

**“The Glare and Glitter of that Fashionable Resort”:
Newport, Rhode Island as Ward McAllister Found It**

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Southern Connection	17
Chapter 2: The European Connection.....	43
Chapter 3: The New York Connection and the Era of Formality	69
Chapter 4: The New York Connection and the Era of Frivolity	93
Conclusion	130

Introduction

“Who the devil is Ward McAllister?” *The New York Sun* posed to its readers in 1889, echoing “a question that has been asked more times of late than any other by reading men all over the country and even in this city.”¹ The journalist observed, “In the foggy view of those who only guess at the answer he seems to be a greater official than the Mayor, a custodian of the ultra-fashionables, [and] a despot as to who is to dance at the coming ball.”² His acquaintances and associates cast him as an expert organizer of entertainments, a controversial figure with intimate knowledge of the practices of the American elite, a generous benefactor, and the veritable gatekeeper of New York City’s high society. As frequent coverage in national newspapers demonstrates, McAllister’s personality and professional endeavors were a source of curiosity throughout the American Gilded Age.

In 1892, the *New York Morning Journal* ran a detailed character sketch of McAllister, commenting, “Few... know that the ruler of New York sweldom bears such an ordinary name as Samuel.”³ By the time of his death in 1895, Samuel Ward McAllister—who went by Ward—had earned celebrity status on two continents, vast yet polarizing influence, and a litany of nicknames. “The Ladies’ Maids’ Pope,” “the pet of the 400,” “the autocrat of the drawing-room,” and “The Lord-High Steward of the Social Household” were just a few choice monikers from the “avalanche of ridicule, criticism, and even abuse” he received from the press.⁴ A caricature of Gilded Age New York’s self-appointed social arbiter even appeared on the cover of

¹ “Who is Ward McAllister?” *The New York Sun*, April 7, 1889, 3.

² *Ibid.*

³ “Men of the Day: Samuel Ward M’Allister,” *The New York Morning Journal*, February 14, 1892, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Newport Historical Society, Newport, RI.

⁴ “Ward McAllister’s Book,” in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers; “A Tottering Idol,” *The San Francisco Evening Post*, February 6, 1892, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers; “A Great Social Organizer Gone,” *The Los Angeles Herald*, February 1, 1895, 1; and “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 24, no. 7 (August 14, 1890): unpaginated.

Judge magazine, sporting a pair of donkey ears and labeled “snobbish society’s schoolmaster.”⁵ The artist sketched McAllister standing before a chalkboard depicting various family crests, with his pointer fixed on a monocle-wearing model of “an English snob of the 19th century.”⁶ His pupil, Uncle Sam, roars with laughter as McAllister lectures from a document titled “lessons to Americans by an ass.”⁷

Born in Savannah, Georgia in 1827 to a slaveholding family, McAllister boasted an impressive genealogy that crossed regional lines and included politicians, presidential cabinet members, abolitionists, lawyers, military officers, and women’s rights activists. Standing at roughly five-foot-nine with greying reddish-brown hair, “blue and kindly eyes,” and a neatly-trimmed imperial beard, he spoke with a southern drawl and had a habit of taking daily walks through New York.⁸ A reporter from the *Sun* commented on his tendency to pepper his speech with “you see, don’t you know, you understand,” which “seem[ed] to come as natural to him as does ‘I guess’ to a Yankee or profanity to a parrot.”⁹ Though “modest and unassuming” in appearance and personality, McAllister wielded considerable power and influence.¹⁰ He felt equally at ease in his modest New York townhome or rented summer cottage as in the nation’s grandest ballrooms and places of power, among industrial titans and international dignitaries alike. Moreover, he built a career on it. As the *Atlanta Constitution* put it, “A man that can snub the Astors and fix the social status of the Vanderbilts must be more than ‘an unknown man who, about the close of the war, dropped down on New York.’”¹¹

Despite the ridicule he sometimes received from the press, McAllister’s peers recognized

⁵ *Judge* 19, no. 473 (November 8, 1890).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “Men of the Day.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ “The McAllisters,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 25, 1882, 4.

the sense of legitimacy he brought to his role. In 1892, an unnamed businessman remarked to the *Boston Home Journal*, “I claim that anything a man makes pay, is after all not frivolous. It becomes his life work, and to get up balls, dinners, and arrange social functions, is as much of a business to Ward McAllister as stocks and bonds were to Jay Gould.”¹² Throughout his decades-long career as the advisor to America’s northern elite, McAllister helped codify the parameters of New York’s high society in an era marked by conspicuous spending and an ever-growing gap between the rich and poor. The period Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner labeled “the Gilded Age” saw, in the words of author Fred Inglis, “a new kind of class struggle to determine not rule—the Constitution had done that—but regard, prestige, preeminence; ... above all, admission (‘will they let me in?’), alliance (‘can I marry her?’), [and] permanence.”¹³ During this socially turbulent period following the American Civil War, McAllister found a powerful ally in Caroline Schermerhorn Astor and fulfilled a unique but indispensable role by catering to New York’s wealthiest, most insecure, and increasingly class-conscious citizens. Together, the pair set out to fashion the city’s elite into a distinct and aristocratic collective. Thus, as the *Boston Globe* affirmed, “A sketch of the career of Ward McAllister means a history of modern New York Society.”¹⁴ Throughout his lifetime, he served as a critical figure in a modernizing New York.

Alongside the codification of American social systems and growth of industry, urban landscapes and populations swelled. A burgeoning nineteenth century tourist industry also provided city-dwellers with greater opportunities for temporary respite from the claustrophobic byproducts of urbanization. In her discussion of the tradition of summer vacationing, Amy

¹² “A Question of Dignity,” *The Boston Home Journal*, December 24, 1892, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers.

¹³ Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 115.

¹⁴ “M’Allister: Social Arbiter, Died in New York Last Night,” *The Boston Globe*, February 1, 1895, 1.

Willard Cross points out, “As more people lived in cities, more people wanted to leave them.”¹⁵ This trend, too, was imbued with contemporary ideas about class division. By the late nineteenth century, for roughly ten weeks each year—beginning in July and ending in early September—Newport, Rhode Island served less as an escape from the Gilded Age’s infamously strict social mores and parameters and more as an extension of them. McAllister’s life and career paralleled and facilitated Newport’s metamorphosis into “the Queen of Watering Places, the Social Capital of America,” and “the play-ground of the upper realms of society.”¹⁶ Many of his contemporaries acknowledged that he got his start as a social “stage-manag[er]” at the popular resort.¹⁷ As one wealthy New Yorker familiar with McAllister’s career observed in 1889, “I remember him first in Newport... ‘Wait until McAllister comes,’ people used to say, ... ‘he will make it lively.’ He did, too...”¹⁸

Author Deborah Davis explains, “Newport [has] a long history... marked by rise and fall and rise.”¹⁹ Its road to exclusivity was an arduous and rather unexpected one, populated and directed by a diverse cast of individuals from different backgrounds and American regions. Once a thriving port city, active participant in the Triangle Trade, and seventh largest city in America during the colonial period, Newport suffered the loss of half its population and a debilitating economic downturn following the American Revolution. After fifty years of stagnation, Newport’s transformation “from comatose seaport to summer haven” was aided, in large part, by

¹⁵ Amy Willard Cross, *The Summer House: A Tradition of Leisure* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 9.

¹⁶ Gabriel Weis, *A Guide to Newport, Rhode Island* (Newport: Gabriel Weis, 1916), 3; and *Newport Villa Owners Summer Visitors’ and Residents’ Guide to the Reliable Business Interests of the City, for 1883* (Boston: W.G. Morrison & Co., 1883), 9.

¹⁷ Stephanie Foote, *The Parvenu’s Plot: Gender, Culture, and Class in the Age of Realism* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014), 167; and “Columbus of the 400,” *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, Wichita, KS, July 22, 1893, 6.

¹⁸ “Who is Ward McAllister?,” 3.

¹⁹ Deborah Davis, *Gilded: How Newport Became America’s Richest Resort* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 3.

an expanding tourism industry that produced a gradual shift from an emphasis on public mingling, as exemplified in hotel settings, to a far more exclusionary atmosphere dominated by “pageantry” and dictated by private homeowners.²⁰ Using descriptors rather akin to McAllister himself, New York socialite Maria “May” Denning King van Renssalaer called postbellum Newport “a town of paradoxes, contradictions and amazing vanities and extravagances.”²¹

Van Renssalaer’s observation that “[n]othing in this republic has been more burlesqued and respected, more jeered at and aspired to, more violently attacked and more passionately envied than that intangible accolade termed ‘social distinction’” rings true in the twenty-first century, as scholars continue to find something fascinating about the competitive, flagrantly lavish, and ritualistic environment in which McAllister lived and moved.²² However, despite his direct influence among some of nineteenth century America’s most powerful families, modern scholars have largely treated McAllister little better than his contemporary critics. Rather than seek to understand why McAllister commanded such a widespread following, some seem astonished by the idea that he commanded one in the first place. As a result, mention of McAllister in recent literature is generally relegated to chapters of larger works about the Gilded Age, the lives of his contemporaries—like the Astors—or New York City’s history.

Historians Greg King, Eric Homberger, and Jerry E. Patterson deserve special mention for exploring and recognizing McAllister’s significance within the larger context of nineteenth century New York’s changing social realms. King’s *Season of Splendor: The Court of Mrs. Astor in Gilded Age New York* traces the development of “old money” versus “new money”

²⁰ Jon Sterngass, *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport, and Coney Island* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 73; and Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, *Turn of the World* (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 1938), 83.

²¹ Mrs. John King van Rensselaer and Frederic van de Water, *The Social Ladder* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1924), 220.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

competition and comprehensively examines the stringent rituals the city's elite adopted between the 1870s and the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. Covering everything from a society gentleman's daily routine to jewelry and architecture, King's work is both reference book and well-argued monograph. Emphasizing high society's "rich cultural legacy," King associates McAllister with a successful, largely cohesive, and aesthetically pleasing period of the Gilded Age.

Homberger's *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* also serves as a paramount work of cultural and social history on this period. Homberger traces the impact of wealth on New York's physical landscape, simultaneously highlighting the transformation of social life from one of conservative expression to one of opulence. The fluid definition of "society" adapted to new trends and individual wills over time. Devoting an entire chapter to McAllister, Homberger examines the social arbiter's personal definition of high society and role as an architect of social parameters meant to check the volatility that followed the Civil War. He notes, "Looking at the remorseless instability of New York, rigidity and exclusivity were but a small price to pay for a little island of coherence and a counterweight to the aggression and competitiveness of the world around them and within their parlors."²³

In *The First Four Hundred: Mrs. Astor's New York in the Gilded Age*, Patterson, like Homberger, is among the few scholars to devote an entire chapter to McAllister's impact on Gilded Age New York. He also falls into a scholarly camp that analyzes McAllister in relation to one of his most important institutional creations, the Four Hundred, an infamous list of family names he thought worthy of social acceptance, which appeared in the press in 1892. This numerical figure became synonymous with New York's elite. In Patterson's view, the Four

²³ Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 27.

Hundred “deserves to be remembered,” and McAllister should be remembered with them.²⁴

Patterson portrays McAllister as intelligent and calculating but foolish, providing a rather well-rounded and, therefore, human portrait of the man. He corroborates King’s idea that Astor and McAllister brought respectability to New York society, but their successors did not. *The First Four Hundred* constitutes a careful study of McAllister’s role in the creation of one of Gilded Age New York’s most long-lasting fixtures.

Another scholarly camp tends to regard McAllister as a mere footnote to the influence of the Astor family. Clifton Hood and Kristin Richardson raise the issue of McAllister’s importance largely alongside Astor’s, thereby exemplifying a scholarly trend that couples them in a simplistic manner.²⁵ Alternatively, authors like Virginia Cowles and Justin Kaplan portray McAllister not as Astor’s equal, but, at best, her shadow and, at worst, her stooge. Rockwell Stensrud summarizes this factually dubious and ultimately lopsided perspective well, noting how McAllister “has been variously described (and debunked) as [Astor’s] lapdog, lackey, and, because of his rather stiff manner, her Machiavelli.”²⁶ Undoubtedly, the Astor-McAllister alliance shaped many aspects of New York and Newport’s social life, but these scholars’ interpretations tend to diminish the reality of McAllister’s independent influence during the Gilded Age, which his role in Newport underscores.

In the historiography of Newport, scholars agree that both the antebellum era and Gilded Age were transformative periods that reflected larger social, cultural, and economic trends. Stensrud’s *Newport: A Lively Experiment, 1639-1969* deserves particular mention for its

²⁴ Jerry E. Patterson, *The First Four Hundred: Mrs. Astor’s New York in the Gilded Age* (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 9.

²⁵ Clifton Hood, *In Pursuit of Privilege: A History of New York City’s Upper Class and the Making of a Metropolis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017; and Kristin Richardson, *The Season: A Social History of the Debutante*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2019.

²⁶ Rockwell Stensrud, *Newport: A Lively Experiment: 1639-1969* (London: D Giles Limited, 2015), 386.

thorough coverage of the city's dynamic history. His monograph epitomizes a scholarly consensus that recognizes both the liminal nature of the antebellum period and Gilded Age and the significance of tourism and social stratification to Newport's development. Given the broad scope of his monograph, Stensrud validates the centrality of cause and effect in Newport's history. After describing Newport's first "Golden Age" in the colonial period, he portrays the antebellum period as one categorized by a veritable "building boom" and widespread efforts to reclaim lost stability and prosperity.²⁷ Newporters completed this process during the Gilded Age, between 1880 and 1914. By highlighting concurrent national and global trends, such as the emulation of European aristocratic traditions and increased globalization, Stensrud concludes, "Newport was a laboratory of history, still a lively experiment, a place to work out the kinks of the rising imperialism that defined the nation's role in the twentieth century."²⁸

Like Homberger's demonstration of the impact of wealth on New York, Davis examines Newport's development against its lasting connotation with "history and money."²⁹ In *Gilded: How Newport Became America's Richest Resort*, she evaluates the intersection between wealth and tourism, a combination with a transforming effect. Similarly, other authors have analyzed Newport against wider trends in tourism. For example, Jon Sterngass's *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport, and Coney Island* offers a comparative study of these three resort destinations, thereby underscoring the significance of not only nineteenth century tourists' built environments, but their cultural and ideological context. The rich historiography of tourism and leisure, which flourished alongside the rise of social history during the twentieth

²⁷ Ibid., 170, 336.

²⁸ Ibid., 372, 440.

²⁹ Davis, *Gilded*, 3.

century, also sheds light on local, regional, and national trends.³⁰ The works of Cindy A. Aron, Dona Brown, Orvar Löfgren, Will McIntosh, A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, and John F. Sears, among others, comprise a portion of the scholarship on these topics.³¹

Though general histories of Newport designate space to antebellum era developments, such as the prevalence of a flourishing hotel culture and other community-based amusements, there exists limited scholarship solely on this period and especially on the southern tourists who drove changes in Newport's infrastructure and social climate. Authors like Carl Bridenbaugh, Sarah Deutsch, and Virginia Bever Platt have written on southerners' participation in Newport's slave trade, as well as their leisurely summer visits, during the colonial period, but treatment of these families' prolonged visits to the resort in the decades prior to the Civil War is much sparser.³² One of the only focused analyses of this complex trans-regional relationship is Charles and Tess Hoffman's *North By South: The Two Lives of Richard James Arnold*, which details the life of a Rhode Island born businessman who, after his marriage to a Savannah heiress, maintained both northern connections—in Providence and Newport—and a plantation in Georgia during the antebellum period. Otherwise, mention of southerners' role in bolstering Newport's

³⁰ See Gary Cross, "Crowds and Leisure: Thinking Comparatively Across the 20th Century," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 631-50; T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Documenting Recreation and Tourism in New England," *The American Archivist* 50, no. 4 (1987): 550-569; and Thomas Weiss, "Tourism in America Before World War II," *The Journal of Economic History* 64, no. 2 (2004): 289-327.

³¹ See Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1995; Orvar Löfgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999; Will Mackintosh, *Selling the Sights: The Invention of the Tourist in American Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2019; A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007; and John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

³² See Carl Bridenbaugh, "Baths and Watering Places of Colonial America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1946): 152-81; Carl Bridenbaugh, "Charlestonians at Newport, 1767-1775," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 41, no. 2 (1940): 43-47; Carl Bridenbaugh, "Colonial Newport as a Summer Resort," *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 26, no. 1 (January 1933): 1-23; Sarah Deutsch, "The Elusive Guineamen: Newport Slavers, 1735-1774." *The New England Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1982): 229-53; and Virginia Bever Platt, "'And Don't Forget the Guinea Voyage': The Slave Trade of Aaron Lopez of Newport," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1975): 601-618.

tourism industry is often relegated to larger chapters in general histories of the city. This thesis fills a critical gap by using the McAllister family's annual summer visits to explore Newport's antebellum southern connection, as well as emphasize this trend's impact on Ward McAllister's career during the Gilded Age.

Dominated by themes of grand architectural feats, social competition, and stifling exclusivity, the historiography surrounding Gilded Age Newport is far more substantial than scholarship on the antebellum era. Affiliates of the Preservation Society of Newport County, such as Antoinette F. Downing, Vincent J. Scully, Jr., and Harriet Jackson Phelps, as well as authors like James Yarnall, have traced the city's architectural evolution, duly noting the cultural significance of Gilded Age constructions.³³ The literature on prominent architects and landscape artists like Richard Morris Hunt, Frederick Law Olmstead, Charles McKim, and Stanford White have also stressed the architectural significance of Gilded Age Newport. Authors agree that the "palaces and châteaux" constructed along Newport's Bellevue Avenue and Ocean Drive exemplified the carefully devised connection between social status and cultural stewardship.³⁴ Indeed, many of these architects' wealthy patrons saw their homes as bastions of high culture, a reflection of the larger "social and economic revolution" that followed the Civil War.³⁵

In addition to contributing to a rich historiography on Gilded Age architecture, authors of works on the Gilded Age often portray Newport as a reflective environment where the elite modeled contemporary ideas about class, money, and pedigree, as well as the period's growing social polarization. Stensrud describes this important context well: "In short, there was

³³ See Antoinette Forrester Downing and Vincent J. Scully, Jr., *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island: 1640-1915*. New York: C. N. Potter, 1967; Harriet Jackson Phelps, *Newport in Flower*. Newport, RI: The Preservation Society of Newport County, 1979; and James Yarnall, *Newport Through Its Architecture: A History of Styles from Postmedieval to Postmodern*. Newport, RI: Salve Regina University Press, 2005.

³⁴ Wayne Craven, *Gilded Mansions: Grand Architecture and High Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 158, 155.

³⁵ Davis, *Gilded*, 34.

extraordinary tension, quite akin to class warfare, in American life during this expansive era: the rich were becoming more numerous and more ostentatiously visible, striving to emulate Europeans in their outlook, while a huge strata of the poor were clamoring for basic needs that only government and private agencies stepped forward, often grudgingly, to meet.”³⁶ Increasingly attaching exclusive connotations to addresses, clubs, beaches, and other local areas, the “New York gentry” and other wealthy vacationers to Newport barred undesirable intruders from their newfound domain “and altered antebellum canons of fashionability in an attempt to create social distance.”³⁷ By focusing on eccentric and influential figures like Harry Lehr, Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, Tessie Oelrichs, and Mamie Fish, some scholars of the Gilded Age underscore the importance of personalities and individual beliefs about status and displays of wealth to the physical and social development of Newport.³⁸ This era offers secondary scholars ample source material to fill volumes with stories about imperious hostesses, social slights, and scandals in Gilded Age Newport.

In both landmark general histories and more focused works, scholars commonly argue that the antebellum period and Gilded Age radically changed Newport’s physical, economic, and social environments. They emphasize the rise of tourism and gradual shift from an embrace of “a veritable melting pot” of fellow vacationers in antebellum hotels to the domination of private residences.³⁹ Scholarship on Gilded Age Newport often highlights the cultural significance of European-modeled architectural feats, the resort’s reflection of a national climate of social polarization, and intriguing personalities like Astor and her ambitious contemporaries and

³⁶ Stensrud, *Newport*, 372.

³⁷ Davis, *Gilded*, 74; Stensrud, *Newport*, 371; and Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 192.

³⁸ See Davis, *Gilded*; and Anne De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters: American Heiresses Who Married into the British Aristocracy*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017.

³⁹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 331.

successors. However, scholars fall short in their limited coverage of southerners' impact on Newport's nineteenth century transformation.

Additionally, despite McAllister's presence and participation during both key periods, mention of his role in Newport often suffers the same fate as mention of his role in New York, falling into the shadow of his wealthy compeers. Those who address his lifelong connection to Newport often follow traditional historiographical trends that diminish his independent influence apart from Astor and cast him as somewhat of an archetypal court jester. Though some authors, like Davis, Stensrud, and Anne de Courcy, recognize McAllister's role in advising Astor to purchase property in Newport in 1881—a critical development that touched off a flood of New York families wishing to summer in Newport—there remains a lack of focused analysis on how the social arbiter's lifetime connection to the city served as a significant predicate to this recommendation. More broadly, despite McAllister's impressive adaptation of antebellum era customs learned in childhood to the “cutthroat culture” of the Gilded Age, historians have not sufficiently addressed his transcending impact on Newport over the course of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

This study builds upon preexisting scholarship to offer a more holistic view of Newport's history through the eyes of one of nineteenth century America's most influential but largely forgotten social figures. Newport served as one of nineteenth and twentieth century America's premier social arenas, but it also held great personal meaning for McAllister. During his lifetime, McAllister's contemporaries applauded his keen sense of “adaptability,” which served him well not only as New York's social arbiter, but as a highly visible public figure amid a growing national celebrity culture.⁴¹ Given his efforts to tailor his public image, glimpses into his

⁴⁰ Ibid., 371.

⁴¹ “M'Allister,” 1.

personal life allow researchers a chance to peek behind the proverbial curtain and see a more human portrait of him.

In many ways, his connection to Newport reveals characteristics not only of McAllister the elite social influencer, but McAllister the man. While the resort served as an extension of his influence in New York, he was never merely a tourist. Newport was also a place where McAllister could retreat from the demands of the position he had cultivated for himself. It was filled with childhood memories of a farmhouse full of his cousins, flying kites together and splashing through the surf. After his marriage in 1853, he returned to the seaside town, selecting it as the ideal place to raise a family. Between the end of his first European tour and his resettlement in New York to cultivate his social career, he lived in Newport for nine months of the year, only leaving to spend winters in the West Indies.⁴² Newport was also an arena where he could put his talents for entertaining and social organization on display, as well as a place to which he returned year after year, even when his position and circumstances changed and became more controversial. As the *New York Sun* observed, “Mr. McAllister has for many years been closely identified with the more aristocratic and exclusive phase of Newport fashionable life. Though he does not play polo or drive a mail stage coach, he is always in the thick of the whirl. The Napoleon of picnics, and the Columbus of cotillion dinners, he, shortly after his arrival, ... [took] the reins of Newport Society.”⁴³ In short, Newport served as a connecting thread, a place of grounding, throughout McAllister’s life.

Chapter 1 offers background on McAllister’s early connection to Newport by addressing the city’s colonial history through the outbreak of the Civil War and focusing on the wealthy southern visitors who pioneered the city’s tourism industry. Families like the McAllisters,

⁴² Ward McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890), 42.

⁴³ “The Season at Newport,” *The New York Sun*, August 28, 1877, 2.

Joneses, Middletons, and Arnolds used Newport as a trans-regional familial meeting place and escape from heat and disease. This comparatively relaxed resort environment emphasized a sense of community and togetherness through social functions, activities, and lodging arrangements like boarding-houses and hotels. Chapter 2 traces the first winds of McAllister's growing influence on Newport in the immediate postbellum era, from roughly 1865 to 1881. This period saw a rush of new wealth into American cities like New York, which became a proving ground for cultivating ideas about gentility. The northern elite began to dominate Newport's summer social scene during this period, emphasizing the extent to which Newport, as Downing and Scully argue, served as a "microcosm" for parallel developments in New York.⁴⁴ Because of their firsthand experiences in Europe, McAllister and architect Richard Morris Hunt's deft adaptation of Old World traditions transformed New York and Newport's social and physical landscape, forecasting their prolonged influence in the two interconnected locations. As cultural influencers, these men also saw Newport's gradual drift away from a hotel-based, communal atmosphere to one dominated by private homes and members-only spheres.

Chapter 3 explores the first, conservative phase of Gilded Age Newport, the era of formality, when trends in privatization intersected with galvanized social boundaries.⁴⁵ Under McAllister and Astor's control, New York and Newport society used exclusion to assign greater meaning to social interactions, physical addresses, and club membership. This period also marked the apex of McAllister's career. At his Newport entertainments, he married his and Astor's aristocratic, exclusionary vision for high society with elements reminiscent of his antebellum era experiences at the resort. Finally, Chapter 4 explores the context of the Gilded

⁴⁴ Downing and Scully, *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*, 130.

⁴⁵ Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 32.

Age's second phase, the era of frivolity, a reactionary period that challenged and eventually undermined McAllister and Astor's authority.⁴⁶ A new wave of Newport hostesses used increasingly lavish and visible entertainments and architectural feats to manifest their ambition, forcing high society to collectively manage the growing friction between privatization and publicity at Newport. Aggravated by the sensationalist press, to which McAllister contributed later in life, Newport became synonymous with the type of wastefulness that Progressive Era reformers decried in subsequent decades. Though McAllister managed to maintain selective authority in Newport during this chaotic period, by the time of his death in 1895, the resort looked radically different than the idyllic southern enclave of his youth.

Examining Newport as Ward McAllister found it makes possible an exploration of the resort's transformation between the antebellum period and the turn of the twentieth century, which illuminates not only how the American elite attempted to construct and maintain their exclusive, clannish world through physical and social boundaries, but how unstoppable political, technological, economic, and cultural factors inevitably breached these barricades. However, framing changes in nineteenth century Newport's physical and social landscapes using McAllister's perspective necessarily narrows the scope of this study. His upbringing and experiences placed him squarely among the nation's most powerful individuals and exclusive realms. Because the focus of this study—in the spirit of authors like King, Davis, Homberger, and Clifton Hood—seeks to engage the historical conversation surrounding the impact of wealth on Gilded Age and Progressive Era America, discussion of the lives of nineteenth century Newport's year-round residents of all socioeconomic classes and professions, as well as its black and Jewish residents, to whom its development owes so much, is limited. Still, McAllister's

⁴⁶ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 9.

privilege reflects a dynamic era of contradictions that left a permanent mark on Newport. Ward McAllister's trans-regional familial ties, international influence, unique social position, and lifelong connection to Newport, Rhode Island rendered him an active facilitator of and key witness to the city's development into one of the most exclusive summer resorts of the nineteenth century and beyond.

Chapter 1: The Southern Connection

Though their numbers dwindled after the Civil War, southern families facilitated and bore important witness to Newport's nineteenth century transformation, a shift aided, in large part, by a burgeoning tourism industry on which the town ultimately depended.¹ *The Newport Mercury* affirmed, Newport "for half a century was a favorite resort of the most celebrated southern families, such as the Middletons, the Allstons, the Izards, the Hamiltons, the Priceleauxs, the Wymberley Joneses, and many others, forming a real aristocracy of birth, wealth, intellect, culture, and elegant manners."² Initially forged during the colonial period, Newport's southern connection evolved and strengthened during the first half of the nineteenth century, establishing trends and conditions that not only helped rescue the city from its post-Revolutionary War stagnation, but later influenced elite northern families' Gilded Age contributions. This southern connection, maintained through trade and tourism, fostered Newport's economic vitality and social transformation in the decisive decades prior to the Civil War.

Founded in 1639 and located on Aquidneck Island—reportedly derived from a Native American word meaning "Isle of peace"—on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay, Newport's geography rendered it an accessible and popular colonial trade center.³ Stensrud explains, "Newport was sustained by the sea. It was the town's lifeblood, its oxygen," so the port's "prosperity and growth depended entirely on its ability to trade with its sister colonies and the world beyond."⁴ International and intercolonial trade created a veritable "Golden Age" for

¹ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 73.

² "Old Time Newport," *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, August 11, 1883, 1.

³ Reverend Frederic Denison, *The Past and the Present: Narragansett Sea and Shore: An Illustrated Guide to Providence, Newport, Narragansett Pier, Block Island, Watch Hill, Silver Spring and All the Famous Sea-Side Resorts of Rhode Island* (Providence, RI: J.A. & R.A. Reid, Printers and Publishers, 1879), 64, HathiTrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t9280gq77&view=1up&seq=12>.

⁴ Stensrud, *Newport*, 165.

Newport, which reached its zenith between 1740 and the dawn of the American Revolution.⁵

Author Maud Howe Elliott described eighteenth century Newport as possessing “more commerce than New York, as much culture as Boston, a population larger than Providence, [and] a strategic military and naval point—[it was] a colonial capital, with all the luxury and learning that colonial civilization could boast.”⁶ A reporter for the *Newport Mercury* echoed Elliott’s outlook, reflecting on “the old colonial times, when Newport was a capitol [*sic*] and New York a hamlet.”⁷

Newport’s geography rendered it an important stop in the Triangle Trade, which generated wealth, fostered the stratification of the local merchant elite, and signaled the first winds of the city’s southern connection. Surviving editions of the *Newport Mercury* dating from the colonial period report incoming and outgoing ships from various southern colonies, including Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, and North Carolina, as well as trade to and from Jamaica, Hispaniola, London, and other international ports.⁸ Aided by a thriving shipbuilding industry that facilitated triangular and bilateral trade in rum, cheese, horses, timber, slaves, and other profitable commodities, Newport’s “rapid increase in communications with southern ports” also promoted “cohesion” among all thirteen North American colonies.⁹

Godfrey Malbone’s life and career uniquely exemplifies transplanted southerners’ roles in this eighteenth century synthesis. Malbone hailed from Princess Ann County, Virginia and

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶ Maude Howe Elliott, *This Was My Newport* (Cambridge, MA: The Mythology Company, 1944), xv.

⁷ “Old Time Newport.”

⁸ “Custom-House, Newport, Rhode-Island,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, October 7, 1765, 3; “Custom-House, Newport, Rhode-Island,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, July 3, 1775, 3; and “Custom-House, Newport, Rhode-Island,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, December 21, 1772, 3. Advertising in Newport’s colonial newspaper also demonstrates the cosmopolitan nature of the city during this period. Various shops and merchants advertise a variety of international wares, as well as imports from other North American colonies.

