

## BACKGROUNDER

# Aquidneck Mill Building at IYRS\*

Today, the site where the Aquidneck Mill building stands on the campus of the International Yacht Restoration School is in the heart of historic Newport. But when the Mill was built along Thames Street in 1831, it was on the fringes of a growing city that was, literally, under construction. According to architectural historian Catherine Zipf, the Mill rose between two pivotal eras in Newport history: the Colonial Golden Age and the Victorian Gilded Age. It was one of the places that played a role as Newport repaired its economy and welcomed new people to a city that, by the close of the century, would become a magnet for wealthy summer residents and their glorious mansions and historic homes. Today, the Mill plays a pivotal role for IYRS. The school's programs in yacht restoration are in high demand—from both students who travel from around the world to study at IYRS and maritime companies that rely on the well-trained workforce that graduate from IYRS programs. Now restored, the historic waterfront landmark provides much needed expansion space for IYRS and serves as a fixture in the local community, with a library open to both students and the public, a Visitor Center, and lease space for organizations and companies that have brought businesses, jobs, and new economic activity to Newport's Lower Thames Street.

**History** The Golden Age that gave rise to Newport left it a small city. The Aquidneck Mill was built in 1831, when the city was in the process of repairing its economy and welcoming new residents. Constructed as waves of Irish immigrants came to Newport, the mill was built for cotton manufacturing. It originally housed 4,356 spindles for weaving cotton into thread, an operation manned by some 100 workers. The three-and-a-half story, green granite building endured the ups and downs of the cotton manufacturing industry. Under the new ownership of the Richmond Co., the mill was expanded with a four-story brick addition and grew to a capacity of 9,632 spindles and 175 workers. In 1884, cotton manufacturing hit another depression and the Richmond operation was closed down. The building was subsequently owned by a series of companies—including the Burnham Elastic Webbing Co., the Edison Illumination Co., and the Newport County Electric Company. IYRS purchased the property in 1995.

**A Fixture on the Newport Landscape** With their open floor plans, large windows, and solid masonry construction, buildings that once functioned as mills have been successfully adapted for many different uses. Newport was not a center of mill culture, but vestiges of the city's industrial past remain. The Perry Mill on the corner of Memorial Boulevard and Thames Street was restored as a retail/condominium complex. The foundation of the Coddington Mill was adapted for residential apartments. The Aquidneck Mill, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is the only mill in Newport whose restoration reenacts the city's tradition of a working waterfront.

**The Restoration** Newport Collaborative Architects, the firm that served as the architect on the restoration of Perry Mill in 1981, served as architect on the \$7.5-million project and construction was managed by Farrar & Associates of Newport. These two Newport firms transformed the large open spaces of the mill building into a structure that functions as a place of education and training, an historic site that is open to the public, and a place of business for the tenants who lease space at the Mill. The school broke ground on the project in July 2007 and the restoration was completed on time and on budget. An official opening ceremony was held in May 2009.

**A New Use** The Mill was originally built for textile manufacturing, but today this historic building not only helps IYRS expand its facilities: it also creates a richer campus experience for the local community and Newport visitors. The 30,000-square-foot building houses critically needed expansion space for IYRS, a maritime research library open to both students and the public, and a new Visitor Center for the school and the Museum of Yachting. Companies and organizations also lease space at the Mill. Most tenants have involvement in the marine industry, including Boothbay Harbor Shipyard, Confident Captain/Ocean Pros, Dunning & Associates naval architects, The Gowrie Group, Jamestown Distributors, Nautor's Swan, and Newport Yacht Management. Additional tenants include Hilltop Motors, The Rhode Island Foundation Newport County Fund, alpine gear and apparel company Wild Things, and Worldways Social Marketing. Some tenants were new to Rhode Island when they moved to the Mill, while others relocated from other areas of the state. Including the school, businesses in the Mill account for nearly 40 jobs.

**A Testament to Newport's Resiliency** The restored Mill officially opened during the difficult economic climate of 2009, and the rebirth of the building during those economic challenges has an historic parallel. According to Dr. Catherine Zipf, Newport's mills were originally born during a period of economic distress. After the Revolutionary War, Newport was in a physically sad state and in need of recovery. But without the money or infrastructure to revive the city, it took several stabs at reinvention before Newport entered its Gilded Age and attracted wealthy residents and their glorious mansions. Before that happened, four mills were built in Newport, but only two (including the Aquidneck Mill) were considered successful. "Newport was not well suited to mill culture," said Zipf. "Still, the mills represent an important moment in Newport's history, when the city was trying to reinvent itself and to capitalize on its waterfront resources in a different way than it had in the past ... These mills demonstrate the resiliency of Newport during very difficult economic times."

**About IYRS** The International Yacht Restoration School (IYRS) is a non-profit institution dedicated to education and maritime preservation. The school teaches the skills, history, art and science of building, restoring and maintaining boats and their systems. IYRS offers intensive programs in traditional boatbuilding and marine systems, employing a time-honored educational model that teaches problem solving, teamwork, project management and hands-on skills. IYRS graduates are highly regarded for their passion and craftsmanship and work in many of the premier modern and restoration yards around the world.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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**\*Historical background on the Aquidneck Mill was supplied by Dr. Catherine Zipf, assistant professor of cultural and historic preservation at Salve Regina University (Newport, R.I.).**