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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Refashioning Newport: Reuse of Textiles During the Gilded Age

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The Gilded Age is the name Mark Twain gave to the end of the nineteenth century when tycoons made massive fortunes off the growing industrialization of North America. It is a time of astronomical wealth and extreme poverty. During this period, American multi-millionaires gathered in elite seaside, summer communities where they entertained each other in palatial mansions coyly called cottages or villas. Many of the most prominent members of New York society called Newport, Rhode Island home during the summer months. Newspapers of the period reported that, at the time, there was no place on Earth with a greater concentration of wealth than this tiny island, off the coast of Rhode Island, and Bellevue Avenue, the street running south down the center of the island, was known as “Millionaire’s Row.”¹

Gilded-Age Newport was famous for its fashions, and with the eyes of the world upon them residents dressed to impress. Newspapers across the country lovingly reprinted descriptions of the garments worn by Newport’s belles and style leaders.² Frederick Law Olmstead bemoaned Newport’s obsession with fashion stating that:

The degree in which the life of many of the summer residents of Newport is, to outward appearance, given to the pursuit of social enjoyments and ruled by fashion tends to distract attention from the special root of the city’s prosperity. It was not fashion that first brought people of luxurious tastes, with means for indulging them, to Newport. It was a satisfaction found in its air and scenery.³

To survive the Newport summer season, a lady needed costumes for bathing, bicycling, horseback riding, yachting, playing tennis, paying calls, driving, walking, receiving guests, attending dinners, attending the opera and the theatre, and gambling at the casino. She also needed evening gowns for fancy dress parties and lavish balls that defined the town’s reputation for excess.⁴ Three outfit changes per day were considered standard, but eight daily outfits were most appropriate if a woman truly wanted to be considered a leader of Newport fashion.⁵

In her memoirs, *King Lehr and the Gilded Age*, Lady Decies reminisced about how women consumed garments stating that:

The new kings of trade might work at their offices twelve, fourteen hours a day but their wives would have something to show for it. Festoons of priceless jewels draped ample bosom, yards of historic lace trimmed under petticoats, the greatest dress designers of Europe vied with one another to create costumes

¹ Cleveland Moffat, “The Most Extravagant City in the World,” *Success Magazine*, 1905, 81-85.

² Harry Cowell, “Town Talk,” *The San Francisco Daily Times*, October 10, 1903, 10.

³ Frederick Law Olmstead, *Improvement of Easton’s Beach, City of Newport, Rhode Island*. (Boston: Franklin Press: Rand, Avery, & Co, 1883) 9.

⁴ Anonymous, “The Newport Set,” *The Independent*, 1902, 2517.

⁵ Moffat, “The Most Extravagant,” 81.

that would grace some splendid ball for one night and then be thrown away.⁶

Some have, perhaps idealistically, taken this description of throwaway fashion culture as a scholarly truth, embracing the idea that every style leader in Newport wore a new gown each night. Newspapers of the period play into this as well, hoping to shock and awe their readers with stories of conspicuous consumption. Readers across the country were entertained by stories of a town where thousand-dollar gowns were disposed of without a second thought, and where a man might buy a new yacht each time the old one gets wet.⁷ So, in this time of extreme consumption who is reusing and remaking clothing and textiles? Almost everyone.

There are different types of reuse active during the Gilded Age, both conspicuous reuse and concealed reuse. This paper will focus on the latter, concealed reuse. The process of conspicuously buying antiques and publicly installing them in your house is very different than the process of quietly remaking an old dress into a new gown. Stores in Newport specialized in importing European Medieval, Baroque Renaissance, and Neoclassical treasures for the town's inhabitants to furnish their homes with. This type of conspicuous reuse was not kept secret, and ample information exists about the European treasures that decorated the Newport cottages.

The type of reuse in need of further investigation is more a subtle process. In 1911, Elsie Vanderbilt ordered a tea gown from Liberty of London, but when the piece arrived, she found the garment unbecoming. First, Elsie sold the dress to Pauline Wagstaff, who in turn offered the garment to a friend named Una.⁸ Una considered remaking the tea gown into an evening gown, but eventually passed on the garment, selling it to Gwendolen King Armstrong.⁹ Gwendolen's family had a respectable genealogy that traced back to Colonial America, and a home on the exclusive "Millionaire's Row" of Newport, Bellevue Ave.¹⁰ Even on the wealthiest street in world, in the heyday of conspicuous consumption, evidence of this type of reusing and remaking is found in letters and diaries, and is quite common among the wealthier Newport residents.