⁹ Deutsch, “The Elusive Guineamen,” 237; “Old Time Newport”; and Stensrud, *Newport*, 121, 171.

became apprenticed to a Newport shipbuilder in 1731. After settling in the city, he eventually became a prominent member of the community and served as a deacon in Newport's historic Trinity Church.¹⁰ After inheriting land and slaves in Virginia, Malbone acquired the means to dispatch three slave ships to Africa between 1736 and 1740.¹¹ His participation in the eighteenth century New England slave trade, paired with familial connections in both Newport and Virginia, renders him an important figure in a period in which trans-regional and international trade fueled Newport's economic boom. Taken more broadly, Newport's merchants helped identify ports in South Carolina and Georgia as mutually profitable epicenters for the colonial slave trade.¹² The "discovery" of these growing markets by 1754 caused a temporary uptick in the number of slave ships sailing from Newport to Africa, which reached its zenith between 1763 and 1774.¹³ Newport slave-trader Aaron Lopez, who dispatched fourteen slave ships between 1761 and 1774, enjoyed a working relationship with Charleston shipping agents Isaac DaCosta and Thomas Farr, which facilitated the sale of human cargo at the southern city's flourishing slave market.¹⁴ Stensrud clarifies that, "[i]n the larger scheme of the European slave trade, Rhode Island's participation was relatively small," and the slave trade was never a dominating industry in Newport.¹⁵ However, it forged a crucial bond between different regions of the North American colonies and influenced the city's economic and social development during the colonial period as a whole.

¹⁰ Stensrud, *Newport*, 122.

¹¹ Deutsch, "The Elusive Guineamen," 229.

¹² *Ibid.*, 244.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 245, 247.

¹⁴ Platt, "And Don't Forget the Guinea Voyage," 601, 603; and Barnett A. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina: From the Earliest Times to the Present Days* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1905), 36. Aaron Lopez's fascinating life illuminates colonial Newport's diversity. A native of Lisbon, Portugal and a Sephardic Jew, Lopez immigrated to and settled in Newport in 1752. He joined a brother and cousin in the city and worked as a candlemaker before his foray into the international and intercolonial trade.

¹⁵ Stensrud, *Newport*, 121.

Even before the term entered the national lexicon, Newport's first tourists were planters and merchants, demonstrating the fusion between trade and tourism during the colonial period. Historians suggest that the first visitors—planters from the West Indies— vacationed in Newport as early as 1729, followed by an influx of South Carolinians beginning in 1730.¹⁶ That Charleston, one of the foremost trading hubs of the colonial American South, contributed, by far, the largest numbers of tourists to Newport during the period is no accident.¹⁷ Their numbers radically increased as the eighteenth century progressed. Between 1767 and 1775 alone, 260 South Carolinians visited Newport, eventually joined by dozens of Georgia, Florida, and Virginia families.¹⁸ Newport's reputation among the merchant elite spread largely by word of mouth, serving as an important precursor to the growth of Newport's tourism industry in the nineteenth century. Stensrud affirms,

Long-standing trading ties led to lasting friendships between merchants, ... and it is not hard to imagine the glowing reports about Newport's gentle climate that sailors related to their beleaguered brethren. After the first several years of making the trek to Newport, it had become common knowledge throughout the sprawling plantation system and within genteel Charleston [and other southern cities] that Newport offered a pleasant respite from excessive heat and disease.¹⁹

As a result, these travelers' yearly appearances in Newport became more predictable over time, strengthening the ties between the two regions.

Newport's southern connection remained strong enough to survive one of the most traumatic events in the city's history, the American Revolution. In 1775, the British began their four-year occupation of Newport. When they arrived, 53,000 townspeople—roughly half the total population—abandoned the port city altogether, never to return.²⁰ Occupying troops'

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144; and Bridenbaugh, "Colonial Newport as a Summer Resort," 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ Bridenbaugh, "Charlestonians at Newport, 1767-1775," 44.

¹⁹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 324-325.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

general destructiveness prior to their 1779 relocation to New York, not to mention the economic pinch of this staggering population loss, lent itself to a fifty-year depression revived only by the birth of the tourism industry. As a *New York Herald* article explained, this powerful development provided Newport with “a new life—a sweet, charming summer life—... springing up in the midst of her decay, which reminds you of the young sapling shooting forth from the fallen tree; aspiring, with youthful hope, and vigor, and beauty, to equal, at some day, the greatness of the parent trunk.”²¹ Just as they had during the city’s colonial economic boom, the first “adventurous tourists,” predominantly from the southern United States, drove Newport’s economic recovery and physical and social revival during the antebellum period.²² In the words of one nineteenth century travel writer, after the Revolution, “the union of the states [brought] their people into closer companionship... [and] northerners and southerners met in this Eden of America in peace and harmony.”²³

Concurrently, Southerners traveled to Aquidneck Island in the colonial and antebellum periods—what Harriet Beecher Stowe described as “pre-railroad times” in the opening chapter of *The Minister’s Wooing*, set in “the then small seaport-town of Newport”—because they had the ability and means to do so.²⁴ Echoing other historians of the early republic period, Will Mackintosh underscores the transformational impact of a “transportation revolution” between 1815 and 1860, which shaped the American tourism industry.²⁵ Developments in canals,

²¹ “Shots from the Sea-Shore—A Fashionable Watering-Place,” *The New York Herald*, July 10, 1846, 2.

²² Davis, *Gilded*, 18.

²³ Richard M. Bayles, *History of Newport County, Rhode Island: From the Year 1638 to the Year 1887, Including the Settlement of its Towns, and their Subsequent Progress* (New York: L.E. Preston & Company, 1888), 488. HathiTrust. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo1.ark:/13960/t74t75x8x&view=1up&seq=9>.

²⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing* (Ridgewood, NJ: The Gregg Press, 1859), 1.

²⁵ Will Mackintosh, “‘Ticketed Through’: The Commodification of Travel in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 32, no. 1 (2012): 62; see also Mackintosh’s expanded work on the commodification of travel and its impact on tourism in Will Mackintosh, *Selling the Sights: The Invention of the Tourist in American Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

steamships, stagecoaches, and, eventually, railroads made travel more feasible and less expensive. Mackintosh explains that “travelers slowly became passengers—consumers of travel rather than producers of travel—and as they began to think about travel as a commodity they invested their experiences with new expectations of affordability, reliability, and convenience.”²⁶ Before the arrival of the Old Colony Railroad in 1864, Newport boasted a regular ferry service, and its pristine port—which had served the city so well during its colonial Golden Age— also welcomed packet ships from southern states. In 1828, traveler Anne Royall called Newport “the seat of much taste and refinement,” noting how “[i]t is said to have the finest air, the finest harbor, and the finest fish in the world. A great number of gentlemen from the south, with their families, spend their summers at Newport, in preference to the springs or any part of the Union.”²⁷ Royall’s observations not only affirm the noticeable presence of southerners in early antebellum Newport but also hint at the contemporary growth of other resort destinations, aided by the transportation revolution, throughout the United States.

The antebellum period often carries a connotation of regional fragmentation—a sharp demarcation between northern and southern identity and experience. However, increased access to reliable transportation, which often brought residents of the two regions into contact with one another, challenges this idea. Aside from cultivating informal relationships with other travelers at resorts like Newport, the accessibility of travel sometimes led visitors from different American regions to marry one another. Kyle N. Osborn explains the significance of these alliances, noting, “Southern travel accounts... suggest an intriguing counter-narrative to regional polarization: the

²⁶ Ibid., 66.

²⁷ Anne Royall, *The Black Book; or a Continuation of Travels in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Publisher not Identified, 1828), 102, 101.

rise of an American aristocracy that transcended sectional lines.”²⁸ As author Eliza Cope Harrison agrees, many elite southern travelers developed family connections that “extended across the Mason-Dixon Line,” a phenomenon that serves as “a significant but little explored aspect of our national experience.”²⁹ These trends were equally visible in the lives of southern visitors to antebellum Newport.

Elite families like the Izards, Middletons, Pickneys, McAllisters, Joneses, and Arnolds came from a variety of backgrounds. A number of “affluent planters” comprised one sect of Newport’s “Southern invaders.”³⁰ The Middletons, whom Harrison terms “par excellent a representative [family] of antebellum American aristocracy,” owned a plantation on the Ashley River, outside Charleston.³¹ By the time of his death in 1846, the family patriarch, Henry Middleton, owned the aforementioned Middleton Place, three additional rice plantations on the Combahee River, a home in Newport, and hundreds of slaves.³² The Joneses also possessed considerable landholdings in the South. George Noble Jones, born in Georgia, owned his family’s waterfront estate in Savannah and managed two Florida plantations, El Destino and Chemonie, remotely.³³ The Izards began visiting Newport in the early 1770s.³⁴ Termed “one of the oldest and richest families” of South Carolina, they maintained a rice plantation on the Pee Dee River and married into the Middleton family.³⁵

²⁸ Kyle N. Osborn, “Their Norths: Antebellum Southern Travelers and Sectional Identity,” *Southern Cultures* 21, no. 4 (2015): 98.

²⁹ *Best Companions: Letters of Eliza Middleton Fisher and Her Mother, Mary Hering Middleton, from Charleston, Philadelphia, and Newport, 1839-1846*, Eliza Cope Harrison, ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), x.

³⁰ James Fenimore Cooper, *Red Rover: A Tale* (Paris: Hector Bossanage, 1827), 14; and Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 42.

³¹ *Best Companions*, ix.

³² *Ibid.*, 502.

³³ Charles G. Hoffman and Tess Hoffman, *North By South: The Two Lives of Richard James Arnold* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 38-39.

³⁴ Bridenbaugh, “Newport as a Colonial Summer Resort,” 5-6.

³⁵ “Izard of South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 2, no. 3 (1901): 239.

In addition to planters, representative members of the southern political elite also vacationed in Newport during the antebellum period. James Hamilton, Jr., for example, born in Charleston and educated in Newport and Massachusetts, enjoyed “a long, colorful, and controversial political career.”³⁶ Following his military service in the War of 1812, Hamilton began practicing law before serving three consecutive terms in the state House of Representatives. He also served in Washington, D.C. as a South Carolina Congressman, the mayor of Charleston, and the state’s governor throughout the 1820s and 1830s. Though a vocal supporter of slavery, Hamilton and his family maintained close connections in New England, evidenced by their regular visits to Newport throughout the antebellum era. Matthew Hall McAllister, Jr. and his nuclear family, of Savannah, similarly claimed impressive political connections. Matthew Hall McAllister, Sr. served as Georgia’s attorney general under President George Washington, and his son held the same position under President John Quincy Adams. Trained as a lawyer, McAllister, Jr. also served as a state senator, mayor of Savannah, a city alderman, president of the Savannah Library Society, and vice president of the Georgia Historical Society. Styled “the war-horse of Georgia” by his constituents, he ran unsuccessfully for the Georgia governorship on the Democratic ticket in 1845.³⁷ The McAllisters were educated at Princeton and Yale and, like many of their Southern compeers, regularly visited Newport to escape Savannah’s oppressive summer heat.³⁸

Overall, families like the Middletons, Joneses, Izards, Hamiltons, and McAllisters illustrate the social and political prominence of southern families who transformed Newport

³⁶ Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 209.

³⁷ *The Daily Union*, Washington, D.C., June 23, 1845, 3.

³⁸ Paul M. Pressly, "The Northern Roots of Savannah's Antebellum Elite, 1780s-1850s," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2003): 183.

during the antebellum period. The presence and impact of this distinctly wealthy sect of American travelers distinguished Newport from other contemporary resorts. The *Richmond Enquirer* observed in 1853 that Newport “is but a summer resort for the idle, wealthy, invalid, and *ennuies*.”³⁹ Stensrud provides context and significance to this reputation. He explains,

Unlike resorts at Cape May, New Jersey, or Coney Island and Saratoga Springs, New York, which, throughout the nineteenth century, catered largely to middle-class patrons, Newport ended up drawing the nation’s established and emerging fashion-setting elite, the wealthiest and most influential in the land, and thus ascended to the august position of the undisputed premier watering-spot in America.⁴⁰

In 1890, once the northern elite had largely replaced Newport’s southern denizens, New York’s most notorious nineteenth century gossip magazine, *Town Topics*, observed the fruit of this antebellum era trend: “Newport is not a summer resort. It does not welcome the itinerant with music from a band, and it is not thoroughly stocked with weighing machines and sausage sandwiches. It is a garden; in fact, it is the Garden of Eden, containing one thousand Eves, a serpent coiling at the heart of each... Newport is not at all like its *vis-à-vis*.”⁴¹ In short, southern merchants, planters, and political elite unintentionally set the tone for the viciously competitive, exclusive environment of the Gilded Age, a principle best summarized by author Kristin Richardson’s astute observation about nineteenth century America: “Social power followed financial power.”⁴²

Elite southern families came to Newport for a variety of reasons, among them trans-regional family connections, the seaside’s supposed health-giving environment, and the resort’s comparatively relaxed, informal social scene. As Osborn points out, “Since many southern travelers hailed from the planter class, southern patricians usually forged natural connections

³⁹ “The York River Rail Road,” *The Richmond Enquirer*, Richmond, VA, July 19, 1853, 2.

⁴⁰ Stensrud, *Newport*, 323.

⁴¹ “Mermaids and Other Maids,” *Town Topics* 24, no. 1 (July 3, 1890): unpaginated.

⁴² Richardson, *The Season*, 95.

with elite northern culture.”⁴³ As previously discussed, trans-regional marriages strengthened this unique bond. For example, George Noble Jones of Georgia married Mary Savage Nuttall of Maine, and Matthew Hall McAllister, Jr. married Louisa Cutler of Massachusetts. The Rhode Island born Richard James Arnold, by contrast, reversed this trend by marrying a Georgia heiress, Louisa Gindrat, and inheriting her property. While maintaining his Rhode Island citizenship, Arnold “decided to invest his own not inconsiderable inheritance on expanding his wife’s dowry, devoting the rest of his life to running a plantation, accumulating through the years 11,000 acres of land and more than 200 slaves.”⁴⁴ In *North By South: The Two Lives of Richard James Arnold*, Charles and Tess Hoffman argue that “Richard Arnold was not unique as a Yankee who acquired land and slaves in the South,” but he stands apart for maintaining “two different, if not entirely separate lives as a southern planter and a northern businessman.”⁴⁵ As a result, the Arnolds, like other southern families, maintained profitable economic interests in both regions, which stemmed from their family connections.

Paul Pressly’s “The Northern Roots of Savannah’s Antebellum Elite, 1780s-1850s” uses the city of Savannah—the home of several frequent visitors to antebellum Newport—as a case study for the social and economic importance of trans-regional connections. Pressly explains that late eighteenth century Savannah’s “reviving commercial economy made the town a magnet for ambitious young Northerners with a load of goods or a little financial backing from a supportive family.”⁴⁶ Because Savannah “never developed the overblown caste system of its neighbor,” it was also far more attractive to northern transplants than “proud, defiant Charleston.”⁴⁷ In the

⁴³ Osborn, “Their Norths,” 110.

⁴⁴ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, xviii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Pressly, “The Northern Roots of Savannah’s Antebellum Elite, 1780s-1850s,” 158.

ensuing years, northerners became active participants in Savannah's religious, educational, philanthropic, social, and business spheres. By 1860, seven of the twelve wealthiest Savannahians had been born in the North, six in Massachusetts alone, demonstrating how these men had "sunk roots deep in the city."⁴⁸ As Pressley convincingly argues, "Their role suggests the extent to which Savannah's traditional elite served as a vigorous part of the cultural corridor that stretched from the coast of Georgia to the ports of Massachusetts."⁴⁹ Matthew Hall McAllister, Jr.'s marriage to Louisa Cutler illustrates this trend and predicated the family's decision to spend summers in Newport. The couple, along with their six children—Harriet, Julian, Matthew Hall III, Samuel Ward, Francis Marion, and Benjamin Cutler—established a long-lasting tradition of making the trek from Savannah to join their Boston relatives on the New England coast.

Because of these vast trans-regional connections, Aquidneck Island often served as a cultural and familial meeting place. For example, Sarah Mitchell Marion Cutler—affectionately nicknamed "the Duchess" and described as a "Southern gentlewoman of strong will, a veritable matriarch"—rented the Bailey farmhouse in nearby Middletown each summer, where she "united the various branches of her family under one roof."⁵⁰ She doubtless found solace in the opportunity to see her children and grandchildren, who had settled in various towns and cities along the East Coast. In a letter to her son, Reverend Benjamin Cutler, she quoted the biblical figure Jacob when reflecting on the diverse paths her grown children had taken. She wrote, "If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.' Eliza in New York, Francis at Avon [in Western New York], you in Virginia, and Louisa in Savannah; and I am to lead a meteor-like life by

⁴⁸ Ibid., 181, 169.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁰ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 43, 42.

wandering from one star to another...”⁵¹ Summers spent at the Bailey farm brought Cutler’s children and grandchildren to her side in the twilight of her life.

Southerners flocked to Newport not only to unite with family members, but to enjoy the health benefits of Aquidneck Island’s climate. One travel writer praised Newport’s “mildness and equableness unsurpassed on the Atlantic coast,” with the “purity of the atmosphere resulting from the nearness of [the] old ocean.”⁵² During the colonial period, the port city had earned the nickname “the Carolina hospital” due to the influx of visiting South Carolinian planter families, and the moniker remained applicable to the antebellum period.⁵³ Moreover, northern families traveled south “during the harsh New England winter” just as frequently as southerners trekked North to resorts like Newport.⁵⁴ Though Sarah Cutler complained about the sometimes fitful weather—in 1830, she took note of the turn from “thick fog and rainy weather” to brilliant sunshine and “fine cool air” in a matter of two days— she encouraged her daughter in New York to bring her granddaughter to Newport, “as she is in such miserable health, which this pure air would have renovated.”⁵⁵ In another letter to her daughter, Cutler wrote, “You astonish me by your complaints of the heat in New York. Believe me, I have not felt one hour of heat since I have been on this Island, and so cold at night that we are obliged to hug ourselves in blankets.”⁵⁶ Similarly accustomed to the southern heat, Savannah native Mary Telfair, writing to her friend Mary Few in early August of 1839, echoed Cutler’s observation about Aquidneck Island’s

⁵¹ Horatio Gray, *Memoirs of Rev. Benjamin C. Cutler, D.D.: Late Rector of St. Ann’s Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1865), 95.

⁵² Robert Grieve, *Narragansett and Mount Hope Bays: Picturesque Narragansett: An Illustrated Guide to the Cities, Towns, and Famous Resorts of Rhode Island* (Providence, RI: J.A. & R.A. Reid, Printers and Publishers, 1888), 156, HathiTrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t5bc4mw53&view=1up&seq=5>.

⁵³ Stensrud, *Newport*, 324.

⁵⁴ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, 186; and Cooper, *Red Rover*, 14.

⁵⁵ Mrs. Sarah Cutler to Eliza Francis, July 9, 1830; July 11, 1830; and June 30, 1830 in Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 44, 45, 43-44.

⁵⁶ Mrs. Sarah Cutler to Eliza Francis, July 11, 1830, in Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 44.

climate. She wrote, “Newport is cool when every other place is warm—we wear our cashemere [sic] shawls and find them very comfortable.”⁵⁷

Several southern families found themselves quarantined in Newport during the Cholera Epidemic of 1832. The violent disease crossed the Atlantic on immigrant ships from Europe, sweeping Canada and the United States with a “panic...which [was] thought to have contributed much to its extension and fearful ravages.”⁵⁸ Newport closed its port, barring all travel from surrounding cities, particularly New York. Though sensitive to the dangers of disease, some of Newport’s southern visitors saw the quarantine as everything from irritating to “cold-blooded.”⁵⁹ An inconvenienced Mary Telfair complained that the epidemic would delay her return to Savannah from Newport.⁶⁰ Sarah Cutler, by contrast, lamented how the transportation freeze might intercept mail and other communications, on which she depended since members of her family lived so far apart. In July 1832, she wrote to her nephew, “This will be a deplorable measure indeed to us, if cut off from the comfort of hearing from you all.”⁶¹ Ironically, though some expressed surprise at “the seemingly unpredictable pattern of the cases” and subsequent failure of most local quarantines to contain infection—Mary Telfair recalled in 1836, “How mysterious is the approach & departure of that awful disease!”—Americans’ increased access to affordable and reliable travel facilitated the disease’s spread.⁶² Newport officials’ quick lockdown of its port ultimately proved wise. By the end of the 1832 epidemic, 3,513 out of New

⁵⁷ Newport, Rhode Island, 2 August 1839, in *Mary Telfair to Mary Few, Selected Letters, 1802-1844*, Betty Wood, ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 194.

⁵⁸ “Cholera,” *The Cheraw Gazette*, Cheraw, SC, September 1836, 174.

⁵⁹ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 49.

⁶⁰ Newport, Rhode Island, 20 August 1834, in *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 146.

⁶¹ Mrs. Sarah Cutler to Samuel Ward, Esq., July 8, 1832, in Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 50.

⁶² Charles E. Rosenberg, “The Cholera Epidemic of 1832 in New York City,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 33, no. 1 (1959): 48; and Boston, Massachusetts, Tremont Hotel, 11 September 1836, in *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 165.

York's roughly 250,000 population had succumbed to the disease.⁶³ By contrast, though barred from travel and plagued by anxiety, Newport's death tolls remained quite low. By August 1832, only two had died of cholera.⁶⁴ As one nineteenth century writer recalled, "Newport was favored, indeed almost exempt."⁶⁵

Newport's draw for southern families lay not only in wider trans-regional family connections and physical advantages, but social considerations as well. In this regard, southern families' attraction to Newport mirrored the appeal of other resort spas throughout the East Coast, including Saratoga and the Virginia Springs. In her monograph on antebellum resorts in Virginia, Charlene M. Boyer Lewis demonstrates how these settings served as proving grounds for evolving ideas about gender, travel and leisure, and "gentility."⁶⁶ She argues that "every day of their stay, visitors found people, ideas, and attachments that were not limited to just one place, as at home. They traveled to the springs to be part of a class, to meet those with whom they could identify from far and near. As they shaped resort society by their actions and expectations, they also defined what is meant to be an elite 'southerner.'"⁶⁷ Though undeniably "centers of fashionable society," the Virginia Springs, like Newport, also offered relatively relaxed social obligations and expectations, encouraging an environment that was, in Charles and Tess Hoffman's words, "more casual than confrontational, more conversational than controversial."⁶⁸ Compared to the Virginia Springs, southern visitors' embrace of informality was particularly

⁶³ "Alexandria: Monday Morning, Sept. 22, 1834," *The Alexandria Gazette*, Alexandria, VA, September 22, 1834, 3; and "Disasters: New York City (NYC): Cholera Epidemic of 1832," NYC Data, Baruch College, Zicklin School of Business, Weissman Center for International Business, <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/cholera-1832.html>.

⁶⁴ "Cholera at Newport — Dr. Turner's Account of the First Cases of Cholera at Newport," *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (August 22, 1832): 26.

⁶⁵ Bayles, *A History of Newport County*, 514.

⁶⁶ Charlene M. Boyer Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen on Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790–1860* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51, 115-117; and Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, xix.

acute at Newport. Mary Telfair observed in 1834, “*Simplicity & Antiquity* are stamped upon this unenterprising place.”⁶⁹ Thus, despite Newport’s reputation as an elite enclave by antebellum American standards, visitors still found means to shed some of the strict parameters of southern genteel life. For example, one 1858 writer took note of casual clothing styles on Newport’s beaches. The tourist marveled at “the belles of the hotels, minus their hoops and other fixings, divested of their drawing-room conventionalities, swimming about in white trowsers [*sic*] and red frocks.”⁷⁰ In a rapidly changing world of political, economic, and social contention, antebellum tourists embraced escapism at summer resorts like Newport, which contributed to its growth. One early Newport historian affirmed this principle. He opined, “Perhaps it was owing to this very repose and tranquility that Newport owes her later prosperity.”⁷¹

Davis describes how, “[m]imicking country folk,” early tourists in Newport “hiked along the shore, bowled on the lawn, dined on sponge cake and fresh milk, danced with their friends, and enjoyed the city’s beaches, pastoral scenery, and relaxed pace. Social life was informal, even bucolic... At least for a moment, it was fashionable to be unfashionable in Newport.”⁷² Many southern families engaged in these types of activities. Mary Telfair, ever the proud Savannahian, wrote, “I feel no inclination to become permanently a New Englander, but if my lot had been cast in it I believe I should not have been a stranger to *local attachment*. Every thing is primitive here – the houses, the people, furniture, dress etc etc.”⁷³ Some families embraced this sense of solace by leasing farmhouses or rooms in boarding houses, located either in Newport or nearby Middletown or Portsmouth. Since the colonial period, Middletown and Portsmouth had attracted

⁶⁹ Newport, Rhode Island, 1 August 1834, in *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 145.

⁷⁰ Hiram Fuller, *Belle Brittan on a Tour, at Newport, and Here and There* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), 159.

⁷¹ Bayles, *History of Newport County*, 488.

⁷² Davis, *Gilded*, 19.

⁷³ Newport, Rhode Island, 20 August, 1834, *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 146.

residents and visitors seeking distance from Newport’s progressively “dense and rapidly increasing population.”⁷⁴ Ward McAllister later noted the cultural significance of these informal summer arrangements, explaining, “It was the fashion then at Newport to lease for the summer a farmer’s house on the Island, and not live in the town.”⁷⁵ The McAllisters joined their Ward and Cutler cousins at the Bailey farmhouse near Middletown’s Third Beach. Presided over by his grandmother, Sarah Cutler, “the house overflow[ed] with people,” forcing some to sleep on mattresses stuffed with corn husks on the floor.⁷⁶ The family fished and splashed in the surf under the “clear, blue, vaulted sky,” built bonfires on Paradise Rocks, and flew kites on the nearby Purgatory Rocks.⁷⁷ “The children scampered all over the Island with great delight,” Maud Howe Elliott recounted, and her mother, Julia Ward Howe, described in a 1836 letter how “we eat, we drink, and sleep abundantly, ride and walk constantly, and are neither important, influential, witty nor wise...”⁷⁸

Just as the secondary literature on Newport notes the resort’s gradual change from a quaint city filled with “quasi-public venues” to one dominated by private residences, southern tourists initially frequented boardinghouses and hotels but eventually built their own private homes.⁷⁹ Mary Telfair’s letters trace her stays at various boardinghouses, including Sarah Gibbs’ Oakland Farm in Portsmouth and a “clean” but “noisy” establishment managed by a Miss Rathbone on Thames Street in Newport.⁸⁰ Similarly, Eliza Middleton Fisher and her mother,

⁷⁴ Bayles, *History of Newport County*, 754.

⁷⁵ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 15.

⁷⁶ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 43; and Louisa Cutler McAllister to Eliza Francis, July 23, 1830, in Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 46.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 47; Mrs. Sarah Cutler to Eliza Francis, July 11, 1830, in Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 44; McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 15; and Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 43.

⁷⁸ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 43; and Julia Ward (Howe) to Sam Ward, August 11, 1836, in Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 53.

⁷⁹ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 112.

⁸⁰ Savannah, Georgia, 14 November, 1836 and Newport, Rhode Island, 2 August, 1839, in *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 168, 94.

Mary Middleton, referenced the “comfortable” rooms at “Miss Hazard’s”—possibly a boardinghouse called the Perry House on today’s Gibbs Avenue in Newport—and the “Fairbanke” (Fairbank) house.⁸¹ These establishments typically leased to multiple travelers or families at a time, and their inherent communal atmosphere is incredibly significant to antebellum America’s wider cultural context. Stergass argues, “At mid-nineteenth-century resorts, Americans searched for a sense of community to overcome the nineteenth-century feeling of alienation, or strangerhood.”⁸² As a result, southerners at Newport’s array of boardinghouses satisfied their longing for togetherness.

Though antebellum Newport possessed a seemingly “infinite number of private boardinghouses,” its unique hotel culture served as a powerful shaping force that changed the face of tourism in the port city.⁸³ A.K. Sandoval-Strausz affirms Sterngass’s findings on the impact of “hotel mania” in Newport.⁸⁴ Categorizing the hotel as a “historical artifact” denoting an “epochal shift” in human mobility that began in the eighteenth century, Sandoval-Strausz argues that “hotels provided essential infrastructure for the kinds of associations that could bring large numbers of people together over great distances.”⁸⁵ Similar to boardinghouses, hotels like the Bellevue House, Ocean House, Fillmore House, and Atlantic House offered “quasi-public venues such as parlors, dining rooms, and verandas” where people could meet other travelers.⁸⁶ Following the destruction of the first Ocean House in 1845, its proprietor, John Weaver, quickly set to work on an “even larger and grander replacement” that exemplified the symbiotic

⁸¹ Eliza Middleton Fisher to Mary Middleton, March 25, 1841 and Mary Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, April, 4, 1841, in *Best Companions*, 197, 200; and Bayles, *History of Newport County*, 489.

⁸² Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 112.

⁸³ “Shots from the Sea-Shore.”

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁸⁵ A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 2, 260.

⁸⁶ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 112, 121.

relationship between the tourism industry and Newport's antebellum building boom, not to mention the communal atmosphere these establishments fostered.⁸⁷ The *New York Herald* observed that the new Ocean House regularly filled its one thousand guest rooms to capacity and could seat five hundred guests "together at its dining table."⁸⁸ Complete with "a splendid saloon, ... a variety of parlors, smoking-rooms, reading rooms, &c., corridors, piazzas and galleries of immense width," the hotel was so architecturally impressive that, the reporter declared, "[b]eside it, the Astor House would look like a shanty."⁸⁹ Furthermore, it served as an informal social hub. Recalling childhood visits to antebellum Newport, Maud Howe Elliott noted that "the Ocean House was crowded for the weekly 'hop'"—community dances—held each Saturday night during the summer season.⁹⁰

Such venues, built in response to Newport's growing dependence on the tourism industry, accommodated its diverse visitors. Stensrud points out,

More than any community in America at the time, antebellum Newport during the summer season was a veritable melting pot, ... a vivid potpourri of Southerners, New Englanders, Philadelphians, and New Yorkers—as well as free and enslaved blacks, Irish Catholic laborers, female servants from numerous European countries, and many more. For the fifteen years before the outbreak of the Civil War, they all mingled together in the hotels, at the beaches, and along Newport's streets.⁹¹

Families like the Middletons viewed Newport's diversity as a window to "a wider world" outside of their traditional associations, social circles, and built environments in the South.⁹² This communal atmosphere stood in sharp contrast to the class-conscious exclusivity that defined

⁸⁷ Stensrud, *Newport*, 330.

⁸⁸ "Shots from the Sea-Shore."

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Some scholars refer to the Astor House as New York's first luxury hotel. It was certainly one of New York's most famous hotels during the antebellum period. The original structure, located on West Broadway, across from today's City Hall Park in Lower Manhattan, was completed in 1836 under the direction of John Jacob Astor.

⁹⁰ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 141.

⁹¹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 332.

⁹² *Best Companions*, 12.

