

The Aquidneck Mill was built in 1831 between the Colonial and Gilded ages,

when Newport was, literally, under construction.

Architectural historian **Catherine Zipf** looks

back at how this mill bolstered Newport's working

waterfront. Terry Nathan looks ahead to the pivotal

role the historic building will play in IYRS' future.



THE AQUIDNECK MILL, standing prominently on the IYRS campus on lower Thames Street, harkens back to an often-misunderstood age in Newport's history.

Dating to 1831, the mill is neither part of our Colonial Golden Age nor our Victorian Gilded Age. It does not represent Newport's thriving mill culture, because Newport never had a thriving mill culture. It does not represent Newport's busy waterfront, because it had little to do with traditional waterfront industries. And it did not help Newport overcome its economic difficulties, because it never employed large numbers of people.

In short, it is easy to dismiss the Aquidneck Mill as a fluke that happens to stand between two important eras—but to do so is to sell this important historical structure short.

The presence of Aquidneck Mill on the

Thames Street waterfront tells the story of how Newport evolved from the Golden Age to the Gilded Age. This transitional period was extremely important, for had Newport not gained a new momentum after the American Revolution, had it not repaired its economy after nearly complete devastation, and had it not welcomed new groups of people to build the city into a thriving metropolis, Newport would never have had a Gilded Age—and the city we know today would never have existed.

A pivotal role in a growing city

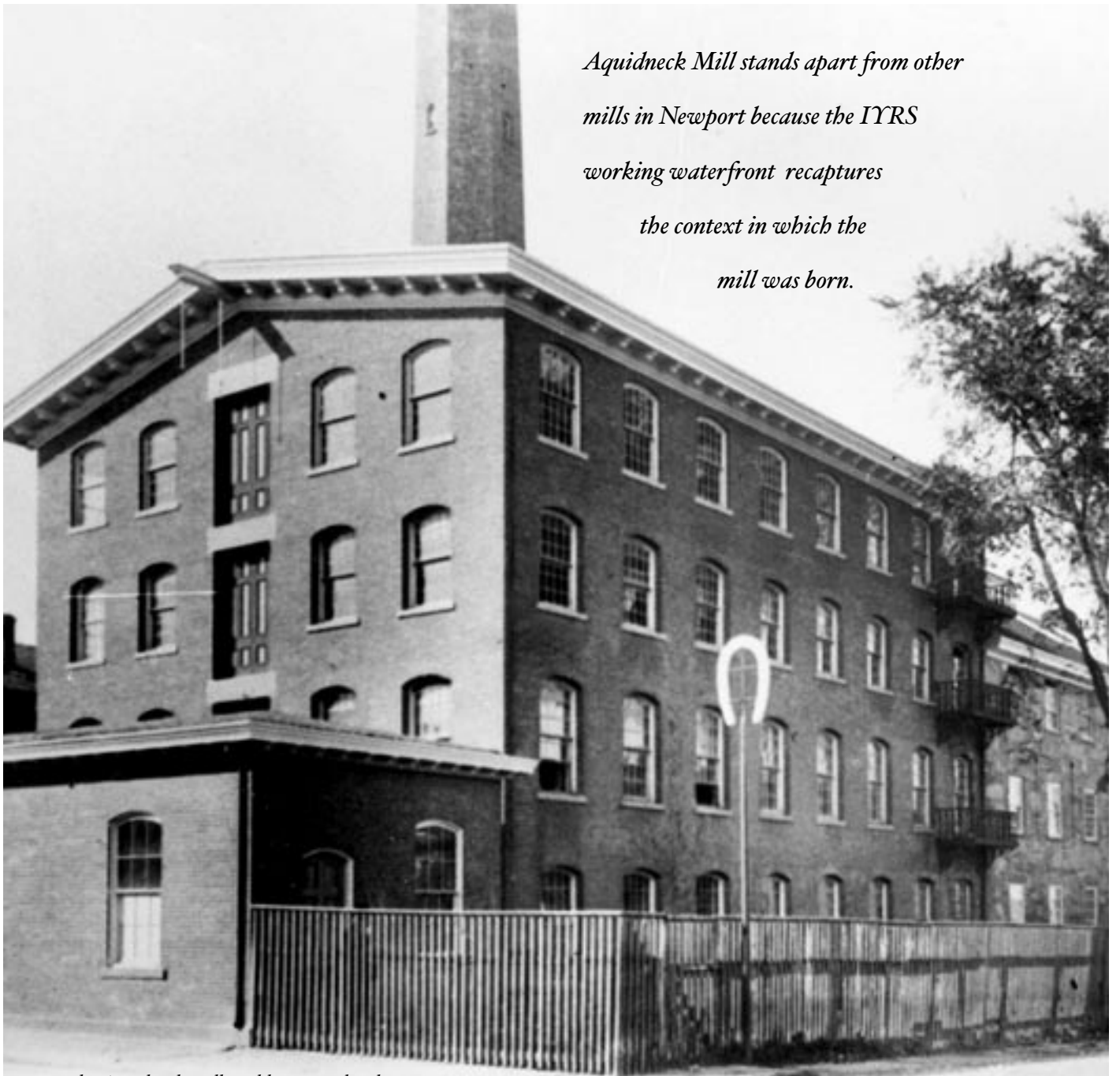
When the mill was built in 1831, Newport was, literally, under construction. The Golden Age that gave rise to Newport had left it a small city—reaching north-south from the Point to Pope Street and east to Spring Street. Damage done by British and French troops after the Revolution (combined with the 1807 trade embargo and the

