The Crucial Battle of Modern Newport

By CLEVELAND AMORY

NEWPORT, R. I.

The textbook story of this "last resort," as I have called it, concerns a "cottage"—i.e., a palace—by the name of The Elms. The story involves the late days of Newport taxi-drivers, a man who, for thirty years, had been taking sight-seers on tours without ever once, ever by instruction, breaking the barriers of good taste—or, indeed, ever once stooping to any editorial comment at all.

Finally one day, with his cabful of visitors, he was passing The Elms, which cost a million dollars to build, has some fifty rooms and is, among other things, marked by a great stone wall along which are sculpted a large row of heads, all of them bearing a suspicious resemblance to the man who had it built.

CLEVELAND AMORY is the author of "The Last Resort" and "Who Killed Society?"

The driver, of course, ignored the sculpture. He merely said that the cottage was The Elms, and that it was the home of E. J. Berwind, the Pennsylvania coal baron. He then went on to add that it was at present being done over and that, during the work, the baron’s sister, Miss Julia Berwind, was living in a stable in the rear. Even this the driver qualified. The stable was, he said, fitted out for an apartment and was entirely suitable. On the spur of the moment he went so far as to point it out, down a narrow side road.

"A lady in the car, however, could not let this pass. "What?" she exclaimed, leaning forward and looking down the road in great concern, "Miss Berwind? In a stable?"

The driver looked around, saw the lady was past calming, and then he too looked down the road at the stable. All at once his thirty years of good work was forgotten.

"Lady," he said slowly, "if it was good enough for Jesus, I guess it’s good enough for Miss Berwind!"

Today, that taxi driver, Mr. Berwind and Miss Berwind have all passed to their final reward. But visitors here for the America’s Cup races, which start Sept. 15, might well pause a moment at this site. For here, this spring and summer, has been fought what may well turn out to be the crucial battle of modern Newport history.

The Battle of The Elms, as it might be termed, began early this year, when a nephew of Miss Berwind, who inherited the cottage, sold it to a New York syndicate, and the latter promptly made plans for subdividing the property.

If this has happened, Newporters agree, you could have written off old Newport, or at least that part of it which comprises the world-famous "cottages" on Bellevue Avenue, as finished, done for and hopeless. Already half a dozen had either been torn down for shopping centers, or given away to churches or schools, or otherwise disposed of. Newport’s Armageddon, in other words, had come. Whichever way The Elms blow, Newport was going.

At this crucial stage of the battle, with the issue still in doubt, came this spring’s flock-market unpleasantness. Now old Newport had lived through many such unpleasantnesses—in fact, since Newport was a-going concern when New York was still a pug, it has lived through more of them than any place in the country, save Boston. And it faced this one with, if not equanimity, at least experience.

Not so the New York syndicate. Pressed for cash, its members ran for cover, or at least held up on their plans. And here the Newport Preservation Society, like the palace guard in other crucial battles in the world’s history, leaped into the breach. Led by its stalwart president, Mrs. George Henry Warren, the society made what, for these times, in Newport and elsewhere, was something most unusual—a cash offer.

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Meanwhile, independent of this offer, the nephew of Miss Berwind, who had sold only the house, not the house furnishings, held an auction at The Elms. And although at this auction the preservation society bid bravely, its representatives were again and again foiled by higher bidders—the most determined of whom were, of all people, Hollywooders and TVers who wanted The Elms' furnishings for grand-style sets.

The same spirit, however, of bidding for the furniture of a house they then didn't know whether or not they owned, nixed the preservation society members in good stead when, at last, the New York syndicate agreed to sell them The Elms. And Mrs. Warren and her cohorts were not the slightest dismayed by the fact that they had managed to acquire very few of the original furnishings—some of which, indeed, were not original original. Instead, they decided to furnish The Elms themselves. First they combed their own attics for items, then thriftshops in Newport. They went on from there to bagging museums in Boston, New York and even farther for items which they asked the museums to lend them from their warehouses.

Incredibly enough, within three weeks from the date of purchase The Elms was ready for its Aug. 20 grand public opening—an event which attracted a larger crowd than anything that had ever been put on in the private days of The Elms. And this month The Elms has taken its proud place, beside The Breakers and Belcourt, which are now open—for $1.00 or so—for public inspection. Also, it is now being readied for a "Reenact L'Amistad" production next summer, to be put on by the Liars' drama people who this summer successfully installed sound and lighting in Philadelphia's Independence Hall.

Old-Guard Newporters realize, of course, they cannot undertake to guarantee that every cottage-palace coming on the market will be bought by them and opened to the public. In fact, the preservation society makes clear that it does not even regard the preservation of the palaces as its main function. This, as the society sees it, is to preserve Newport colonialism—in other words, to preserve enough of eighteenth-century Newport so that it will be the only place in the country where one will be able to see, continuously, a complete story of architecture and history from colonial times to the present.

NEWPORT comes, of course, well-equipped for this—with the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House built in 1673, Richard Munday's Trinity Church built in 1725, Peter Harrison's Redwood Library built in 1770 and the Touro Synagogue built in 1763. Newport's Redwood Library, in fact, accommodates all free public libraries in New York and Boston, and the Touro Synagogue not only was the first synagogue in this country, it was for many years the only one.