Gilded Age Newport. Moreover, trans-regional interactions, fostered by infrastructure built to accommodate greater numbers of tourists to Newport, challenges the idea of a rigid separation between northern and southern identities during the antebellum period. At Newport, sharp sectional prejudices were far from the rule; at least, they were more blurred than one might assume. Tellingly, Osborn points out that, partly owing to the regularity of “wayfaring” northern and southern tourists traveling and mingling throughout both regions, midcentury secessionists found it difficult to “push their movement, an accomplishment only secured through the election of an anti-slavery Republican for president in 1860.”⁹³

Between the 1840s and the start of the Civil War, as Sterngass explains, commercialization and “privatization at Newport eroded the delicate sense of accessible community fostered by hotel culture,” and as hotels closed, so began the dominance of private residences, which paved the way for the “cottage wars” of the Gilded Age.⁹⁴ Describing Newport in 1868, the *Alexandria Gazette* declared, “Fashion dwells in cottages now, and though the cottagers come and hear the germania [*sic*] play and hop in the parlor, they come as from private palaces to a public hall, and disappear again into the magnificent mystery of cottage life.”⁹⁵

While many scholars associate Newport’s grand private homes with the Gilded Age, southerners are responsible for departing from a reliance on public lodgings and constructing summer residences on Aquidneck Island, decades before the northern elite arrived on the scene. Especially as the town grew more crowded with hotel guests, regular southern visitors to

⁹³ Osborn, “Their Norths,” 102, 99.

⁹⁴ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 182; and Davis, *Gilded*, 44.

⁹⁵ “Letter from Newport,” *The Alexandria Gazette*, Alexandria, VA, September 5, 1868, 2. The “germania” refers to a musical band either comprised of German musicians or playing music influenced by music theory and style originating in Germany. They typically played waltzes, polkas, and marches, which became some of the most popular dances in antebellum America. German immigrants, many of whom arrived in the United States during this period, introduced these musical styles and genres to the United States. See Victor Greene, *A Passion for Polka: Old-Time Ethnic Music in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 18.

antebellum Newport began to erect their own modest cottages—structures more true to the descriptor than their Gilded Age counterparts, which made a mockery of the word.⁹⁶ Henry Middleton was among the first to stop annually leasing rooms from the locals and purchase “a most elegant...and finely-situated” home, called Stone Villa, in the late 1830s.⁹⁷ Like Sarah Cutler at Bailey’s farmhouse, Mary Middleton enjoyed filling their home with her extended family, otherwise spread across different cities and regions. In April 1841, she scolded her daughter, Eliza Middleton Fisher, “But how could you think of living any where but in your father’s house at Newport? I could never bear the idea of losing so much of your society as your being in another house would compel me to do. Mrs. Grant told me she had engaged Mrs. Hazard’s rooms for next Summer, so that fortunately for me you have no chance of having them...”⁹⁸

In 1839, George Noble Jones commissioned a private residence on Bellevue Avenue, later regarded as Newport’s premier address during the Gilded Age. Renamed Kingscote by its second owners in the 1880s, the resplendent structure, complete with many of its original Gothic architectural elements, still stands today. Jones’ home stood near the now-demolished second Ocean House, possessing, in the words of one travel writer, an “air of retirement contrasting with the busy human hive on the other side of the road.”⁹⁹ By the early 1850s, Richard Arnold, being “used to *space* in Georgia,” also desired the solitude of a private residence in lieu of staying in one of Newport’s packed boardinghouses, as his family had done throughout the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁰⁰ He, too, purchased property not far from Newport’s city center.

⁹⁶ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 215.

⁹⁷ *Best Companions*, 12; and John Ross Dix, *A Hand-Book of Newport and Rhode Island* (Newport, RI: C.E. Hammett Jr., 1852), 63, Gale Primary Sources, https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ps/i.do?p=SABN&u=vic_liberty&id=GALE|CY0106919911&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon.

⁹⁸ Mary Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, April 4, 1841, in *Best Companions*, 199-200.

⁹⁹ Dix, *A Hand-Book of Newport and Rhode Island*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, 215, 216.

The rise of private vacation homes in Newport coincided with changing national ideas about wealth and mirrored the American elite's use of architecture to reflect their status, a trend that remained critical during the Gilded Age. As Stensrud explains, "Something elementary was shifting in the psyche of upper-class America: as these men slashed through the competition in the cut-throat jungle of business and industry, they wanted to display their ascendance and status as winners, and, at the same time, carve out some solitude."¹⁰¹ The so-called "villa period" of the 1840s also overlapped with Newport's antebellum building boom, during which city planning fell in step with the tourism industry.¹⁰² Largely owing to the influx of southern tourists, local officials and intrepid entrepreneurs recognized that "the city had to be developed and cultivated, gardened and groomed, to ensure its long-term success as a summer resort."¹⁰³

The most important figure in this era, particularly owing to his relationships with wealthy families seeking to build private summer residences, was Alfred Smith. As a tailor in New York, Smith often served southern tourists who stopped to complete their shopping in the city before boarding a ferry to Newport.¹⁰⁴ A visit to the resort convinced Smith to abandon tailoring and enter Newport's promising real estate business. Noting that some families had already sought respite from the hotel crowds by constructing private residences, Smith correctly predicted that more families would follow. Smith's most far-reaching real estate development was his measured, well-planned sale of land tracts on Bellevue and Ocean Avenues to Newport's wealthy "half year residents."¹⁰⁵ These parcels amply accommodated the wealthy's desire for "more privacy, more peace and quiet, [and] more of an enduring identification with the city."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 366.

¹⁰² "Old Time Newport."

¹⁰³ Stensrud, *Newport*, 337.

¹⁰⁴ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 170.

¹⁰⁵ Stensrud, *Newport*, 338; and *Newport Villa Owners Summer Visitors' and Residents' Guide to the Reliable Business Interests of the City, for 1883*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Stensrud, *Newport*, 337.

Smith also benefitted financially from his wise business decisions. Between 1845 and 1865, real estate prices on Bellevue Avenue rose from \$7 per acre to \$450 per acre.¹⁰⁷ Southern families like the Joneses and Arnolds felt the impact and took advantage of the resort's real estate boom and the subsequent rise of Bellevue Avenue as an exclusive summer neighborhood. For example, in 1856, fifteen years after constructing his own private residence, George Noble Jones sold a small parcel of his land on Bellevue Avenue for \$18,000.¹⁰⁸ Thus, between the late 1840s and mid-1860s, southern families pioneered a long-lasting trend that radically changed the physical and social landscape of Newport and predicated its Gilded Age reputation for exclusivity.

Newport's diversity rendered it a unique political and intellectual environment in the decisive years immediately preceding the Civil War. In *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era*, Susan-Mary Grant argues that a distinct northern identity, or northern nationalism, projected the idea that economic, social, and political factors rendered "the South... a world apart not just from the North but also from the nation."¹⁰⁹ Rhode Island and, more specifically, summer resorts like Newport became complicated battlegrounds over fundamentally different visions for America's future. In 1850, for example, *The Richmond Enquirer* derided "the hypocrisy of Northern Abolitionists," citing Rhode Island's historic ties to the slave trade.¹¹⁰ Merely "[drawing] back the curtain of history," the writer argued, revealed "facts most damning to the oily-tongued, canting philanthropists of the North, who have amassed fortunes out of a traffic in slaves, and now seek to carry out their fanatical view of robbing the South of her property..."¹¹¹ Similarly, as tensions rose across the country, several southern

¹⁰⁷ Craven, *Gilded Mansions*, 152.

¹⁰⁸ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, 213.

¹⁰⁹ Susan Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 38.

¹¹⁰ "People in Glass-Houses," *The Richmond Enquirer*, Richmond, VA, September 27, 1850, 2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

newspapers urged their readers to stop vacationing at northern resorts like Saratoga, Cape May, and Newport, in favor of southern destinations like the Virginia Springs. In 1851, *The Southern Press* of Washington, D.C. issued a particularly virulent critique of southern tourists who traveled north: “At the approach of every summer, our people swarm in flocks to Northern cities and Northern watering places; the Southern stream of travel, like the Nile, enrich[es] the whole country... There is no excuse for this absenteeism. Our mountain air is as cool and salubrious as the most favored Northern climes—Old ocean wafts her breezes as gently on Sullivan’s [I]sland, as at Newport, Rockaway, or Long Branch.”¹¹² Such accounts reveal the extent to which the late antebellum period saw the politicization of leisure and tourism. Tellingly, another writer lamented “that Saratoga, Newport, Niagara, and numerous other resorts, are too great attractions for even the most zealous advocate of Southern rights to resist” and advised that “one of the first steps to Southern independence is to break off, as fast as possible, our social and commercial connections with the North.”¹¹³ *The Richmond Enquirer* agreed that southerners’ decision to avoid Newport and other destinations would demonstrate “to our Northern neighbors that *it is possible* for the South to... secure some few of its luxuries, without [visiting] a resort to the North for them.”¹¹⁴

Grant argues, “Both images of the South—the positive and the negative—existed in the antebellum northern mind,” and this was certainly the case in Newport.¹¹⁵ Newport embodied several paradoxes, at once earning a reputation for conservatism and a spirited, though often politically repressed, abolitionist movement during the antebellum era. The communal atmosphere of Newport’s hotels, beaches, and boarding-houses also challenged stereotypes and

¹¹² “Absenteeism,” *The Southern Press*, Washington, D.C., July 23, 1851, 3.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ “The Duty of the South,” *The Richmond Enquirer*, Richmond, VA, September 4, 1855, 4.

¹¹⁵ Grant, *North Over South*, 3.

prejudices that appeared in national newspapers and political speeches. For example, Julia Ward Howe struggled to equate her personal experiences at Newport, where her southern and northern cousins gathered in harmony each summer, with the sectional caricatures found in the contemporary press.¹¹⁶ Moreover, regular Southern visitors to Newport reacted to the inevitable political tension in different ways. While “resid[ing] in the heart of Yankee New England,” some southern transplants and visitors’ “hearts remained tied to their heritage.”¹¹⁷ As a result, many southern families, like the Joneses, left Newport. Anxious that Union troops might confiscate their southern property, they sold their Bellevue Avenue cottage when the war broke out, abruptly departing Newport and “leaving no trace of themselves.”¹¹⁸ After the war, they never returned to the summer resort.

Those who decided to remain in Newport during the war “walked a tightrope between the appearance of support for the Union cause and the reality of their southern sympathies.”¹¹⁹ Owing to their trans-regional familial connections, many vacationers had relatives on both sides of the conflict. Richard Arnold and his family serve as an ideal example to this end. Charles and Tess Hoffman term the family “a microcosm of the nation as a whole,” explaining that Arnold’s children were split—both geographically and in terms of allegiance— between North and South, and while he personally opposed secession, Arnold worried over the fate of his property in Georgia.¹²⁰ Elizabeth Izard Pickney also lived in Newport during the war, isolated from her southern relatives, including three grandsons and a son-in-law in the Confederate Army.¹²¹ She publicly declared herself loyal to the Union cause but later confessed to a friend that “We used to

¹¹⁶ Louise Hall Tharp, *Three Saints and a Sinner: Julia Ward Howe, Louisa, Annie, and Sam Ward* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 219-220.

¹¹⁷ Stensrud, *Newport*, 348.

¹¹⁸ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, 233.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 230, 233.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

get together, shut all the doors and windows and then vomit secession.”¹²²

Given the nuance of southern visitors’ political stances, pressing economic concerns, and familial worries during the Civil War, many of the forces and conditions that had initially drawn them to Newport worked against them. For example, when the war began, Pickney began to regard Northern vacationers, alongside whom she had once enjoyed Newport’s charms and activities, as “violent against the South.”¹²³ The southern press no doubt compounded her feelings of insecurity, especially as reporters affirmed, “Agitation has made association [in northern resort destinations] distasteful.”¹²⁴ Simultaneously, these newspapers praised southern tourists for “beginning to appreciate, morally and pecuniarily, those re-unions which bring them into proper social sympathy.”¹²⁵ These conditions rendered Newport, in many ways, just as divided as the nation, which uniquely impacted the southern visitors who had contributed to the resort’s economic recovery following the American Revolution. As Tess and Charles Hoffman explain, during the Civil War, “patriotism and tourism were at war in Newport.”¹²⁶

Drawn to Newport for its picturesque geographical features, health-giving weather, and informal environment and aided by advancements in transportation and technology, southern visitors’ unique experiences mirrored larger trends that shaped antebellum era Newport. As existing secondary literature notes, nineteenth century southern “excursionists” aided Newport’s economic recovery following the American Revolution.¹²⁷ In subsequent decades, these elite

¹²² January 24, 1862, in Isabella Middleton Leland, "Middleton Correspondence, 1861-1865 (Continued)," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 63, no. 1 (1962): 37.

¹²³ Ibid. Though Newport’s abolitionists made headway on several important issues during the antebellum era, the city also possessed a sizeable population that was quite sympathetic to slavery and the southern cause. See Richard C. Rohrs, “‘Where the great serpent of Slavery ... basks himself all summer long’: Antebellum Newport and the South.” *The New England Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (2021): 82–106.

¹²⁴ “Northern and Southern Travel,” *The Abbeville Banner*, Abbeville, SC, August 13, 1857, 2.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, 234.

¹²⁷ Davis, *Gilded*, 12, 18, 20.

families' regular visits demanded improved infrastructure, thereby accelerating the city's physical expansion. Finally, after years of relative harmony, the Civil War sharply concluded one era and heralded a new one for Newport. Tess and Charles Hoffman explain that, by the dawn of the Gilded Age, "[g]one were the charades of more innocent years—gone were the southern social leaders like the Joneses who led them."¹²⁸

The Civil War had the opposite impact on Newport as the American Revolution ninety years before. As Stensrud notes, "The Civil War had dampened Newport's spirit and siphoned away its Southern gentry but did little to interfere with the city's heady ascent to its position as the most august resort in America."¹²⁹ During the Gilded Age, wealthy "cottagers" seized upon the antebellum-era trend of constructing private residences as a means of physically representing their status and, by extension, excluding other classes from their sphere.¹³⁰ Not all people celebrated the new era of seemingly unbridled wealth, especially those who remembered Newport's quiet antebellum years. At the end of her life, Julia Ward Howe lamented the passing of Newport's "half rustic, half cosmopolitan, and wholly free" environment, in which art and literature had thrived, in favor of "[t]he rapid *crescendo* of the fast world," "the shallow pursuit of amusement," and a "rampant gayety [that] offered little or nothing to... those who love to combine reasonable intercourse with work and study."¹³¹ Though southerners never again dominated Newport's elite social scene, the resort was not completely devoid of southern influence during the Gilded Age. Savannah-born Ward McAllister used his personal experiences to help transform Newport into an American social capital.

¹²⁸ Hoffman and Hoffman, *North By South*, 240.

¹²⁹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 351.

¹³⁰ "The Season," *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, August 2, 1884, 1.

¹³¹ Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences, 1819-1899* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900), 409, 405.

Chapter 2: The European Connection

Edith Wharton's unfinished 1938 novel, *The Buccaneers*, opens with one of her secondary characters, Mrs. St. George, reminiscing at Saratoga. Set in the 1870s, the novel comments on the interaction between the European and American elite following the Civil War. Seated on the verandah of the Grand Union Hotel's picturesque lawn, Mrs. St. George worries over her two daughters' dim marriage prospects in an ever-competitive social climate. She considers how "[e]verything was changed since crinolines had gone out and bustles come in" and how "society at Saratoga, now that all the best people were going to Newport, had grown as mixed and confusing as the fashions."¹ In the subsequent years, despite their wealth, the St. Georges find New York high society frankly inhospitable. The family matriarch reflects that "it was bitter to be left out of all the most exclusive entertainments, to have not a single invitation to Newport, to be unbidden to the Opera on the fashionable nights."²

At the girls' English governess's suggestion, the family decides to embark upon "a London season," thereby joining other American women who, in "a novel kind of invasion," married into the British aristocracy and inspired the envy of their wealthy countrywomen, who collectively looked to European traditions to cultivate exclusivity and social parameters in urban social life following the Civil War.³ As is the case with many of her works, Wharton's grounded the plot of *The Buccaneers* in historical reality. Sterngass argues that the American elite "eagerly imported titles, artifacts, and styles to substitute for their own lack of rooted credentials and conventions. At Newport, they rejected hotels and desperately aped the hereditary aristocracies of Europe, hoping to bask in the reflected glory."⁴ Thus, Mrs. St. George's attraction to English

¹ Edith Wharton and Marion Mainwaring, *The Buccaneers* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1938, 1993), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 87.

³ *Ibid.*, 86, 83.

⁴ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 221.

aristocratic traditions and the rise of Newport's elite status bore a strong correlation to the codification of stringent social parameters in American cities throughout the late 1860s and 1870s.

The end of the Civil War touched off a new era marked by rapid industrialization, population growth, and the dizzying acquisition of fortunes. American socialite Elizabeth Drexel Lehr remembered the postwar urban landscape as “an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of dazzling wealth, restless endeavor, and rivalry. The ‘Gilded Age’ had dawned. It merited its name.”⁵ Because of larger political, economic, cultural, and social conditions, the American elite—a competitive amalgamation of hereditary wealth and recent millionaires like Wharton's fictional St. George family—looked to Europe for instruction and stability. Tellingly, in 1900, Julia Ward Howe wrote, “In Aeseop's fables the ass puts on the lion's skin, but in our modern society this is reversed; the lion put on the ass' skin. The American lion would gladly be mistaken for the European ass, and has here and there acquired the ass' bray.”⁶ While some, like Howe, saw the American elite's late nineteenth century “assumption of foreign manners and customs” as deeply unpatriotic, others justified the practice and “methods of cultural transmission” in terms of the lack of an American aristocratic order in the Old World tradition.⁷ By historian Dana Cooper's estimation, 588 American women married titled Britons between 1865 and 1914, and though scholars dispute the exact number, the alliances “pledged British and American families to one another...”⁸ However, the bulk of the American leisure class forged this connection in subtler, more selective ways, and their embrace and adaptation of European fashion, architecture,

⁵ Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, *King Lehr and the Gilded Age* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1935), 19.

⁶ Julia Ward Howe, “Degeneration of Society,” *Austin's Hawaiian Weekly* 2, no. 20 (February 3, 1900): 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*; and Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 403.

⁸ Dana Cooper, *Informal Ambassadors: American Women, Transatlantic Marriages, and Anglo-American Relations, 1965-1945* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2014), 4.

manners, cuisine, and other traditions became common after the Civil War.

This trend utterly transformed Newport as a resort destination. Many of its antebellum southern visitors, attracted to the seaside town for its idyllic communal atmosphere, would have felt like utter strangers in Newport's increasingly stringent, exclusionary atmosphere that began to take shape during this transitional period. Facilitated by experienced social and cultural influencers like Ward McAllister and Richard Morris Hunt, Newport's metamorphosis into an exclusive summer resort between the end of the Civil War and the early 1880s reflected the American elite's construction of European-inspired social boundaries and opulent private residences that assigned significance to their wealth and sought to elevate the national cultural scene.

McAllister's first-hand experiences in European aristocratic circles and connection to Newport served as crucial precursors to his influence throughout the Gilded Age. As the *New York Sun* opined, "Mr. McAllister, like the celebrated Grecian philosopher, Epicurus, has enriched his mind by foreign travel, has studied the habits and customs of the more cultured classes at London, Paris, and other centres of fashion, and boldly advances truths and arguments before unknown..."⁹ His first trip to Europe in 1855 altered the course of his life and helped plant the seeds for Newport's transformation immediately following the Civil War. Prior to his departure from the United States, McAllister planned to follow the example of his grandfather, father, and brother by reading law. Initially, his career choice took him to San Francisco, where his brother, Hall, had established a law firm in 1848. Tempted by Hall's "Arabian Nights stories" of extraordinary profits—to the tune of \$100,000 per year, double what the family normally accrued from their holdings in Georgia—McAllister and his father left Savannah for California

⁹ "The Season at Newport," *The New York Sun*, October 5, 1877, 2.

in 1850.¹⁰ During the initial fervor of the Gold Rush, San Francisco was a dynamic, vibrant, and dangerous city swelling with a diverse population. As one reporter for the *Baltimore Commercial Journal* wrote in 1849, “There is no mistake about it, ... this is *the* true El Dorado [that] the wise men of by-gone days sought for so long in vain. It is impossible to tell, however, whether it will be a benefit or a curse for us.”¹¹ Casting the city as a place of “odd contrasts and droll inconsistencies,” another correspondent remarked that “the people of San Francisco are mad, stark mad.”¹² Living expenses were astronomical, and the high risk of violence encouraged the McAllisters to remain “armed to the teeth with knife and pistol” at all hours.¹³ Ward later described sleeping with a pistol under his pillow.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the entire family quickly reaped Hall’s promise of financial and professional success.

The McAllister firm in San Francisco specialized in criminal defense, debt collection, mining claims, and real estate matters, but Ward’s value lay in orchestrating social matters.¹⁵ In modern terminology, Ward excelled at networking. Following his father’s advice to “always invite nice people,” Ward oversaw various dinners and other entertainments on the firm’s behalf that, as he later reflected, were “never... surpassed anywhere.”¹⁶ Of the two brothers, Hall—ambitious, resilient, and unafraid to take risks—was better suited to the city’s booms and busts. Ward’s talents, on the other hand, were more conducive to the opposite coast, and after two years in California, “his love of the East won him back.”¹⁷ He initially settled near his extended family

¹⁰ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 19.

¹¹ “Interesting from San Francisco,” *The Baltimore Weekly Commercial Journal*, April 7, 1849, 176.

¹² “Life in San Francisco,” *The Mountain Sentinel*, Ebensburg, PA, January 17, 1850, 1.

¹³ Matthew Hall McAllister III to Ward McAllister, February 15, 1853, Folder 1, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers.

¹⁴ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 20.

¹⁵ Daniel W. Levy, “Four California Lawyers in the Classical Era,” Spring 1994, Digital Stacks, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford University, 13, <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hn318gd2085/SCM0198.pdf>.

¹⁶ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 20.

¹⁷ “Ward McAllister,” *The University Magazine* 9, no. 1 (July 1893): 866.

in New York City. In February 1853, he married Sarah Taintor Gibbons, a Georgia heiress later described as “an omnivorous reader [with] ... the face of a girl [and]... the mind of a philosopher.”¹⁸ The Gibbons family was tremendously wealthy, originating in Savannah and eventually relocating to New Jersey, from whence they operated a ferry to New York. Sarah’s grandfather, Thomas Gibbons, was the appellant in the landmark *Gibbons v. Ogden* Supreme Court Case, which upheld Congress’s regulatory power over interstate commerce. Moreover, Thomas Gibbons offered a young Cornelius “Commodore” Vanderbilt a post in his thriving shipping company, a position that greatly influenced his later success.¹⁹ After Sarah and Ward’s marriage in 1853, the newlyweds purchased Bayside Farm and decided to make Middletown, Rhode Island, just a few miles from Newport, their “permanent home.”²⁰ Hall, with whom Ward sustained a regular correspondence, delighted at the idea of the couple “all snugly fixed at Newport.”²¹ The farm included a humble white farmhouse, roughly fifty acres of land, and waterfront access to Narragansett Bay.

As an independently wealthy and newly married twenty-six-year-old, Ward considered many paths for his future. “[N]ot wishing to be idle,” he proposed returning to San Francisco, which Hall dissuaded.²² In August 1853, Hall wrote, “What a strange idea it is you bare [*sic*], and how you do persist in it, of coming out to this country—Why my dear fellow it would be perfectly absurd—As for enjoyment of life, you... would not leave the Atlantic States to find it here...”²³ Hall encouraged Ward to invest a portion of Sarah’s income into San Francisco’s

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ T.J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 36.

²⁰ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 42.

²¹ Matthew Hall McAllister III to Ward McAllister, August 15, 1853, Folder 2, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers.

²² McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 21.

²³ Matthew Hall McAllister III to Ward McAllister, August 15, 1853.

booming real estate industry and reap “the benefit of a California interest and a New York rate of living.”²⁴ “Abandon now and forever all idea of visiting this country,” Hall concluded. “[I]t is a wretched Hole at best, and no one ought to come here, who can live like a gentleman at home.”²⁵ In lieu of returning to California, Ward sought a position as secretary to James Buchanan, then the United States Minister to Great Britain. However, Ward’s father also desired a position under President Franklin Pierce. The senior McAllister explained to his son that the president “cannot give two appointments to one family. If you go to England as Buchanan’s Secretary, President Pierce cannot make me Circuit Judge of California.”²⁶

While Ward yielded to his father, his brother discouraged him from abandoning his travel plans. In a telling letter concerning their sister Harriet’s marriage prospects, Hall commented, “Before she marries anybody, or engages herself to anybody, she ought to see the world—mingle in society—travel to Europe if possible. And understand and feel what life really is.”²⁷ Confident in “the continued brightness of [Ward’s] prospects,” Hall encouraged his brother to do the same, writing, “This going abroad strikes me as better than any other suggestion for your future... I sincerely trust you will succeed in it.”²⁸ Hall’s encouragement no doubt played a critical role in Ward’s decision to go to Europe. Ward and Sarah traveled, with their two small children, to England, France, Italy, Germany, and Austria and spent three years eagerly learning foreign customs, traditions, manners, cuisine, and entertaining practices. When McAllister returned to

²⁴ Matthew Hall McAllister III to Ward McAllister, June 15, 1853, Folder 2, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers; and August 15, 1853, Folder 2, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 21. Contemporary letters between Ward and Hall McAllister suggest ongoing disagreements between Ward and his father. Whether the loss of the secretaryship because of his father’s ambitions added to the strain on their relationship is unclear.

²⁷ Matthew Hall McAllister III to Ward McAllister, February 15, 1853, Folder 1, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers.

²⁸ Matthew Hall McAllister III to Ward McAllister, February 28, 1853, Folder 1, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers.

the United States in 1858, he encountered a country that was increasingly receptive to “the benefit of [his] European education.”²⁹

McAllister’s transformative European tour coincided with advancements in trans-Atlantic travel. An 1853 *New York Herald* article commented that, in decades past, the international traveler “was considered a very lucky and a very great man indeed if he got back safely, and he was for months afterwards the lion of the drawing-room and the pet of the fair sex. Look at the change now!”³⁰ By the 1850s, innovations in steamships and the growth of shipping companies like the Cunard and Collins Lines ushered in a “Golden Age of Sail,” which reduced the duration of trans-Atlantic crossings to nine or ten days.³¹ By 1898, additional advancements in engineering shortened the trip to an average of five and a half days.³² Travel became more affordable as well. Whereas the average first-class ticket cost roughly \$76.50 in 1860, the price dropped to \$40 by 1883.³³ For context, in the 1890s, a first-class steamer ticket cost the equivalent of a bicycle.³⁴ Availability of reliable, affordable accommodations powerfully impacted the already growing tourism industry. In 1872, the *Newport Daily News* predicted that “the usual spring and summer rush of travel from New York to Europe” would generate a larger “number of tourists abroad this year...than any previous season,” resulting in “quite a lively competition between the various lines of ocean steamships carrying mails and passengers.”³⁵

The increased availability of European travel also had wider implications on American cultural identity and international relations. As the *New York Herald* observed, “These floating

²⁹ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 35.

³⁰ “The Travel to Europe—Americans Abroad—Departure of Diplomats,” *The New York Herald*, August 20, 1853, 4.

³¹ Edwin C. Guillet, *The Great Migration: The Atlantic Crossing by Sailing Ship, 1770-1860* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 233; and De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters*, 157.

³² Guillet, *The Great Migration*, 245.

³³ Cooper, *Informal Ambassadors*, 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *The Newport Daily News*, Newport, RI, March 29, 1872, 2.

palaces... form connecting links in the great golden chain that binds us to the New World... Thus we find, insensibly, that foreign manners, foreign ideas, and foreign costumes have become adopted in our country, and that the 'language of the courts' is more and more familiar in the mouths of all ranks of our citizens."³⁶ In her analysis of the Prince of Wales' American tour in 1860, Skye Montgomery highlights the "transformation in the ways Americans understood and celebrated their national identity."³⁷ She argues, "By mid-century, the centrality of Great Britain as a point of negative reference in relation to 'Americanness' was declining and many Americans embraced aspects of English cultural heritage with an enthusiasm that would have been unthinkable only years before."³⁸ This embrace was far from one-sided.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the British peerage's view, especially of newly wealthy American families, underwent a considerable change during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Maureen E. Montgomery explains that "the barriers against commercial and industrial wealth were lowered, and the power and prestige of elite status were shared with the new captains of industry and finance. 'Entrance qualifications' were not so demanding as they had been in the past."³⁹ As a result, the British aristocracy increasingly permitted American participation in elite social life. Though they never entirely lost their "outsider status" in British high society, Americans' inclusion in the London Season "provided the opportunity... to enter aristocratic households and be presented in court."⁴⁰ They seized these opportunities to observe and become better acquainted with aristocratic traditions in European social centers. Moreover, Montgomery points out that these relaxed standards also served as an important precursor to the

³⁶ "The Travel to Europe."

³⁷ Skye Montgomery, "Reannealing of the Heart Ties: The Rhetoric of Anglo-American Kinship and the Politics of Reconciliation in the Prince of Wales's 1860 Tour," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 2 (2016): 201.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Maureen E. Montgomery, *'Gilded Prostitution': Status, Money, and Transatlantic Marriages, 1870-1914* (London: Routledge, 1989), 80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

frequency of Anglo-American marriages throughout the Gilded Age, which set a far-reaching precedent. Cooper affirms that once these familial alliances were secured, “[f]or better or for worse, through successful and unsuccessful marriages, these women became informal ambassadors... Their lives abroad gave them countless diplomatic opportunities to represent the United States to Great Britain as the two nations moved closer to a rapprochement and a truly special relationship.”⁴¹

Trans-Atlantic cultural and commercial exchange played a central role throughout Newport’s history. European influence on the city dates to its founding, especially owing to its centuries-long reputation as a thriving international port and the presence of British and French military forces during the American Revolution.⁴² Whereas the city “naturally emulated the social norms of the mother country” and, as a result, enjoyed a large Loyalist population throughout the colonial era, the harsh British occupation during the American Revolution severed this historic reverence.⁴³ After the 1779 arrival of Newport’s French “redeemer[s],” the city’s population embraced French dress and cuisine, which remained “all the fashion in America” into the 1870s.⁴⁴ Maud Howe Elliott recalled that when she “first developed social consciousness, the tone of Newport was distinctly French.”⁴⁵ Newport also retained its English and French architectural influence into the nineteenth century. As Downing, Scully, and Paul M. Baker explain, “curved bays, elliptical rooms, bow windows, ... flying and spiral staircases,” and mansard roofs remained popular.⁴⁶ Later, Newport’s vacationers, more so than its year-round residents, adapted foreign traditions to accommodate changing tastes and values, ultimately

⁴¹ Cooper, *Informal Ambassadors*, 193.

⁴² Stensrud, *Newport*, 146, 248.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; and Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980), 75.

⁴⁵ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 132.

