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Newport's Real Estate King by Alan T. Schumacher

In "Representative Men of Rhode Island," a biographical series published in 1908, it is stated: "To no one citizen does the city of Newport owe a deeper debt of gratitude than to the late Alfred Smith, who passed away there October 26, 1886, and to whose single energies is almost wholly due the development of the spot into its present place among the famous residential cities of the world." Smith's lasting historical interest arises from the remarkable success of his far-sighted promotion of Newport's most famous and vital thoroughfares — Bellevue (1853) and Ocean (1867) Avenues.

Alfred Smith was born December 6, 1809 in a little house on Wilkey Lane (now Aquidneck Avenue) in Middletown. His parents were Benjamin Whitehead Smith and the former Hannah Howard Peckham. He was a lineal descendant of Edward Smith, who was associated with John Clarke in procuring the 1663 Royal Charter for the Colony of Rhode Island from King Charles II. This Charter guaranteed equal civil and religious liberty to all.

Young Alfred received a limited education in the local district school. When his family abandoned farming and moved to Cross Street in Newport, Alfred was apprenticed to Quakers Messrs. Isaac Gould & Son to learn tailoring. (An indenture of apprenticeship was a contract for a term of years agreed upon by an employer, guardian, and child.) The terms of instruction were strict—the young man was not to drink, gamble, or otherwise sin nor was he to be in bed after sunrise. Still, Gould was an indulgent master and in time Alfred evolved into a proficient pupil.

The next step for Smith was brief employment as a cloth cutter by a firm in Providence. His skill provided entree to Wheeler and Co., located on Broadway in New York City, which was regarded at the time as the most fashionable tailoring establishment in the United States. In due course he was earning a handsome sum of \$6,000 a year, and, being frugal (it was rumored he slept under the counter to save lodging expense) he rapidly began to amass a small capital.

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In the 1830's the contrast between the burgeoning New York City and somnolent Newport was immense. Unlike New York with its many resident Tories, Newport had received a crippling blow from the British military occupation of the Revolution. From being the fourth largest colonial municipality with a population exceeding 11,000, it diminished by 1790 to a town of 6,716. Fifty years later the total had only become 8,334, about a 24% increase. In that same period of time the population of the United States as a whole grew well over 400%.

Commercial enterprise was torpid. Attempts at establishing whaling, shipping, and textile industries were unsuccessful. It was reported that in the ten year period ending in 1828 only one new house was built in Newport.

However, there were faint stirrings. The town's first hotel, the Brinley, soon to be called Bellevue House (the proprietor was French) on Catherine Street just off Griffin (later renamed Touro) reopened in 1825. Once again prosperous Southerners and Carribbean planters remembering their grandparents' pleasant pre-Revolutionary visits began to return to escape their oppressive summer climates.

Where did they stay? In boarding houses mainly. Other hotels opened—the Whitfield House, later renamed the Touro House, and the first Ocean House, built in 1837 and shortly to be destroyed by fire. These places spawned auxiliary services, which generated needed business for Newporters.

At Wheeler and Co. Smith was meeting some of the richest men in the United States, such as William Beach Lawrence, distinguished statesman and scholar of international law and later Lt. Governor of Rhode Island. Knowing of Smith's Newport background he took his advice in buying Ochre Point Farm of over sixty acres for \$12,000 in 1835. This was the first large land purchase by an "outsider" since the Revolution. Other patrons of the tailoring establishment also began to think of Newport as a sea-accessible summer watering place for their families, and Smith was the fellow to consult for local information.

In 1836 on the site of an old ropewalk which extended over seven hundred feet from the Jewish burial ground almost as far as Bull Street, Lt. Governor Engs laid out the beginnings of Kay Street. Seeing commercial profit on this street and in the surrounding area he built houses for rent.

This small trend of increasing speculative interest in Newport was not unobserved by Smith. Although not quite thirty years of age he had, by hard work and personal austerity, saved funds in the neighborhood of \$20,000. Being basically a country fellow with a pronounced love for nature, the starkness of New York City life held little long term appeal for Smith. Thus, in 1839 he relinquished his situation at Wheeler & Co. and slowly entered upon his new vocation—the real estate business.

However, Newport was still pretty much in the doldrums; there was little real estate activity. Fortunately, Smith had another commercial interest, landscape gardening, which practice would complement the development that the foresighted former tailor realized was shortly to come.