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AQUIDNECK MILL:

By Catherine Zipf

Aquidneck Mill stands apart from other mills in Newport because the IYRS working waterfront recaptures the context in which the mill was born.



The Aquidneck Mill Building in its heyday.

PLAYING A PIVOTAL ROLE IN NEWPORT'S HISTORY AND IYRS' FUTURE

AQUIDNECK MILL

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War of 1812) decimated Newport's slave and shipbuilding economies. For the next decade, Newport limped along, losing many of its prominent merchants to the more active port of Providence.

Fortunately, the beginning of construction at Fort Adams sparked a series of changes that resulted in new development along southern Thames Street. These changes included the arrival of successive waves of Irish immigrants who built the Fifth Ward, the neighborhood surrounding the southern endpoint of Thames Street that still thrives today.

Aquidneck Mill was constructed amid this growing, but far from stable, economic climate. Originally called the Newport Steam Mill, the three-and-a-half-story green granite structure on Howard's Wharf cost the astronomical sum of \$40,000. At the time, Howard's Wharf stood on the outskirts of town at the end of the Thames Street development. The mixed-use area housed a

ing, and commercial trade. None of these industries dominated (Newport's sailing and maritime culture had already begun a long decline that would end with the development of the automobile.), but they did constitute a working waterfront that survived until well into the twentieth century. And the construction of Aquidneck Mill, built for cotton manufacturing, expanded this working waterfront environment in a new direction.

The mill originally contained 4,356 spindles, the typical measure of a mill's capacity to weave cotton into thread. Approximately 100 people tended the machines, performing various tasks like mending broken threads, feeding baled cotton into spreaders, and changing spools on the spindles when full or empty. Most mill activities occurred within the building, but there were also ancillary buildings on the wharf. Small sheds stored raw cotton, finished thread, coal, and wood, while mechanical shops fabricated new parts to ensure that all machines were in good running order.

True to type, yet unique

Mill buildings represent a certain architectural type. Because they had to function well, light, air, and wide open interior spaces were extremely important. Before the age of electricity, mill builders maximized

the amount of natural light by putting large regularly spaced windows on all sides and at all levels of the building. Inside, the plan was likewise functional with posts placed along a grid to support each successive floor.

The resulting system of parallel aisles and perpendicular rows created a wide open floor plan that was ideal for mechanical production. A stair tower on one end of the building gave access to each

*The construction of
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waterfront environment
in a new direction.*

floor and occasionally to a small office for the mill's business operations. Aquidneck Mill follows this type nearly exactly, with its eastern stair tower and belfry (now gone), its 11 regularly spaced windows, and its interior post construction.

All mills relied heavily on a connection to the water. Early mill buildings, like the 1793 Slater Mill in Pawtucket, R.I., used running rivers and streams to power its machinery. Water from the river turned a waterwheel connected by gears to a crank shaft, to which individual machines were connected and disconnected according to need. A complex belt system transferred power from the waterwheel shaft to spinning machines, looms, saws, and drills. This reliance on water power made towns near running water, like Fall River, ideal for mill construction.

