belle instead of the

ball."³⁹ Turn-of-the-century photographs of the Casino seem hardly able to contain the women's finery, particularly the open parasols and bewitching hats that appear ready to burst with floral decoration. Understanding that they were there to be seen as well as to see, women transformed the Casino lawn into a "veritable garden of 'silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row.'"⁴⁰

Players also had to meet Newport's sartorial standards. Costumes were scrutinized carefully, and by all contemporary accounts the requirements of the game did little to check the players'

38. Bourget, *Outre-Mer*, 60.

39. E. M. Halliday, "Sphairistike, Anyone?" *American Heritage*, June 1971, 56.

40. "The Monday Games," *Town & Country*, 31 Aug. 1907, 17.



According to *Town & Country*, the Chinese ball hosted by Mrs. Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont in 1914 was "the last merry assemblage" before the coming war. Courtesy of *Town & Country* magazine.

preoccupation with appearance. Well-dressed ladies in dainty pique costumes or flannel skirts and pastel silk blouses played alongside "young men in flannel, rosy with health and irresponsibility."⁴¹ Describing a blue surah tennis skirt with matching bodice "embroidered with sweet peas" for the *Newport Daily News* in 1891, Ellen Osborne attributed the outfit to "Miss Sallie Hargous—about whose clothes one gets, alas! very tired of writing." In the same article Osborne chastised her female readers for not coordinating their tennis outfits. "It spoils the prettiest of lawn pictures to see a girl in a bright scarlet cap and blazer playing in the same set with one gowned in buttercup yellow."⁴² Harmonizing outfits ceased to be a concern when the "white is right" credo took hold.

The decision to move the National Tourna-

ment to Long Island in 1915 clearly reflected the erosion of Newport's position as the nation's sporting capital and paralleled changes in its social prominence. Sports values shifted, and the isolation and enforced homogeneity that had long ensured Newport's dominance gradually began to undermine it. The young men who traveled the tennis circuit complained about the inaccessibility of the resort, and the town itself was unable to handle the crowds of spectators who arrived in mid-August. The new breed of players, who rose to prominence because of their athletic skills rather than their social position, came to resent Newport's imperial atmosphere.⁴³ The music, courtside fashion shows, and social conversation that once had carried immense potency now became a hindrance to the game. The USLTA could not ignore the changes. As Ameri-

41. W. C. Brownell, *Newport* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 28.

42. "Tennis Suits," *Newport Daily News*, 14 Aug. 1891.

43. O'Connor, *Golden Summer*, 142.

ca's sports ethic steadily grew more independent of the consumption economy, officials were forced to choose between sporting and social values. As Henry Slocum noted in 1931, the move to Long Island signaled that "the battle of the stadium versus the vari-colored parasols was over."⁴⁴

Other events hastened the end of this era in Newport's history. The inauguration of an income tax system in 1913 threatened many families' opulent lifestyle, and a year later the summer pleasures of Newport's Gilded Age were disrupted by the upheaval of World War I. Reporting on a Chinese ball hosted by Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont in 1914, *Town & Country* observed that the event "was the last merry assemblage before the big war-cloud made the discomfort of ocean

fog, social intrigue and ambition and little affairs of self quite small by comparison."⁴⁵ When the war ended, Newport still was a favorite playground of high society, but it no longer was the *only* place to be seen during the summer months.

From 1890 to 1914, however, Newport was the resort of pure fashion, where athletics, social activity, and conspicuous consumption were prized. Renowned for its geographic isolation and inaccessibility, it became the special property of an American plutocracy that thrived on a heightened sense of class consciousness. Obsessed with appearances and driven by a fierce competitive spirit, the summer residents used every event, whether at the dinner dance, the beach, or the Casino, to establish their sartorial dominance.

44. Allen, "Tennis at Newport," 17.

45. "Fuhi, Ming, and Manchu Dynasties," *Town & Country*, 8 Aug. 1914, 17.

Rhode Island Miscellany

The Men's Bars of Rhode Island

Edward Widmer

Mike's 17 Bar derives its name from the address it occupies along tiny Snow Street in downtown Providence. Though sadly neglected by walking tours and imitation streetcars, it is evocative of a glorious period in Rhode Island history, albeit history of a different stripe from that associated with wordy commemorative plaques. The 17 Bar is one of a disappearing breed of watering holes that used to dot the local landscape, a Class C drinking institution (no hot food) commonly called a "men's bar." Today this name is somewhat misleading, for suffragettes have been penetrating the confines of Mike's and other men's bars since a 1974 state law bestowed visiting rights upon them. Dedicated to the daytime workingman rather than the nocturnal bacchant, the bar's spartan appearance recalls the days when Providence had a more traditional economy, an era when the New Haven Railroad was proud to serve the great industrial state of Rhode Island.