⁴⁶ Downing and Scully, *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*, 106; and Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 121.

seeking to “[imitate the] public display, ritual, and protocol of European court life.”⁴⁷

As Sterngass explains, “Although Newport County ranked as one of the wealthiest counties in the United States according to the 1860 census, the Newport of ostentatious plutocrats did not really exist before the Civil War.”⁴⁸ Scholars generally regard the Civil War as a demarcating event that signaled a change in American culture. Historian Greg King argues that social leaders in American urban centers, especially New York, reacted to a national sense of “enormous upheaval” resulting from the war.⁴⁹ Thus, European influence remained—indeed, even strengthened—but took on new significance and value in Newport after 1865. Exacerbated by what one contemporary called an “invasion of wealth and ambition from other parts of the nation” into its cities, “America, like many countries in the uncertain nineteenth century, was in the grip of nationalism, searching for a sense of heritage that would bestow prestige. The adoption of aristocratic standards thus offered clear examples upon which Gilded Age society could model itself.”⁵⁰ Consequently, the urban elite began crafting, in the words of Eric Homberger, a unique, “shared sense of corporate identity.”⁵¹

Exclusion and the embrace of high culture proved central to this end. King writes, “Exclusion provided this new elite with its *raison d’être*: to be desirable, society must be seen as something distinct.”⁵² Even contemporaries drew a connection between the influx of European customs and the American elite’s desire to define, as Elizabeth Drexel Lehr termed it, “Society—with a capital ‘S.’”⁵³ In 1866, *Harper’s Weekly* lambasted postwar extravagance, lamenting that “New York is apparently content to be a cast-off Paris... The wild waste of money in the most

⁴⁷ Montgomery, *Gilded Prostitution*, 48.

⁴⁸ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 188.

⁴⁹ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 7.

⁵⁰ Van Rensselaer, *The Social Ladder*, 36; see also King, *A Season of Splendor*, 7.

⁵¹ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 150.

⁵² King, *A Season of Splendor*, 5.

⁵³ Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 250.

vulgar ways is a matter of profound public concern. It tends directly to make marriage difficult, and whatever limits honorable marriage threatens public morality.”⁵⁴ By way of solution, the writer encouraged greater regulations on high society. He urged “the sensible people in ‘society’” to “plainly discountenance the gaudy and mad extravagance of the time, and teach the spirit and taste and dress and manners of the demi-monde that they must not presume upon admission to ‘society.’”⁵⁵ Consequently, the architects of American postwar social institutions adapted timeworn traditions to their contemporary needs to achieve control and establish authority. Armed with firsthand experiences in fashionable European circles, two of these architects, Ward McAllister and Richard Morris Hunt, stepped easily into fulfilling this goal.

Beginning in the early 1870s, McAllister gained a foothold in New York because of his independent wealth, important familial connections, and deft application of European customs to American social life. He believed, “The American people have a *greater* power of ‘catching hold,’ and adapting themselves to new surroundings than any other people in the world.”⁵⁶ Thus, as McAllister commented, “We imported European customs rapidly.”⁵⁷ In 1872, McAllister created the Patriarchs, a subscription-based committee that organized, presided over, and controlled the guest lists of annual assembly balls hosted at Delmonico’s restaurant in New York. The “Patriarchs were chosen solely for their fitness,” McAllister later said of the twenty-five “representative men... who had the right to create and lead society.”⁵⁸ They paid a \$125 annual fee to earn the privilege of inviting a select number of guests to the events.⁵⁹ He explained,

⁵⁴ “The Feast of Folly,” *Harper’s Weekly* 10, no. 495 (June 23, 1866): 386.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁵⁶ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 81.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 71; This number was later increased to fifty members.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72, 71.

We knew then, and we know now, that the whole secret of the success of these Patriarch Balls lay in making them select; in making them the most brilliant balls of each winter; in making extremely difficult to obtain an invitation to them, and to make such invitations of great value; ... and to make them the stepping-stone to the best New York Society... The social life of a great part of our community, in my opinion, hinges on this and similar organizations, for it and they are organized social power, capable of giving a passport to society to all worthy of it.⁶⁰

McAllister styled the Patriarchs after London's most famous assembly room, Almack's, which one nineteenth century observer termed "the most holy place of fashion."⁶¹ The tradition of the assembly or "hunt" ball originated in the English countryside during the eighteenth century, but it eventually found its way into urban centers.⁶² The event became synonymous with presenting eligible debutantes and, by extension, making calculated alliances among wealthy families. At its core, however, Almack's promoted social control. As one attendee later reflected, when the British elite recognized that "a shadow was creeping over the aristocracy of the land: wealth was eclipsing peerage," they organized Almack's "[i]n a spirit of self-defense."⁶³ The Patriarchs— "an American Almack's"— addressed a similar concern.⁶⁴ Possessing judicious dominion over the annual Patriarch Ball, each committee member could extend invitations to four ladies and five gentlemen.⁶⁵ Collectively, the organization hoped "to make [the Patriarch Balls] thoroughly representative; to embrace the old Colonial New Yorkers, our adopted citizens, and men whose ability and integrity had won the esteem of the community."⁶⁶ The Patriarchs also relied on collective social sensitivity to maintain the perceived quality of their ranks. Inviting someone perceived as gauche or otherwise unworthy reflected poorly on the committee member and, by extension, the organization as a whole. Both "old" and "new" money families

⁶⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁶¹ "Almack's, a Sketch, by an American," *Bentley's Miscellany* 10 (January 1, 1841): 640.

⁶² Richardson, *The Season*, 36.

⁶³ "Recollections of Almack's, by a Chaperon," *London Society* 4, no. 2 (August 1863): 145, 146.

⁶⁴ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 71.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 71-72.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 72.

could receive invitations, a fact that especially tantalized the latter, who ambitiously longed to be included.

The committee disbanded in 1897, but in its twenty-five years of activity, the Patriarch Balls became, in the words of the *Boston Globe*, “the leading fixtures of each social season.”⁶⁷ As a result, not only did the Patriarchs “[become] a device by which changing relations within the upper strata of New York society were managed and accommodated” during a period of “social anarchy,” but the committee’s success cemented McAllister’s influence in the city for the next two decades.⁶⁸ In fact, historians regard the Patriarchs as the ingenious high point of McAllister’s career and a veritable “masterstroke.”⁶⁹ His organizational talent also had personal and professional implications. As Patterson notes, “The Patriarchal decree was the earliest manifestation of McAllister’s ambition: the direction of New York Society. Although no one had asked him, he assumed the mantle of authority, deciding who was in Society and who was not, issuing his decisions with Old Testament firmness.”⁷⁰ The Patriarchs thrust McAllister and his vision for New York society into the limelight. McAllister later reflected, “From the giving of the first of these dances...I had no peace at home or abroad. I was assailed on all sides...”⁷¹ He became, by his own estimation, “a diplomat” to the wealthy.⁷²

Given the unprecedented coexistence of hereditary wealth and new fortunes in American cities and the fact that, as one contemporary commented, “The Society of Birth and the Society of Wealth mingle no more readily than oil and waters,” McAllister’s brilliant organizational techniques seemed to justified exclusion yet left room to permit a select number of the *nouveau*

⁶⁷ “M’Allister,” 1.

⁶⁸ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 185; and Davis, *Gilded*, 34.

⁶⁹ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 963.

⁷⁰ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 78.

⁷¹ “M’Allister,” 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

riche to enter society's ranks.⁷³ He later adapted similar principles when organizing subscription picnics at his farm near Newport. Just as the Patriarch Balls "put McAllister in a position to favor any family in New York that were struggling for social recognition," he wielded power over the selective guest lists at his summer picnics.⁷⁴ In both cases, he actively refined the contested definition and parameters of high society. Thus, McAllister's organizational power over New York and Newport entertainments represented a unique blend of Old World aristocratic order and New World ingenuity.

One of the most important tools for cultivating a collective definition of gentility and a sense of separateness during the Gilded Age was the American elite's self-description as patrons of high culture. One commentator called high society "the star of civilization"—an institution that "manipulates the movements of mankind toward lifting humanity from the retrogressive drift of its natural tendency" and "elevates the standard of the race."⁷⁵ By belonging to this privileged group, wealthy Americans accordingly endowed themselves with a sense of *noblesse oblige*. This gave society a meaningful calling and purpose, which, McAllister thought, benefited the nation as a whole and undermined the European opinion that the United States was "a country... filled with admirable ambition but lacking both manners and artistic heritage."⁷⁶ He wrote,

The elegancies of fashionable life nourish and benefit art and artists; they cause the expenditure of money and its distribution; and they really prevent our people and country from settling down into a humdrum rut and becoming merely a money-making and money-saving people, with nothing to brighten up and enliven life; ... They bring to the front merit of every kind; seek it in the remotest corners, where it modestly shrinks from observation, and force it into notice; adorn their houses with works of art and themselves with all the taste and novelty they can find in any quarter of the globe, calling worth talent and ingenuity.⁷⁷

⁷³ Van Rensselaer, *The Social Ladder*, 108.

⁷⁴ "The Swell Set in Gotham," *The Savannah Morning News*, March 12, 1892, 5.

⁷⁵ "Society," undated clipping from unspecified newspaper, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers.

⁷⁶ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 36.

⁷⁷ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 57.

Aided by their vast stores of disposable income, wealthy Americans' assumption of cultural stewardship physically transformed their surroundings, a national practice with roots in the seventeenth century. In *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, Richard L. Bushman demonstrates how Americans have used decoration, architecture, and other aspects of the "material world" to "elevate life to a higher level of beauty" and "capture... aristocratic culture for use in republican society."⁷⁸ Similarly, Gilded Age neighborhoods and private residences exemplified the wealthy's modification of their built environments to manifest and codify a prevailing "ethos of exclusion."⁷⁹ Sterngass explains, "Nineteenth-century Americans believed that everything had its specific place: Indians on reservations, lions in zoos, the insane in asylums, athletes on sports fields, or the wealthy in class-based residence zones."⁸⁰ Though these designations changed over time, neighborhoods like Washington Square, Murray Hill, and Fifth Avenue in New York; the North Shore and the Back Bay in Boston; and Prairie Avenue and the Gold Coast area in Chicago served as epicenters of fashion and respectability at various points in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Like McAllister's vision for elite social institutions, grand architectural feats within designated New York and Newport neighborhoods exemplified a characteristic amalgamation of Old World influences and New World values. Throughout the Gilded Age, architects frequently blended a variety of different styles— from French and Swiss to Georgian, Italianate and Palladian to Gothic— on and within the same structure. In King's words, these homes stood "side by side in a confusing architectural riot" but afforded their wealthy owners the opportunity

⁷⁸ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xviii, xix, xii.

⁷⁹ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 10.

⁸⁰ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 213.

to assert their “social supremacy.”⁸¹ While this trend was particularly apparent in New York, especially along Fifth Avenue, grand homes appeared in several major American cities during the Gilded Age. In an 1871 article for *Scribner’s Magazine*, author J.T. Headley wondered if “under the influence of wealth and a ruinous fashion,” Philadelphia’s fashionable neighborhoods might eventually imitate New York, “where people do not build homes for their own comfort, but [as] objects of admiration for other people to gaze at.”⁸² These palatial private residences also helped the wealthy visualize otherwise intangible principles associated with a burgeoning definition of the American elite. King explains the profound significance of these “carefully crafted” environments; he writes, “Tied to centuries of privilege and power, [these houses] evoked precisely the spirit of permanence and wealth with which Gilded Age society wished to surround itself. Ensnared in a stately new palace, wandering amid its marble corridors, and entertaining in a lavish ballroom, its owners could envision themselves as true successors of Old World aristocracy.”⁸³

Throughout the late 1860s and 1870s, the urban elite also applied their patchwork conception of American high society to their built environments in Newport. Newport’s transformation from a resort predominated by communal amusements to one of private, exclusive homes, beaches, and entertainment spaces mirrors the wealthy’s contemporary efforts to solidify class distinctions and undertake “the elaborate staging of gentility.”⁸⁴ Like areas in major American cities, Bellevue Avenue, Ocean Drive, and Bailey’s Beach acquired distinction as elite and highly selective locations in Newport. Whereas privatization and the desire for “social distance” became a hallmark feature of late antebellum era Newport, the trend

⁸¹ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 131, 179.

⁸² J.T. Headley, “Philadelphia,” *Scribner’s Monthly* 2, no. 3 (July 1871): 236.

⁸³ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 140, 130.

⁸⁴ Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 65.

strengthened at the dawn of the Gilded Age.⁸⁵ This principle became more stringent over time. For example, by 1883, Bellevue Avenue had shed its reputation as a sparsely populated stretch of land “neither named nor dreamed of” and transformed, like the city around it, into “one great artery of summer wealth, the most celebrated of streets— a conservative, truly aristocratic close corporation of residents, whose holders’ tenacity has held this avenue against all speculation has kept it for themselves and their posterity.”⁸⁶ McAllister’s Newport holdings, by contrast, did not fall into the Gilded Age understanding of a fashionable locale on Aquidneck Island. He met his guests at Narragansett Avenue in Newport, from whence they made the roughly six-mile trek in either a caravan of coaches or, after 1864, by train. That he still managed to make the undoubtedly out-of-the-way Bayside Farm a desirable and socially-significant location testifies to his personal ingenuity. He later remarked of Bayside Farm, “I bought this place in 1853; if I had bought the same amount of land south of Newport, instead of north of the town, it would have been worth a fortune today.”⁸⁷

Like urban neighborhoods and residences that reflected changing American customs, Newport’s summer cottages stood as a testament to the prevalence of European influence that became fashionable after the Civil War. As the *Brooklyn Times Union* noted,

It is said we are growing each year more and more like our English cousins; we strive to do everything pertaining to society according to the latest approved degree of ‘smartness’ that is seen in London, or at the fine old English country houses. To a certain extent we can do this. Many of our wealthiest citizens own fine country estates, which, if they have not the age of the English places, or perhaps the family picture gallery, are still as well appointed and show as much magnificence and wealth, if it has been more recently acquired.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 192.

⁸⁶ “Old Time Newport,” 1; and *Newport Villa Owners Summer Visitors’ and Residents’ Guide to the Reliable Business Interests of the City, for 1883*, 13.

⁸⁷ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 44.

⁸⁸ “Where Society is Going: Summer Resorts and Country Houses Being Opened,” *The Brooklyn Times Union*, June 23, 1887, 4.

In particular, the American elite adapted the concept of the English country home—which had long “afforded an opportunity to demonstrate one’s taste, a principal means of achieving social distinction”—to resort destinations like Newport, the Berkshires, and the Hudson River Valley.⁸⁹ King argues that “members of Gilded Age society consciously attempt[ed] to replicate the traditions of the Old World through such estates... Freed from the usual social concerns and the hustle of city life, they offered bucolic escapes without loss of the trappings of grandeur and the luxuries deemed so necessary to life in the Gilded Age.”⁹⁰ Owning a country house or coastal summer residence also mirrored the idea that the wealthy could use their money to elevate the nation’s cultural scene. As one 1859 architectural handbook explained, “A nation, whose rural population is content to live in mean huts and miserable hovels, is certain to be behind in education, the arts, and all that makes up the external signs of progress. With the perception of proportion, symmetry, order, and beauty, awakens the desire for possession, and with them comes the refinement of manners which distinguishes a civilized from a coarse and brutal people.”⁹¹ Only “when smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country,” the author opined, did one see proof that “order and culture are established.”⁹²

As Stensrud argues, in the Civil War’s immediate aftermath, “the very nature of [Newport] was being radically transmuted with the demise of the huge hotel and the corresponding rise of the mammoth mansion.”⁹³ Throughout the transitional early years of the Gilded Age, hotels that had once been Newport’s crowning features closed in rapid succession. In 1875, the *New York Times* published an article titled “The City of Cottages: Decline of

⁸⁹ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 184.

⁹⁰ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 249.

⁹¹ Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton, 1859), v.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Stensrud, *Newport*, 367.

Newport Hotel Life,” which bemoaned the closure of all but two of Newport’s seven most popular “first-class houses” and criticized tourists’ purchase or rental of private cottages for their supposed “social advantages not given by hotel boarders.”⁹⁴ In 1852, Newport’s tax records recorded only twelve local homeowners who visited solely in the summer months. but by the late 1870s, annual lists of “villa owners” from American cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, and hundreds of others appeared in print.⁹⁵ The impact of this private construction boom cannot be understated. American novelist Henry James witnessed its transforming effect on “the dainty isle of Aquidneck,” complaining how “the face of nature was now as much obliterated as possible, and the original shy sweetness [of Newport] as much as possible bedizened and bedeviled.”⁹⁶ Several of James’ later works included sharp critiques of American extravagance, which, he thought, was epitomized by Newport’s physical changes. He observed that Newport “now bristles with the villas and palaces into which the cottages have turned” and lamented how “these monuments of pecuniary power”—veritable “white elephants”—were “all cry and no wool, all house and no garden,” yet came to dominate the resort’s landscape.⁹⁷

Like their urban counterparts, Newport’s Gilded Age cottages were rarely confined to one architectural style. One journalist described Gilded Age Newport as “a galaxy of most elaborate country houses... of every conceivable kind,” including “French, Gothic, Swiss, Flemish, Elizabethan—every sort of ancient house known to Great Britain or Continental Europe being imitated or improved upon, while in some remarkable cases widely varying styles are

⁹⁴ “The City of Cottages: Decline of Newport Hotel Life,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 1875, 1.

⁹⁵ Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer, *Newport: Our Social Capital* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1905), 27; and Denison, *The Past and the Present: Narragansett Sea and Shore*, 83-85.

⁹⁶ Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1907), 204.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 203, 204, 205, 216.

condensed into one.”⁹⁸ From the onset of Newport’s midcentury building boom to the end of the nineteenth century, cottage owners consistently relied on architects to capture their vision for luxurious suburban living. As a result, talented men like Horace Trumbauer, Charles McKim, Stanford White, and Richard Morris Hunt became celebrities of their day by catering to Newport’s wealthiest tourists and constructing some of the grandest, most iconic landmarks that survive today.⁹⁹

Hunt was particularly important to Newport’s transformative building boom in the immediate postbellum years. Maud Howe Elliott wrote, “The Emperor Caesar Augustus ‘found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble.’ Richard Hunt might well have said, ‘I found Newport a town of wood; I left it a town of marble.’”¹⁰⁰ Born in 1827 in Battleboro, Vermont, Hunt was the first American to study at the renowned *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and, in the words of the *Newport Mercury*, designed “many of the finest Newport residences” during the Gilded Age.¹⁰¹ Celebrated New York architect Charles McKim later regarded Hunt as “the pioneer and ice-breaker who paved the way for recognition of the profession by the public.”¹⁰² Throughout his lengthy career, Hunt gained national renown for designing George Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, the Statue of Liberty’s pedestal, many of the buildings that housed the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, renovations to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and many other public and private landmarks.

⁹⁸ “Newport,” *The Democratic Advocate*, Westminster, MD, August 31, 1889, 1.

⁹⁹ Downing and Scully, *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*, 171; Downing and Scully argue that the professionalization and, therefore, more formal recognition of architects’ roles elevated their status beginning in the 1870s.

¹⁰⁰ Maud Howe Elliott, *Three Generations* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1923), 117-118.

¹⁰¹ Richard Chafee, “Hunt in Paris,” in *The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt*, Susan R. Stein, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 13; and “Death of R.M. Hunt,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, August 3, 1895, 1.

¹⁰² Charles McKim to Lawrence White, April 21, 1909, in Charles Moore, *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), 303.

King also assigns Hunt wider significance to the American elite's efforts to codify high society. He explains, "Hunt's work was characteristic of the age, and it spanned the end of the Victorian movement to encompass not only Beaux-Arts ideals but also the growing taste for neoclassicism and historicism, all carefully drawing on European precedents as filtered through an American prism."¹⁰³ Like McAllister, Hunt's life and career underscores the American elite's reliance on influencers with firsthand experience with the places and traditions they sought to emulate in the United States. As Paul M. Baker explains, Hunt's timely "designs... helped forward the renewed unifying nationalism which followed the Civil War and Reconstruction."¹⁰⁴ Echoing McAllister's perspective on high society's purpose and potential, Hunt "strongly believed that the arts were necessary for an advanced civilization and that he would be able to contribute a great deal as a professional architect in the United States."¹⁰⁵

After completing vigorous and highly competitive schooling at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, where he mastered construction, mathematics, perspective, and architectural design, Hunt traveled throughout Europe in the 1850s, a trip that minimally overlapped with McAllister's own European tour.¹⁰⁶ Hunt's travels were practical in nature. As Baker explains, "In his journeys he attempted to broaden his knowledge of the history of architecture by becoming personally acquainted with as many of the great buildings of the past as he could visit."¹⁰⁷ Surviving sketches trace his journey throughout France, Germany, England, Belgium, Italy, the Middle East, and Asia Minor. In 1855, he returned to the United States, eager to begin his professional career. In his wife's words, Hunt "returned to his native land accredited as an ambassador of art,

¹⁰³ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 156.

¹⁰⁴ Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, xv.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁶ Chafee, "Hunt in Paris," 23.

¹⁰⁷ Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 45.

from the abounding wealth of the old world to the infinite possibilities of the new.”¹⁰⁸ His challenge and ultimate triumph would be his ability to blend the two.

Hunt also enjoyed a lifetime connection to Newport. His brother and sister-in-law, William and Louisa, relocated there in 1856. Four years later, Hunt met his future wife, Catherine Howland, in town, and several of Catherine’s siblings settled nearby, strengthening their local ties. Richard and Catherine made Newport their “second home” and eventually purchased William and Louisa’s cottage, called Hill Top, in 1864.¹⁰⁹ The Hunt brothers easily fit in with Newport’s thriving artistic community in the 1850s and 1860s, and Hill Top’s adjacent artist’s studio became a hub of activity for the local intelligentsia. Among the studio’s denizens were artists and writers like John La Farge, William and Henry James, and Edward Wheelwright; Julia Ward Howe even delivered a lecture and reading of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” there in 1865.¹¹⁰ Stensrud identifies “shared artistic vision and a mutual love of Newport” as the common bond that brought these talented men and women together in the Hill Top studio on Church Street.¹¹¹ It was at this intellectual gathering place, Stensrud explains, where “these men shaped and shared their visions of what the structure and intent of real art was and could be.”¹¹²

Possessing strong family ties and a welcoming community of creative peers, Hunt also helped foster Newport’s transition from hotel-based resort to one dominated by European-inspired private homes. Between 1863 and 1880, he designed six private villas in Newport, as well as a centrally located commercial building on Bellevue Avenue called Travers Block. He quickly won the admiration of his clients and the local press. Referring to the cottage Hunt had

¹⁰⁸ Catherine Clinton Howland Hunt, *Unpublished Biography of Richard Morris Hunt, 1895-1909*, Binder 1, typescript, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, Miscellaneous Items in High Demand, The Library of Congress, 205, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/pnp/ppmsca/35100/35141.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 138.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 353.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 358.

designed for her, one Newport client remarked, “The only place where it is not perfect is where I did not follow his advice.”¹¹³ One of Hunt’s most prominent Newport commissions was the renovation and enlargement of George Peabody Wetmore’s French-inspired villa, Château-Sur-Mer, in multiple phases throughout the 1870s. A year after it was completed in 1852, one local guidebook referred to “the almost palatial residence” as “the *ne plus ultra* of taste and utility.”¹¹⁴ In 1876, after Hunt’s second phase of renovations, the *Newport Daily News* called the Wetmore residence “one of the finest in the country.”¹¹⁵ Today, owned and operated by the Preservation Society of Newport County, Château-sur-Mer remains open to visitors as an earlier example of the Bellevue Avenue cottages that defined the Gilded Age.

Architectural historians generally associate Hunt’s designs with the uniquely American Stick Style, which prevailed throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century and featured prominent wooden details, “irregular and picturesque outlines,” and the visibility of structural elements of the home’s “skeleton.”¹¹⁶ Hunt often added ornamental details to “enhance and unify the forms of the house,” achieving a “more natural, ‘organic’” look.¹¹⁷ However, Sarah Bradford Landau argues that this traditional interpretation downplays Hunt’s European influence, which had roots in his international travels.¹¹⁸ The sheer diversity of Hunt’s designs supports Landau’s view. Incorporating a variety of vernacular styles taken from French, German, and Swiss influences, among others, Hunt was responsible for some of the “princely dwellings” that

¹¹³ Catherine Clinton Howland Hunt, *Unpublished Biography of Richard Morris Hunt, 1895-1909*, Binder 2, typescript, 165, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, Miscellaneous Items in High Demand, The Library of Congress, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/pnp/ppmsca/35100/35155.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Dix, *A Hand-Book of Newport and Rhode Island*, 169.

¹¹⁵ “Building Operations,” *The Newport Daily News*, Newport, RI, April 25, 1876, 1.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Bradford Landau, “Richard Morris Hunt, the Continental Picturesque, and the ‘Stick Style,’” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42, no. 3 (1983): 272.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 275; and Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 121.

¹¹⁸ Landau, “Richard Morris Hunt, the Continental Picturesque, and the ‘Stick Style,’” 272, 277.

became synonymous with Gilded Age Newport.¹¹⁹ Baker affirms Hunt's lasting significance to the area. He notes, "It was in Newport that Richard would... do some of his most important and impressive work, helping to share the physical form of the community and to fix a part of its historic and symbolic meaning. In Newport, more than anywhere else, Hunt's work would establish his later conventional reputation."¹²⁰

Hunt not only designed new homes, but also worked alongside the wealthy to renovate existing ones. In 1881, Caroline Schermerhorn Astor and her husband, William Backhouse Astor, Jr. purchased Beechwood, a cottage on Bellevue Avenue originally constructed in 1853. In 1888, she hired Hunt to oversee significant renovations to the residence. The Astors had made their fortunes, in part, through real estate, but this transaction had immense social significance. In the 1870s, Astor—who self-described as *the* Mrs. Astor, much to the irritation of her sisters-in-law—began her ascent to the pinnacle of New York society with McAllister's support. Possessing staunch ideas about the culturally constructive potential of codified social institutions, she allied with McAllister to regulate the tide of ambitious new millionaires pouring into the city. As King explains, Astor "envisioned a ruling elite that would provide an enduring legacy to her country. By forming a set of stringent rules, by creating around her a caste that replicated foreign ideals, Caroline attempted to endow American society with tradition and a sense of noblesse oblige."¹²¹ Astor's impact on Gilded Age New York's social history cannot be understated. Historian Lloyd Morris asserts that Astor "transformed society into a secular religion," ushering in a new era of competition under the auspices of aristocratic ideals and cultural responsibility.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Sarah Bradford Landau, "Richard Morris Hunt: Architectural Innovator and Father of a 'Distinctive' American School, in *The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt*, Susan R. Stein, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 52; and Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 161.

¹²⁰ Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 120.

¹²¹ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 6-7.

¹²² Lloyd Morris, *Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life from 1850 to 1950* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 145.

Therefore, Astor's choice of a summer home in Newport had enormous consequences. As Stensrud explains, "At that moment... Newport, with the august Astors at the helm, set off on its voyage as the undisputed aristocratic American resort. The second Golden Age had officially begun."¹²³

In the transitional period between the end of the Civil War and the early 1880s, the American elite looked to social arbiters like Ward McAllister and architects like Richard Morris Hunt to construct European-inspired social boundaries and opulent private residences that manifested an otherwise elusive definition of exclusivity, a trend that altered Newport's social scene and built environment. McAllister and Hunt's lifelong connections to Newport facilitated and reinforced the resort's absorption of these urban ideals. Moreover, both men's firsthand educations in Europe, though different in focus, were attuned to the perceived needs and values of the American elite in the immediate postwar period. Aided by diplomatic progress and advancements in transportation, Americans rapidly imported European customs to a receptive and socially insecure audience. While some criticized the "gross imitations of Napoleonic revels and imperial robberies" as a threat to American patriotism, others, especially those who had acquired fortunes in the wake of the Civil War, saw European ideals as a powerful tool with the potential to "[give] to all men a nobler notion of life."¹²⁴ The elite's desire for social codification mirrored and facilitated Newport's transformation from a hotel-based resort to one of private homeowners and exclusive neighborhoods and beaches.

The arrival of Caroline Astor signaled a new era for Gilded Age Newport. McAllister's childhood familial connections to Newport, paired with his intimate knowledge of European

¹²³ Stensrud, *Newport*, 385.

¹²⁴ "A Period of Reaction," *Harper's Weekly* 19, no. 943 (January 23, 1875): 78; and "Society," Ward McAllister Papers.

court customs and alliance with Astor, allowed him to transition into this new, flagrantly competitive period of Newport's history. Not only did he influence many of his fashionable friends in New York to begin summering in Newport, but he used the authority he had cultivated as the founder of the Patriarchs to exercise control over the summer resort's social scene. Far from the easygoing retreat antebellum tourists had enjoyed, Gilded Age Newport became synonymous with stifling competition and exclusivity as the nineteenth century drew to a close. As Van Rensselaer later reflected, "While Ward McAllister ruled, there was extravagance, but with it the saving grace of elegance. Whatever else may be said of this strange figure whose sole aim in life seems to have been to guide and direct Society, he had taste and culture. But the golden flood he started could not be controlled. McAllister made Newport vivid. He could not keep it from being vicious."¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Van Rensselaer, *The Social Ladder*, 238

Chapter 3: The New York Connection and the Era of Formality

Beginning in the 1880s, after a decade of European-inspired codification of social rank, “New York society turned over a new leaf” and entered a competitive, extravagant, and controversial phase.¹ As historian Jerry E. Patterson explains, “It was an era in which social behavior was stiff and formal but could also be both ostentatious and careless. Although no one knew it, least of all its central figures, the age was burning itself out.”² American high society continued to cultivate gentility and embrace high culture, but its institutions and practices became increasingly exclusionary under this newly-donned cloak of respectability. Unspoken rules reigned, and each action, inaction, invitation, or snub became laden with meaning. These values were fairly widespread, especially among the conservative members of New York’s upper class. Again, Edith Wharton effectively captured the claustrophobic environment of her youth—one riddled with “anxiety about food, fashion, social and sexual relationships, and the mysterious imponderables of ‘culture.’”—in her writings.³ For example, living in “an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies,” Wharton’s protagonist in *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, describes his high society peers as “people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than ‘scenes,’ except the behaviour of those who gave rise to them.”⁴ The same crowd seized control over Newport’s resort environment in the late nineteenth century.

Just as Newport mirrored New York society’s construction of social institutions and European-inspired villas in the immediate post-Civil War period, it again served as a microcosm

¹ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 110.

² Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 7.

³ Rhoda Nathan, “Ward McAllister: Beau Nash of ‘the Age of Innocence,’” *College Literature* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 278.

