

## Three Newport Mansions of the Gilded Age

Newport, Rhode Island was a prosperous seaport long before the Gilded Age. Colonial merchants worked in the busy seaport and created a town open to all types of individuals. The Hunter house is a fine example of colonial houses in Newport.

Many wealthy southern planters began coming to Newport in the summer to escape the heat and humidity of the Deep South. The families generally stayed at small hotels or individual collages owned by the hotels. George Jones, a planter from Savannah, was one of the first to purchase land in 1839 and build his own cottage on what became Bellevue Avenue. When the Civil War irrupted, many of the cottages built by these southern planters were sold to northern industrialists.

The years after the Civil War were a time of industrial growth and creative invention in the United States. It was also a time of tremendous accumulation of wealth and power among a few barons of industry and landowners in the country. The new multi-millionaires had no income tax, low property taxes and a large population of low wage workers to put to work, which also gave them time and opportunity to spend their money freely. Mark Twain labeled this time period "The Gilded Age" because so much money was spent lavishly on glittering golden items such as designer clothes, jewelry, yachts, horses, and numerous immense mansions. High society lived in tight knit groups in huge mansions lining New York's Fifth Avenue with each family trying to outdo each other with lavish parties, costume balls, and beautiful carriages and horses. The summers in New York were hot and oppressive, so many of the families sought refuge from the heat and fled to Newport and Long Island. Some of the older cottages were torn down and new huge mansions began to take shape along Bellevue Avenue.

For 8 weeks during July and August, Newport was alive with the activities of "the season". These activities included riding, coaching, tennis and croquet. Women also enjoyed archery while the men fished, sailed and played polo. Everyone enjoyed swimming, but men and women used the beach separately. Women's swim suits were multi layered, long sleeve black wool dresses over long leggings and complete with a large bathing hat. Formal events included at least one formal dinner, for about 200 people, and sometimes a costume ball. Debutante "coming out" balls" were also a highlight of the season. In the early evenings, people would take their finest carriage and horses along Bellevue Avenue nodding to acquaintances and leaving their calling card at other houses. A large sporting complex called the Newport Casino was built in 1879 to accommodate events such as tennis tournaments, concerts, and horse shows. Boating became yachting and the famous Newport yacht races began.

Although the summer season was full of fun activities, all aspects of "Gilded Society" life contained very specific rules as to the what, when, and how of fashion, conversation, and behavior. Every member of the family had a distinct set of rules and procedures to follow every day.

At the end of August, servants began packing all the silver, china, valuable tapestries and art, and all the clothes to return to New York for the fall. Train cars were packed with items for transport. The remainder of the furniture left in the house was covered with white cloth, the drapes were drawn and everything was closed until July of the next year. The estimated cost of "the season" in Newport was extraordinary - almost \$200,000 per month solely for entertaining. Women changed their clothes at least nine times a day and never wore the same gown to tea, dinner, or evening festivities more than once.