Aquidneck Mill, however, used water differently. Newport had no river or stream of sufficient capacity to power an entire mill complex, so Aquidneck Mill had to use coal to run its steam-powered machinery. With no railroad sidings in Newport (railroads would not be able to cross onto the island until new bridges from Fall River were constructed toward the end of the century), Aquidneck Mill imported its coal on barges that docked at Howard's Wharf. Raw cotton was also brought in from the ocean, while processed thread was transported out. The mill's location adjacent to the bay and in navigable waters was therefore of critical importance to its ability to compete with other mill centers.

Surviving the rise and fall of fortune

The mill's operations proved profitable, but only in an off-and-on fashion. In 1845, additional lot space on the wharf was purchased and the storage capacity



The mill building in the mid-20th century.

combination of multi-purpose structures. Commercial structures tended to cluster along the spine of Thames Street, although a few were scattered around the wharves. Residential space varied widely, from single- or double-family houses along side streets to apartments above storefronts and boarding houses on the wharves.

Howard's Wharf itself was home to waterfront activities like fishing, ice-mak-

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AQUIDNECK MILL BUILDING

THE FUTURE

Demand for IYRS programs is growing. Over the past 20 months, the full-time program enrollment has grown 50%, and new students are coming from around the world, including Japan, Germany, France, and throughout the U.S. The year-old continuing education program is currently attracting about 250 students on an annualized basis, and many are from area yards and marinas—looking to build on their professional skills.

The growth in the full-time program has reached near capacity levels. Thus, the need for more classroom and workshop space has become almost critical. If momentum is a key ingredient in continued growth and the long-term financial integrity of the institution, then the restoration of the 30,000 square foot mill building on our campus is an imperative. With plans well under way, fund-raising efforts have steadily increased. To date, IYRS has raised over \$700,000 in foundation grants from the Alletta Morris McBean Charitable Trust, the 1772 Foundation, the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, and the Rhode Island Historic Preservation

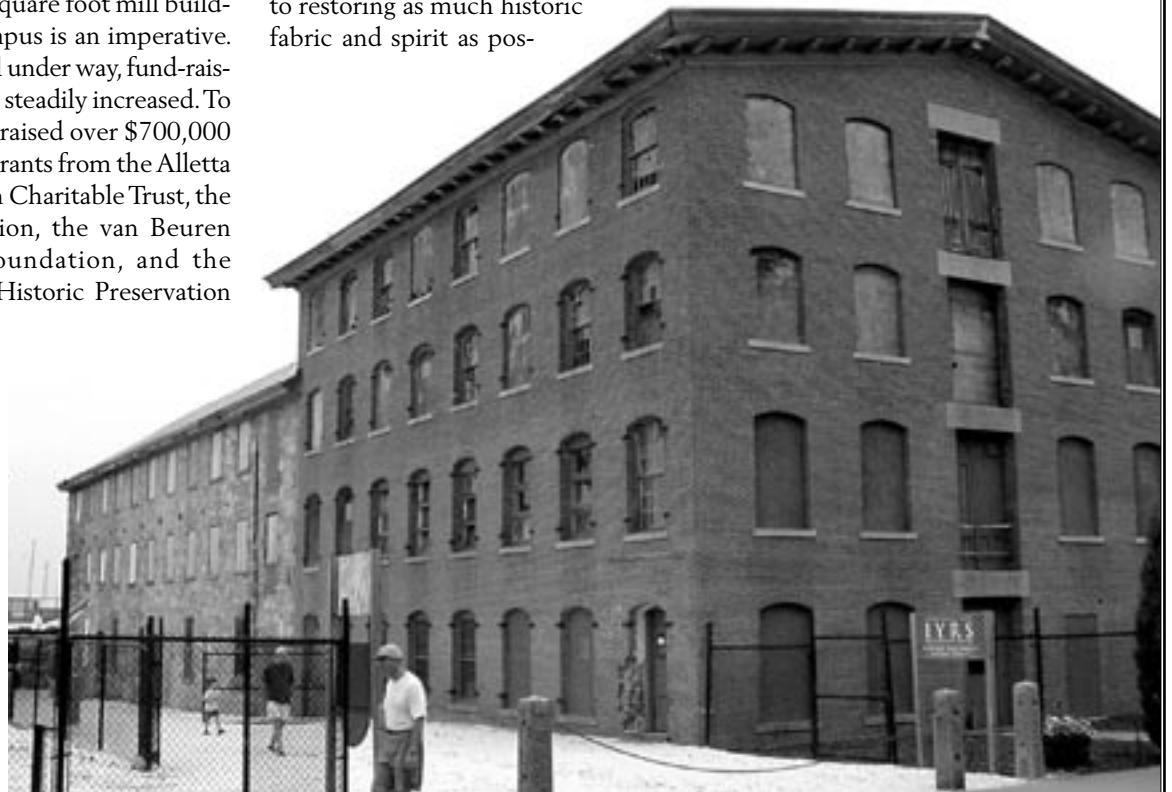
and Heritage Commission. Additionally, the State has conditionally approved over \$1.2mm in net tax credits for the restoration. The IYRS Board of Trustees has pledged almost \$500,000, and IYRS intends to seek a long-term mortgage in the amount of approximately \$1.5mm. The debt service on this mortgage will be covered by lease income from synergistic tenants that also provide our students value by being related to our trade and educational programs.