⁴ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Windsor Editions, 1920), 338.

for larger trends throughout the 1880s and 1890s.⁵ The summer social season became more codified and drew visitors to Newport each July and August, whereupon “Society continue[d] to be Newport’s chief industry.”⁶ The roughly ten-week season gave Newport an “artificial,” rigid air, a far cry from its antebellum reputation as a casual, relaxed resort destination.⁷ As *Town Topics* wrote in 1893, “[W]hile Newport is the ideal summer resort of the earth, it is like a garden in winter to anyone that is not one of its legitimate inhabitants. Except to drive along its handsome roads and gaze over the glittering lawns at the splendid houses, the ordinary tourist finds Newport a desert of dreariness. Once [you] get into those houses, however, . . . you are as near paradise as mortal man can ever approach.”⁸

Both Greg King and Maureen E. Montgomery divide the Gilded Age into two distinct periods or phases. King explains that the first period was imbued with Caroline Astor and Ward McAllister’s vision for an aristocratic, “munificent society.”⁹ The second period, dominated by Astor’s successors, saw “a more chaotic and lavishly indulgent version of society... An increasingly confused array of warring hostesses attempted to seize the reins of power, not through their cultivation of taste or insistence on refinement but with sybaritic splendor and ever more bizarre forms of novelty to keep themselves amused.”¹⁰ Montgomery labels the first period succinctly as an “era of formality,” and King aptly describes the second as an era of “frivolity.”¹¹ With their shared dedication to raising the standards of the American upper class, Astor and McAllister served as paramount figures during the 1880s in both New York and Newport.

⁵ Downing and Scully, *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*, 130.

⁶ Van Renssalaer, *The Social Ladder*, 221; and Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 82.

⁷ Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, *The Glitter and The Gold* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1952), 28.

⁸ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 29, no. 25 (June 22, 1893): 5.

⁹ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

¹¹ Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 32; and King, *A Season of Splendor*, 9.

However, cultural forces and the anarchical behavior of their wealthy peers began to gradually undermine their supremacy by the early 1890s.

In *The Husband Hunters: American Heiresses Who Married Into the British Aristocracy*, Anne de Courcy devotes Chapter 8 to Newport's role as "the testing ground for those who wanted to get into society."¹² After briefly tracing the resort's historic development, she describes Newport's ironclad social scene, largely controlled by women, as the backdrop for the English Duke of Marlborough's marriage proposal to Consuelo Vanderbilt. She explains, "The sea might be sparkling, the copper be[a]ches glowing in the sunshine, but the refreshing sea breezes brought no sense of holiday relaxation; rather, the rules of etiquette were even more stringent here... Nothing was too expensive or too grand for those summering in this little town."¹³ De Courcy stands apart for the weight she assigns to Ward McAllister as a key figure in Gilded Age New York and Newport. Though she terms him a "snob," she argues that his efforts and influence lay "at the heart of the stratagem designed to create what would become known variously as 'Society' and the 'Four Hundred.'"¹⁴ Moreover, she highlights his lifetime connection to Newport. Here, in her assessment, lies McAllister's greatest significance. De Courcy asserts that, as "one of Newport's earliest aficionados," McAllister was "[t]he catalyst for the change in Newport" that expedited its "New York invasion" and transformed it into the exclusive resort that defined the Gilded Age.¹⁵

By recognizing and responding to a chaotic postwar social environment, McAllister's creation of the Patriarchs entrenched his authority among a respectable amalgamation of old and new money families, which established his decades-long position as New York's premier social

¹² De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters*, 119.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 123, 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121; and Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 142.

arbiter. Thus, after imparting his firsthand knowledge of European customs on New York and Newport society throughout the previous decade, McAllister continued to exercise significant control over these two arenas. After encouraging the Astors to purchase Beechwood in 1881, McAllister served as an advisory figure for entertainments at Newport's glittering private residences and members-only clubs. In the ensuing decade, the Astor-McAllister alliance, built upon important shared ideals, strengthened and exerted influence over both New York and Newport. Against the backdrop of an increasingly codified social calendar, ironclad mores and customs designed to create exclusion, and physical spaces designated as elite realms, Astor and McAllister controlled Gilded Age Newport's era of formality between 1881 and 1892.

Eric Homberger explains that by the dawn of the 1880s, "McAllister's word was gospel for the planning of a successful dinner or a ball, and his judgment was sufficient to damn a sauce, or blight an aspiring millionaire."¹⁶ While McAllister's social career bloomed in New York, Newport remained central to his family life. Ward and Sarah had three children together: Louise, born in 1854; Samuel Ward, Jr., born in 1855; and Heyward, born in 1859. Ward Jr., was born in Newport, just months before the family set off on their first European tour. While maintaining Bayside Farm in Middletown, the family rented a cottage in Newport near the fashionable villas on Bellevue Avenue, a tradition they maintained each summer, even after McAllister's death in 1895.¹⁷ Despite her husband's veritable celebrity status, Sarah McAllister "cared little for society" and "[was] rarely seen in public."¹⁸ *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* characterized the couple in more empathetic terms. Describing Sarah as "an extremely literary woman" and "an

¹⁶ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 149.

¹⁷ "Local Briefs," *The Newport Daily News*, Newport, RI, August 3, 1896, 3; and "Within the Pale," *The New York Tribune*, September 16, 1900, 11.

¹⁸ "Death of Mrs. Sarah T. McAllister," *The Norwich Bulletin*, Norwich, CT, October 14, 1909, 1; and "Columbus of the 400," 6.

incessant reader of books, papers, [and] magazines,” the reporter concluded that, between husband and wife, respectively, “[t]he one outshines all associates in elegance of style and manner and the other keeping up her end charmingly in matters literaire [*sic*]. Of course, each shines with a light reflected from the glory of the other, so there is nothing to be desired for the McAllister combination.”¹⁹ Secondary authors, like many of Sarah’s contemporaries, generally pay her little attention, aside from her fortune, often writing her off as an invalid and a “recluse” with “a personality so mild and unobtrusive that, unlike her husband, [she] was hardly ever noticed by anyone.”²⁰ McAllister mentions his wife only in passing in his memoirs, leaving the prevailing image of a shy, “shrinking Sarah” who deferred to her daughter, Louise, to fulfill her social obligations.²¹ While little is known of Sarah, her fortune, paired with the couple’s mutual family connections, kept the McAllisters in close proximity to New York and Newport’s elite. Elizabeth Drexel Lehr affirmed that “although you never saw or heard of Mrs. McAllister, it was her money which made him go about organizing ‘society.’”²²

Sarah’s money no doubt served as a helpful safety net that sustained the couple’s Newport property. In his memoirs, McAllister admits that Bayside Farm was largely unprofitable for the first several years of his ownership, until he “watched carefully the Yankee farmers around [him], and satisfied [himself] that they knew more about the business than [he] did, and at once followed in their footsteps.”²³ Ward and Sarah subdivided the farm and mortgaged “one undivided half part” of the property first to real estate developer Alfred Smith and, later, to a

¹⁹ “New York Chit Chat,” *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 4, 1891, 13.

²⁰ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 74; Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 163; and King, *A Season of Splendor*, 34.

²¹ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 74.

²² Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 124.

²³ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 44.

farmer named George Anthony and his wife, Ruth.²⁴ Meanwhile, the McAllisters began renting the remaining pasture to local farmers and selling farm animals like lambs, cows, chickens, and turkeys; they also sold produce such as melons, strawberries, and cucumbers, for which they earned \$3000 per year.²⁵

Bayside Farm was also valuable for its picturesque landscape and social significance as an entertainment venue. After the Old Colony and Newport Railroad Company snaked a new line of tracks through McAllister's property in 1863, he constructed a platform and began welcoming guests by "special train" when he hosted his famous entertainments for his New York friends, visiting diplomats, and international high society figures.²⁶ Before he turned the farm into a profitable venture, McAllister temporarily rented cattle and sheep for his empty pastures because, as the *New York World* sardonically commented, "it would never do to entertain all the great society people and have no cattle on the thousand hills."²⁷ After dining under a grove of leafy trees—which lay in view of the charming white farmhouse, its eastern exposure threaded with clinging vines—he invited his guests to stroll through the gardens and down to the beach. McAllister's brother, Julian, "exercised his engineering skills" by converting the barn into a makeshift ballroom.²⁸ He repurposed the hayloft for musicians' use, and the guests danced beneath a chandelier hung from the rafters. During his parties, McAllister recalled, "You sat on

²⁴ Mortgage, October 31, 1867, Book 11, p. 187; Mortgage, October 13, 1869, Book 11, p. 310; Mortgage, October 16, 1872, Book 12, p. 144; Foreclosure, September 12, 1900, Book 18, p. 313, Town of Middletown, Rhode Island LandRecords.com, <https://i2f.uslandrecords.com/RI/Middletown/D/Default.aspx.AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>.

²⁵ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 44; "The McAllisters—A Savannah Family," *The Savannah Morning News*, January 28, 1882, 4; "People Who are Talked About," *The Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, Sacramento, CA, August 31, 1890, 1; and "Columbus of the 400," 6.

²⁶ "Railroad Notice," *The Fall River Evening News*, Fall River, MA, May 20, 1863, 3; and "Ward M'Allister's Breakfast," *The New York Sun*, July 29, 1890, 6. *The Fall River Evening News* references the railway company as the Newport and Fall River Railroad Company, which was the line's name before its 1863 merger. Regular service on the new railway line began on February 1, 1864; see Donald M. O'Hanley and George L. Kenson, "History of the Newport Line," Old Colony and Newport Railway, <https://www.ocnrr.com/history1.html>.

²⁷ "Personal and Pertinent," *The New York World*, October 22, 1890, 4.

²⁸ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 61.

closely cut turf... with the whole farm lying before you, and beyond it the bay and the distant ocean, each dotted over with sailing craft, the sun, sinking behind the Narragansett hills, bathing the Newport shore in golden light...”²⁹

In a 1936 lecture delivered at the Newport Art Association, longtime Newport resident, historian, and state senator Erich A. O’D. Taylor asserted that McAllister’s picnics “inaugurated” a “shift in the social attitude” of Newport.³⁰ McAllister’s events unquestionably epitomized his parallel authority in New York and Newport during the Gilded Age. McAllister affirmed the picnics’ personal and professional significance. In 1888, a *New York Tribune* reporter asked McAllister to recount his social career. “Well,” McAllister replied, “I would have to go back to the time when I was married to get at the beginning of my connection with social festivities... [S]pending the summer at Newport, [I] naturally fell into the social tide there and soon began to organize the Newport picnics. Never heard of them? Well, you are young yet.”³¹

McAllister believed that “Society must have its leader or leaders. It has always had them, and will continue to have them. Their sway is more or less absolute.”³² Therefore, in addition to his own rising social influence, Caroline Schermerhorn Astor’s preexisting authority in New York assigned greater meaning to her purchase of Beechwood in 1881.³³ A combination of privilege and tactful maneuvering established Astor’s sway over New York society. As one unnamed Gilded Age New Yorker opined, “Miss Caroline Schermerhorn was a handsome girl and had as much claim to genuine blue blood as any one in New York State... She was brought up by her sister in their home on North Washington Square with as much formality as a young

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Erich O’D. Taylor Refers to Newport After 1875,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, August 21, 1936, 5.

³¹ “Secrets of Ball-Giving: A Chat with Ward McAllister,” *The New York Tribune*, March 25, 1888, 11.

³² McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 46.

³³ Davis, *Gilded*, 37; Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 190; and Stensrud, *Newport*, 385.

princess.”³⁴ Descended from “cautious Dutch husbandmen” with reputations for “nurturing their fortunes and looking after their kinfolk” and possessing grand ideas about the New York upper class’s noble potential, Caroline Schermerhorn was poised to become high society’s reigning queen.³⁵ It took her marriage to one of New York’s wealthiest men and social alliance with McAllister to secure the royal moniker beyond a reasonable doubt. As King explains, “McAllister became an indispensable broker in Caroline’s rise to power, acting not only as adviser but also as a kind of unofficial chamberlain to her burgeoning court.”³⁶

By McAllister’s account, he first met the Astors through familial connections. His uncle and namesake, the Washington lobbyist Sam Ward, married Emily Astor in 1838, so McAllister and Caroline were distantly related by marriage. Furthermore, as a young man newly returned from San Francisco in the early 1850s, McAllister stayed briefly with his Ward relatives in New York. Attending an array of balls and dinners—including one memorable event at Caroline’s uncle Peter Schermerhorn’s home—“gave McAllister a remembered identity in New York.”³⁷ In the early 1870s, when Astor’s daughters were of marriageable age and McAllister first organized the Patriarchs, she likely recognized his name and seized an opportunity to place her family on a firm social foundation; that English assembly balls, after which McAllister styled the Patriarchs, were traditional realms for presenting eligible debutantes likely influenced the timing of their partnership as well.³⁸ Whereas Astor’s philandering husband was frankly uninterested in social matters, McAllister grounded his career on them. Thus, McAllister’s successful creation of the Patriarchs served as the necessary prelude to their decades-long relationship. As the *New York*

³⁴ “Society’s Diamond Stars: Mrs. William Astor and Her Charming Family,” undated clipping, Box 3, Astor Family Papers, The Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room for Rare Books and Manuscripts, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, New York.

³⁵ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 237.

³⁶ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 34.

³⁷ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 161, 162.

³⁸ Richardson, *The Season*, 42.

Mercury asserted, “Mrs. William Astor’s reputation in New York to-day as the leader of New York society was positively and directly manufactured by Mr. McAllister just as much as a piece of furniture is manufactured by the cabinetmaker.... [I]t was he who took her by the hand and gave her prominence at the Patriarch balls when these balls were synonymous with society...”³⁹

McAllister and Astor built their alliance on a set of shared ideals, which included an esteem for family pedigree and the desire to foster a common sense of cultural legitimacy among an otherwise heterogenous mix of old and new money New Yorkers. As Homberger and Patterson point out, these connected core values displayed heightened self-awareness of the pair’s social surroundings. Homberger explains that McAllister’s conception of a family was not only a name, but “a material and symbolic patrimony, and a form of stakeholding in America... In an age of ‘new money[,]’ to have a family set a person apart from the other hungry claimants for social position.”⁴⁰ Simultaneously, as Patterson points out, Astor “thought it was her duty to uphold the old standards of decorum and the formalities of her youth,” and, as a result, “[s]ocial life was conducted the way it had been a hundred years ago by her great-grandmother Anne Van Cortlandt, despite the fact that New Yorkers of her class were now much richer and had many more opportunities for ostentation.”⁴¹ Together, McAllister and Astor championed a conservative appreciation of lineage and high culture, but they also recognized the inevitability of new wealth—ambitious newcomers without impressive ancestries—settling in New York. Like their coveted guest lists, Astor and McAllister’s view of New York high society was “conservative but not fossilized,” and it quickly won approval.⁴²

Because Astor famously did not grant press interviews—with select exceptions toward

³⁹ Quoted in “The Swell Set in Gotham,” 5.

⁴⁰ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 157, 158.

⁴¹ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 66.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67.

the end of her life—McAllister served as her mouthpiece, and he was brimming with compliments about her effective leadership and outstanding character. He even affectionately referred to her as the Mystic Rose, a nod to the “heavenly figure” in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, “around whom all other figures in Paradise revolve.”⁴³ From the moment when he “was brought into contact with this *grande dame*” in the winter of 1872-1873, he expressed his confidence in Astor’s leadership role.⁴⁴ He affirmed that she had

all the qualities necessary—good judgment and a great power of analysis of men and women, a thorough knowledge of all their surroundings, a just appreciation of the rights of others, and, coming herself from an old Colonial family, a good appreciation of the value of ancestry; always keeping it near her, and bringing it in, in all social matters, but also understanding the importance and power of the new element; recognizing it, and fairly and generously awarding to it a prominent place.⁴⁵

Recognizing the presence of “the newly created Cræsus” in post-Civil War New York was not the same as permitting them to enter society without meeting certain qualifications.⁴⁶ In fact, McAllister’s description of Astor “fairly and generously” accepting the legitimacy of these new money families—in New York and Newport alike—is a bit generous itself.⁴⁷ By no means were the *nouveau riche* welcomed into high society with open arms. This was particularly true for postwar industrialists. Edith Wharton remembered that “no retail dealer, no matter how palatial his shop-front or how tempting his millions, was received in New York society until long after I was grown up.”⁴⁸ Industrialist titans’ wives like Alva Vanderbilt, Marietta Stevens, and Nancy Leeds waged war for decades before finally receiving admittance in New York and Newport

⁴³ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁴ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 74.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Wasteful New Yorkers: Ward McAllister on the Expenditures of New York Families,” *The New York World*, July 31, 1892, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers.

⁴⁷ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 74.

⁴⁸ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), 11.

circles.⁴⁹ Once, when considering whether to extend an invitation to an unnamed New York couple, Astor allegedly remarked, “I buy my carpets from them, but then is that any reason why I should invite them to walk on them?”⁵⁰

Throughout the 1870s, new money families tried “roughly to elbow [themselves] into society, and push [their] way into the inner circle.”⁵¹ Consequently, Astor and McAllister began to visualize and define an elite class of New Yorkers who were worthy of their aristocratic ideal. With the Patriarchs in place and the ongoing shift toward privatization in Newport further entrenching social parameters, McAllister and Astor actively cultivated aristocratic exclusivity. Among their most important tools was the decades-long formulation of the Four Hundred, which culminated with the 1892 publication of a physical list of laudable family names in the press. The Four Hundred was a controversial and perpetually elusive construct with roots in Astor’s annual winter ball, an event first organized in the late 1870s and held each successive January or early February at her home at 350 Fifth Avenue. Elizabeth Drexel Lehr called the event both “the greatest social event of the year” and “the occasion for much heartburning,” as an invitation equaled Astor’s approval of a guest’s right to inclusion in society.⁵² Lehr explained that there was

[w]eeping and gnashing of teeth on the part of those who did not receive the coveted slip of cardboard, ‘Mrs. Astor requests the pleasure...’ Life could hold no more bitter mortification... Doctors were kept busy during the week of the ball recommending hurried trips to the Adirondacks for the health of perfectly healthy patients, maiden aunts and grandmothers living in remote towns were ruthlessly killed off to provide alibis for their relations... any and every excuse was resorted to. Not a man or woman in society who would let their friends jump to the dreadful conclusion that their absence from the

⁴⁹ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 118-119. Astor’s infamous feud with Alva Vanderbilt, which culminated in 1883 and will be discussed in Chapter 4, exemplified her exclusionary tone. The Stevenses only found acceptance after their daughter’s marriage to a British aristocrat, and the Leedses had the Vanderbilts to thank for inviting them into society’s inner circle.

⁵⁰ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 86.

⁵¹ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 82.

⁵² Lehr, *King Lehr*, 87.

greatest social event of the year was due to lack of an invitation!⁵³

The boundaries of Mrs. Astor's Fifth Avenue ballroom, in which she hosted these coveted events, eventually earned greater meaning. McAllister first began casually assigning numerical parameters to New York society in 1888. In an interview with the *New York Tribune*, McAllister explained that society's parameters had narrowed by necessity. After all, in the previous few decades, the number of newly-wealthy *arrivistes* to New York had only increased. McAllister explained that "a fortune of a million is only respectable poverty. So we have to draw social boundaries on another basis."⁵⁴ Lehr, supported by secondary scholars like Davis, Stensrud, Cowles, and others, asserted that McAllister chose 400 to match the maximum number of people who could fit in Astor's ballroom.⁵⁵ McAllister, on the other hand, maintained that the number was steeped in literary and aristocratic tradition. He cited a Lord Byron poem in his memoirs and pointed to similar statistics in the royal courts of Austria and Spain.⁵⁶ However, these vague explanations were not completely accurate. McAllister employed the number merely as a descriptor; it was never intended to be taken literally.

At its core, the Four Hundred reflected McAllister and Astor's vision for an American aristocracy. McAllister said as much to the press, explaining that it "stands for an exclusive association of people, who represent the very best society in this city—the aristocracy of New York as it were."⁵⁷ Seeking to elevate the nation's cultural scene through both "wealth" and "refinement," McAllister and Astor regarded the Four Hundred as being less about quantity—or lack of entertaining space—and more about quality.⁵⁸ Clifton Hood explains, "Looked at from

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Secrets of Ball-Giving," 11.

⁵⁵ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 86.

⁵⁶ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 79; Quoted in "Ward M'Allister is Dead," *The New York Sun*, February 1, 1895, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

an economist's perspective, McAllister and Astor sought to reallocate social and symbolic resources to create scarcity and raise the value of their goods."⁵⁹ In the two decades before the official publication of the list of names in 1892, the pair used this otherwise arbitrary number to describe the complicated instruments of exclusion desired in a socially turbulent New York. The semi-elusive Four Hundred enforced aristocratic standards and served as the culminating objective of New York's postwar social gambit. As McAllister explained, "There are only about 400 people in fashionable New York society. If you go outside that number you strike people who are either not at ease in a ball-room or else make other people not at ease. See the point?"⁶⁰

The Four Hundred had a multi-faceted and far-reaching legacy. Homberger regards the institution as "perhaps the greatest single American contribution to the idea of aristocracy."⁶¹ It also entrenched Astor and McAllister's power, at least temporarily, and created a "chaotic urban purgatory" that demanded "the barriers of exclusion [rise] even higher."⁶² In 1881, Astor expanded her realm to Newport, certainly at McAllister's encouragement. Given McAllister's intimate knowledge of Newport, the idea that he approved of her purchase of a Bellevue Avenue cottage is likely; that he planted the seed for her real estate decision is not far-fetched. Where society's queen led, her subjects followed. When she purchased Beechwood in 1881, one of her first major renovations was the construction of a ballroom.⁶³ She hired Richard Morris Hunt for the job.

As Stensrud affirms, "Customs set by these New York gentry were enforced rigorously in Newport."⁶⁴ Gilded Age Newport's era of formality mirrored its ongoing drift toward

⁵⁹ Hood, *In Pursuit of Privilege*, 231.

⁶⁰ "Secrets of Ball-Giving," 11.

⁶¹ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 4.

⁶² Stensrud, *Newport*, 384.

⁶³ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 268.

⁶⁴ Stensrud, *Newport*, 383.

privatization, a trend with roots in the antebellum period and further entrenched during the immediate postwar era with the demise of hotels in favor of private residences. As they had in the late 1860s and 1870s, the elite carefully manipulated their built environments to reflect their values. They constructed echo-chambers in which they hosted splendid entertainments and displayed their tastes for high culture. Consuelo Vanderbilt described summers in Newport when she and her childhood playmates returned home, after “picnics... [and] wild games inspired by the tales of Fenimore Cooper ... to the marbled halls and Renaissance castles our parents had built.”⁶⁵ As sumptuous private spaces became the epicenters of pageantry and social ambition, the elite alienated those who supposedly did not share their regal vision.

Those who did not build summer homes in Newport often leased smaller cottages. McAllister and his family regularly rented the Ruggles House on Coggeshall Avenue or the Lyman cottage on LeRoy Avenue. Like their choice of residence in New York—first on Sixteenth Street and later at 16 West 36th Street, not far from the Astors’ home on Fifth Avenue—the McAllisters’ choice of cottage rental was purposely close to, but not in the epicenter of, Newport’s social hub.⁶⁶ Friends often questioned why “the Shepherd of the Four Hundred” lived rather simply compared to his “flock.”⁶⁷ On one occasion, a visiting reporter from the *New York Sun* remarked how “there is that warm, home-like spirit about the [McAllister family’s] house, so seldom found in the houses of the rich, that says the chairs are there to be sat upon, the foot-stools are to put one’s feet on, the books are to be read, and the bric-a-brac is there to be admired.”⁶⁸ McAllister, described as a man “[d]evotedly attached to his wife and children [who] remains at home as much as possible,” assured his peers that he “was wholly and

⁶⁵ Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, 19.

⁶⁶ “Coaching the Papers,” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1891, 5.

⁶⁷ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 23, 24.

⁶⁸ “Ward McAllister at Home,” *The New York Sun*, February 6, 1890, 5.

absolutely contented” to live in his “modest little house.”⁶⁹

However, whereas McAllister’s simple choice of residence was well-suited to his advisory role, not everyone who was eager to participate in the summer social season reaped comparable benefits. As a correspondent for the *New York Times* cautioned, a tourist’s ability to lease or own a private summer cottage in Newport did not automatically ensure his or her social success. The reporter asserted, “One of the blunders of country people at watering-places and Summer resorts is to fancy that proximity gives them a right of intimacy.”⁷⁰ In other words, visitors during the era of formality saw the fruits of Newport’s drift toward privatization. By the 1880s, the private residences that dominated the city earned exclusive meaning and manifested class-conscious aspirations. Tellingly, McAllister’s social successor, Harry Lehr, advised “ambitious newcomers” to “[a]void Newport like the plague until you are certain you will be acceptable there... If you don’t it will be your Waterloo.”⁷¹ He counseled modesty and tact, lest one be too bold and receive a bruising snub. Lehr cautioned his listeners, “[Y]ou can always pretend that the climate does not suit you and go back to New York without anyone having witnessed your defeat...”⁷² Not everyone heeded his advice. As his wife, Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, later explained, “They could only sit in the palatial villa they had so rashly acquired and accept their defeat with what grace they could.”⁷³

More broadly, throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Newport saw the classification of specific locations around town as decidedly “members-only.”⁷⁴ While Bellevue Avenue and Ocean Drive had already won this reputation decades earlier, Bailey’s Beach and the Newport

⁶⁹ “Men of the Day”; and McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 82.

⁷⁰ “The City of Cottages,” 1.

⁷¹ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 112.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Davis, *Gilded*, 68.

Casino exemplified how Newport's wealthy tourists used exclusion to assert and maintain their status. As discussed in Chapter 2, Bailey's Beach lay at the base of Bellevue Avenue and earned distinction as the preferred beach of the elite beginning in the 1850s. The *Washington Post* called it "the most aristocratic bathing beach on this side of the Atlantic," observing how "such an aggregation of American blueblood and millionaires, their wives, their heirs, and heiresses, it would be hard to find paddling in any other surf that beats on American shores."⁷⁵ Rather "spartan" and "nondescript wooden" bathhouses, rented annually and engraved with purchasers' initials, served as the true mark of "acceptance" on the beach, but they cost between \$1,500 and \$3,000 per season.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, visitors remained bound by strict codes of Victorian propriety. Women donned wool bathing costumes, complete with full-length skirts and wide-brimmed hats, before entering the surf; failure to wear customary black stockings—thereby hiding their legs—was an offense for which they could be kicked off the beach altogether.⁷⁷

Not only did the *nouveau riche* seek to gain admittance into this members-only sphere, but the influx of Newport's wealthy tourists also drew the attention of middle-class visitors. May King van Rensselaer recalled how the wealthy built walls around Bailey's Beach to keep out "excursionists... anxious to see all they can of the merry army amusing itself in or beside the water."⁷⁸ Bailey's Beach serves as an important example of the Newport elite constructing exclusionary barriers. Not only did its bathers construct physical barricades around Bailey's Beach, but they required bathers to adhere to strict codes of conduct. The social meaning assigned to bathhouses, clothing requirements, and behavioral expectations mirrored a sense of hyperawareness that became synonymous with Gilded Age Newport's era of formality.

⁷⁵ "Aristocrats at the Bath," *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1893, 14.

⁷⁶ Davis, *Gilded*, 70; and Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 25.

⁷⁷ Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, 26; and King, *A Season of Splendor*, 336.

⁷⁸ Van Rensselaer, *Newport: Our Social Capital*, 75.

In addition to streets and beaches, Newport's wealthy tourists began assigning greater meaning to brick-and-mortar structures, particularly local clubs. Davis explains, "One definition of the word 'club' is 'a formal association of people with similar interests.' But a club is also 'a heavy stick suitable for use as a weapon.' The Newport club was both: a safe haven, yes, but also the cottagers' best defense against the rising tide of interlopers demanding admission."⁷⁹ The Newport Casino illustrates clubs' significance in reinforcing what author David Scobey terms "complex codes of refinement."⁸⁰ In addition to manners and architecture, wealthy tourists imported the social importance of clubs from urban centers. Hood explains that "private clubs reached their zenith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they became essential to how upper- and middle-class New York men organized their lives."⁸¹ Like private homes, late nineteenth century clubs were modeled after their European counterparts, and their architecture purposely "set a self-congratulatory tone for the privileged members."⁸² Here, business and industrial titans could write letters, read the daily news, or socialize—often over a meal, drink, or cigar— with men of similar rank.⁸³

It may be tempting to believe that these male-only spheres provided respite from "the war games socially conscious women played with gowns, flowers, food details, parties, balls, stationary, and other items of social currency," but, in reality, ever-present social matters governed most aspects of club membership and experience.⁸⁴ As *Harper's Weekly* noted, "Club life, of course, grows and develops side by side and in consequence of the development of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁸⁰ David Scobey, "Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York," *Social History* 17, no. 2 (1992): 204.

⁸¹ Hood, *In Pursuit of Privilege*, 193.

⁸² "M'Allister on Clubs," *The Savannah Morning News*, September 3, 1892, 20; and Mosette Broderick, *Triumvirate: McKim, Mead & White: Art, Architecture, Scandal, and Class in America's Gilded Age* (New York: Random House, 2010), 277.

⁸³ Hood, *In Pursuit of Privilege*, 194-195.

⁸⁴ Broderick, *Triumvirate*, 278.

social life. Where there is society such as capitals know there will be men about town, and where there are men about town there must be clubs.”⁸⁵ Thus, the most exclusive clubs in New York and other major American cities were not open to everyone. McAllister, as a member of multiple New York clubs, both recognized and firmly advocated their significance. He once commented, “It has always been esteemed a distinction to enter a club. Hence, exclusion is a reproach... [and] an institution which should consist of the worth, intelligence and probity of a city should never take from a man his club membership, thus tarnishing his good name, until he has by a crime made himself a social outcast.”⁸⁶ The same etiquette, familial connections, and customs McAllister and Astor weighed when choosing their guest lists also applied in a club setting. Mosette Broderick affirms, “To be considered of a high social rank at one’s death, one had to die a member of numerous clubs, particularly those of an exclusive nature, and have the club names run in one’s obituary column.”⁸⁷ Naturally, the elite brought similar ideas to Newport.

The tradition of exclusive club life began in Newport during the antebellum period, exemplified by the Newport Reading Room, founded in 1853 with the help of Julia Ward Howe’s husband, Samuel Gridley Howe. The Reading Room enjoyed an intellectual and literary reputation and boasted several prominent members, including some of Newport’s southern denizens like George Noble Jones. However, as Newport’s social tone changed, becoming more rigid and akin to New York, so did the atmosphere of its clubs. Consequently, with its construction on the cusp of the Gilded Age’s era of formality, the Newport Casino illustrated contemporary urban trends uniquely adapted to Newport. Maud Howe Elliott opined that the Casino’s “building mark[ed] an epoch in Newport life.”⁸⁸ Commissioned by the eccentric James

⁸⁵ “The Metropolitan Club,” *Harper’s Weekly* 9, no. 1 (1888): 651.

⁸⁶ “M’Allister on Clubs,” 20.

⁸⁷ Broderick, *Triumvirate*, 277.

⁸⁸ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 154.

Gordon Bennett, Jr.—publisher of *The New York Herald*, “the most irreverent newspaper of its day”— in 1879, with the express purpose of creating a rival to the Reading Room, the Newport Casino offered tennis courts, a bowling alley, restaurants, a ballroom, a theater, a library, and more.⁸⁹ One of the nation’s most respected architectural firms, McKim, Mead & White, designed the building. Throughout the Gilded Age, these three architects were responsible for many significant New York landmarks, including additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the original Pennsylvania Station, the Morgan Library, the Municipal Building, and many of the buildings on Columbia University’s campus. Nationally, the firm designed the Rotunda at the University of Virginia, the Boston Public Library, and renovations to the White House.⁹⁰ They also left their mark on Newport by designing numerous buildings throughout the city, several of which still stand today.