Though shopping trips to Europe, particularly Paris, formed the core of fashionable women's wardrobes, letters and diaries from the Newport Historical society detail the techniques women used to supplement their wardrobe. In 1876, Kate Hunter Dunn began preparing for the Newport summer season in late February. Her diary contains frequent updates on her wardrobe. For two months, she employed two women to stitch for her in addition to her lady's maid. They started by picking apart her gowns from last season and then basted the garments back together with a different silhouette (under Kate's supervision). They removed under layers as necessary and sent some pieces to New York to be dyed a fashionable new shade of blue. When the gowns returned in April, Kate employed another seamstress to stitch for four straight days and finish her summer wardrobe. After this flurry of activity, there are no further updates on Kate's wardrobe until the

⁶ Elizabeth W. D. B. Decies, *King Lehr and the Gilded Age ... with Extracts from the Locked Diary of Harry Lehr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935).

⁷ Moffat, "The Most Extravagant," 81-85.

⁸ Una's last name remains unknown.

⁹ Gwendolen King Armstrong, "Gwendolen King Armstrong letter to Ella King." (*King Family Papers* Newport, Rhode Island: The Preservation Society of Newport County) November 11, 1911.

¹⁰ Rebecca J. Kelly, "Fashion in the Gilded Age: A Profile of Newport's King Family," in *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, ed. Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 9-32.

next year. Once her summer wardrobe is complete, she can rest; careful preparation pays off in the pool of new gowns she pulls from during the social season.¹¹

Dressmakers and tailors specializing in remaking advertised in popular fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Bazaar*. Some list their former employers, suggesting that their Parisian origins or tailoring training will make them better suited to handle certain garments. These stores advertise that they are willing to remake gowns sent to them through the parcel post, without a visit from the client. For New York City's tailors and dressmakers, this seems to be a potential source income during the summer months, when the city's wealthiest inhabitants abandon Manhattan for cooler climates.¹²

Many of these stores are located in the respectable shopping districts of New York, where wives and daughters of the wealthiest men would have been able to shop freely.¹³ Known as "Ladies Mile," this area was home to Tiffany and Co. and Lord and Taylor, as well as artistic remaking shops like Mademoiselle Naftal's, located in the diamond district next to the Harvard Club, or Madame Renee's located off Fifth Avenue across from Christie's.¹⁴

These shops do not advertise in any of the public newspapers available to Newport residents. Where they do advertise is in the Newport Social Index, a sort of early phone and address book with a list of summer residents, cottage names, and vessels of the New York Yacht Club docked in Newport. This private directory of the city's wealthiest inhabitants was only available to summer residents and their guests.¹⁵

In addition to remaking, stores would also buy gowns, which could be altered and sold to a new party, often less-affluent members of society who would like a Parisian wardrobe, but who could not afford the associated costs. Papers at the Jesup Library in Bar Harbor, Maine discuss gown brokers as if they dealt illegal contraband. "A secret, sacredly concealed, sort of dress exchange gives occupation to many gentle-women of modest means, behind the veil of profound gentility... These places are never advertised, for publicity would speedily kill patronage."¹⁶ These exchanges specialize in garments that have only been worn once, twice or not at all. They do not consider pieces "second-hand," but rather use the term "second-cost," to describe the shopping experience.¹⁷

These exchanges provided an opportunity to divest oneself of unworn garments when going into mourning unexpectedly. If one ordered a gown from Europe unseen, and decided that the piece

¹¹ Kate Hunter Dunn, "The Diary of Kate Hunter Dunn, 1876," The Newport Historical Society, February 15- June 30, 1876.

¹² "Gowns Remodeled," *Bazaar*, November, 1916, 30 and "Shopper's and Buyers Guide," *Vogue*, February 15, 1916.

¹³ Emily Katherine Bibby, "Making the American Aristocracy: Women, Cultural Capital, and High Society in New York City, 1870-1900" (Master's Thesis, Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2009).

¹⁴ "Gowns Remodeled," *Bazaar*, 30 and "Shopper's and Buyers Guide," *Vogue*.

¹⁵ Alvah H. Sanborn, *The Newport Social Index - Season of 1910* (Newport, Rhode Island: Social Index Publishing Company, Mercury Publishing Company, 1910).

