

# The Newport Daily News

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IRISH HERITAGE MONTH

## History lesson

### Trolley tour traces city's Irish roots

By Matt Sheley  
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — Fort Adams, Forty Steps and the mansions on Bellevue Avenue are all important landmarks in the city.

Many don't realize how much the Irish contributed to those places and the rest of the City-by-the-Sea, according to Vincent Arnold, president of the Museum of Newport Irish History, based at 648 Thames St.

He led a trolley tour the museum sponsored across the city Saturday to show the role the Irish played in Newport centuries ago and their descendants continue to play today.

"Obviously, things that happened in the past build and build and build to what's going on in the present," said Arnold, a Middletown resident. "It's difficult to understand what's going on today if you don't know

what led up to it."

Participants boarded a Viking Tours trolley at Hibernian Hall on Wellington Avenue for a trip that wound its way around the southern section of the city, with Arnold providing tidbits of information along the way. The first records of Irish immigrants arriving in Newport date back to the 1600s, he said. While not much is known about the earliest Irish settlers, the Irish continued to migrate to America during the next 200 years, participating in massive infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Erie Canal.

Locally, 300-400 Irish laborers were among those who built Fort Adams after the War of 1812, when British forces sacked communities up and down the East Coast, Arnold said. The Army project at Fort Adams started in 1830 and took 33 years to complete, he said. Other Irish worked in the coal mines of Portsmouth, he said.



Vincent Arnold shares facts about Irish history with John Reid, left, of Middletown and Max and Trish Poirier of Newport during a stop at the Museum of Newport Irish History.



Jacqueline Marque ♦ Daily News staff photos

Lorrie and Ronald Moore of Portsmouth look out the window on Saturday during a trolley tour of the city as part of Irish Heritage Month.

"We know that they were here because of newspaper articles and other source materials," Arnold said. "Unfortunately, it's been difficult to find out much else because the information just isn't there."

There is an abundance of Irish history along Bellevue Avenue, where immigrants worked as maids, liverymen, kitchen help and other household staff in the mansions used as summer cottages by America's wealthy. They even owned a

mansion, as was the case with Inchiquin, built in the 1890s by James O'Brien, a direct descendent of the first King of All Ireland, Arnold said.

The Irish help held informal dances on Friday nights at the Forty Steps, located at the end of Narragansett Avenue and leading from the Cliff Walk to a small platform overlooking the ocean, as a way to get together and blow off a little steam

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Vincent Arnold, president of the Museum of Newport Irish History



Jacqueline Marque ♦ Daily News staff

Tour members wander through the Barney Street Cemetery. The site was restored by the Museum of Newport Irish History in 1999.

### Lesson

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throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, Arnold said.

He told the tale of Timmy "The Woodhooker" Sullivan, who owned a rundown house on Bellevue Avenue and operated a junkyard on his property in the mid-1900s, much to the consternation of some of his wealthy neighbors. Sullivan prevailed in court fight after court fight, Arnold said, because the city lacked sufficient ordinances to prevent him from collecting his unusual treasures and displaying them for all to see.

A laminated newspaper article from a prominent New York daily was passed around the trolley for participants to read about the celebrated neighbor vs. neighbor brouhaha.

Moving into the heart of the city, the trolley stopped at the Barney Street Cemetery, permitting those on the tour to get out and to stroll

around the small historic site restored by the museum in 1999. The last stop on the tour was the Museum of Newport Irish History, which features a variety of exhibits, photos and displays. In observance of St. Patrick's Day, the museum will be open on Saturday, March 17, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. In addition, it will be open on Saturday, March 24, and Saturday, March 31, from 1-4 p.m.

"I thought it was very useful," John Reid of Middletown said of the hour-plus tour. "My grandfather came here from Ireland 150 years ago, and I thought it was time I knew more. It's what you do now with the information that really matters."

"It's good for us to remember the past and the struggles of other people," said Ronald Moore of Portsmouth. "History is really cyclical and all of this is so close to our roots. That's what helps make it so interesting and identifiable."

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