On a personal front, in February, 1843, Smith married Ann Maria Talbot, daughter of Captain Allen Talbot of Dighton, Massachusetts. One year later a son, Howard, was born. Three daughters later followed. He bought land on Mount Vernon Street in August 1844 and on that site in 1845 built a white Greek Revival house. No. 12 Mount Vernon Street was Smith's home until his death, and was also his office for most of his life. It stands today as a condominium.¹



*12 Mount Vernon Street, Alfred Smith's House.
Photo by John T. Hopf.*

¹Two plaques on the building indicate that it was Alfred Smith's home and that it has been placed by the U.S. Department of the Interior on the National Register of Historic Places.

As indicative of Smith's interest in horticulture a visitor commented in the *Newport Mercury* of May 3, 1850 — "The grounds are so charmingly laid out. He has the finest flower garden or nursery in the state. Many of his flowers are valuable exotics imported from different parts of Europe. He also has several varieties of rare trees, also imported. Mr. Smith devotes much time to the nurture and cultivation of these gems of nature."²



*Portrait of Ann Maria Talbot Smith.
From the Collection of Channing Memorial Church.*

²Another noted floral and landscape gardener of the 19th and early 20th centuries was Thomas Galvin, who started his business in 1845 and was instrumental in beautifying Newport considerably by undertaking commissions for both natives and summer visitors for many years. He died in 1912.

1845 really marked the renaissance of Newport. Prior to then land was valued only for what it would yield under cultivation. Smith packaged land as real estate and turned around the whole market. With two other men he formed a syndicate which bought three hundred acres of farm land south and east of Touro Street. The property was subdivided into lots, streets were laid out on a grid and trees planted. In short order land values trebled. With demand for lodging increasing, another hotel, the Atlantic House, opened on Touro Street in 1844. Other factors increasing land values were the introduction of the first overnight steamship run between New York City and Newport by the Fall River Line and the building of a new six hundred bed Ocean House on the corner of Touro and Bowery Streets, both in 1847. Smith was on his way to acquiring big wealth. By 1853 he was the seventh richest man in Newport according to the tax book of that year.



*Map showing routes of the Fall River Line.
Collection, Newport Historical Society.*

Hotel life, so amusingly outlined in the 1858 article “Belle Brittan at Newport” (“Belle Brittan” was the pseudonym for Hiram Fuller) was

luxurious, social, and gay with frequent concerts, hops, and other varied entertainments, even indoor hockey played on boards. Bath Road (now Memorial Boulevard), originally laid out by Robert Johnston, a Jamaica planter who had purchased Easton Farm in 1832, was improved for the convenience of hotel patrons as salt water bathing was now considered healthful and invigorating. This restorative work was undertaken in 1856 through the effort of Alfred Smith, who had organized a public subscription.

