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A walk back in time
'Other Summer Colony' tour sheds light on 'forgotten' era

By Joe Baker, Daily News staff



Susan Kieronski, right, conducts a tour titled 'The Other Summer Colony: Newport's Forgotten 19th Century Intellectuals' on Wednesday. At left, Joanne and Jerry Gielda of Holden, Mass. listen in.

When people think of Newport's rich history, they think of its preeminence as a Colonial port or the grand villas built along Bellevue Avenue during the Gilded Age. In between those two glorious eras, though, the city went through some difficult times, an economic downturn that lasted more than a half-century. But it was during that period that Newport attracted the attention of a different element, a group of renowned artists, writers and intellectuals who sought out the beauty and peacefulness that marked the city before industry titans and socialites rediscovered it in the late 19th century.

It is that often-neglected period of the city's history that is the subject of a new walking tour sponsored by the Newport Historical Society. "The Other Summer Colony: Newport's Forgotten 19th Century Intellectuals" was offered during the weeklong Newport Winter Festival program and will be offered several times during the year, said Ingrid Peters, the society's director of education.

On Wednesday, a hardy group of five people — seven counting a reporter and a photographer — strode up Touro Street to Bellevue Avenue and then meandered through side streets to learn about the intellectual heavyweights that inhabited Newport and started the Town and Country Club. Members engaged in discussion over various topics designed to stimulate their intellectual curiosity during the club's meetings.

"This place was in such a depression after the Revolutionary War," said tour guide Susan Kieronski. "It was a backwater and nobody came here."

Because the local economy was stagnant, people often could not afford to tear down their houses and rebuild, which has allowed Newport to make its claim as having one of the richest stocks of 17th and 18th century buildings in America. It was during the mid-1800s that artists discovered Newport and flocked here in droves, Kieronski said.

"Writers, artists and intellectuals were looking for a quaint place to do their work, where they could get some peace in their soul," she said. The colony of artists included illustrious names such as Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and Clement C. Moore, who penned "A Visit from St. Nicholas," commonly referred to as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas."

Henry James, author of "Daisy Miller," and Charlotte Cushman, considered the greatest actress of her generation and noted for playing Lady Macbeth opposite John Wilkes Booth in a New York City production, were among those who found inspiration in Newport. According to a Newport Mercury story about the club, its meetings were "full of a fund of reason and flow of soul."

Those who braved the February elements for Wednesday's tour found it was worth the trip.

"I'm just fascinated by these walking tours," said Catherine Murray of Wakefield. "I come over here all the time. It's such a rich history." Jerry and Joanne Giolda, of Holden, Mass., were in town for the week. A Spanish teacher, Joanne had the week off. "We've never been on a walking tour," she said. "This was something different. It has prompted us to take another one when we come back in the summer."



The Hypotenuse House, left, at 33 Catherine St., and the summer residence of Clement C. Moore, above, at 25 Catherine St., are on the Newport Historical Society's tour.

Jacqueline Marque □ Daily News staff photos