

The Season

1913

Newport's Season Promises to Break All Records for Gayety," predicted the *New York Times* on July 20, 1913. If the weather cooperated—and it usually did during the eight-week social season that began the first week in July and ended with the Horse Show in early September—the privileged summer residents who flocked to Newport, Rhode Island, looked forward to an uninterrupted whirlwind of activities. Every day in the “queen of summer resorts” brought a new schedule of racing, tennis, sailing, luncheons, teas, dinners, clambakes, cotillions, fantasy balls, even daybreak swims after a long night of dancing. Veteran socialites rushed from one event to another, thinking longingly of early autumn, when they could enjoy a brief respite before facing the annual round of festivities at their winter homes. But at the moment, rest was not on the schedule. Their calendars were packed with an exciting succession of engagements, and, somehow, they found the energy to do it all.

There was a long overture before the curtain could rise on this annual social extravaganza. The return of the summer colony launched Newport's service industries on a course of herculean preparations. Local merchants in the waterfront district put aside their mundane wares and stockpiled exotic provisions they knew would appeal to the rich—caviar, little hens, rare wines, candies, and other delicacies. They also raised their prices; if they played their cards right, the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker could pull in enough money during the season to support their families for the rest of the year. The tradesmen were upset whenever they heard that a wealthy regular was vacationing elsewhere: the absence of a handful of these big spenders could mean a \$500,000 loss in just one summer.

On Bellevue Avenue, Newport's most fashionable street, New York department stores such as Bonwit Teller, Bergdorf Goodman, and Brooks Brothers set up summer boutiques. Their clientele did not want to miss a day of shopping, despite the fact that they were at the beach. The fancy emporium Henri Bendel was stocked with "hats, gowns, wraps, furs, sports clothes, lingerie, blouses," and anything else a woman might need on a whim, or for an unanticipated fashion emergency. Beauty salons cautioned ladies to protect their skin before they ventured into the sunlight and offered treatments to keep them looking their best. Caswell-Massey, a local apothecary founded by a Scottish doctor in 1752, sold Sarah Bernhardt's cucumber night cream and George Washington's preferred cologne. There were also stores that sold serious jewelry. The guilty husband who needed to buy—or the desperate wife who needed to sell—could depend on an agent from Van Cleef & Arpels or Tiffany to handle all transactions with the utmost discretion.

The most elaborate preseason preparations took place in the giant houses on and around Bellevue Avenue. These palatial residences were referred to as cottages, a quaint euphemism

that was a throwback to the days when Newport had simple beach homes instead of French, English, and Italianate palaces. There were annual rituals that marked the June opening of a cottage. A small army of domestics—a combination of advance staff members transported from winter households in New York and other cities, and temporary help from local cleaning firms—descended on the sleeping giants with brooms, mops, buckets, and pounds of Sapolio, the preferred soap of the day. Every piece of furniture had its own custom-made linen shroud to protect it from dust and the passage of time. These covers—and little bags of camphor to ward off moths—were removed and stored neatly until the house’s annual closing in September. Carpets and drapes were liberated from storage. Floors were cleaned and polished. Chandeliers were dismantled and washed with ammonia. Mattresses were turned. Hundreds of pieces of precious china and crystal were rinsed and laid out in the butler’s pantry, while the family’s valuable silver—and sometimes their even more valuable gold—service was shined and locked in the safe to await the first dinner party. Pots and pans, monogrammed with the family’s initials or crest, were scrubbed and lined up for the chef to inspect.

Outside, the cottage’s grounds and gardens were coaxed back to life. The head gardener and his staff tended the flower beds, hedges, and trees that were the hallmark of the best Newport estates. The challenge for every gardener was to orchestrate a constant array of blooms throughout the summer: this meant precise plantings that yielded different flowers at different times.

The social secretary of the lady of the house oversaw all of these activities. “Miss” (usually a single woman with a refined background but a reduced bank account) was expected to effect a seamless transition from one household to another on behalf of her mistress. It was her job to review the existing staff and to retain the summer help. She ordered the right kinds of

stationery in bountiful quantities because, in polite society, communications were written and delivered by hand and the telephone was considered vulgar. She also studied the Social Index, the city's annual "who's who" and "who's where" registry of cottagers and their cottages. This would be the starting point for every Newport guest list.

The family matriarch and her daughters selected their wardrobes—approximately 280 changes for the season—months before they set out for Newport. The bare necessities for the well-dressed socialite included fourteen new evening gowns, ten afternoon outfits, and a half dozen suits, along with matching shoes, hats, parasols, and assorted accessories. Gloves, though expensive and made from the finest materials, were practically disposable. Ladies wore them everywhere, including to clambakes, and changed them several times a day. There were some traditional Newport ladies who kept their European wardrobes in storage for a year so their clothes would not look ostentatiously new.

Husbands had a much easier time packing. Their clothes were simple enough: a few good suits, formal wear, and appropriate athletic garb. Their duties never varied. They were supposed to make money—as much as possible—and show up on weekends, prepared to be the perfect escort.

The preseason frenzy ended in early July. Before the first bed had been slept in, the first invitation sent, the first champagne cork popped, or the first dinner served, the social secretary, the gardener, the butler, the housekeeper, the chauffeur or the coachman, the chef, the laundress, and the assorted maids and footmen, were worn out. Their employers, on the other hand, were feeling fresh and eager to get going.

The summer of 1913, the season that promised to be Newport's most brilliant to date, was off to a fabulous start.