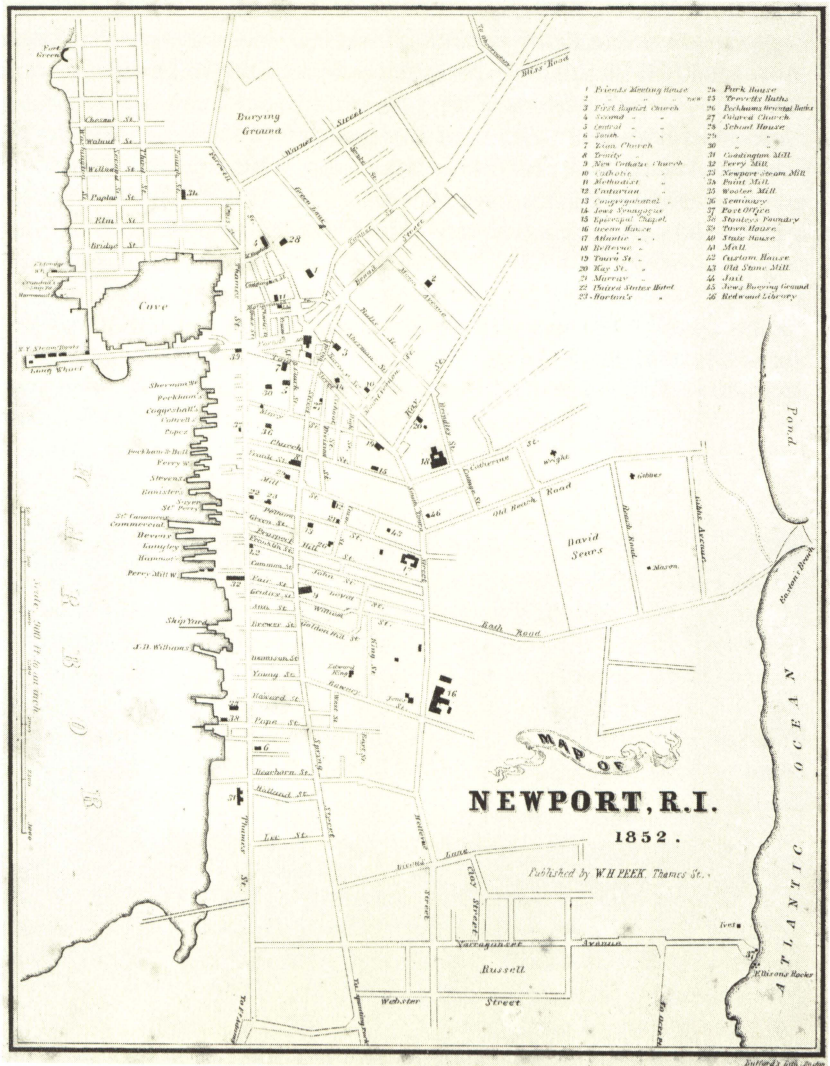
In due course some of these hotel guests became renters or builders of cottages, which were initially generally of simple wooden design. But in the 1840's hardly any summer visitors had built substantial cottages for themselves. By tradition "Kingscote" (so named in 1864 by subsequent owner, William H. King), designed in 1841 by Richard Upjohn for the Noble Jones family of Savannah, is considered the first such structure.

Newport was being popularized. In 1840 Sarah Cahoon's illustrated *A Week at Newport* was printed, a book which had wide circulation. Articles and illustrations in magazines like *Harper's* and *Leslie's* contributed to a growing local excitement. As early as 1852 George W. Curtis wrote in *Lotus-Eating*, "Beyond doubt Newport is the great watering place of the country." That same year marked the publication of John Ross Dix's *Hand Book Of Newport* followed by Edward Peterson's *History* in 1853 and then George Champlin Mason's *Newport Illustrated* in 1854. As late as 1897 a revised edition of this last work was printed.

During this period a number of organizations were being born. Incorporated in 1853/4 were the Newport Gas Light Co., the Newport Reading Room, and the Newport Historical Society. With all this attention and excitement Newport abandoned its simple township government and reincorporated as a City on May 6, 1853.³

Real estate activity was frenetic. In the winter of 1853/4 over sixty houses were built. A fair amount of this construction took place in the Kay, Catherine Street, and Old Beach Road neighborhood. But the built-up section for some years extended no further east than Greenough Place as large estates, particularly that of David Sears of Boston, kept the area rural. As usual, one sees the ubiquitous Alfred Smith involved. In 1853 he promoted the extension of Kay Street to Rhode Island Avenue.

³Though it had been a township through most of its history, Newport had observed city status from 1784-1787.



Map of Newport, 1852, private collection of Alan Schumacher. Though Bellevue Avenue is not opened until 1853, Bellevue Street can be seen running off of South Touro. At the time it did not extend beyond the limits shown in the map.

The Kay-Catherine-Old Beach neighborhood was considered desirable and fashionable. Victorian styled residences built by Newporters were often rented summers to an artistic elite — Clement C. Moore, John La Farge, Raphael Pumpelly, William James — as well as to other

intellectual persons from neighboring cities who eschewed notoriety. Development of this section of Newport continued for many years. After the Civil War additional houses were built. The more pretentious stone cottages were termed villas. Summer rental lists reflected the attractiveness of the area.

Newport was experiencing a remarkable transformation in the mid-19th century. Returning in 1857 to the scene of his boyhood after an absence of many years, George Channing in his "Early Recollections" referred with astonishment to Newport as now an American Brighton or Baden-Baden. The stage had been set, then, for a further development which would favorably affect the city in the latter part of the century and beyond. It happened in a curious manner.

