Newport Rhode Island History

A PLAN of
the
TOWN of NEWPORT
in
RHODE ISLAND.
Surveyed by CHARLES BLASKOWITZ,
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References
ISLAND

Newport, Rhode Island, is a city steeped in rich history, known for its stunning coastal scenery, opulent mansions, and pivotal role in the American Revolution. Located on Aquidneck Island, Newport has been a significant maritime and cultural hub since its founding in the 17th century. Its historical trajectory reflects broader themes of colonialism, commerce, and social change in America, making it a fascinating subject for exploration.

Early Settlement and Colonial Era

Newport was established in 1639 by a group of religious dissenters from Massachusetts, including William Coddington and John Clarke. They sought a place where they could practice their faith freely. The settlement quickly grew, attracting Puritans, Quakers, and Jews, leading to its reputation as a center of religious tolerance.

Economic Development

By the late 17th century, Newport had become a thriving port town, capitalizing on its strategic location. Key aspects of its economic development included:

- Trade: Newport’s harbor facilitated trade with Europe, the West Indies, and other American

colonies. The city became a major center for the rum trade, exporting large quantities of the liquor.
- Shipbuilding: The shipbuilding industry flourished in Newport, with local craftsmen constructing vessels that were used for trade and fishing.
- Slavery: Like many other New England towns, Newport was involved in the transatlantic slave trade, with enslaved Africans contributing significantly to the local economy.

Newport During the American Revolution

Newport played a crucial role during the American Revolution. The city was occupied by British troops in 1776, serving as a strategic base for their operations in New England. This occupation had significant impacts on both the local population and the war effort.

Key Events

1. British Occupation (1776-1779): Newport was occupied by British forces, serving as their main naval base in the region. This occupation disrupted local life and led to significant suffering among residents.
2. Battle of Rhode Island (1778): The battle was fought near Newport and involved American and French forces attempting to expel the British. Although it ended in a tactical victory for the British, the alliance between the Americans and French proved crucial later in the war.
3. Evacuation: In 1779, the British evacuated Newport, which was celebrated by the local populace. The city's liberation marked a turning point in the fight for American independence.

Post-Revolution and the Rise of Tourism

After the American Revolution, Newport began to reinvent itself. The 19th century saw the city emerge as a popular resort destination for wealthy families from New York and Philadelphia, drawn by its picturesque scenery and coastal charm.

Architecture and Mansions

During this period, Newport became famous for its lavish summer homes, known as "cottages," built by America's elite. Notable mansions from this era include:

- The Breakers: Completed in 1895 for Cornelius Vanderbilt II, this Italian Renaissance-style mansion is one of Newport's most famous landmarks.
- Marble House: Constructed by William K. Vanderbilt, this mansion is inspired by the Petit Trianon at Versailles and reflects the wealth and culture of its time.
- Rosecliff: Built for silver heiress Theresa Fair Oelrichs, this mansion is known for its grand ballroom and stunning gardens.

These structures not only showcase the opulence of the Gilded Age but also reflect the architectural trends of the time, blending various styles and materials.

The 20th Century and Beyond

As the 20th century unfolded, Newport continued to evolve, facing both challenges and opportunities. The Great Depression had a profound impact on the city, as many wealthy families curtailed their summer visits. However, Newport’s resilient spirit led to a resurgence in tourism, especially after World War II.

Cultural and Historical Preservation

In the latter half of the 20th century, preservation efforts gained momentum, aimed at protecting Newport's unique architectural heritage. The following initiatives played a significant role:

- Historic Districts: The establishment of historic districts helped safeguard many of Newport’s significant buildings and neighborhoods.
- The Preservation Society of Newport County: Founded in 1945, this organization has been instrumental in the preservation and restoration of many historic properties, ensuring that future generations can appreciate Newport’s rich heritage.

Modern Newport

Today, Newport is a blend of historical charm and modern attractions. The city hosts numerous cultural events, festivals, and regattas, making it a vibrant tourist destination. Key highlights include:

- Newport Jazz Festival: Established in 1954, this annual event attracts jazz enthusiasts from around the world.
- Newport Folk Festival: With roots dating back to 1959, this festival has played a pivotal role in the folk music revival.
- Sailing and Yachting: Known as the "Sailing Capital of the World," Newport hosts prestigious sailing competitions, including the America’s Cup.

Conclusion

The history of Newport, Rhode Island, is a compelling narrative woven through the tapestry of American life. From its beginnings as a haven for religious dissenters to its status as a symbol of wealth and culture, Newport has consistently adapted to the changing tides of history. Today, it stands not only as a testament to the past but also as a vibrant community that honors its historical roots while embracing modernity. Visitors to Newport can explore its rich history through its well-preserved architecture, museums, and cultural festivals, ensuring that the legacy of this remarkable city continues for generations to come.

Frequently Asked Questions

What significant role did Newport, Rhode Island play during the American Revolution?

Newport served as a strategic naval base and was occupied by both British and French forces during the American Revolution, making it a key location for military operations.

How did Newport become a prominent summer resort in the late 19th century?

Newport became a fashionable summer destination for America's elite in the late 1800s, attracting wealthy families who built grand mansions and hosted lavish social events.

What is the historical significance of Newport's colonial architecture?

Newport is known for its well-preserved colonial architecture, which reflects its rich history as a bustling port in the 18th century and showcases styles from early American, Georgian, and Federal periods.

Who were some of the notable figures associated with Newport's history?

Notable figures include Commodore Matthew Perry, who opened Japan to the West, and several prominent families like the Vanderbilts and Astors, who influenced Newport's social scene.

What was the impact of the Gilded Age on Newport?

The Gilded Age saw an influx of wealthy industrialists who built opulent 'summer cottages' in Newport, transforming it into a symbol of wealth and social status in America.

How did the abolitionist movement manifest in Newport?

Newport was a site of significant abolitionist activity, with residents participating in anti-slavery movements and the establishment of the African Meeting House, one of the oldest Black churches in the U.S.

What role did Newport play in the slave trade?

In the 18th century, Newport was a major port in the transatlantic slave trade, with many ships involved in the triangular trade, bringing enslaved Africans to America.

What is the significance of the Newport Jazz Festival in the city's history?

Founded in 1954, the Newport Jazz Festival helped popularize jazz music and established Newport as a cultural hub, attracting renowned musicians and audiences from around the world.

What historic event took place at the Newport Casino in 1881?

The Newport Casino, built in 1880, hosted the first U.S. National Championships in lawn tennis in 1881, marking the beginning of the sport's popularity in America.

How has Newport's maritime history shaped its identity?

Newport's maritime history as a shipbuilding and trading port has shaped its identity, contributing to its status as a center for sailing and yacht racing, including the America's Cup.

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