Beautiful in its own right and historically important to the Newport waterfront, when it is fully restored, the mill building will be an important component in creating a campus-like atmosphere. We are working closely with Newport Collaborative Architects and share a commitment to restoring as much historic fabric and spirit as pos-

sible. The restoration of the Aquidneck mill building goes deeper than our pragmatic need for more space. It goes to the core of our preservation mission and commitment to restoration values. As Howard Mansfield writes in *The Same Ax Twice*, "Good restoration schools us in the graces of the old ways. When we bring our attention to that which is old, it is not the past we are restoring but the future. Good restoration saves the future."

To contribute to the restoration of the mill building and to help IYRS grow, please contact James Russell at jrussell@iyr.org or me at tnathan@iyr.org; or call us at 401-848-5777. Thank you.

*Terry Nathan
President*



*At right:
The mill
building
today.*

AQUIDNECK MILL

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was expanded—a fact suggesting business expansion. But in 1857, a depression in the cotton manufacturing business forced production to stop entirely. A year later the building was sold for \$9,500 to Mr. Rodman, who updated the mill's machinery and who christened the mill "Aquidneck."

In 1860, the building sustained substantial fire damage to its second and third stories. Although the damage was repaired, the building faced an uncertain fate; it was sold twice more before landing in 1865 in the hands of the Richmond Manufacturing Company, who purchased the property for \$40,000. The increase in price probably reflected Civil War—era inflation, as well as the improvements that Rodman had made.

Under the Richmond Co., Aquidneck Mill gained a new lease on life with the construction of a substantial four-story brick addition on the east side of the building. Although the addition followed

mill construction principles, the differences in height and material make it stand out from the original even today. With more space, the Richmond Co. expanded production to include 9,632 spindles; 210 looms; 175 employees; and new ancillary buildings for storage, offices, a boiler house, and shops. On average, the company produced 200,000 yards of cloth per month from 1,000 bales of cotton. Unfortunately, in 1884 the cotton manufacturing industry hit another depression, ending the Richmond Co.'s operation entirely.

Finding new uses

In subsequent decades, the mill changed hands several times and was adapted for use by companies as varied as the Burnham Elastic Webbing Co. and the Edison Illumination Co. In 1900, it was purchased by the Newport and Fall River Street Railway Company, who in 1903 built the large brick structure on the western edge of the lot, now known


as IYRS Restoration Hall. This two-story red brick building has classical details, blind arches, and large windows on its upper story. Originally, Restoration Hall contained three generators (including the first vertical Curtis Steam Turbo-generator in history), a boiler, and a steam turbine that, together, ran the street railway. The building housed street railway functions until 1920, when it was purchased by the Newport County Electric Company. IYRS acquired the property in 1995.

Generally speaking, mill buildings have survived at a high rate because their open plans, large windows, and solid masonry construction are easily suited for many purposes. Mills around New England have been reused as commercial spaces, office spaces, condominiums, residential apartments, and museums, as well as for educational purposes. Some have been preserved intact to document this important chapter in New England's history.

Even though Newport was never a center of mill culture, it retains vestiges of its industrial era. In addition to Aquidneck Mill, Perry Mill—at the corner of Memorial Blvd. and Thames Street—survives as a combination retail/condominium complex. The foundation of Coddington Mill on Coddington Wharf, heavily damaged by fire in 1869, has been adapted to residential apartments.

Aquidneck Mill stands apart from these other mills, because the IYRS working waterfront environment recaptures the context in which it was born. As the school's preservation efforts continue, the public will benefit greatly—not just from the preservation example IYRS has set, but also by learning more about this important era in Newport's history. ▲

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