The Casino differed from its urban counterparts in several key ways. First, it granted membership to both men and women. Visitors fell into three categories: subscribers, shareholders, and the general public.⁹¹ Moreover, regular tennis matches and community dances felt reminiscent of the antebellum “hops” at Newport’s hotels. In Sterngass’s words, “The Casino, on the same Bellevue Avenue block as the Ocean House, represented a final Newport attempt to salvage the more egalitarian experience of resort life.”⁹² However, it also came to

⁸⁹ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 25; Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 201; Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 153; and Stensrud, *Newport*, 378.

⁹⁰ The McKim, Mead & White firm’s national visibility made one of its partners’ murder in 1906 even more shocking. On June 25, 1906, during a rooftop performance of the romantic musical comedy *Mam’zelle Champagne* at New York City’s Madison Square Garden, Pittsburgh millionaire Harry Kendall Thaw shot Stanford White in front of an audience of nearly one thousand. Thaw justified the grisly crime in terms of avenging the honor of his wife, a former actress and model named Evelyn Nesbit, whom White had allegedly raped when she was sixteen years old. During the sensationalistic trials in 1907 and 1908, news broke that White and his bohemian friends frequently hosted wild parties throughout New York, where he often entertained underage actresses and singers. The press coverage of the trials were so explicit and shocking to readers that President Theodore Roosevelt called for censorship. White’s working relationships with many of America’s wealthiest families, especially in New York and Newport, fueled a growing distrust for the upper class that developed throughout the Progressive Era.

⁹¹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 378.

⁹² Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 201.

represent late nineteenth century Newport's complicated perspective on exclusivity.

Like other locations throughout the seaside town, membership at the Casino carried pronounced social distinction. Van Rensselaer derided "the ambitious [who] spend thousands of dollars for the mere privilege of writing their names in the membership book of a rather shabby Casino... where rich folk from a score of states spend whole summers in submitting to the ordeals of 'getting in' or in accomplishing the scarcely less taxing task of staying in, once they arrive."⁹³ As a testament to the club's local reputation, McAllister hosted a variety of entertainments at the Casino, including a 1884 dinner in honor of President Chester Arthur and several members of his cabinet.⁹⁴ In short, the Casino remained a hub of local gossip and the epicenter of Newport's social world. *The Newport Mercury* called it "probably the most extensive and elaborate place of amusement to be found at any summer resort in this country."⁹⁵ Despite its more democratic model, reminiscent of Newport's community-based hotel scene, the Casino's relatively open doors were no match for the fierce exclusivity that became synonymous with Gilded Age Newport during the era of formality.

In light of intraclass warring and the general public's growing interest in their lives, Newport's perennial cottagers honed a fragile balance between privacy and pageantry. Correspondents for major newspapers and gossip magazines often found Newport dull or quiet, owing not to a lack of activity, but to the wealthy's predictable and regulated routine. An 1887 article in *Town Topics* captured Newport's impenetrable social scene well:

To speak by the card, one does not *see* much of anybody at Newport, except at the Casino, when lawn tennis is played or dancing goes on, or on Bellevue Avenue, from 5 to

⁹³ Van Rensselaer, *The Social Ladder*, 219-220.

⁹⁴ "The President at Newport," *The New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, New Haven, CT, August 29, 1884, 3.

⁹⁵ "The Season," *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, August 2, 1884, 1. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Newport Yachting Club and Clambake Club also secured reputations as bastions of exclusivity. See Davis, *Gilded*, 74-75.

6:30 P.M. At the Casino, all is dress, artificiality, and pose, and the dancing is formal and constrained. On the drive, one encounters daily the same everlasting procession of somewhat *ennuyé* [*sic*] faces... For a while, this summer, fashion went to the beach at noon and bathed at distant intervals... I fear, however... that I have reached that point at which I must express the opinion that people that visited Newport in hopes of regaling themselves with a series of magnificent spectacles in which millionaires, old Knickerbocker families and British lords were moving figures, were seldom, if ever, carried off their feet.⁹⁶

In such an environment, the summer season became monotonous and claustrophobic.

McAllister's solution was to harken back to some of the traditions he associated with the Newport of his childhood. As the *Philadelphia Times* wrote, "The commander-in-chief of the 400 has decided that entertainments as now given are too stiff and formal, so we shall probably see many picnics, open-air teas and lawn parties before the season closes."⁹⁷ Though McAllister began entertaining at his farm long before the "New York invasion," his events' popularity throughout the era of formality demonstrated both his decades-long connection to Newport and the extent of his dynamic authority.⁹⁸

Though certainly blessed with a scenic stage for these entertainments, McAllister used little details—down to decorating the table and entertainment facilities with greenery, cattails, Indian corn, and hay grown on the property—to emphasize the rustic, comparatively "casual" nature of Bayside Farm in stark contrast to the pageantry of balls and dinners at Newport's private cottages.⁹⁹ *The New York Sun* explained, "It was Mr. McAllister's idea to preserve the ruralistic [*sic*] effect in harmony with the surroundings."¹⁰⁰ However, McAllister's entertainments were not free from pageantry or strict behavioral codes. This has led some Gilded Age scholars to liken Bayside Farm to Marie Antoinette's play farm, with Newport mirroring

⁹⁶ "Newport Remembered: Reflections of an Outsider," *Town Topics* 18, no. 10 (September 8, 1887): 12.

⁹⁷ "Newport Getting Gay," *The Philadelphia Times*, July 27, 1890, 7.

⁹⁸ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 142.

⁹⁹ "Ward M'Allister's Breakfast," 6; and Davis, *Gilded*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ "Ward M'Allister's Breakfast," 6.

“an American Versailles.”¹⁰¹ However, this perspective discounts McAllister’s lifetime connection to the area and experience with its changing customs of entertaining and leisure. In the Newport of his childhood, southern tourists—like his grandmother, Sarah Cutler— did not consider Middletown and Portsmouth remote; farmhouses in these nearby towns offered exactly the type of respite they had traveled North to experience. During the Gilded Age, McAllister created a similar communal environment for his guests at Bayside Farm, but, as he asserted in his memoirs,

[D]o not for a moment imagine that all were indiscriminately asked to these little fêtes. On the contrary if you were not of the inner circle, and were a new-comer, it took the combined efforts of all your friends’ backing and pushing to procure an invitation for you. For years, whole families sat on the stool of probation, awaiting trial and acceptance, and many were then rejected, but once received, you were put on an intimate footing with all.¹⁰²

In a highly regulated environment—dressed down with rustic accoutrements reminiscent of antebellum summers— McAllister’s breakfasts, picnics, and country dinners at Bayside Farm served as an extension of his and Astor’s aristocratic ideals during Gilded Age Newport’s era of formality. Homberger affirms, “McAllister wanted to strengthen the sense that [his guests] shared common values and recognized the need, growing more urgent with each passing year, to maintain the strictest exclusivity.”¹⁰³ He went so far as to bring the principle of the subscription dinner, in true Patriarchs fashion, to Bayside Farm.¹⁰⁴ Reflective of wider trends, McAllister’s Newport picnics reached the pinnacle of their exclusivity in the 1880s. By this time, in Lehr’s words, “Newport was the very Holy of Holies, the playground of the great ones of the earth from which all intruders were ruthlessly excluded by a set of cast-iron rules,” and those who

¹⁰¹ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 75; De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters*, 119; and Stensrud, *Newport*, 369.

¹⁰² McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 45.

¹⁰³ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 180.

¹⁰⁴ “M’Allister’s Unique Picnic,” *The New York World*, August 3, 1890, 2.

“neglected” to visit every summer “exposed a definite gap in one’s social armour.”¹⁰⁵ A snub from McAllister eventually represented the same. Picnics at Bayside Farm became to McAllister what the winter balls were to Astor. He later recalled, “My little farm dinners gained such a reputation that my friends would say to me: ‘Now, remember, leave me out of your ceremonious dinners as you choose, but always include me in those given at your farm, or I’ll never forgive you.’”¹⁰⁶

Entertainments at Bayside Farm signaled the pinnacle of McAllister’s authority, which gradually waned during the 1890s. In Newport, Van Rensselaer remembered, “From the McAllister picnics, Society turned to pageants; from his comparatively simple cotillion affairs, to enormous entertainments in which opera stars, actors, jugglers, musicians, and even circuses took part. Dinners became vaudeville shows; dances, something closely approximating pagan festivals.”¹⁰⁷ So began a reactionary new era of extravagance. Wealthy tourists tired of “straight-laced Newport” in favor of increasingly ridiculous displays.¹⁰⁸ In Sterngass’s words, “Once a leisure class hierarchy had been consolidated, wealthy Newport visitors dropped much of the pretext of formality and again behaved in anarchical ways, although this time in a private setting.”¹⁰⁹

The Astors’ purchase of Beechwood in 1881 signaled the beginning of Newport’s era of formality, the first phase of the Gilded Age, during which wealthy tourists imported rigid ideas about social leadership and exclusionary environments into Newport. At this time, the resort earned the reputation as “the place of all others to take social root in” but not without significant

¹⁰⁵ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 112.

¹⁰⁶ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 43.

¹⁰⁷ Van Rensselaer, *The Social Ladder*, 237-238.

¹⁰⁸ “The Saunterer,” *Town Topics* 18, no. 5 (August 4, 1887): 3.

¹⁰⁹ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 226.

growing pains or long-term consequences.¹¹⁰ The claustrophobia that accompanied Newport's era of formality in the first several years after Caroline Astor's arrival left many ostracized, which eventually inspired anarchy. During this period, McAllister's authority reached its apex, exemplified by his Bayside Farm entertainments, which adapted antebellum traditions to new social rules he helped create and enforce. His ability to navigate and maintain control over this turbulent period speaks to his talent for social leadership and the extent of his influence during the Gilded Age. However, the subsequent era of frivolity saw McAllister's gradual fall from grace, owing to society's unstoppable drift away from the aristocratic creation he and Astor had envisioned. In short, McAllister's own words became sadly prophetic: "[T]here is no power like the social power; it makes and unmakes."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 45.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

Chapter 4: The New York Connection and the Era of Frivolity

In 1892, one-third of all American millionaires resided in New York, and many of them annually summered in Newport, which had secured its reputation not only as “the social shrine of the Northeast,” but “the headquarters of Ward McAllister and his social army.”¹ Historian Greg King assigns greater significance to this year, describing it as a critical line of demarcation between the two periods of the Gilded Age. After what Maureen E. Montgomery categorizes as the “era of formality,” there began a radical new period—an era of frivolity—by the end of which, “[t]he golden age of aristocracy had passed. The quiet, cultured, and dignified life-style of former days had been replaced by one that was brash, extravagant, and highly publicized.”² May King van Renssalaer, writing of this new period, described a collective American elite whose “standards are cash rather than culture[,] arrogance rather than aristocracy.”³ In both New York and Newport, larger cultural, social, and political factors forecasted cracks in the Astor-McAllister alliance, in large part because the two figures receded from and reentered the public spotlight sporadically and, at times, amidst great personal hardship, tragedy, and even scandal.

Despite growing controversy about the legitimacy and security of his role as New York’s indispensable social arbiter, McAllister believed that his peers effectively depended on his advice and expertise. In January 1892, he remarked to a *New York Sun* reporter, “I care really much less for my position than people think I do. I can give up society better than society can spare me.”⁴ The first few years of the new decade challenged his confidence. Following his divisive choice to publish a “gossipy memoir” and serve as a press contributor, minor family

¹ Museum of the City of New York, *Gilded Age New York: Design, Fashion, and Society*, Donald Albrecht and Jeannine Falino, ed. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2013), 17; Unpublished Memoirs of Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, 221, Matilda Young Papers, 1932-1933, Special Collections, Rubenstein Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; and “Newport Warfare,” undated newspaper clipping, Box 3, Astor Family Papers.

² King, *A Season of Splendor*, 78, 9; and Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 32, 37.

³ Van Renssalaer, *The Social Ladder*, 236.

⁴ “Ward M’Allister’s Sway,” *The New York Sun*, January 24, 1892, 8.

scandals in 1892 and 1894 demonstrated the damaging potential of the sensationalist press, as well as its changing treatment of society figures.⁵ Until his death in 1895, McAllister managed to maintain his authority in New York and Newport, though he, like the American upper class in general, came increasingly under public criticism, a trend exacerbated by intraclass warfare that undermined the social unity he and Astor had attempted to construct beginning in the 1870s. As the Progressive Era unfolded in the United States, the court of public opinion—aided by technological advances that rendered the nation better connected and informed than ever before—began to test the wealthy’s air of untouchability. Growing increasingly aware of the chasm between the rich and poor, especially in cities, American newspaper readers also questioned the legitimacy of McAllister’s role as New York society’s advisor.

Beginning in 1892, neither McAllister nor Astor appeared as omnipresent leaders of New York society, which, by this time, began to reap the consequences of the exclusionary boundaries it had created in decades past. Borrowing again from Downing and Scully’s assessment, Newport served as a microcosm in which these trends were magnified before the nation.⁶ Astor’s absence as New York society’s reigning queen created a vacuum for new leadership, which brought a new set of ambitious, wealthy women with differing—often reactionary—views, practices, and visions for high society’s future to the forefront. In Newport, where privatization had reigned as the wealthy’s watchword since the late antebellum era, the media’s insistence on greater social visibility created a warped celebrity culture in which the cottagers’ private lives became lucrative material for gossip columns. This merely raised the stakes for social supremacy, perpetuating a vicious, paradoxical cycle in which the elite came to depend on, loathe, and struggle with the consequences of publicity. In decades past, McAllister had shown a

⁵ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 154.

⁶ Downing and Scully, *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*, 130.

talent for adapting to new circumstances and environments. For example, in Newport, he revised antebellum traditions to make them better suited to the Gilded Age at Bayside Farm and other exclusive spheres, which contributed in no small way to the impressive duration of his career. McAllister once again tried to acclimate to new challenges in the 1890s, but internal and external forces eventually compromised his social footing. When he died in 1895, Gilded Age Newport was on the cusp of the most chaotic phase of its era of frivolity.

Reflecting on the Gilded Age, Van Renssalaer described how, at the start of each summer social season, “Newport forgets its more material commerce and begins to import Ambition.”⁷ In fact, ambition became a hallmark characteristic of Gilded Age Newport, especially throughout its era of frivolity. This principle rang markedly true after 1892, when family tragedy required that Caroline Astor temporarily step down from her exalted position as society’s leader. In the spring of 1892, Astor’s daughter, Charlotte Augusta, abandoned her husband, James Coleman Drayton, and children to follow her neighbor, Hallet Borrowe, with whom she was having an affair, to London. After an unknown, but presumably close, person leaked Charlotte and Borrowe’s correspondence to the press, Drayton challenged Borrowe to a duel. Charlotte’s father, William Backhouse Astor Jr., traveled overseas to diffuse the situation and bring his daughter home, followed shortly afterward by his wife, but he died of heart failure before he could make the return trip. William Astor’s death, as well as that of his daughter, Helen, just a year later, raised questions over Caroline’s future in New York society. *The New York Evening World* reported,

Mrs. Astor is said to be completely prostrated by her husband’s death, which has followed so suddenly upon her other troubles in connection with the Drayton-Burrowe scandal... Mrs. Astor, as well as the other members of her family, must now necessarily retire for a time from society. Many believe that she will never again resume her sway as the undisputed leader of the fashionable set, although there are others who think that as soon as the period of mourning is passed she will be as conspicuous a figure as before in

⁷ Van Renssalaer, *The Social Ladder*, 220.

all the gay gatherings of the exclusive inner circle.⁸

Veiled literally in deep mourning garb and figuratively by the shadow of this international scandal, Mrs. Astor and Mr. and Mrs. Drayton returned to New York in May of 1892. Following strict Victorian tradition, the deaths of her husband and daughter mandated that Astor remain cloistered away from society for a total of two years, with profound consequences.⁹ King explains, “With her talent for ignoring the unpleasant, Caroline existed more and more in a social world confined to the rigid barriers she herself had erected, refusing to acknowledge the passage of time and the great changes being wrought from within her privileged milieu.”¹⁰

Astor set an intimidating example for her followers and rivals, and the opportunities of these upper-class women, especially within restrictive social environments, speak to the gendered dimensions of ambition in Gilded Age New York and especially Newport. The heterogenous American upper class that took shape after the Civil War designated powerful roles and expectations to both men and women. However, upper-class women’s economic privilege offered them considerable, though relative, freedom. In her literary and cultural study of the Gilded Age parvenu, Stephanie Foote argues that “[t]he story of how class became a culture, and how a structuring economic and social architecture became a key part of one’s most interior sense of self, is a gendered story,” especially because “[m]ost of the popular cultural material about social policing, class performances, manners, and the subtleties of public social regulation was about and directed at women...”¹¹ Because nineteenth and early twentieth century norms maintained that a woman’s truest allegiance was to her home and family, socially-ambitious

⁸ “The Late Wm. Astor’s Body,” *The New York Evening World*, April 27, 1892, 1.

⁹ *Victorian Women: A Documentary History of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States*, Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1981), 506.

¹⁰ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 78.

¹¹ Stephanie Foote, *The Parvenu’s Plot: Gender, Culture, and Class in the Age of Realism* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014), 5, 160.

women could use gender norms and cultural expectations to their advantage. Foote explains that though the middle- or upper-class woman typically did not function as the primary breadwinner, “She could master all the forms of her world, becoming in some sense the banker who could convert the family’s economic capital into social capital.”¹²

McAllister personally assigned gender to the social aspirant in his memoirs, detailing the process by which a young girl might find success in elite circles. Not only did he explain the perils young debutantes might encounter in New York and Newport—he cautioned, “The launching of a beautiful young girl into society is one thing; it is another to place her family on a good, sound social footing. You can launch them into the social sea, but can they float?”—but he observed “how many women... have benefitted their husbands, and secured for them... advantages” as respected social leaders.¹³ McAllister’s admiration and flattery of Astor and other female pillars of New York’s social scene reinforced his recognition of elite women’s ability to manipulate their surroundings for their own benefits and the benefits of their families. “Women brought Society across the Atlantic,” Van Renssalaer agreed, “It was nurtured here by them and has always been peculiarly their sphere... The Vanderbilts, the Astors, the Belmonts and other present leaders have attained their station largely through the infusion of aristocratic blood into their line through marriages with the old families. Their wives made them.”¹⁴

That female social aspirants and leaders had the means and opportunity to advance themselves did not mean that the culture at large encouraged them to do so. Naturally, these critiques lay in prevailing gender norms. Blanche Oelrichs sarcastically commented, “[O]bviously the real business in life was a successful *début* and marriage with a rich and

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 81.

¹⁴ Van Renssalaer, *The Social Ladder*, 17.

handsome man about whom no one could say ‘Who *was* he?’”¹⁵ Astor was also not immune to criticism that stemmed from traditional gender expectations. *Town Topics*’ conservative-minded editor had Astor in mind when he ranted, “[A] vain and jealous old lady, who persists in being at the head of the court, is undeserving of the courtesy and tenderness that gentle and true womanhood commands from me, as from nearly all men.”¹⁶ In the wake of her husband’s death, the magazine’s Newport correspondent cruelly remarked, “With a society in which the widow of a hotel keeper is queen, Anglomania, in my opinion, is almost respectable.”¹⁷

As an extension of New York’s ironclad social realm, Newport served as another key location where upper-class women exercised considerable control, a critical precursor to the power vacuum created by Astor’s temporary departure from society in 1892. With their husbands arriving in Newport by yacht or train on weekends, the resort town’s elite parameters were “built by women for women.”¹⁸ Newport’s weekly male “exodus left a seraglio of rich, pampered wives and daughters looking for ways to pass the time,” which they filled, with the “same winner-takes-all spirit as their husbands,” by facilitating and participating in rites of social membership.¹⁹ Understandably, when Astor departed society’s epicenter, there were “plenty of eager understudies” ready to take her place.²⁰ Three women in particular—a veritable “triumvirate” of ambition—rose to the forefront of Newport’s social whirl: Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, Marion “Mamie” Graves Anthon Fish, and Theresa “Tessie” Oelrichs.²¹ Together, they helped usher in Gilded Age Newport’s era of frivolity. In particular, Alva Vanderbilt Belmont served as a crucial transitional figure whose life and influence epitomized a new wave of

¹⁵ Michael Strange, *Who Tells Me True* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 45.

¹⁶ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 26, no. 25 (December 17, 1891): 1.

¹⁷ “Newport Remembered,” 11.

¹⁸ De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters*, 127

¹⁹ Davis, *Gilded*, 76; and De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters*, 7.

²⁰ Davis, *Gilded*, 78.

²¹ Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 123.

challenges to Astor's rigid parameters of social exclusion in New York and Newport. Ever the pioneer, the trends she spearheaded—using entertainments and architecture—would eventually be hijacked to the point of ridiculousness by other wealthy women as the twentieth century dawned.

Like Ward McAllister, Alva Erskine Smith Vanderbilt Belmont witnessed and facilitated Newport's social and physical transformation throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Born in Mobile, Alabama in 1853, she passed childhood summers in Newport, like many upper-class southern families. Moreover, frequent travels abroad with her mother had instilled a deep appreciation for European, especially French and Italian, culture. After the Civil War, with her mother dead and her father financially ruined, Alva knew that she must marry well. To her great relief, William K. Vanderbilt proposed marriage at the Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia in 1874, and she quickly accepted, though the marriage was far from a happy one. Alva was passionate, domineering, and deeply complicated, and, as her daughter later reflected, “[o]ne of her earliest ambitions was to become a leader of New York society.”²²

Alva's “forceful,” even “combative,” personality equipped her for the monumental task of securing her family's place among New York's Four Hundred in the 1880s.²³ As Arthur T. Vanderbilt II explains, these heirs to a \$100 million shipping and railroad fortune, nearly \$2.5 billion in modern money, “were exactly the sort of objectionable element Mrs. Astor wished to exclude from her ball: people with no background who had gotten rich too quickly, people who thought that their money could buy everything.”²⁴ Though Astor withheld her approval, “For

²² Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, 6. Alva's daughter also termed her “a born dictator.”

²³ “Mrs. Belmont, 80, Expires in France,” *The Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., January 26, 1933, 2; and Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, 6.

²⁴ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 43; and Arthur T. Vanderbilt II, *Fortune's Children: The Fall of the House of Vanderbilt* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), 100.

Ward McAllister, the Vanderbilts presented something of a dilemma,” and he was not so quick to reject them.²⁵ First, his in-laws had enjoyed a business relationship with Commodore Vanderbilt for many years. McAllister himself enjoyed a warm friendship with the family patriarch. Though the Commodore reportedly spit tobacco juice on the floor, no matter where he happened to be, and one historian called him “perhaps the greatest master of swearing in his generation,” McAllister evidently overlooked the family patriarch’s lack of social graces, instead regarding him as “one of America’s noblest and most cultivated men.”²⁶ As for the Vanderbilts’ staggering fortune, McAllister possessed a unique view of the interaction between old and new wealth: he believed that his guests’ *quality*, a descriptor that surpassed net worth, served as the deciding factor for social acceptance. When Alva entered the social scene, he demonstrated his support for the Vanderbilts by permitting them invitations to the Patriarch Ball.

Though McAllister seemed willing to extend the proverbial olive branch, Astor still refused to invite the Vanderbilts to her winter ball. Alva merely used these continued slights as fodder. As Elizabeth Drexel Lehr remembered, “Nothing made [Alva] happier than the knowledge that she was pitting herself against the rest of the world. She loved to see herself as a pioneer, to make others bend to her will, to have them follow her in the end, meek, sheeplike...”²⁷ Thus, “[w]ith the strategic cunning of a tycoon effecting a commercial takeover,” Alva waged war on Astor’s restrictive social parameters and won, setting the stage for her growing authority in both New York and Newport.²⁸

On March 26, 1883, William K. and Alva hosted a grand costume ball, formally opening

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 42; Dixon Wecter, *The Saga of American Society: A Record of Social Aspiration, 1607-1937* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), 131; and McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 34.

²⁷ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 121.

²⁸ Janet W. Buell, “Alva Belmont: From Socialite to Feminist,” *The Historian* 52, no. 2 (1990): 223.

their newly completed Fifth Avenue mansion, designed by Richard Morris Hunt, to members of New York society. Alva later recalled that the event “marked an epoch in the social history of the city.”²⁹ It also demonstrated the greater meaning the American elite assigned to entertaining practices during the Gilded Age. One of Alva’s contemporaries, James “Jimmy” DeWolf Cutting agreed, “You don’t give parties to enjoy yourselves, ... but to advance yourselves.”³⁰ In stark contrast to the quiet entertainments that prevailed among conservative elite circles in decades past, the Vanderbilts represented a new wave of American families that displayed their riches on an unprecedented scale. Homberger points out, “In this complex transition towards heightened visibility, the ball was a social weathervane.”³¹ Three months before the Vanderbilt ball, Alva issued 1,200 invitations, but Caroline Astor and her daughters were not included. Twenty-one-year-old Carrie Astor was reportedly “inconsolable,” prompting her mother to swallow her pride and pay a call on the Vanderbilts.³² In De Courcy’s words, “the coup had succeeded,” and the Astors received their invitation.³³

In her memoirs, Alva declared that the event “was the most brilliant ball ever given in New York.”³⁴ McAllister, who counted himself among the invited, remembered, “Every artist in the city was set to work to design novel costumes,” which resulted in “a pageant of knights, nobles, ladies, characters from history and fiction, and pretty little creatures from that world immortalized for the nursery by Mother Goose.”³⁵ McAllister sported tights and a plumed hat as the Count de la Môle, the ill-fated lover of the French princess Marguerite de Valois. *The New York Tribune* commented, “A courtier might be seen walking with a marchioness, or a duke with

²⁹ Belmont Memoir, 109.

³⁰ Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 92.

³¹ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 23.

³² De Courcy, *The Husband Hunters*, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁴ Belmont Memoir, 108.

³⁵ “The Vanderbilt Ball,” *The New York Tribune*, March 27, 1883, 5.

a Venetian lady, and indeed the combinations of imitated rank and beauty were endless where so many powdered wigs were graciously bowing, so many pairs of bright eyes flashing in rivalry of the jewels of their owners, and so much talking, dancing and promenading were enjoyed.”³⁶

While signaling the Vanderbilt’s official arrival among Astor’s restrictive ranks, the ball’s visibility also made it controversial. The ball cost \$250,000, roughly \$6 million in modern money, leading the *Catoctin Clarion* of Mechanicstown, Maryland to blast the event as “bare-faced worship of the golden calf.”³⁷ However, these well-publicized displays of extravagance became a fixture of New York and Newport social life as the Gilded Age progressed, as did the criticism they received.

Davis explains, “The Vanderbilt ball confirmed that Alva was an important member of New York society, but Newport remained unvanquished territory. There was only one effective, albeit expensive, way to make a big splash in that city and that was engage in the sort of real estate one-upmanship that, in some circles, was actually called Vanderbuilding.”³⁸ Like her predecessors, Alva used architecture to demonstrate her social might. She “stormed the social capital at Newport” and inaugurated this new sphere of influence with the construction of Marble House, commissioned as a birthday present from her husband in 1888.³⁹ Davis identifies this year as a crucial turning point for Newport. By her assessment, it touched off what she terms “the cottage wars,” a period that manifested ambition using architecture and, by her estimation, “launched Newport’s Gilded Age.”⁴⁰ Alva, like other prominent hostesses eager to exercise their social talents in Astor’s later absence, played a crucial role in this transformative period of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Only a Sulde [*sic*] Affair,” *The Salt Lake Herald*, March 29, 1883; and “Gotham Gossip,” *The Catoctin Clarion*, Mechanicstown, MD, April 5, 1883, 2. The guests’ costumes alone made up \$155,000 of the total expenditures.

³⁸ Davis, *Gilded*, 44.

³⁹ “Mrs. O.H.P. Belmont, Society Leader, is Dead,” *The Indianapolis Times*, January 26, 1933, 1.

⁴⁰ Davis, *Gilded*, 44, 51.

Newport's history.

Alva's philosophy behind the design of the Vanderbilts' New York and Newport homes stemmed from a desire to create structures that "represented not only wealth but knowledge and culture," a principle reminiscent and largely in agreement with Astor and McAllister's vision for an American aristocracy.⁴¹ Out of a deep appreciation of the Medicis, Alva sought to use the buying power that the Vanderbilt resources afforded to make her homes representative of high culture.⁴² As her daughter later reflected, "Now firmly established as a social leader, my mother, wishing still further to dominate her world, assumed the prerogative of an *arbiter elegantiarum*, instructing her contemporaries both in the fine arts and the art of living. Ransacking the antique shops of Europe, she returned with pictures and furniture to adorn the mansions it became her passion to build."⁴³ At Newport, she seized an opportunity to once again manifest these lofty goals. Touching off a new "era of palace building," the Vanderbilts—not accidentally—purchased land directly adjacent to Astor's Beechwood property and placed the design and construction of Marble House in the capable hands of Richard Morris Hunt, who shared Alva's love of European culture.⁴⁴

Alva regarded Hunt as "one of [her] best friends," later remembering, "I spent many delightful hours in his office, working with the draughtsmen he placed at my disposal, always encouraged by him, and inspired alike by his kindness and great genius."⁴⁵ Drawing inspiration from the Petit Trianon at Versailles, master craftsmen fashioned 500,000 square feet of Italian marble—which comprised \$7 million of the total \$11 million cost of the "cottage"—into a

⁴¹ Ibid., 111.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, 7.

⁴⁴ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 303; and Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 348.

⁴⁵ Belmont Memoir, 92.

veritable “secular temple,” which Alva furnished with meticulous care.⁴⁶ She declared, “[Marble House] was like a fourth child to me.”⁴⁷ The palace was complete with stately Corinthian columns, detailed sculptures, priceless historical artifacts, stunning works of art, and a replica Chinese teahouse at the corner of the back lawn, overlooking the Atlantic. Rather symbolically, Marble House did not possess any exterior doorknobs, giving its hostess control over to whom she opened her doors; when they did open for the first time in August 1892, Richard Morris Hunt was among the guests at the house-warming party.⁴⁸

Neither Astor nor McAllister were present for the first of Alva Vanderbilt’s many splendid entertainments at Marble House. Their absences over Newport’s social scene allowed Alva, alongside Mamie Fish and, later, Tessie Oelrichs to “[run] the social side of things at Newport for many years.”⁴⁹ However, even though Alva and Astor found common ground in a mutual appreciation for European culture, this new wave of Newport hostesses faced a different set of challenges compared to the prior era of formality. External factors, including changes in media, politics, and a growing climate of reform, blurred the public and private lives of Newport’s perennial cottagers, something that clashed against the decades-long trend that favored controlled, exclusive environments centered around the home.⁵⁰ Even Alva Vanderbilt eventually witnessed Newport drift from her control. She explained how she and her fellow hostesses “were tremendously energetic, full of life and initiative[,] and under our leadership society at Newport knew its gayest and most brilliant period... It was an ideal life, thoroughly

⁴⁶ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 304; “Marble House,” The Preservation Society of Newport County, <https://www.newportmansions.org/explore/marble-house>; and Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, 25.