Cloistered in the first floor of the 1897 Columbia Building (originally a bicycle company), Mike's has hardly changed since its opening in 1938. It differs from contemporary incarnations in almost every respect. It is brightly lit and extremely narrow (approximately fifteen by sixty feet), offering little room to do much else except lean an elbow on the bar. The World War Two-era pinups along the back wall confirm the bar's sexual orientation, as does the word on the only bathroom door: "Men." Behind the long wooden

bar is a richly detailed mirror with a frosted glass depiction of a satyr offering wine to two demiclad nymphets. The long-term proprietor, Peter Pirolli (who took over from his father, the original Mike, in the 1950s), knows that his regulars prefer these dated accoutrements to the aesthetic atrocities currently in vogue (wood paneling, lowered ceilings, etc.). Appropriately, the AM radio, which is always tuned to a local "memory station," fills the barroom with the swinging sounds of the Dorsey brothers.

Obviously this masculine bias is reflective of a social order that no longer prevails within the city. Not only law but common sense dictates that bar owners accommodate women more willingly, and today they routinely give their clientele the choice of sitting in comfortable booths or at least at large tables. Because women have become a growing part of the work force, they spend more time and money in public and constitute a greater part of the bar- and restaurant-going population. The decline of the diner (which originated in Providence), with its similarly industrial orientation and narrow shape, parallels the decline of the men's bar in this respect.

Another reason for the narrowness and illumination of the men's bar is a long-forgotten Rhode Island statute (passed in 1933, repealed in 1980) that required "a clear and unobstructed view into substantially the whole of the licensed place" from a point five feet above the curb outside. This perspective, be it that of a policeman walking his beat or an irate wife looking for her husband, ensured that men's bars would not become the haven for criminals and miscreants, as many citizens feared they would when Prohibi-

Edward Widmer is a doctoral candidate in American civilization at Harvard.

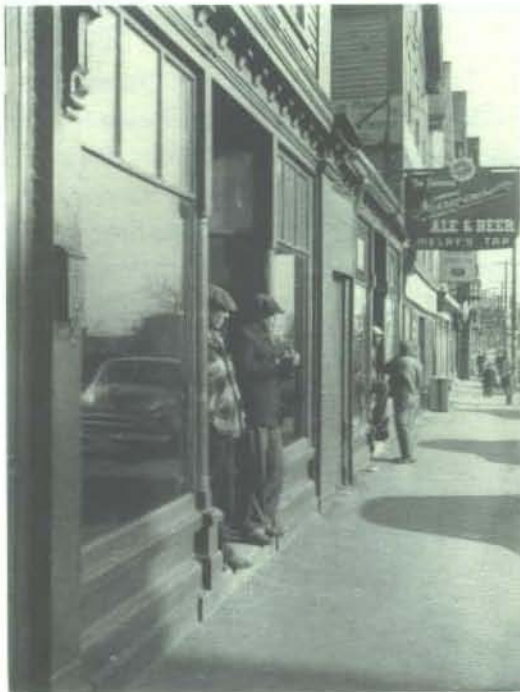


The Golden Grill at 93 Woonasquatucket Avenue, North Providence, about 1946. As a "grill," this establishment differed from the Class C (liquor only) establishment, but the atmosphere was unmistakably the same. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6204).

tion was repealed. The long narrow barroom perpendicular to a glass front door, of the type that abounds in industrial quarters, dates from the early years when this law was in effect. In other words, this arrangement reflects not only the sociological definitions of an era but its legal ones as well.

The old-fashioned bowling machine that offers the chief diversion at Mike's and other such bars subtly reflects these definitions also. Although it has been rendered obsolete by more compact pinball and video games, the machine's long narrow shape is perfectly accommodated by the contours of the old-fashioned saloon. Moreover, the manual dexterity required to throw a metal puck at plastic pins activated by metal pickups mirrors the industrial nature of the work performed by the patrons of forty-odd years ago, just as the screen reading and button pushing of video games mimic the technological workplace of today.

Although men's bars are a disappearing institution, Rhode Island is still comparatively well endowed with them, to the degree that they almost represent an indigenous architectural form. This is doubtless the legacy of Rhode Island's exceptional dependence upon industry for its livelihood and the extent to which industry has always been profoundly *local* here. That is, Rhode Island factories have traditionally operated on a smaller and more independent scale than those elsewhere in New England, and consequently they have created a greater number of distinct neighborhoods, be they the tiny mill-village fiefdoms along the Blackstone and Pawtuxet or the intraurban mill villages of Providence (e.g., Olneyville) and Woonsocket (Bernon, Globe Village, Social, etc.). Although many of the mills from which these communities derived their essence have long since closed, a surprising number of villages have remained intact and uncompromising in the face of the national sub-



Melay's Tap at 18-22 Wickenden Street, Providence, in the late 1940s. RIHS Collection (RHi E79.882).

urban exodus. Almost without exception, each has retained several of its men's bars, and these have helped both to preserve a sense of cultural and geographical integrity and to reinforce the old devotion to the local community.