¹⁶ "The Woman's Department - A Woman's Dress Exchange," *The Bar Harbor Record*, June 11, 1891: 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

didn't suit, a gown exchange provided an avenue for recouping some of that investment. There was no haggling, and discussion of these sales stresses how the point is not to get a new gown, but to get a Parisian gown. Ironically once acquired, these Parisian gowns were often altered and changed to fit the new owner's preferences. The value of the garment is intrinsically linked with the textile's potential to be transformed into something new.¹⁸

Women who didn't order their gowns altered or remade still participated in the system of reuse by donating their less-favored garments to friends and family members at the end of the season. In Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, heroine Lily Barthes relies on friends to supply her with gowns at the end of each season (Figure 1). Even at the novel's open, before Lily falls on hard times, she is aware of the possibility that, "some penetrating eye would detect in her dress the traces of Judy Trenor's refurbished splendor."¹⁹

Figure 1. Edith Wharton's Lily Barthes, in Judy Trenor's refurbished splendor.²⁰

As the exception that proves the rule, in Newport society at least one matron made a large show out of not recycling or reusing any of her gowns. As a splashy way of advertising that she did not need to take part in the system of remaking, one style leader is said to have publicly ordered her gowns to be burned at the end of the season. Their reported destruction was proof that she intended to purchase all new pieces next year. Attempts to identify the matron in

¹⁸ "The Woman's Department - A Woman's Dress Exchange," *The Bar Harbor Record*, June 11, 1891: 6.

¹⁹ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905).

²⁰ A.B. Wenzell, "She lingered on the broad stairway...", illustration, 1905, public domain via *Wikimedia Commons*.

question were not successful, and it is perhaps an exaggerated story meant to delight and horrify readers.²¹

Once the potential usability of a garment had been exhausted, lady's maids would inherit some pieces and be deputized to sell others at garment exchanges that specialized in clothing, accessories, or rags. According to the Countess Dash:

Chambermaids are better dressed than rich bourgeoisies... They wear cashmere shawls from India, jewels, and lace because they levy a tithe on household suppliers, the dealers with whom they exchange their mistresses' old garments.²²

Some exchange establishments are more respectable than others. One Newport exchange is located in the front parlor of local matron's house. Here, business could be done under the guise of a social call. For those willing to travel further afield, diaries of Rose Grosvenor detail visits to two clothing exchanges in Providence, RI – the aptly named Clothing Exchange and Ladies' exchange.²³

There are over 100 men licensed to peddle goods in and around Bellevue Avenue during the late-nineteenth century, though peddling without a license is also one of the most common reasons for arrest in town records.²⁴ Rag peddlers are a common feature of cities at this time, and in Newport traders also dealt in ready-to-wear garments. Many of these men are German Jewish immigrants, newly arrived in the United States. Part of the second-wave of Jewish migration to Rhode Island, in 1865 the census reported 22 self-identified Jewish people living in Rhode Island, but by 1920 that number had grown to over 25,000.²⁵

Often limited to working in the dry goods industries back in Europe, significant research has been done on the career paths of German Jewish immigrants following their arrival to the United States.²⁶ Many men found careers in the garment and textile industry. First, individuals began working as peddlers, saving up money until they could open a physical store. These businesses often doubled as a family home on the upper floors. Families worked in the hopes of eventually opening factories that produced ready-made garments. Levi Strauss, Henri Bendel, and both Bergdorf and Goodman relied on this pattern for success, working their way up from peddling to

²¹ Moffat, "The Most Extravagant," 81-85.

²² Gabrielle Anne Poillou de St. Mars, *Les Femmes a Paris et en province par la Comtesse Dash* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1868) quoted in Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Richard Bienvenu (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 48.

²³ Rose D. Phinney Grosvenor, "The Diary of Rose D. Phinney Grosvenor, 1882," in *An American Family in the Nineteenth Century*, compiled by Rosa Anne Grosvenor Tourette (Newport, Rhode Island: The Redwood Library Archives, 1973).

²⁴ "Public Laws Passed," *The Newport Mercury*, February 21, 1902: 3.

²⁵ Johnathan D. Sarna and Ellen Smith, "Introduction: The Jews of Rhode Island," In *The Jews of Rhode Island*, edited by George M. Goodwin and Ellen Smith, (Hanover, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2004) 1-11. and Geraldine Foster, *The Jews in Rhode Island: A Brief History* (Providence, Rhode Island: Rhode Island Heritage Foundation and the Rhode Island Publications Society, 1985).

