The idiom “history is written by the victors” is appropriate for buildings as well as people. At any given point in time a building’s appearance showcases the lifestyle its owners want to project to the outside world, concealing a progression of changes that occurred over time. Nowhere is this truer than in Newport’s resort architecture. An examination of hidden, often functional building elements and materials, combined with traditional historical resources like household accounts and photographs, moves beyond opulent veneers to reveal a building’s development over time. Understanding these changes offers new insight into how buildings were actually used in different ways at different times, which in turn reveals new perspectives on the lives, ambitions and social milieu of their inhabitants.

As one of Newport’s first summer cottages, Kingscote has undergone many transformations in its 176-year history. Often overshadowed by magnificent neighbors, its architectural massing and features seem to grow out of the natural environment rather than dominate it, making it all too easy to overlook its significance. However, this relatively unpretentious, picturesque house contains a complex history encompassing a southern gentleman’s vision, Civil War repercussions, and a family’s place within high society. Kingscote’s architectural evolution tells the story of Newport unlike any other house, if we know how to listen.

Like many fellow antebellum Southerners, George Noble Jones summered in Newport to escape his native region’s oppressive summer heat. His beautifully landscaped cottage
outside Newport’s city center set a precedent soon followed by other wealthy vacationers eager for an alternative to increasingly crowded resort hotels. Richard Upjohn’s original Gothic Revival style design of 1839 contained ample wine cellars, rare (for the time) indoor plumbing, and even an aviary; comforts supporting Jones’ luxurious lifestyle. However, his summertime respites interrupted by the Civil War, Jones sold Kingscote to native Newporter William Henry King in 1863.

King undertook few updates, indicating that the 24-year-old house’s amenities and plan were still current, and would carry it into the later part of the century as a comfortable, fashionable entertaining space. But William Henry King’s mental collapse in 1866, necessitating lifelong inpatient psychiatric care, marked the beginning of Kingscote’s greatest period of flux. At this time William’s nephew David King Jr. wrote, “I should never think of settling down in [Newport] ... it’s no place to bring up a family.” Little did he realize that less than 10 years later, his bride Ella Rives would fall in love with Kingscote and with Newport society.

The King family had a deep, well-respected presence in Newport and Ella Rives’ uncle was a long-time summer colonist. Beginning in 1875 David rented the house as a summer residence. (fig. 1) As guardian of his incapacitated uncle’s fortune from the China trade, he was able to spearhead alterations reflecting his family’s growing social standing. The extent of their first major renovation campaign (1876-78), by Newport architect George Champlin Mason, has fallen into obscurity though. Kingscote’s organic architectural style with multiple projections, dormers and porches seamlessly incorporates Mason’s changes to the original dining room and servants’ wing. The lack of detailed office records from Mason’s practice, combined with a tendency by historians to favor the more famous McKim, Mead and White renovations (1881-82), have also overshadowed Mason’s contribution. But now, findings
from careful analysis of the building and historic sources challenge prior assumptions and add to the story of Kingscote and the King family.

Upjohn’s 1839 plan included a moderately sized family breakfast room that suited the relaxed social lifestyle enjoyed by the Joneses; one that favoured outdoor events like tea parties and clambakes. By the late 1870s, increasingly formal evening dinners were fashionable, requiring larger dining rooms and more service facilities. As the Kings were a family central to a circle of wealthy people who entertained almost constantly in Newport, they began renovations to support this lifestyle. This included the currently existing five-window bay in the original dining room; a feature absent in an early painting of the house. (fig. 2) Though this small addition added minimal square footage, it provided stylish decorative details to the room. (fig. 3 & 4) Beautiful fruit and flower motif painted glass, typical of dining rooms, suggests it was installed while the room was still being used for food service (pre-1881). An 1878 entry in the probate records for William Henry King’s estate list $101.00 paid to Friedrick (sic) Bros. for such decorative windows, which supports this timeline.
An examination of the foundation further proves that the bay was built separately from the house: the joint between the foundation walls of the main house and the bay is clearly discernible and the floor structure above differs as well. (fig. 5) Inside the room, the fact that this bay was added later is evident from a visible change in floorboards. (fig. 6) In a final piece of evidence, an 1878 photo of the King family in front of Kingscote captures Mason’s completed alterations. (fig 7) The new bay is visible as a single story crenellated addition. There is also a new second story addition on top of the original one-story area of the dining room, maintaining Upjohn’s descending height effect. This added floor space to the bedroom above, and is confirmed by another change in floorboards. (fig. 8) During Mason’s renovations, the Kings welcomed a daughter, Maude Gwendolyn (1876), and this larger bedroom, which adjoins an early schoolroom, may have been used to accommodate their growing family.

This evidence not only proves that some of Mason’s work still exists, but also illustrates how it was successfully integrated into the original architecture. It also provides a clearer picture of the King family immediately before Kingscote became one of “the” Newport hotspots, illustrating the beginning of a process of using the house to both serve and to reflect their roles within the escalating standards of Newport summer society. Examining historic house parts using these analytical techniques has the potential to reveal even more of Kingscote’s history, including later building campaigns by unknown architects. Additionally, due to their unbiased nature, these methods can be applied to any historic building including Gilded Age houses with the most seamless and shiniest veneers. This allows us to reveal unseen parts of a building’s history, giving an accurate voice to the people who lived in them and enhancing our own understanding of how they used these exceptional buildings.

Aimée Keithan is a 2014-2015 Preservation Society of Newport County Research Fellow. She earned her M.A. in the Archaeology of Buildings from the University of York, England and has over 10 years of experience in the field of architectural design.