Most of Rhode Island's hundreds of factory-places have no official status beyond a post office or perhaps a telephone exchange, and yet to this day they form the core of the laboring man's geographic self-perception. People describe their homes as Manville, Phenix, or Olneyville rather than the more amorphous Lincoln, West Warwick, or western Providence, and this local identification is repeated in names like the Olneyville Tap and the Phenix Hotel bar. It is no coincidence that Barrington, Rhode Island's wealthiest and most quintessentially "suburban" community, is the only town in the state where liquor is not sold. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Central Falls, the most densely populated place in the state, which achieved a

measure of notoriety by claiming the most bars per inhabitant in the country (*Providence Journal*, 7 October 1962). This is a difficult claim to verify, but in 1962 Central Falls had a bar for every 320 residents. (By way of comparison, there was a bar for every 420 residents in Woonsocket and every 640 residents in Providence.)

Nor was this the first time that Rhode Island's love affair with the bottle earned it national headlines. During Prohibition, Little Rhody's attempts to buck the federal government were astonishing, even by its own iconoclastic standards. Before the Twenty-first Amendment repealed the Eighteenth, the General Assembly brilliantly diluted the law (if not its evening cocktails) by placing alcohol control within the public nuisance statutes, thereby making legal action contingent upon the complaint of a citizen. Furthermore, the state had the audacity to sue the U.S. attorney general (*Rhode Island v. A. Mitchell Palmer*) to test the Volstead Act's dubious constitutionality. A 1930 referendum on the matter left little doubt: 171,960 Rhode Islanders were opposed to Prohibition, while only 47,652 approved it.

Another medium for the expression of local independence was the selection of one's beer, which, until the last decade or so, actually represented a meaningful decision. The Narragansett Brewery was founded in 1890 and for decades acted as one of the most visible indices of Rhode Island culture. The very word "Narragansett" associated the beer with the region in which it was brewed, and its inexpensiveness and abundance linked together the Rhode Islanders who frequented the places where it was served. To order a draft of 'Gansett was, in effect, to declare fealty to the state and its local orientation. Advertisements took full advantage of this connection, and the legendary slogan "Hi, Neighbor, Have a 'Gansett" positively oozed with a feeling of local camaraderie (it was also strangely reminiscent of the "What Cheer, Netop" with which Roger Williams had been greeted by the original Rhode Islanders in 1636).

Despite the demise of the Narragansett Brewery in 1981—a demise occasioned by many of

the same forces that have weakened the old neighborhoods and bars—many of the remaining men's bars continue to indulge in a celebration of local pride by displaying the paraphernalia distributed by Narragansett over the years. Old signs, clocks, radios, and unused keg taps continue to proclaim allegiance to the beer in spite of the fact that it is now made under false pretenses by the Falstaff Corporation in Fort Wayne, Indiana. An illuminated Narragansett sign above a bar doorway remains the most visible indication of a saloon of the old style, for presumably no signs have been installed since 1981.

Beside the obvious pleasure derived from Hi-Neighborly barroom friendships, the long-term regulars of Mike's 17 and other men's bars receive more tangible benefits for their fidelity. The homeless among them are allowed to use the bar's address to receive important mail, such as disability checks. One such customer at Mike's has officially been declared the ward of the proprietor, who quietly takes the responsibility of cashing his checks and providing him with money. An article in the *Providence Evening Bulletin* (28 March 1966) about the closing of a

similar bar quoted the bartender remembering when he used to cash up to \$20,000 on the days that sailors from the navy base at Quonset received their paychecks; cashing checks is a service commonly offered at men's bars. Patrons are also able to receive the important messages of daily existence there, from the morning news to the evening lottery number, and they may take advantage of the telephone and bathroom facilities.

Finally, the bars may be simply a place to stay warm in the wintertime, by no means an unimportant consideration. In keeping with their synchronization with an outdated industrial work schedule, most of them open at 6:00 or 7:00 a.m. and do their peak business in the morning and afternoon. Since homeless shelters discharge their tenants during the early morning, it is small wonder that the barroom can seem so congenial.

For these reasons, for their architectural merit, and for their quintessential devotion to the glories of Rhode Island Past, the men's bars are worthy of note as they fade from the changing landscape.

The Correspondence of Roger Williams, 1629-1682



"Landing of Roger Williams," by Alonzo Chappel, 1857. Courtesy of Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

GLENN W. LaFANTASIE, *editor*

For the first time all the letters of America's famous religious dissenter, advocate of religious freedom, and the separation of church and state, friend to the Indians, and founder of Rhode Island are available in published form. This two-volume set contains every known piece of correspondence by or to Roger Williams from his days as a chaplain in England in 1629 to the eve of his death in New England, including a few letters never before published. Coupled with extensive annotation and detailed commentary, these documents reveal for modern readers the multifaceted dimension of Williams' career in Puritan New England and the central role he played in settling and developing colonial America.

The collection replaces an incomplete and faulty edition of Williams' letters published in 1874. It should immediately become the standard source for both scholarly researchers interested in specific aspects of Williams' career and students of colonial

American history seeking a general appreciation of his life and times. Among the topics raised in the letters are relations with the Indians, religious and political developments in the Providence Plantations and Rhode Island, news about people and events in revolutionary England, Williams' protests about treatment of religious dissenters in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and complaints to his neighbors about disorders and divisions.

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