²⁶ Gabriel Goldstein and Elizabeth Greenberg, *A Perfect Fit: The Garment Industry and American Jewry, 1860-1960*. (Lubbock, Texas: Costume Society of America Series at Texas Tech University Press, 2005).

owning incredibly successful businesses. At least one man, Noah H. Rosen, makes enough money peddling in Newport to open a business on Thames St., but most individuals chose to relocate to Providence or Boston when they wanted to expand their businesses.²⁷

Newport has a rich Jewish history and is home to the first synagogue in the United States, but Newport's eighteenth-century Jewish settlers had all moved on by the late-nineteenth century. Providence was a major textile manufacturing center at the end of the nineteenth century, with a large Jewish community supported by kosher stores, day schools, and synagogues. Those peddlers working in Newport are most likely Providence-based. Men would remain on the road for six days at a time, before returning to Providence for the Sabbath and other holidays.²⁸ Once garments had been bartered for and acquired, peddlers would often sell them to immigrants, newly arrived in the United States. For many new individuals, acquiring American-style clothing was necessary if you wanted to find work.

Though the Providence community is quite strong, anti-Semitism is also alive and well in Rhode Island at the end of the nineteenth century. At one point, the Navy asks that all peddlers cease doing business in the area around Newport naval base, as they are unable to protect them from being robbed.²⁹ Some peddlers had drop-off and pick-up points on the island, and these storage caches became targets for robbers. Additionally, there's a killer active in Southern New England in the 1870s specifically targeting peddlers as vulnerable, transient members of society.³⁰

For many years, peddlers were an important part of the Newport community. Today, Newport has an oyster festival, a daffodil festival, as well as festivals for flowers, food and wine. In the 1890s and early 1900s, Newport had a peddler's festival.³¹ Peddlers would parade through town before gathering in set locations where wealthy women could play-act at bargaining, exchanging small gifts and trinkets for insignificant sums of money.³² Though long forgotten today, peddlers were once an inalienable part of the fabric of Gilded Age Newport.

Additionally, other newly arrived immigrant families found success in Newport's textile reuse system. Though less information exists about them, seven members of the Lee family set up laundry businesses in and around Aquidneck Island. The Lees eventually expanded their business to include dyeing garments and textiles.³³ A French family also opened a business in Newport cleaning and dyeing textiles and garments, in "the French fashion."³⁴

We are ready for a shift in thinking in the way we approach communities like Newport. The bulk of the existing research into Gilded Age material culture has focused on how objects

²⁷ Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association, "Jewish Family Names, Newport 1902," In *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, ed. David C. Adelman (Providence, Rhode Island: Oxford Press, Inc., 1958), 238-41.

²⁸ Sarna and Smith, "Introduction: The Jews of Rhode Island," 1-11. and Foster, *The Jews in Rhode Island*.

²⁹ "Local Affairs," *Newport Daily News*, March 20, 1876: 2.

³⁰ "Miscellaneous -- Murdered Peddlers," *Newport Daily News*, January 10, 1873: 2.

³¹ "Peddler's Parade," *Newport Mercury*, July 15, 1905: 1.

³² "Local Matters," *Newport Mercury*, July 29, 1905: 1.

³³ Sampson, Murdock, & Co., "Laundries," In *The Newport Directory* (Boston: Sampson, Murdock, & Co., 1900) 294.

³⁴ Murdock, Sampson, & Co., "Advertising Department," In *The Newport Directory* (Boston: Murdock, Sampson, & Co., 1895) 415.

entered the homes of the wealthy. Equal consideration should be given to how objects moved through those homes and out into the community. The Gilded Age was the era for which the term “conspicuous consumption” was coined.³⁵ It is well known that at the end of the nineteenth century spending money was a performance. Some would say that we are living in the second Gilded Age right now, and regardless, the way that these families conducted business has shaped the world in unavoidable ways. Colleges and museums that bear the names of the Gilded Age industrial tycoons like Drexel, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, Astor, and Morgan still exist across the country today. But, for every Vanderbilt cottage with platinum-gilt walls, there existed another Vanderbilt quietly exchanging unwanted garments behind closed doors. When studying the Gilded Age, it is important not to be blinded by the gold and glitter. Important historical figures must be grounded in the local contexts that they inhabited. If no man can be an island, then no mansion can be either.

³⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).

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