

VOGUE

LIVING

The Gilded Age: How Newport Became the Wildly Flashy Summer Getaway for New York's Elite

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November 5, 2023



Carrie Coon and Nathan Lane in *The Gilded Age*. Photograph by Barbara Nilke/HBO

Episode two of *The Gilded Age* season two unfolds across two places: the first, New York City, where the characters jockey for societal prowess in ornate ballrooms around Manhattan. The second? Newport, Rhode Island—where they do the *exact same thing*, but at tennis matches. “Could you join us in Newport on Friday? There’s a tennis tournament at the casino and I have someone I’d like you to meet,” Aurora Fane tells Marian Brook while sitting in her living room. “His parents have a place in Newport and a house on East 56th.” (Marian’s aunt, the very socially-minded Agnes Van Rhijn, agrees on her behalf.)

When Marian arrives at the Narragansett Bay enclave, she realizes half of upper-crust New York is there with her, including her cousin Oscar, as well as Gladys and Larry Russell. This, she quickly realizes, is the summer place to see and be seen—and maybe even meet her husband in the process.

The Gilded Age is a piece of historical fiction that borrows heavily from actual events... and in this case, the choice of Newport as a seasonal hotspot for the Manhattan elite is very much based in reality. During the 1800s, the wealthiest families in New York—including the Vanderbilts, Astors, and the Morgans—built summer “cottages” (read: mansions) of outstanding grandeur. Cornelius Vanderbilt’s *The Breakers*, for example, had 48 bedrooms, 50-foot high ceilings adorned with Baccarat chandeliers, and an Italian Renaissance-style exterior. Meanwhile, William K. Vanderbilt’s home, made of 500,000 cubic feet of marble, cost 11 million dollars to build at the time—somewhere over 300 million dollars today.

Why Newport? Part of it was the temperature, oceanside climate, and proximity to New York: an important shipping hub since the Revolutionary War, the Rhode Island town and New York City were connected by both rail and road. Yet, it was man-about-town Ward McAllister (here portrayed by Nathan Lane) who made it a bonafide hotspot of the Gilded Age. In the 1850s, the lawyer bought a home in the area. During the warmer months, he’d frequently entertain his high-profile guests by the sea. According to the New England Historical Society, “McAllister then made the place famous for his ‘picnics.’ Soon enough, many were convinced to join him.” After the leading architectural firm of the era McKim, Mead & White built the Newport Casino in 1879—a recreational complex that included tennis, squash, billiards, and lawn bowling—the tycoons of the era began snatching up land, razing the more modest homes, and building their own, often designed in homage to European palaces. During this pre-income tax era, the town became a shrine to booming capitalism: high society by the sea.

From the 1890s up to the 1910s, *Vogue* extensively covered Newport. Much of our coverage centered on what to wear: “At Newport alone is this summer picture seen at its best, set in residential gorgeousness, and environed with the splendors of wealth. One must look for what is smartest, and find the models of fashion’s latest caprice. The outside world takes delight in these fine leaders, and enjoys with pride being their followers. What Newport women do and wear is a law from east to west, north to south,” we wrote in 1896.

Our fashion advice? “Silk grass lawns are the most chic by far, whether plain, embroidered in white or pink, blue, yellow, mauve, or wrought with marvels of lace incrustations, supplemented by many fine needlework trceries and lavish use of lace edgings.” The writer then adds he saw a particularly modish woman wearing such a dress at the Casino. (*Vogue* mentioned the Casino a lot in those years. In 1893, we ran an illustration of two carriage drivers exchanging gleeful whispers: “Newport, in Front of the Casino—the Latest Bit of Gossip,” the caption read.) In 1907, we ran a photographic spread (a novelty in those days) of The Breakers and Ochre Court, a Châteauesque mansion belonging to wealthy real estate developers Ogden and Mary Goelet.

The heyday of Newport ebbed as the Gilded Age did. The Progressive era ushered in financial reform—including the introduction of a federal income tax—which made the building, as well as upkeep, of Newport’s mansions harder and harder. During the Great Depression, many of them fell into disrepair or were demolished entirely.

Today, Newport still enjoys a reputation as a glamorous summer vacation spot for well-to-do Americans. And, thanks to the Newport Historical Society, some of the grand homes of those Gilded Age tycoons have been preserved and are open to the public—so you can still take in the splendor, just as Marian Brook did.