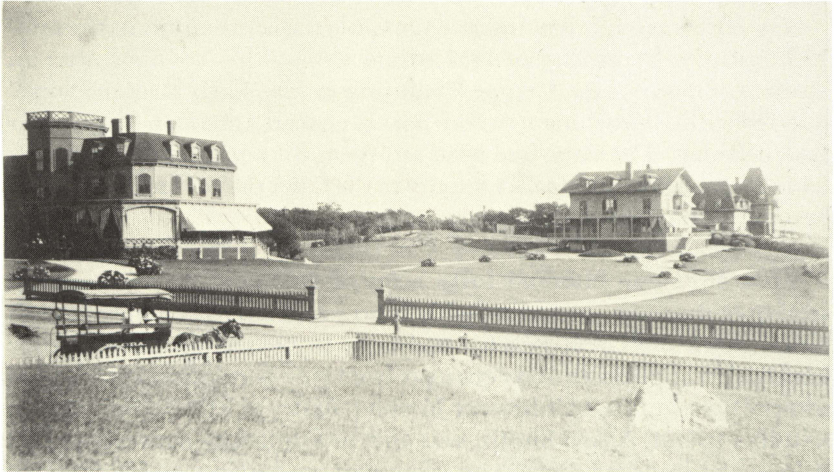
Since 1819 one hundred forty acres of farmland in the southern section of the town, including what is now referred to as Bailey's Beach (once called the Great Beach), had been in possession of the Bailey family. Through death and departure from Newport to San Francisco of some of his relatives, half-brother Joseph I. Bailey in 1851 in conjunction with his friend, Alfred Smith, was able to acquire by conveyance full title to the hundred forty acres. The cost to Bailey was \$27,000. He apparently was skeptical of placing this sum in undeveloped property and is alleged to have said "All I expect to get out of the bargain is driftwood enough to keep me warm for the winter." Smith also obviously provided consideration because an undivided half interest was obtained by him in the form of a joint tenancy with the right of survivorship as differentiated from tenancy in common. This legal association continued for many years.

The reason for Smith's enthusiasm for the purchase became apparent. Smith had enough influence with the Town Council that it ordered on January 5, 1852 a new highway, fifty feet wide, to be laid out from Dixon's Lane to the Beach — a highway which would create splendid opportunities for real estate sales.

By the end of April surveying was complete. About thirty small landowners were affected but most agreed to the desirability of the new highway. Various members of the Hazard family did not and on appraisal were awarded \$1,450. One recalcitrant was paid \$6.25 for damages sustained.

In keeping with stylish French nomenclature in road building — avenue, route, boulevard, concourse, environs, detour — the street was

named Bellevue and was completed in 1853. As was his custom Smith immediately planted hundreds of trees alongside the new dirt road, which was not paved until the early 1920's although it was gravelled much earlier.



*Bellevue Avenue at Bailey's Beach.
Photo by Charles Stanhope c. 1890.*

Prior to the building of the new avenue there was only one large house south of Narragansett, "Chateau-Sur-Mer," finished in 1852 for William Shepard Wetmore. Because of a curve at Dixon's Lane Wetmore's contractor evidently thought that the projected Bellevue Avenue would be located further east than it turned out to be and that is why the imposing arch of Fall River granite guarding the entrance to the property is some hundred disconsolate feet from the new road.

William Beach Lawrence, as stated earlier, was already settled in a small house, later enlarged, on Ochre Point. At one time because of the color of the soil it was believed there was gold to be found there, hence the name. With Bellevue Avenue a reality, farm houses in the neighborhood were slowly being bought for remodeling. Ward McAllister acquired one such house on Webster Street in 1858 and John Carter Brown of Providence another on Hazard Avenue in 1862, which was remodeled five years later.

Also bringing the newly elegant Bellevue Avenue to the public's

attention was a “fete champetre” given in 1857 by Wetmore at his residence for his industrialist friend, George Peabody, head of one of the largest mercantile concerns in the world and philanthropist extraordinaire. This party was considered to be the most magnificent ever staged in America up to that time and was attended by the elite from all parts of the country. A precursor of future Newport extravaganzas! Soon thereafter the reborn Ocean House hotel, presumably for social reasons, changed its address from South Touro Street to Bellevue Avenue.

