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## Tribute to Gladys Bolhouse

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## In Memory of Gladys Bolhouse . . .

It is with the very deepest sadness and regret that the Newport Historical Society informs its members of the passing of Gladys Bolhouse, Curator of manuscripts at the Newport Historical Society from 1946 to 1992. A font of knowledge about Newport history, Mrs. Bolhouse was consulted by historians from around the world and her name appears in the acknowledgments section of countless books and articles. In 1984, she was named Newport's first Official Historian by the Mayor and City Council. Mrs. Bolhouse was born on the Point and lived in Newport her entire life. More than just a source for information about Newport history, Gladys Bolhouse was and is a part of Newport history.

Gladys Estelle Carr was born in 1899 in a house on upper Thames Street, and later lived in houses on Poplar Street and Elm Street. She moved to a house on Charles Street when she married Peter Bolhouse in 1926 and spent the remainder of her life there. After graduating from Rogers High School in 1918, she joined the Navy as a "Yeoman F" and was stationed at the Naval Training Station in Newport. From her post with about thirty other women she supported the war effort through administrative duties. The rank of "Yeoman F" was a precursor to women serving as WAVES during the second World War and the full status of women in the armed forces today. After the end of her military service, Mrs. Bolhouse worked at St. George's School in Middletown until the birth of her first child.

It was through her association with the Daughters of the American Revolution that Mrs. Bolhouse became involved with the Newport Historical Society. While researching her Newport ancestry, Mrs. Bolhouse acquired an unmatched knowledge of the resources at the Society, leading to the position that she held for forty-six years. Mrs. Bolhouse organized the Society's vast holdings of archives and manuscripts and made them accessible to the public through her fluent knowledge of Newport history. She was consulted for historical information by the staff of the Society and scholars until the time of her death. Mrs. Bolhouse was also a long-standing member of the Publications Committee of the Society, serving in that capacity and greatly assisting in the publication of *Newport History* until recently.

Mrs. Bolhouse also wrote several articles for *Newport History*. These were: "Incidents Through the Years at the Portsmouth Coal Mines, 1808-1967" in 1967; "Women and the Battle for Rhode Island" in 1968; "The Meunchinger-King Hotel" in 1968; "18th Century Building Agreements" in 1970; "Abraham Redwood: Reluctant Quaker, Philanthropist, Botanist" in 1972; "The Hercules Courtenay: A Letter to President Jefferson" in 1977; "The Moravian Church in Newport" in 1979; and "Chevalier de Chatelux, Major General, Newport, Rhode Island" in 1981. Mrs. Bolhouse was also a member of the committee that revised and republished *Newport: A Short History* by C.P.B. Jefferies in 1992.

The staff and board of directors of the Newport Historical Society have fond memories of Mrs. Bolhouse's many years at the Society. Her ever-friendly and professional demeanor eased the anxieties and workload of staff and researchers on countless

## **Gladys Bolhouse (1899-1995)**



*Photograph from the Newport Historical Society Oral History Program (1984-85).  
Courtesy of John W. Corbett, Photographer.*

occasions. Since her retirement, the staff of the Society have greatly missed her weekly deliveries of home-baked cakes and pastries, which were enjoyed by everyone as they laughed and talked with Mrs. B. about the Red Sox, television, and of course, Newport history. Each day as researchers and staff go about their daily duties, the presence of Mrs. Bolhouse is evident: in an invaluable note typewritten on an index card, in her files on the history of dozens of Newport families, in her legacy of caring, and in the status of Newport history that was elevated by her presence. This legacy and her memory will always remain.

Family was foremost for Mrs. Bolhouse: her own and the families of others. She looked at history in terms of family, as one of the most meaningful ways to analyze the past. Her work as an historian put her on a plane with the finest professional scholars, and it showed profound knowledge, insight, and intelligence. She looked at the rest of the staff as family, and she was like a grandmother to us all. Our day at the Society started with a ritual that was more like coming home than going to work. As Daniel Snyder, the Executive Director, came in every morning, Mrs. Bolhouse's first order of business was to get an update on the comings and goings of his growing family, and to share the news about her newest great-grandchild.