⁴⁷ Belmont Memoir, 110.

⁴⁸ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 306; Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, 362; and “Festivities at Newport: Mr. Vanderbilt’s Marble Palace Thrown Open,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1892, 5.

⁴⁹ Belmont Memoir, 158.

⁵⁰ Glenn Wallach, “‘A Depraved Taste for Publicity:’ The Press and Private Life in the Gilded Age,” *American Studies* 39, no. 1 (1998): 31-32.

refined but full of gaiety and fun, with much camaraderie, but at a much later date, completely changing, and spoiling the Newport I loved so well.”⁵¹

One of the most salient characteristics of the Gilded Age was the degree of publicity that the lives of the wealthy attracted. With the tides of social leadership changing, summers in Gilded Age Newport demonstrated a growing conflict between privatization and visibility. Elizabeth Drexel Lehr encapsulated the tone of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century resort well: “Newport was at last Newport—the American capital of luxury and extravagance. All of us who spent our summers there now, had to reconcile ourselves to playing in the limelight.”⁵² Rival hostesses seeking social acceptance went to more expensive lengths to demonstrate the depth of their families’ coffers, which merely gained spectators and forced the rich to respond to visibility in unique ways. Homberger explains that this new concern “had come to be as much a part of being rich as possessing a fine carriage or a great mansion.”⁵³ Newport’s wealthy tourists initially retreated to the timeworn construction of physical and social boundaries around their exclusive enclaves, as had been the custom during the era of formality. However, eager onlookers found new means of breaching gates, walls, and guest lists over time.

Newport’s Cliff Walk exemplifies the complicated debate over public access to the wealthy’s private spheres in an exclusive resort setting. Stensrud affirms that the “Cliff Walk has been steeped in controversy for almost as long as it has existed.”⁵⁴ The three-mile path—which Henry James described as possessing a “meandering right-of-way for a seaward fringe”—stretches from Easton’s Beach to Bailey’s Beach and originally served as a fisherman’s track.⁵⁵ It

⁵¹ Belmont Memoir, 158, 162.

⁵² Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 88.

⁵³ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 21.

⁵⁴ Stensrud, *Newport*, 403.

⁵⁵ Henry James, *The Ivory Tower* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1917), 20.

also abuts many of the wealthy's Bellevue Avenue properties that, Consuelo Vanderbilt remembered, had "[risen] like mushrooms in the competitive atmosphere of Newport's plutocracy."⁵⁶ Thus, as wealthy visitors constructed summer homes with increased frequency, the path became more contested territory. Cottagers tried repetitively to prevent tourists from accessing the Cliff Walk and, by extension, the wealthy's backyards. They feared that these day-trippers would "[take] what they saw as calmly as they would have picked up shells on the beach."⁵⁷ However, as the *Baltimore Sun* explained, city officials "decided in favor of the poor fisherman, and of us poor inheritors of their rights, to use this walk in perpetuity."⁵⁸ The cottagers retaliated by constructing walls, hedges, and iron gates to preserve their privacy. This forced the undaunted rubbernecker to get down on their bellies and peer beneath the barriers.⁵⁹

Just as the Cliff Walk demonstrated the cottagers' anxiety over public access to otherwise private spaces, David Scobey explains how the New York elite used the practice of promenading to react to the "unmooring of hierarchy," a characteristic of a rapidly urbanizing America.⁶⁰ In addition to raising physical boundaries around privileged spheres, the American elite attempted to take advantage of their heightened visibility to accentuate their status above the general public. Scobey argues that "seeing and being seen" was

a double performance, a rite of mutuality within a spectacle of hierarchy. On the one hand, it represented a symbolic act of class formation. It offered genteel men and women a means of including one another in a moral collectivity, with its own ideals of cultural authority, sexual order and physical self-mastery. On the other hand, it represented a symbolic act of class subordination. It offered the gentry a means of displaying its ascendancy over the whole social order, not by expelling all others from its presence, but by displacing them to the margins, as a willing audience, seeing without being seen. The two symbolic acts comprised a single drama. Together they mapped out an elite public-within-the-public, inscribing class and cultural hierarchy across the common landscape in

⁵⁶ Balsan, *The Glitter and The Gold*, 27.

⁵⁷ Van Renssalaer, *Newport: Our Social Capital*, 57.

⁵⁸ "Life at Newport," *The Baltimore Sun*, August 20, 1888, 6.

⁵⁹ Van Renssalaer, *Newport: Our Social Capital*, 56, 57.

⁶⁰ Scobey, "Anatomy of the Promenade," 211.

New York.⁶¹

In Newport, the cottagers performed a daily promenade down Bellevue Avenue with similar goals in mind. Each afternoon, a “grand parade” of coaches and, later, automobiles traveled the length of the fashionable street, turning onto Ocean Drive and concluding the ritual at nearby Castle Hill, where they turned around and returned home.⁶² Like Scobey’s assessment of urban promenading, these Newport drives “affirmed [the elite’s] dynamism, prosperity and civility, ... licensing extravagant display as a badge of membership in the cultivated elite of the ascendant metropolis.”⁶³ Their pageantry also demonstrated the perils and paradoxes of increased public attention. As Maureen Montgomery points out, “Publicity... was an essential factor in this self-glorification and competition for social acclaim, but it could also prove very harmful.”⁶⁴

Lehr recalled, “Ward McAllister always claimed that he fled from publicity, yet it was in his lifetime that various sundry papers began to devote a great deal of space to the personalities of the men who had made money through the development of railroads, real estate, and steel.”⁶⁵ Following the Civil War, the United States experienced a veritable revolution in media. From 1850 to 1890 American newspaper circulation and readership increased from roughly 800,000 readers of 100 papers to 8 million readers of some 900 papers nationwide.⁶⁶ With literacy at an all-time high, newfound access to cheap paper production, and groundbreaking new technology in the form of advancements in typesetting, the web-fed rotary press, electronically run machinery, and halftone engraving, newspapers reached a greater number of readers than ever

⁶¹ Ibid., 211, 221.

⁶² Van Renssalaer, *Newport: Our Social Capital*, 73.

⁶³ Scobey, “Anatomy of the Promenade,” 211.

⁶⁴ Montgomery, *Gilded Prostitution*, 48.

⁶⁵ Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 237.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Cappello, *None of Your Damn Business: Privacy in the United States from the Gilded Age to the Digital Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 31.

before.⁶⁷ The explosive growth of “national information networks” transformed the press into a “big business” that waged war on the wealthy’s bastions of exclusivity.⁶⁸ Newspapers’ content also changed during this period. Especially salient during this dynamic new era of American media was the emergence of “new journalism,” which author Karen Roggenkamp defines as “an innovative, commercialized, sensationalistic, and above all dramatic style of reportage” that “teemed with stories that read nearly like fiction, with vivid characters, evocative settings, narrative presence, and descriptive language.”⁶⁹

With the growth of media and publishing infrastructure came a “revolution in society journalism,” during which coverage of the rich changed in tone and detail.⁷⁰ Prior to the 1880s, it was common practice for “the name of a true gentlewoman [to appear] in the paper but three times—when she was born, when she was married, and when she died...”⁷¹ Reporters typically employed a “stately and discreet” approach to covering the lives of the rich, almost, as Andy Logan notes, “to the point of flunkeyism.”⁷² Society pages typically included guest lists, as well as details on entertainments, weddings, and comings and goings to resorts like Newport, Saratoga, Long Branch, and Cape May. Any criticism of the rich was reserved not for the society pages, but for other sections of the newspaper, speaking to larger cultural mores and Victorian ideas about class.⁷³

⁶⁷ Kathy Roberts Forde and Katherine A. Foss, “‘The Facts—the Color!—the Facts’: The Idea of a Report in American Print Culture, 1885—1910,” *Book History* 15 (2012): 127; and Tim Curtis Smythe, *The Gilded Age Press, 1865-1900* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 122.

⁶⁸ Wallach, “A Depraved Taste for Publicity,” 34; and Amanda Mackenzie Stewart, *Consuelo and Alva: The Story of a Daughter and Mother in the Gilded Age* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 103.

⁶⁹ Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century Newspapers and Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2005), xii, 29.

⁷⁰ Andy Logan, *The Man Who Robbed the Robber Barons* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965), 130.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 144.

This changed in the 1880s, when “society journalism” entered the American lexicon. Because “society had become a much more public affair” and its members engaged in much more visible shows of wealth—such as entertaining and architectural endeavors— the wealthy inadvertently opened the doors for journalists to compose more detailed reports on the elite’s private lives. As with other traditions, trends, and constructs, Newport attracted many of New York’s characteristics, including its intrepid reporters. As Cappello explains, the increasingly competitive media industry produced “a powerful drive for the ‘scoop’—and so standard journalistic practices became much more invasive.”⁷⁴ This was particularly true for Newport’s cottagers. In Lehr’s words,

What the leaders in the houses, which now were scattered thickly over this side of the island, could not prevent was the curiosity of the society reporters who had come to look at Newport as the greatest of the summer hunting grounds. They fixed their hungry gaze upon all the gaiety and fashion, exaggerated its importance for the sake of increasing their own and aroused an interest in the doings of the Newport colony such as had never before been awakened by any circle of merry-makers.⁷⁵

Moreover, as Montgomery explains, “The emergence of a regular society page in the New York dailies... signified that there was sufficient ‘news’ about the activities of the wealthy to sustain the commitment of both newspaper space and staff. It also meant that a steady flow of information had to be maintained.”⁷⁶ Thus, the revolution of the society pages in the late nineteenth century created a new demand for informants and correspondents specifically hired to gather information on the upper class. A writer for London’s *The New Review* wrote in awe about the lengths to which some reporters went to fill newspapers with the most delicate, private matters. “There is no underground,” he described. “Elevated, like their unsightly railroads, in all men’s eyes, the worst is at least seen and known... Every conversation is an interview. Any

⁷⁴ Cappello, *None of Your Damn Business*, 31.

⁷⁵ Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 88.

⁷⁶ Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 144.

casual remark is treated as a public announcement.”⁷⁷ Even *Town Topics* expressed horror at “the means adopted by the editors of daily newspapers to fill their pages. Nothing is too solemn, sacred, dangerous or disgusting for them to discuss carelessly and superficially.”⁷⁸ In Newport, reporters shamelessly eavesdropped on wealthy tourists, snuck into entertainments in the cottages, and even recruited servants as spies.⁷⁹ Once they obtained desired information, they raced to transmit it back to the newspaper offices. *Town Topics*’ Newport correspondent described how “Every day from five hundred to two thousand words were telegraphed to all the important journals in New York and Boston. And what was the matter of the words thus wired? Names—names—names. Why on earth the very same list should have been flashed over the lines every twenty-four hours, I am at a loss to understand.”⁸⁰

Changing journalistic trends cased the elite to reap the unforeseen consequences of building barriers around their homes, beaches, and clubs. Though high society had undergone a radical and tumultuous process of regulating membership in the postbellum period, the tide of new wealth continued to flood into urban centers. Between snubbed millionaires failing to achieve a sense of belonging in Newport and a growing sect of informants and journalists committed to supplying an ever-interested public with insider glimpses into the elites’ privileged world, Newport’s cottagers had effectively become trapped by their own rules and barriers. With Astor still out of the limelight and social leadership in flux, McAllister attempted to adapt to this climate by becoming a press correspondent, which he achieved through his foray into authorship.

“I write for two reasons,” McAllister once remarked. “I enjoy it, and it pays me.”⁸¹

⁷⁷ Martin Morris, “American Traits,” *The New Review* 13, no. 77 (October 1895): 436, 439.

⁷⁸ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 29, no. 5 (February 2, 1893): 12.

⁷⁹ Logan, *The Man Who Robbed the Robber Barrons*, 177; and “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 30, no. 1 (July 6, 1893): 5-6.

⁸⁰ “Newport Remembered,” 12.

⁸¹ “Ward M’Allister Dead,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 1895, 1.

McAllister had used the press since the 1880s to disseminate choice information about New York's upper class, but larger cultural conditions expanded this relationship. In 1890, he wrote *Society as I Have Found It*, a curious mix of autobiography, self-help book for the socially ambitious, and instructional manual on best practices for entertaining, the choicest wines (listed meticulously), and the ideal pairings of sauces and dishes at dinner parties or picnics. The book is full of name-dropping and detailed accounts of grand parties from Newport to Italy, including a \$10,000 dinner financed by a federal tax refund.⁸² In hindsight, McAllister's publishers' confidence that the memoir would "unquestionably be *the* book of the year" seems hyperbolic, but given the growing popularity of detailed society reportage in New York and other American urban centers, their confidence was far from unwarranted.⁸³ McAllister published the book at a time when interest in society—among outsiders and members of the Four Hundred alike—was so lucrative that it inspired a wave of magazines, fiction, and etiquette books that "relied on and taught social plotting" and "demystified" the previously cloistered lives of the American aristocracy.⁸⁴

With this logic in mind, McAllister's insider point of view should have been tantalizing, but his memoir received vitriolic backlash. In the words of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, after the book's publication, "it was predicted that his silly pen had dug McAllister's social grave."⁸⁵ While his comparatively fewer supporters believed that "the record of [his] life... prove[d] how much [he had] done to secure the high rank to which...the Empire City is now entitled," most reviewers scoffed at the position McAllister described and maintained; *The Elmira Star Gazette*

⁸² McAllister, *Society as I Have Found It*, 77.

⁸³ Undated clipping from *The New York Commercial Advertiser*, in personal scrapbook, Box 204, Ward McAllister Papers.

⁸⁴ Foote, *The Parvenu's Plot*, 4; and Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 203.

⁸⁵ "The New Master of Ceremonies," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 23, 1892, 4.

commented, “Ward McAllister’s book on society consoles you for not being in it.”⁸⁶ Rumors flew that the memoir had “been the last straw to break the camel’s back” and might have ousted McAllister from his wealthy peers’ good graces.⁸⁷ Some of the New York elite, who valued their privacy, certainly saw its publication as a gauche breach of etiquette. However, McAllister brushed off any suggestion that he had been “banished” by the members of the social ranks he had helped create.⁸⁸ In fact, he hinted that, if desired, he could have been far less discreet with his written observations. Once, when a reporter asked if the memoirs had “alienated” him from the New York elite, McAllister replied, “Oh, bless you no!.. Some of ‘em were a little nervous, don’t you know, when they heard I was writing the book for fear of what I might say about ‘em. But I have been exceedingly careful about personalities and have kept out lots of things which would have [made] mighty interesting reading.”⁸⁹

The general public seized onto the idea that the book had created an irreparable fissure between McAllister and the rest of the elite, which fueled its negative reception. Even Theodore Roosevelt, then serving on the U.S. Civil Service Commission, weighed in on the publication. Laughing, he remarked, “I am told that the Socialists are circulating the book to show what manner of people those are in New York who lead lives without working. And, really, I confess, if I believed that the best people of New York were of that sort, I should not blame anyone for being a Socialist.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ “McAllister and His Critics: They May Poke Fun at Him, But He Can Afford to Smile, for His Book Sells Like Hot Cakes,” undated clipping from unknown newspaper, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers; and untitled clipping from *The Elmira Star-Gazette*, October 28, 1890, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers.

⁸⁷ “Ward McAllister to be Dethroned,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, December 13, 1890, 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ “M’Allister and His Critics.” After the book’s caustic reception, he mailed a copy to the New York Society Library and identified all of his subjects in red ink in the margins. See Nathan, “Ward McAllister,” 278.

⁹⁰ “Cabin Offsets Steerage: Theodore Roosevelt Talks About Ward McAllister’s Four Hundred,” *The Portland Daily Press*, Portland, ME, December 20, 1890, 1.

Though reviewers generally reacted negatively to McAllister's memoir, he remained undaunted and continued to use the press as a mouthpiece. In 1891, *The Washington Post* described how "on the eve, or on the morning rather, of a great social function, Mr. McAllister meets the reporters of the city morning press by appointment."⁹¹ He invited correspondents into his home office and permitted them to copy the proposed menu for the event, as well as take down select information about the decorations, music, and guest list. Similarly, he kept office hours at his rented Newport cottage on LeRoy Avenue from nine to ten each morning, with the express purpose of speaking with reporters.⁹² By 1892, despite his vitriolic criticism of McAllister's memoir just two years earlier, Joseph Pulitzer of the *New York World* recognized that recruiting New York's premier social arbiter as a regular press correspondent would be a brilliant move, especially as competition for society news grew steeper.⁹³ While maintaining his regular interview schedule with other New York dailies, McAllister wrote for the *World* for \$150 per week on a variety of topics, including clubs, divorce, Newport's climate, social life in other American cities like Chicago, and Anglo-American marriages.⁹⁴ His last contribution, on imported European fashions, was published just eleven days before his death.⁹⁵

As the Gilded Age wore on, newspaper readers wanted more than descriptions of the interiors of the elite's homes; they wanted intimate details about the people who lived in them. Staged house tours, restrained interviews, and the otherwise "kid-glove treatment" of society's

⁹¹ "Coaching the Papers," 5.

⁹² Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 19.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁹⁴ "M'Allister as a Reporter," *The Portland Daily Press*, Portland, ME, May 18, 1892, 3.

⁹⁵ "Plea for Social Patriotism: McAllister Says We Should Be Original, Stop Importing Our Fashions and Manners, and Make New York the Centre of the World's Social Life," clipping from *The New York World*, January 20, 1895, in personal scrapbook, Box 204, Ward McAllister Papers.

members no longer sufficed.⁹⁶ Thus, the modern gossip column was born. However, as Wallach notes, “Our culture of exposure did not always exist.”⁹⁷ The wealthy’s increased visibility in New York and Newport served as a critical backdrop to this development. Montgomery explains that “it required self-discipline to put oneself on display and thereby exercise some control over what was seen and how it should be seen. Nevertheless, the society reporter’s gaze could register transgressions and unintended slip-ups in the performance as well as excesses.”⁹⁸ Past scandals like the infamous affair between Brooklyn minister Henry Ward Beecher and a friend’s wife in 1872 raised grave questions about the public’s right to sensitive, even reputation-ruining, information.⁹⁹ As a result, by asserting a dedication to serving the “public good,” late nineteenth century newspapers precariously blurred “the traditional public sphere of politics and the intimate, private world of family, home, and sexual relations.”¹⁰⁰ Wallach explains, “In this struggle, the press emerged as an institution that inscribed lines between the spheres and guarded its boundaries.”¹⁰¹

In 1892, McAllister appeared in the press for two radically different reasons that demonstrated both its constructive and destructive power. First, McAllister released a list of names comprising the Four Hundred—which, in actuality, included just over three hundred names—in the *New York Times*, officially deciphering the otherwise elusive numerical illustration that he had introduced in the late 1880s.¹⁰² However, before the ink was dry, the arrival of a young woman from Georgia touched off a two-year family scandal that, once leaked

⁹⁶ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 206. For an example of journalists’ respectful, collected coverage of the elite and their homes, see “A Millionaire’s Home,” *The Washington Post*, March 2, 1884, 2. Here, the journalist is invited into the Astors’ home on Fifth Avenue.

⁹⁷ Wallach, “A Depraved Taste for Publicity,” 32.

⁹⁸ Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 121.

⁹⁹ Wallach, “A Depraved Taste for Publicity,” 34.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² King, *A Season of Splendor*, 104.

to the papers, challenged McAllister's already tenuous authority in New York and Newport. Between 1892 and 1894, the scandal brought the full war between publicity and privacy to the doorstep of McAllister's Newport cottage.

In May of 1892, Ward McAllister's youngest son, Heyward, surprised members of New York and Newport society by announcing his marriage to Janie Champion Garmony, the daughter of a moderately-successful real estate developer in Savannah. The couple had been secretly married five years prior, and Ward McAllister was among the last family members to know. The young couple first met in 1886, not long after twenty-seven-year-old Heyward's uncle, William H. Gibbons, placed him and his cousin, Frank Lathrop, in charge of some of his landholdings in Georgia. According to the *Los Angeles Herald*, Gibbons "tried them, [and] tested their business capacity," and Heyward took charge of a 10,000 acre rice plantation with profitable flocks of cattle and sheep.¹⁰³ Heyward expected to reap an even greater inheritance upon his uncle's death. Until then, however, he remained financially dependent on his father.

When Heyward became infatuated with "accomplished, pretty and popular" Janie Garmony, he returned to New York to seek his family's approval to propose marriage, but his father was staunchly against the idea.¹⁰⁴ Ward allegedly "considered it unmanly [for] his son to bind a woman to him until he could give her a proper home," agreeing to support Heyward financially "as a bachelor," but not if he married too hastily.¹⁰⁵ As the *Evening World of Wilmington, Delaware* reported, "The young man listened patiently, apparently concurred in his father's views, and said nothing more about marrying, but went ahead and took himself a

¹⁰³ "Again to be a Bride: Ward McAllister's One-Time Daughter-in-Law Engaged," *The Los Angeles Herald*, March 6, 1898, 11; and "Five Years Wedded," *The New York World*, May 13, 1892, 1. Gibbons may have offered Frank Lathrop and Heyward the opportunity to try their hands managing his property because they were both second sons.

¹⁰⁴ "Shocking Bad Form," *The San Francisco Call*, May 13, 1892, 1.

¹⁰⁵ "M'Allister's Son Married," *The Evening Journal*, Wilmington, DE, May 13, 1892, 1.

wife.”¹⁰⁶ On January 4, 1887, Heyward and Janie were secretly married in Savannah, but five months later, Heyward left Georgia, returned to New York alone, and “lived with his father as usual.”¹⁰⁷ By the time William H. Gibbons died in June, profits had plummeted, and the sheep on Heyward’s plantation had died, “which cleared him out pretty thoroughly.”¹⁰⁸ In his will, Gibbons favored Frank Lathrop over Heyward, and the latter—with his wife still in Georgia—lingered in New York.¹⁰⁹ Not even when Janie contracted a nearly-fatal case of typhoid in the winter of 1891 did Heyward pay a single visit back to Savannah.¹¹⁰ She recovered and patiently waited another year for her husband to return. When he remained in the North, she took matters into her own hands.

In September 1892, after seeking legal counsel, Janie paid a call on the McAllister cottage at Newport and had “a long, earnest talk” with her estranged husband.¹¹¹ *The Pittsburg* [sic] *Dispatch* reported how “the story spread through Newport that the conversation between husband and wife had been on the subject of an application for a divorce which Mrs. McAllister proposed to make” on the grounds of non-support and desertion.¹¹² Though the couple remained married for another three years, the possibility of divorce was enough to cast a pall over the family’s good standing. Alva Vanderbilt, who divorced William K. Vanderbilt in 1895, wrote, “Women were not supposed to divorce their husbands in those days, whatever their provocation, and social ostracism threatened anyone daring enough, or self-respecting enough, to do it.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Heyward H. McAllister and Janie C. Garmany, January 4, 1887, Marriage, Chatham, Georgia, United States, "Georgia, County Marriages, 1785-1950," Georgia Department of Archives and History, Morrow, FHL microfilm 183,861, FamilySearch, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KXJX-6VR>; and “M’Allister’s Son Married,” 1.

¹⁰⁸ “Five Years Wedded,” 1.

¹⁰⁹ “Again to be a Bride,” 11.

¹¹⁰ “Five Years Wedded,” 1.

¹¹¹ “Tired of Ward’s Son,” *The Pittsburg* [sic] *Dispatch*, September 21, 1892, 1.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Belmont Memoir, 151.

She described that when she sued for divorce, “Society was by turns stunned, horrified, and then savage in its opposition and criticism.”¹¹⁴

Janie did not possess nearly the social clout that Alva commanded, but that she took steps to initiate legal action against Heyward was enough to create the rumblings of a similar response. With McAllister already held in contempt by some of his society peers for the contents of his memoir, as well as unfounded rumors that he was attempting to pare down the Four Hundred to 150 names, the news came as a greater shock. The social arbiter quickly discovered that the media attention he had previously courted as a public figure and writer could have damaging effects on himself and his family. When reporters rushed to seek a reaction to the development, Ward insisted, “It is a private as well as a delicate matter... There will be no sensational developments, don’t you know.”¹¹⁵

McAllister’s confidence was shortsighted and frankly naïve, especially when, just two years later, another young woman arrived on the family’s doorstep in Newport. This time, the caller was thirty-three-year-old actress Lizzie McCall, who also—and impossibly— claimed to be Heyward’s wife. Originally from Buffalo, New York, the young actress possessed a fiery temper and was more infamous for personal theatrics than professional ones.¹¹⁶ By the time the scandal with the McAllisters broke, McCall had been married twice before and was in the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “Society Stands Aghast,” *The Helena Independent*, Helena, MT, September 26, 1892, 2.

¹¹⁶ Note that newspapers also refer to her as Lizzie McCall-Wall, a nod to one of her married names. By the time she clashed with the McAllisters, she had dropped the second surname. Hence, she is referred to only by McCall for the remainder of this chapter. McCall had shot her first two husbands, killing the first and standing trial for manslaughter. When rejected or angered, she also had a habit of resorting to extreme suicidal gestures. Once, when a frustrated stage manager demanded that she leave the premises in the next five minutes, she drew out a small vial and replied, “Thanks... I can die in two.” After a dramatic fit of seizures that required she be rushed to the hospital, doctors discovered that the bottle was filled with licorice water and exposed her macabre charade. If newspaper reports are to be believed, McCall appeared to have exhibited several behaviors consistent with borderline personality disorder, though modern day historians cannot possibly or responsibly offer a conclusive diagnosis.

process of divorcing her third husband. After causing a “scene” at the McAllister cottage in Newport, she returned to New York, furiously gathered the love letters she and Heyward had exchanged, and sought the counsel of the notorious law firm Hummel & Howe, threatening to sue Heyward for breach of promise.¹¹⁷ Following the bizarre turn of events, *Town Topics* noted, “An explosion of some sort is expected almost daily, and meanwhile the atmosphere around the [McCall] apartment and the McAllister cottage at Newport is charged with electricity.”¹¹⁸

One of the curious elements of the McAllister-McCall scandal is the centrality of reporters at every development, as well as the varying degrees to which the key players both courted and grew frustrated with media attention. At one extreme, McCall threatened to weaponize the press against the McAllisters—both Heyward and his father. Speaking of the latter, she said, “Why, it’s shameful: that man’s put me on the level of a common woman. To say that I have chased after his son! Thank you, I don’t have to chase men. I let them chase me. Oh, I’ll make him suffer for this! I will go up to Newport and I will oblige him to make me a public apology—an apology that will appear in print.”¹¹⁹ After making and then retracting a threat to publish an official statement detailing her relationship with Heyward, McCall also claimed to have “refused several highly advantageous offers out of consideration for the McAllister family,” presumably from intrepid reporters seeking to capitalize on her love of attention.¹²⁰ In the next breath, however, she expressed exasperation at reporters’ persistence and sought, in vain, to exercise control over her image in the newspapers. Her interviews are sprinkled with instructions like “no, don’t say that... say...,” suggesting that McCall might have grown alarmed at the speed

¹¹⁷ “Will Sue and Then Star,” *The Savannah Morning News*, September 8, 1894, 6; “Lizzie M’Call,” 28; see also Cait Murphy, *Scoundrels in Law: The Trials of Howe and Hummel, Lawyers to the Gangsters, Cops, Starlets, and Rakes Who Made the Gilded Age*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 2010.

¹¹⁸ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 32, no. 12 (September 12, 1894): 1.

¹¹⁹ “M’Call vs. McAllister,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 1894, 6.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

with which her words could be broadcasted to a tremendous readership.¹²¹ She once declared, “I am tired of ventilating my private affairs before the public” and subsequently stormed into the offices at the *New York Sun*, threatening to sue every newspaper in New York; she explained, “I have been... busy keeping reporters out of my rooms. The hallway has been thick with them for two days.”¹²²

In the grand scheme of the summer season, the fallout surrounding Heyward and McCall’s relationship was a minor scandal at best. After all, the height of the drama coincided with the ongoing Drayton-Burrowes scandal involving the Astors and swirling rumors around William K. and Alva Vanderbilt’s separation and divorce, to name two salient examples. In fact, when asked to comment on the Vanderbilts’ separation, McAllister deferred. *The Birmingham Age-Herald* explained his diplomatic response in terms of his personal life, noting, “The McAllisters... have a little scandal of their own on tap at present and are living in a glass house.”¹²³ However, the event exemplified the extent to which McAllister—who was far more accustomed to contributing to and controlling his public image—disliked the fact that McCall, and the newspaper coverage she encouraged, had disrupted his family’s privacy in Newport. He explained, “My son Heyward is big enough to take care of himself, but when he is at my house in Newport, you understand, he is my guest, and I won’t have the sanctity of my home invaded, don’t you know.”¹²⁴

As the American elite achieved veritable celebrity status, especially in the eyes of a readership who had grown accustomed to glimpses of their otherwise exclusive homes, clubs,

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Will Sue and Then Star,” 6; and “Denials by Miss M’Call,” *The New York Sun*, August 19, 1894, 5.

¹²³ “To Escape Notoriety,” *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, Birmingham, AL, September 25, 1894, 8.

¹²⁴ Tristram Shandy, “Swell Society Stands Aghast,” *The Scranton Tribune*, Scranton, PA, September 15, 1894, 7.

and events, they opened the gates to wider criticism. Even minor embarrassments could be exaggerated to fill columns. Homberger affirms that “[s]candals became harder to hide. The costs of discovery could be high.”¹²⁵ Speaking of the McAllister-McCall scandal, the *Scranton Tribune* summarized, “[T]he fall campaign of the sensation lovers has opened well and promises a season of undiluted delight. Whatever effect these scandals may have, they are exposing to the public some edifying examples of American aristocracy.”¹²⁶

Colonel William D’Alton Mann, editor-in-chief of *Town Topics*, believed that his critical coverage of the Four Hundred served the public good, though his work exemplified the ugly extremes of scandal-hungry society journalism in Gilded Age America. *Town Topics* followed the deeds and misdeeds of upper-class Americans in several cities nationwide but paid special attention to happenings in New York. It also highlighted events in summer resort destinations like Newport, to which Mann dispatched special correspondents to gather news. “The Saunterer”—as Mann signed the columns—employed a tone, common among many society reporters, that “suggest[ed] collusion between the reader and the columnist in glimpsing the exclusive show of fashionable folk.”¹²⁷ After taking control of the magazine in 1891, Mann reveled in his ability to weaponize society news and ridicule high society figures. In “Saunterings,” the magazine’s centerpiece, Mann highlighted “news of the routine social engagements of his weekly cast of characters directly after reports of their indictable pursuits, which usually left out names but provided instead such do-it-yourself clues” to disclose to the reader who, among the illustrious Four Hundred, was having an affair, engaged in dubious business practices, had a drinking problem, was gaining weight, had been snubbed for an

¹²⁵ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 12.