Mrs. John Nicholas Brown, the former Anne Kingsolving, whose husband was at the time of his birth known as the "world's richest baby" and who is herself not only chairman of The Elms House Committee but also perhaps the most charming of Newport grandest dames, puts the matter succinctly: "The future of Newport," she says, "is as the poor man's Europe. Williamsburg, beautiful as it is, is serious—even their foundations had to be rebuilt. Colonial Newport is real—and the people who come to see the palaces will stay to see the history."

"Most of us," Mrs. Brown concludes, "lives in an 'Elmey' way any more, but most of us have ancestors who did. I think it's going to be the fate of Newport that, even if people no longer live here at all, other people will be all the more interested to come to see how they once did live."

Another Bellevue Avenue, Newport's distinguished (Continued on Page 11)
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A art collector Maxim Karolik, who lives practically across the street from The Elms, is also a firm believer in Newport. "In my home town," says Karolik, who grew up in Bessarabia, Russia, before he came to America and married the late Newporter Martha Amory Codman, "there were just three places in America I had ever heard of—Washington, New York and Newport. I didn't know much about Washington and I thought there were Indians in New York, but I did know one thing—that Americans millionaires spent their summers in castles in Newport. Today the way I see it is this: It's good to preserve examples of how people can see what not to do even if they can afford it."

KAROLIK stands on a hill he used to write about Newport twenty years ago. "There is a general realism," he said, "that these palaces do not belong here; they should never have been built here because they represent the very thing from which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans escaped and which they preferred to leave on the other side.

He also stands on another of his long-held philosophies concerning Newport. "In the passing of these palaces," he says, "I see the passing of the so-called practical man. He passed because he was only big, not great. In 1929 he collapsed; ten years later; in 1939, when the war started in Europe, thoughtful people wondered whether it was worth while to revive him. In 1941, after Pearl Harbor, he died and was buried. Whether his passing is a fact or a fancy, no one can yet tell. I am inclined to believe that it is for the better, because other ideals than his are safer and healthier for all of us."

Mrs. Charles Russell, another Bellevue Avenue grande dame, is in all favor of the current trend even if, during the Jazz Festival, she admitted to growing "tuck and tired" of piano students bousing beer cans off her brick wall. "But it's a good wall, and they make quite an interesting accompaniment," she said philosophically.

ABOUT tourists, generally, she said approvingly. "The American people seem to be crazy to have a place to go to—on a excuse for all their Sunday driving. Well, we're giving it to them. And then there's the other side of the coin. You can't find people who want to buy palaces, but we haven't got only palaces. We've got mansions too—they're one step smaller than palaces—and there'll always be new people who can afford them. New blood has always been necessary to Newport—even if it isn't always blue blood. Why, there's not only the Cup Races this summer—there's also been a big increase in Navy Newport. Foreign officers come over to take courses at the War College, you know. That's where we get our extra men from. You find out if they have any bachelors or if they have some married men whose wives haven't come over yet, and then you invite them."

In this spirit, Mrs. Louis Bruguiere, a leading Newporter, not long ago invited Sir Frank Packer, leader of the Australian Cup Syndicate, to tea—then, afterward, to dinner. "She did absolutely right," a friend commented. "She had him first to tea to try him out."

"Nowadays," Mrs. Russell observed, "you have to be careful, you know. I understand that on Sunday nights some of the younger generation don't even dress any more."

RICHLY iconic in the old days it used to be fashionable for the rich to get out and see how the other half lived. Nowadays at Newport, apparently, the poor get out and see how the rich live—and the irony is that the rich have to get out too. Another irony is that so many Newports themselves jake the boats. For example, one Newport lady frankly admitted to us, "We've never found a place to see the Auchincloss house, but we've never been invited."—C. A.

This true! At this Mrs. Runnells said, "We're going to have a real Jai" and "dined, during the Jazz Festival they didn't even dress Saturday Night."

To raise money for its various preservation, the Newport Preservation Society last month opened five mansions to the public for the first time, all of which were actually being lived in. One was Benjamin, owned by Mrs. Stuart Donahue, and another was no less a house than James Ewing Smith Farm, owned by Mrs. Hugh D. Auchincloss, mother-in-law of President Kennedy. During the open-house period, Mrs. Auchincloss and young John Fitzgerald Kennedy Jr., who was staying there at the time, escaped to Bailey's Beach, but more than 3,200 people trooped through the houses at 55 per head.

Seeing the Auchincloss house, visitors beheld an extremely unpretentious house from the outside but one which, inside, was typical of the turn..."
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As the sun was setting on another summer day, Newporters took to the docks to enjoy the leisurely pace of life in the harbor. With the season coming to a close, the Yachts Club hosted a farewell dinner for its members. The event was a testament to the grandeur of the era, where elegance and refinement were paramount.

GuARDS—Mrs. John Nicholas Brown, chairman of the Eileen House Committee and two committee members, Mrs. W. F. Fall and Charles Palsten, survey the tradition of the Eileen House dinner.

NEWPORTER'S EDGE—Newporters gathered at the Eileen House to celebrate the end of the season. The event was a grand occasion, with guests enjoying a sumptuous meal and champagne. The atmosphere was one of opulence and sophistication, reflecting the high society that thrived in Newport.

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