Above all, she was wise and accepting. Her historical viewpoint helped her put the present in perspective. She understood people and cared for them deeply, regardless of their foibles. The staff, board, and members of the Newport Historical Society all cared about her just as much.

## **Gladys Bolhouse remembered**

Peruser of manuscripts, researcher's best friend, cheerful giver of information to countless seekers, loving mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, superb cook, lover of sandy beaches, Bermuda bicyclist, avid reader of detective stories as well as Ezra Stiles's diary—Gladys was all those and much more. Her admirers think of her as the person who remembered most about Newport's 350 year history. She more than earned the sobriquet, the Historical Oracle.

Her reputation for having a phenomenal memory had reached far and wide when this writer first encountered it personally. At Redwood Library sometime in the 1950s a visitor asked me about church bells in Newport: how many there? how old? what size? how much did they weigh? Frankly, I flunked that test, but Gladys Bolhouse did not. A call to her brought this response: "Look in the first City Directory of Newport, that's 1856-57, and in the very back you'll find a listing of all the churches in Newport, and that tells about bells." So I did, and I relayed this to the inquirer. It was a start.

Gladys was a starter. If she knew the answer, she also knew where she'd seen it. If she didn't, and that was rare, she knew where to look. She had the closest thing to a photographic memory many of us had ever encountered. Also, she had good historical sense. If you placed a historical event in the wrong decade, too early or too late, no matter what the century, she would correct you instantly. How did she acquire such a bottomless pool of knowledge? I can suggest one clue. Gladys referred again

and again to her sleeplessness. Awake at night, she would reach for a volume of Ezra Stiles's diary, and thus pass the hours in the 1700s.

Once she and I joined in a reading project. We wanted to become better acquainted with the diary of "Nailer" Tom Hazard of Wakefield, home, incidentally, of some of her Stedman forebears. This volume, which spans some sixty years and in printed form is longer than the New York telephone directory, scares off most readers. We decide to scan the eight hundred double-columned pages and compare our findings. It took several months and proved enlightening. It also proved that Gladys Bolhouse was an historian not only by profession but by avocation.

Once when someone mentioned the harvesting of witch hazel and the manufacture of its extract, she burst into song, not exactly warbling. Instead, her voice wobbled on and off pitch, but the words were the important thing: Which Hazel, Which Hazel, Which Hazel shall I marry?

I had the privilege of accompanying her to the Point, her native haunt, to see the Watson's William Claggett clock. We left the Historical Society on shank's mare during lunch. I wish I had taped her travelogue. She related fact and anecdote about each and every house along the way—who the first owner was, his occupation, whether the house had been moved, all this not for just one house, but for each in turn. Her knowledge of the Point came into full use when she researched deeds for Antoinette Downing's and Vincent Scully's *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*. That she felt well-acquainted with the past residents of these properties was evidenced by her use of nicknames for them, not Thomas Claggett, for instance, but Tommy.

When the dispute arose over the correct pronunciation of Thames Street, Gladys sided with old Newporters and could substantiate her pronunciation by finding an early document in which the misspelling of the name "Tems" left no room for doubt. In like manner, Gladys settled many questions. For instance, no one knew for certain who the architect was of the old rusticated church in Brooklyn, Connecticut. It may have been Peter Harrison, but even Carl Bridenbaugh, Harrison's biographer, could not settle the question. Then one day a parcel of Brinley and Malbone family papers arrived at the Historical Society. These families had removed from Newport and settled in Brooklyn when the fervor for independence made them uncomfortable here. I remember saying to Gladys that morning, "We may find out who the architect was of the Brooklyn Church from these papers." So it proved. Gladys called excitedly to say she had found in a letter by Godfrey Malbone that his design for the church was complete and had been forwarded to Peter Harrison for his approval. The mystery had been solved. Gladys was elated.

Such were the accomplishments of the Curator of Manuscripts at the Newport Historical Society. And such were her deepest satisfactions.

Richard Champlin