¹²⁶ Shandy, “Swell Society Stands Aghast,” 7.

¹²⁷ Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 142

invitation, or made a beautiful or ugly bride.¹²⁸ Naturally, this type of coverage extended to Newport, where its subjects found it increasingly difficult to protect their privacy. As one write-up noted, “Such acrid whisperings as these indicate that the noble calm of the queen city by the sea has its occasional tempests, even though they occur in a teapot.”¹²⁹

As King explains, “On purchasing *Town Topics*, Mann set about transforming it from an accumulation of guest lists at parties and balls passed on by social secretaries to something more disturbing.”¹³⁰ To dissuade Mann’s persistent informants—ranging from servants to social climbers—from bringing their misdeeds to light, some members of the elite allegedly resorted to bribery. In 1905 and 1906, Mann stood trial on charges that *Town Topics* served as a thinly-veiled blackmail operation. His accusers alleged that Mann had accepted bribes up to \$20,000 from wealthy men and women seeking to be included on the editor’s “‘immune’ list,” which could protect them “from the Saunterer’s rapier.”¹³¹ Logan explains that Mann’s targets included “almost the entire roster of men whose names were then synonymous with the nation’s financial and industrial power and whose high-handed and often felonious maneuvers against the interests of their fellow Americans historians have been exposing, at full tilt, ever since.”¹³²

Mann maintained a rather “evangelical concept of the Saunterer’s duty to its readership” with a cynical twist.¹³³ Whereas the American press had turned the corner from its original distant, respectful, and rather vague coverage of the American elite, Mann’s treatment of his subjects exposed the waste synonymous with Gilded Age New York and Newport’s era of

¹²⁸ Logan, *The Man Who Robbed the Robber Barons*, 138.

¹²⁹ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 24, no. 7 (August 14, 1890): 2.

¹³⁰ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 407.

¹³¹ Logan, *The Man Who Robbed the Robber Barons*, 173, 177; and “Brings in Lehr’s Name,” *The New York Sun*, January 24, 1906, 1. Oftentimes, bribes from the wealthy were written off as loans, gifts, or merely subscriptions to the magazine.

¹³² Logan, *The Man Who Robbed the Robber Barons*, 59.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

frivolity. That was exactly the goal Mann had in mind. In “The Saunterer,” Mann explained,

Up to the time *Town Topics* took its place among the prominent journals of the times, society in New York received little or no attention from the newspaper press of New York... [W]hen I find the ornamental folks of our most unimportant fashionable world being discussed and pictured over whole pages of sloppy journalism, gushed over, dressed, undressed, and often followed through the pangs of childbirth... I am fully convinced that had I not gaily set the puppets to dancing, the newspapers of the town would never have seen fit to do more than make formal mention of the occasional entertainments among the rich...¹³⁴

Though perhaps a little overstated, Mann’s tactics and purpose for *Town Topics* secured his infamous legacy and exemplified a growing distrust of the rich and their highly-publicized displays of wealth. King argues that “the scandal and excesses of society ultimately doomed the Gilded Age, as public opinion turned against unrestrained extravagance.”¹³⁵

Simultaneously, labor unrest, racial tensions, and economic hardship culminating in the Panic of 1893 demonstrated that the privileged, private world of New York and Newport—society as McAllister had found it—was a remarkably out-of-touch existence enjoyed by a select few. One contemporary New York clergyman described his environment as an “age of ‘trusts’ and ‘distrusts.’”¹³⁶ Through the efforts of activists, muckraking journalists, politicians, and others, the gap between “the world of indolent frivolity” and the “gaunt, hungry, and hollow-eyed millions” became more apparent, especially in cities.¹³⁷ It was no longer possible to ignore New Yorkers’ diverse experiences. O. Henry certainly had McAllister in mind when he penned the preface to his collection of short stories, *The Four Million*. His literary focus on a broad swath of the human experience in New York exemplified larger trends and themes that remained fixtures of the Progressive Era. He observed, “Not very long ago some one invented the assertion

¹³⁴ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 26, no. 25 (December 17, 1891): 1.

¹³⁵ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 423.

¹³⁶ “Would Banish M’Allister,” *The New York World*, April 17, 1893, 3.

¹³⁷ B.O. Flower, “Civilization’s Inferno: A Caustic Attack on Fashionable Society,” *The New York World*, March 26, 1893, 25.

that there were only ‘Four Hundred’ people in New York City really worth noticing. But a wiser man has arisen—the census taker—and his larger estimate of human interest has been preferred in marking out the field of these little stories of the ‘Four Million.’”¹³⁸

The publication of two books in 1890 demonstrated the growing recognition of social polarization in New York. In November, photojournalist Jacob Riis published his groundbreaking work *How the Other Half Lives*, detailing horrifying living conditions in New York’s slums, roughly one month after McAllister released his memoir, *Society as I Have Found It*. Homberger explains that the two books demonstrated how “social distance” between rich and poor “was itself a product more of perception than of empirical reality.”¹³⁹ In fact, Riis believed that *How the Other Half Lives* achieved its vast commercial success partly due to the proximity of *Society as I Have Found It*’s publication. In his autobiography, Riis recalled, “Ward McAllister wrote his book about society as he had found it, and the circuit was made. Ministers preached about the contrast. *How the Other Half Lives* ran from edition to edition.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, increased coverage demanded increased sensitivity to the realities of a polarized American society. By attempting to profit from his insider perspective and provide an interested readership with the details they craved, McAllister fell victim to his own game. In 1893, the *Utica Sunday Globe* remarked, “The world knows that New York’s society, with exceptions, of course, is reeking with pride, selfishness, vanity, and immorality, but the world didn’t know until Ward McAllister spoke, how rotten utterly rotten it is to its core. Its members are votaries of pleasure, with the smile of Christianity on their lips.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ O. Henry, *The Four Million* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), unpaginated.

¹³⁹ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 28.

¹⁴⁰ Jacob Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1901), 309.

¹⁴¹ Untitled clipping from *The Utica Saturday Globe*, Utica, NY, March 18, 1893, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers.

As the American public began to demystify and ridicule the wealthy's insular existence, Newport again served as the epicenter of increasingly garish displays at the hands of a fragmented American elite that had almost completely departed from Astor and McAllister's aristocratic vision. In King's words, "Slowly, gradually, the old order was passing... Such ostentation left Caroline Astor adrift. The frantic search for money as social power buried her concept of the Gilded Age, with its noble instincts and distinguished elite."¹⁴² This regressive movement towards bored extravagance served as the perfect environment in which a growing war between privacy and visibility could breed and thrive, producing exactly the type of "conspicuous consumption" Thorstein Veblen described in his landmark 1899 work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.¹⁴³ When Astor reemerged from mourning in 1894, her social leadership in Newport had been successfully usurped by Alva Vanderbilt, Tessie Oelrichs, and Mamie Fish, whom Davis terms "the rebel, the perfectionist, and the loose cannon."¹⁴⁴ Under "[t]his devil-may-care triumvirate," Sterngass argues that "Newport society demolished the impeccable public dignity of Ward McAllister's Four Hundred and achieved its most brilliant period from 1890 to 1914."¹⁴⁵ Astor continued to host popular entertainments in New York and Newport following her reentry into society, but her peers viewed her as an old-fashioned figure representative of a different age.

Meanwhile, the McAllisters' family scandal in 1894 was only a minor act in a larger comedy of errors that challenged the social arbiter's authority in the first half of the decade. Coming on the heels of his poorly-received book and subsequent rumors that "deposed

¹⁴² King, *A Season of Splendor*, 399.

¹⁴³ Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1899), 75.

¹⁴⁴ Davis, *Gilded*, 83.

¹⁴⁵ Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 226.

McAllister” might “have a chance of writing a book on ‘Society as I Have Left It,’” he could scarcely afford to have “this amusing catastrophe to the pretentious house of McAllister... canvassed in club and drawing room...”¹⁴⁶ In addition, McAllister often found himself at odds with the new set of prominent Newport hostesses. However, to the surprise of his peers and interviewers, he brushed off even the fiercest attacks. In fact, he meticulously documented written coverage and cruel caricatures of him in a series of scrapbooks, now housed at the Newport Historical Society. On one occasion, a visiting reporter asked about the scrapbooks’ contents. “What was it Barnum used to say?” McAllister replied. ““For Heaven’s sake, keep my name in the papers, ... call me a humbug, But print my name—it all advertises the show.””¹⁴⁷ In the face of scathing write-ups, “providence having gifted him with a double skin,” McAllister maintained, “I don’t allow them to disturb my serenity in the least, don’t you know.”¹⁴⁸

In Newport, the members-only spheres the cottagers had painstakingly crafted since the late 1860s, using customs, architecture, and social mores imported from Europe and New York, imploded by the turn of the twentieth century. The 1890s saw the rejection of Astor and McAllister’s aristocratic vision for American society, as exemplified by the previous era of formality. Stensrud explains,

As America entered the twentieth century, high society was in flux as never before. Change was everywhere, along with growth, and the center could not hold for the single reason that there were too many people to command. The assault on the bastions of privilege by the swarming, unpedigreed, newly rich created a pulsing dynamic as more people sought status and inclusion in the lofty ranks. For several decades, the moral authority of Mrs. Astor had kept the upper crust intact, but by 1900 the younger generation was rebelling against the outmoded concepts of propriety.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ “A Tottering Idol,” *The San Francisco Evening Post*, February 6, 1892, in personal scrapbook, Box 203, Ward McAllister Papers; and Shandy, “Swell Society Stands Aghast,” 7.

¹⁴⁷ “McAllister and His Critics.”

¹⁴⁸ “Saunterings,” *Town Topics* 24, no. 7 (August 14, 1890): 2; and “McAllister and His Critics.”

¹⁴⁹ Stensrud, *Newport*, 436.

In 1895 and 1898, respectively, two of Newport's prominent hostesses signaled their budding social authority and society's drift toward frivolity by constructing summer cottages. The first, Crossways, belonged to Mamie Fish. Born to a well-respected family in Staten Island and raised on Manhattan's fashionable Irving Place, Marion "Mamie" Graves Anthon married Stuyvesant Fish, who was every inch the epitome of the robber baron as a New York banker and the president of the Illinois Central Railroad. Though she was poorly educated and reportedly could barely read or write, her sense of humor and scathing wit endeared her to a new set of "bored and yet eager devotees of gayety."¹⁵⁰ *Town Topics* hailed her as a "feminine Moses" who had rescued her peers from a "wilderness of dulness [*sic*]."¹⁵¹ Partnering with McAllister's successor, Harry Lehr, Fish hosted a variety of expensive novelty events that both entertained and made a mockery of the cottagers' rituals of social membership. She threw parties whose guests of honor were dogs and monkeys and, on one occasion, invited all of Newport society to Crossways under the guise of entertaining the tsar of Russia, who ended up being Harry Lehr in costume.¹⁵² Her annual Harvest Ball came to represent the final grand event of each summer season at Newport. One of Mamie's most interesting qualities was her self-awareness when hosting these events. Blanche Oelrichs commented, "One knew as one looked at and listened to her, that she sensed well the triviality in which she drowned her time, and that her brash mirth concealed an ever more exasperated cry at the impotence of the kind of life that went on around her."¹⁵³

The second cottage, Rosecliff, belonged to Tessie Oelrichs and boasted the largest private

¹⁵⁰ "Saunterings," *Town Topics* 43, no. 3 (January 18, 1900): 3.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Lehr, *King Lehr*, 134. Fish came to champion the early twentieth century's most ridiculous novelty events. For example, at her Circus Ball, guests could feed peanuts to the live elephant that wandered through the ballroom. Another intrepid host held a dinner where guests remained on horseback for the entirety of the evening. The animals' shoes were specially outfitted with pads as not to scuff the floors.

¹⁵³ Strange, *Who Tells Me True*, 57-58.

ballroom in Newport.¹⁵⁴ Especially as the twentieth century dawned, Oelrichs became famous for her lavish entertainments at Newport. Her niece remembered, “Gorgeous toilettes, society—a flux of faces in and out of rooms, on beaches, in casinos—absorbed her.”¹⁵⁵ When planning her 1904 *Bal Blanc*, she petitioned the U.S. Navy to anchor its White Fleet in view of Rosecliff “and was genuinely surprised when they refused.”¹⁵⁶ These entertainments typified Newport society’s rapid pace during the second phase of the Gilded Age. The sumptuous expense was enough to raise eyebrows, even among some of high society’s members. Minnie Stevens, who had frequented Newport during her youth and became Lady Paget after her marriage to a titled Briton, reportedly asked her American peers during her periodic visits, “Just what is it you are all after anyway?”¹⁵⁷

At the turn of the twentieth century, journalists continued to decry ridiculous novelty events hosted in New York and Newport at astronomical expense. Even Mrs. Astor, in her reserved, dignified, but biting way, criticized her fellow hostesses’ antics. In a rare press interview, published shortly before her death in 1908, she explained, “I am not vain enough to think New York will not be able to get along very well without me. Many women will rise up to take my place. But I hope my influence will be felt... in discountenancing the undignified methods employed by certain New York women to attract a following. They have given entertainments that belonged under a circus tent rather than in a gentlewoman’s home.”¹⁵⁸ Many in society’s conservative circles agreed. For example, Van Renssalaer observed with contempt how “[t]he bizarre was glorified; the eccentric exalted by these easily bored folks,” and

¹⁵⁴ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 330.

¹⁵⁵ Strange, *Who Tells Me True*, 54.

¹⁵⁶ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 331.

¹⁵⁷ Lehr, *Turn of the World*, 251.

¹⁵⁸ “Mrs. Astor Censures Some Society Women,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1908, 5.

Newport's exclusive social life had succumbed irreversibly to a "gilded chute into crassness and vulgarity."¹⁵⁹ Usurped by a new generation with a new vision for society's purpose, Astor was forced to again recede from the spotlight she had so long commanded. Moreover, she marveled at how a select few hostesses, seeking "notoriety," had "done untold harm to the good name of American society."¹⁶⁰ Astor remarked, "Women of this stamp are few in New York, but, alas! they are so appalling active."¹⁶¹

A combination of personal difficulties, professional decisions, and larger cultural, political, social, and technological factors forecasted Astor and McAllister's waning influence. Without the pair at the helm, society entered a "decentralized" stage, during which it "split up into several smaller circles."¹⁶² Meanwhile, reporters remained poised to broadcast not only the ensuing intraclass warfare—waged using entertainments and social snubs—but its increasingly gaudy fruit. Because "celebrities and mass media were dependent on each other," the visibility of the upper class to the American public ensured that "the sensational press [sent] to Newport a small army of reporters" to "pursue them from early dawn till midnight chime, so that descriptions, interviews, and pictures of them may be obtained for publication" well into the era of frivolity and beyond.¹⁶³ The fracturing of McAllister and Astor's cliquy but relatively cohesive Four Hundred marked a discernable change in tenor for Gilded Age New York and Newport. Discussing the causes for society's dissolution into warring factions, *The Kansas City Times* observed that the New York elite "have entertained the false notion that with money enough they can be just like European aristocracies. This has led them into extravagances,

¹⁵⁹ Van Renssalaer, *The Social Ladder*, 238, 242.

¹⁶⁰ "Mrs. Astor Censures Some Society Women," 5.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² "Newport," *The New York Times*, August 20, 1899, 12; and Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, 38.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 142; and "Newport," 12.

absurdities and social and personal bitteresses [*sic*]. To some, it may seem an American comedy. It is really an American tragedy.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ “McAllister’s 400 is Torn to Pieces,” *The Kansas City Times*, Kansas City, MO, January 15, 1899, 16.

Conclusion

On the Monday of Ward McAllister's funeral, February 4, 1895, New Yorkers woke to one of the coldest mornings of the season. The service was scheduled to begin at ten o'clock, but hours in advance, a crowd began to form in the shadow of Grace Church's proud steeple, huddled together on streets recently cleared of snow. Most were ordinary men and women "never heard of in society" who had ventured into the cold out of "curiosity."¹ *The New York Sun* reported that "the general public out-numbered the acquaintances of the bereaved family by ten to one."² However, "Society was well represented," and though Eric Homberger describes the funeral as "predominantly a 'Vanderbilt' occasion," several members of the Patriarchs and the Four Hundred attended as well.³ Members of the Astor family made an appearance, but Caroline Astor was noticeably absent. She even declined to cancel a dinner party scheduled for that evening.⁴

Between the upper-class attendees and the curious spectators, Grace Church's sanctuary was packed. By the time the hearse arrived, pulled by two black horses and followed by five coaches belonging to the family, a squad of policemen from the Mercer Street station had arrived to manage the throng. Mountains of wreaths and flowers filled McAllister's former pew—number 113—and nearly covered his coffin, which was draped with a black shroud and a magnificent arrangement of American Beauty roses, Mrs. Astor's favorite flower.⁵ Lander's Orchestra, which for decades had been a fixture of McAllister's entertainments, received "the

¹ "Mr. M'Allister's Funeral," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1895, 9.

² "Ward M'Allister Buried," *The New York Sun*, February 5, 1895, 4.

³ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 152.

⁴ King, *A Season of Splendor*, 105.

⁵ "M'Allister Funeral," *The New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, New Haven, CT, February 5, 1895, 2; and "High Livers," *The Wheeling Sunday Register*, Wheeling, WV, January 13, 1895, 10.

privilege of furnishing the music as an act of respect.”⁶ Homberger summarizes, “McAllister’s send-off was quality, pure quality.”⁷

After McAllister’s death, Newport’s era of frivolity reached its peak. In 1906, one journalist observed how “each year has seen new exploits which have fairly taken the breath away from the great mass of people who look on and laugh or wonder.”⁸ Mamie Fish partnered with Harry Lehr to spearhead the Gilded Age’s last gasp of glory before the earth-shattering impact of World War I. Lehr once commented, “I begin where Ward McAllister left off. He was the voice crying in the wilderness who prepared the way for me.”⁹ Largely reactionary to the grim pageantry of the previous century, “Harry Lehr’s empire of laughter” was characterized by “eccentric escapades” and “endless drolleries,” and Newport remained one of his most successful domains.¹⁰ The parties and daily promenades continued, gates around the cottages remained closely guarded, and New York’s wealthiest citizens continued to frequent the resort, as they had under McAllister and Astor’s sway. However, some of Lehr’s contemporaries commented that he could not quite fill his predecessor’s shoes. A journalist from the *Starkville Times* regarded Lehr as a “social diplomat” but concluded, “Where McAllister made his reputation as a skillful organizer, Lehr has made his mark as a freak entertainer.”¹¹

Although temporarily interrupted by the two World Wars, Newport retained its aura of exclusivity throughout the twentieth century and continues to attract celebrities and socialites alongside hordes of tourists in the twenty-first century. In 1953, John F. Kennedy married Jacqueline Lee Bouvier at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Newport, exemplifying the seaside

⁶ Receipt from Lander’s Orchestra, dated March 1886, Folder 10, Box 202, Ward McAllister Papers; and “The 400 Lost in Crowd at McAllister’s Funeral,” *The Boston Globe*, February 4, 1895, 10.

⁷ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York*, 152.

⁸ “Leaders of ‘Society,’” *The Starkville Times*, Starkville, MS, November 23, 1906, 3.

⁹ Lehr, *King Lehr*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹¹ “Leaders of ‘Society,’” 3.

town's continued role as "the 'in' resort" for blue-blooded Americans.¹² In this regard, Maud Howe Elliott's observation rings true: "No matter what the season, life is never dull here; some famous person is always coming to be entertained, some worthy [cause] is always planning a benefit. Summer or winter, Newport is a world city."¹³

Following McAllister's funeral, his family began making burial arrangements. The body was eventually interred in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, but they considered selecting Newport as McAllister's final resting place.¹⁴ With his daughter Louise, who "inherited her father's fondness for society" and assumed the role as the administratrix of McAllister's estate, at the helm, the McAllister family maintained Bayside Farm—which remained in Sarah's name—for another ten years.¹⁵ It would never again, however, serve as one of Newport's fashionable proving grounds for social success. The McAllisters sold all of the farm's livestock, equipment, and other tools at auction in 1901, an event, like the social arbiter's funeral, that drew a crowd of curiosity-seekers. The farm's remaining forty-six acres went to Reverend Matthew Harkins of the Catholic Diocese of Providence. Under Harkins' direction, the church used half of the property as a working farm. In 1903, he rented the property to an Irish farmer named Michael Barry, at which point the *San Francisco Call* commented that farm "will be more noted for cabbage heads than ever."¹⁶ The other half of the property became a burial ground for the nearby St. Columba's Chapel.¹⁷ During World War II, the U.S. Navy took possession of much of Aquidneck Island's western coastline, including a portion of the former Bayside Farm. In 1965, a

¹² Davis, *Gilded*, 216.

¹³ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 166.

¹⁴ "Ward M'Allister Buried," 4.

¹⁵ "Are Not New Women," *The Times*, Owosso, MI, November 15, 1895, 7; "Local Briefs," *The Newport Daily News*, Newport, RI, March 6, 1895, 5; and Foreclosure, September 12, 1900, Book 18, p. 313, Town of Middletown, Rhode Island. In 1900, one portion of the farm went up for auction after being foreclosed upon. Sarah bid the highest, thereby placing both adjacent plots of land in her name.

¹⁶ *The San Francisco Call*, February 11, 1903, 6.

¹⁷ "Ward McAllister's Farm," *The Fall River Globe*, Fall River, MA, February 6, 1901, 1.

Providence resident lamented how “the grove where [McAllister’s guests] picnicked is [now] a Navy dump infested with rats, piled with debris, and with a smoking incinerator topping it.”¹⁸

Despite the sad fate of his property, McAllister left an undeniable mark on Newport—and Newport on him. When Louise McAllister died in 1923, she left \$5,000 in her father’s name to the Newport Hospital, a fitting gift given his lifelong connection to the community.¹⁹

McAllister’s participation in Newport’s nineteenth transformation cannot be understated but must be understood through the lens of his childhood experiences. Memories of the resort’s relaxed environment, centered around quiet country retreats and community-based activities and lodgings, encouraged McAllister to purchase Bayside Farm in 1853, where he hosted defining social functions that married quaint southern charm with Gilded Age trappings and Anglophilia. His early experiences also demonstrate the extent to which elite southern tourists influenced antebellum Newport by aiding its post-Revolutionary War recovery. Southern visitors forever impacted Newport by initiating the resort’s drift away from a flourishing hotel and boarding-house culture to an environment dominated by increasingly grand private homes.

The Civil War catalyzed privatization in Newport and siphoned off the majority of its southern tourists in favor of a northern elite that was in flux. An explosion of new wealth flooded American cities like New York and inaugurated a period in which increasingly socially-insecure, wealthy Americans turned to European court customs for meaning, purpose, and stability. Influencers with firsthand knowledge of and educations in Europe, like McAllister and architect Richard Morris Hunt, became indispensable to this end. McAllister used his experiences

¹⁸ *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, November 12, 1965, 4. During World War II, the U.S. Navy docked a fleet of destroyers in Coddington Cove, not far from McAllister’s former property. North of the cove, the Navy converted farmland “into the Naval Underwater Systems Center 1115, a military research facility of reinforced-concrete, ‘bombproof’ structures.” See *Historic and Architectural Resources of Middletown, Rhode Island: A Preliminary Report*. Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission, Providence, RI, June 1979, 7, http://www.preservation.ri.gov/pdfs_zips_downloads/survey_pdfs/middletown.pdf.

¹⁹ “McAllister Bequest,” *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, December 29, 1923, 1.

traveling abroad to develop codes of conduct and rites of membership in the United States, bringing order to the otherwise messy coexistence of old and new money families in New York. The creation of the Patriarchs best exemplified his success, and he applied the European-inspired model of the subscription ball not only to the annual Patriarch Ball in New York, but to his exclusive entertainments at Bayside Farm. His efforts not only altered the social tone of New York, but facilitated the growth of his career, which was foundational for his continued influence in Newport. Simultaneously, Richard Morris Hunt's design of grand, European-style villas and châteaux for wealthy patrons demonstrated the roles of architects in physically manifesting an aristocratic potential for American wealth. In later decades, architects like Charles McKim, Stanford White, and Horace Trumbauer followed a similar path and completed the process of privatization in Newport. Together, McAllister and Hunt helped transform Newport's social and physical landscapes throughout the late 1860s and 1870s.

McAllister's alliance with Caroline Astor presented an answer to their peers' desire for a codified American aristocracy and defined the first period of the Gilded Age, the era of formality. Spanning the 1880s, this phase saw wealthy tourists' efforts to mimic exclusionary social boundaries also taking shape in New York. During this period, the relationship between New York and Newport strengthened, and similar trends played out in both locales. With her authority secured in New York, Astor's 1881 purchase of Beechwood on Bellevue Avenue signaled the beginning of Newport's "New York invasion," during which a summer visit to the resort achieved its most exclusive meaning and became a test for one's social success.²⁰ Obtaining access to private homes, clubs, and beaches became more difficult, which reflected a series of practices meant to ensure a sense of quality control. Drawing from traditions learned in

²⁰ Elliott, *This Was My Newport*, 142.

childhood, McAllister infused his entertainments at Newport with his and Astor's vision for an American aristocracy. However, by the early 1890s, intraclass warring and external factors began to chip away at McAllister and Astor's seemingly impenetrable boundaries.

The second of the Gilded Age's two phases, the era of frivolity, initiated a turbulent and reactionary period of Newport's history. While personal tragedy and family scandal intermittently forced Astor and McAllister out of the limelight, a swarm of ambitious hostesses eagerly stepped up to usurp their authority. The life of Alva Vanderbilt Belmont exemplifies the extent to which Astor's challengers used entertainments and the construction of spectacular summer cottages to galvanize their social triumphs. Other successors to Astor, like Mamie Fish and Tessie Oelrichs, engaged in far more flagrant displays of ostentatious spending, changing the tenor of Newport's social scene in a way that somewhat ostracized the former queen when she reemerged in society after the deaths of her husband and daughter.

Meanwhile, between 1892 and the turn of the twentieth century, against the rising tide of the Progressive Era's emphasis on social justice and reform, the rest of the nation turned a critical eye on the American elite. The boundaries that Newport's wealthy tourists had constructed since the late antebellum era brought the tension between privatization and visibility to a boiling point. Debate over public access to the Cliff Walk not only demonstrated the continued growth as a popular tourist destination, but forecasted more frequent attempts to peer into the wealthy's personal lives. An increasingly intrusive media and scandal-hungry readership demonstrated the potentially damaging role of the press in invading this previously off-limits realm of society, a development exemplified by Colonel William d'Alton Mann's philosophy for publishing *Town Topics* and simplified by the wealthy's tendency to display their riches in ever-public ways.

While McAllister managed to retain some semblance of authority over Newport society until his death in 1895, the talent for adaptability he had so long exercised at the resort eventually backfired. Decisions to serve as a press contributor and write his memoirs did little more than expose him to greater ridicule, to such an extent that one unnamed attendee of his funeral—reportedly a member of the Patriarchs—remarked, “Poor McAllister! What a pity he wrote a book!”²¹ Even so, despite what some secondary scholars have concluded, McAllister died a controversial figure, but hardly in utter disgrace. In fact, high society felt his absence in Newport and New York alike. *The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported, “The dead social leader... is sincerely mourned by the world in which he moved... Already discussion is rife as to who can take Mr. McAllister’s place in the peculiar field which he filled. Many think that no one can take it; others that there is no place to fill. His position was unique, was his own creation, and died with him.”²²

McAllister’s legacy remains a curious one. Two decades after his death, Edith Wharton modeled two of her characters in *The Age of Innocence*—Lawrence Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson—after him.²³ Nearly a century later, scholars tend to minimize McAllister’s independent influence or look askance at the fact that he commanded a following at all. Patterson’s remarks sum up this perspective well: “It is amazing that anyone paid any attention to McAllister, but thousands did.”²⁴ However, a study of McAllister’s life and influence illuminates many of the major themes of the Gilded Age. Not only does his proximity and trusted advisory role to some of the period’s key figures render him an important actor, but his hand in constructing social boundaries reflected a contemporary sense of heightened class consciousness that eventually

²¹ “Society in Mourning: Ward McAllister’s Death Came Almost Without Warning,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1895, 19.

²² “The Dead King,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, Cincinnati, OH, February 2, 1895, 4.

²³ Nathan, “Ward McAllister,” 278.

²⁴ Patterson, *The First Four Hundred*, 79.

fueled Progressive Era reform. Following McAllister's death, *Town Topics* cynically opined that "he was a strange product of a strange element of the American people... His actual influence upon the society he moved in was not important, but the influence he exerted in bringing that society into ridicule was marked."²⁵

Taken more broadly, nineteenth century Newport served as a microcosm of McAllister's rise and fall against the backdrop of a modernizing America. As the *Sun* observed, "Newport changes as the waves change and as the world at large changes."²⁶ As in New York, trends at Newport showed the profound effects of industrialization, unchecked wealth, and globalization. McAllister's connection to an ever-changing Newport both reinforced his carefully crafted public image and demonstrated many of the elusive personal qualities he attempted to reserve for his private life. As he was wont to emphasize, "I have no claim whatever to be[ing] the leader of society... I am simply a modest man living on a modest income."²⁷ Picturing him on his daily, often solitary walks or rides down Bellevue Avenue and Ocean Drive, or within his rented cottage off of Bellevue Avenue, surrounded by his family, lends a greater sense of verisimilitude to his words.

Along the Navy Defense Highway on Aquidneck Island's western coast, a sandy peninsula juts into Narragansett Bay that once belonged to the McAllisters. There remains little physical evidence that Bayside Farm was ever there. It is difficult to imagine the sight of elegantly dressed men and women strolling the beach or dancing on a makeshift ballroom floor. The echoes of laughter, conversation, and orchestral music drifting out from beneath the canopies of lantern-strung trees is equally elusive. However, the railroad tracks still make their

²⁵ "Saunterings," *Town Topics* 33, no. 6 (February 7, 1895): 1.

²⁶ "Life at Newport," *The New York Sun*, August 20, 1888, 6.

²⁷ "Who is Ward McAllister?," 3.

way down the coast, cutting through the property and overlooking the same vibrant blue waters. Further south, Newport remains a flourishing summer destination, brimming with hydrangeas and filled with tourists browsing the shops on the wharves, strolling the shady sidewalks on Bellevue Avenue, and touring the marvelous “cottages” that survived the wrecking ball just shy of a century ago. One can still peer into the backyards and gardens of the grand homes along the Cliff Walk. A visitor need not go far to see remnants of the Gilded Age in Newport. Like many aspects of its vibrant history, Aquidneck Island still bears the marks of a period when McAllister endeavored “to remold the fashionable existence at Newport more closely to his heart’s desire.”²⁸

²⁸ Van Renssalaer, *The Social Ladder*, 228.

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