Only a few years later, in 1864, a teenage girl, Kate Hunter, wrote “The Avenue is the Great Drive and hundreds of carriages drive up and down it in the height of the season, which is in August. At the end, among the rocks on the shore, is the Boat House. The Spouting Rock is quite near it.”

A master stroke of Smith’s as an inducement to build cottages was to provide a right to a small bathing pavilion at the Beach, known for a while as Spouting Horn, to house owners in the area. Others by paying a daily or seasonal fee were allowed usage privileges. Attendants, a patrol boat and raft were provided. As time passed the Beach became a popular children’s spot while their elders bathed at Easton’s Beach. As envisioned, besides seaweed sales, the Bailey’s Beach Bathing Association became revenue productive for Bailey and Smith and their heirs until sold for a private club in 1897. By then, Easton’s Beach, with the introduction of trolley service, was becoming too crowded for the summer colonist.



*Print of Bailey's Beach from Harper's Weekly, 1880's.
Drawn by W.P. Snyder. Courtesy of Alan Schumacher.*

Smith's success also became his partner's. Before inheriting property, Bailey was assessed \$10.20 in 1849 on personalty of only \$3,000. Fifteen years later, largely owing to his association with Smith, with the tax rate at 60 cents per \$100, he paid taxes of \$390 on an assessment of \$65,000. His residence was at 20 Kay Street. He was an early director of the newly established Newport Gas Light Co., an expanding utility, and in Boyd's City Directory he listed his occupation as land broker.

During the period in question Alfred Smith in 1849 paid \$57.80 in taxes and in 1864 \$579.60 on an assessment — realty of \$16,800 and personalty of \$79,800, totalling \$96,600.

In addition to their individual payments the joint tenancy of Bailey and Smith paid \$210 in taxes on realty assessed at \$35,000 in 1864. These figures illustrate the partners' business acumen as well as Newport's low tax rate. And, as the years wore on, the association became far more lucrative.

Smith's next master stroke was the creation of Ocean Drive. Prior to 1867 the western section of Aquidneck Island consisted of a few large fenced-in farms, principally those of Seth Bateman of Castle Hill and Robert Kennedy of Price's Neck, reached by hazardous foot-paths and dusty lanes. Custom gave the public a right of way for fishing and gathering seaweed for fertilizer.



*Ocean Ave: Looking east toward Bailey's Beach.
Photo by Clarence Stanhope c. 1890.*

The impetus for western development arose through the purchase by Edward King, on the advice of realtor Smith, of the Harrison farm on the harbor side of the city in 1857. King then deeded to the City land on which Wellington and Harrison Avenues were built. Prior to this construction, the road leading to Fort Adams and Castle Hill was ill-defined, becoming a quagmire in rainy weather.

Several years later, in 1859, a project initiated by Smith was launched to connect Harrison Avenue to Bellevue Avenue by a road along the south shore. All landowners bounding the proposed routes were agreeable to granting a public right-of-way except General John A. Hazard, who wanted access restricted to his neighbors. This difficulty along with the onset of the Civil War set aside consideration of the new thoroughfare until 1866 when a petition of one hundred twenty-five persons forced action by the Commissioner of Highways. By this time many voters realized that a new road would bring additional prosperity to the city as well as creating a beautiful, scenic pleasure drive. It was observed that summer residents were now paying one-third of city taxes.

The opening of Ocean Avenue was assured when Smith at his own expense built a substantial stone bridge over the creek which ran from Almy Pond across Bailey's Beach to the Atlantic. Contrary to the general belief that Frederick Law Olmstead of Central Park fame was responsible for the layout of the drive it was the result of a survey in 1862 by S.L. Minot of Boston. Olmstead's role was merely that of consultant to the project. It wasn't until 1885 that he was commissioned to plan sites and roads for development which only slowly materialized at the tip of the Island. In the days before the advent of the automobile, horse and buggy travel was time-consuming.

It is curious to note the different names given the new macadam-covered thoroughfare in the first few years of its existence — The New Road, The Shore Road, Sea Side Avenue and Sea View Avenue — before settling down to Ocean Avenue. In any event it was immediately pronounced the finest shore driveway in the world. Because of this new, convenient access a sizable portion of the City was made available for occupancy by summer visitors and in time by year-round residents.

In 1852 the Tax Book listed merely a dozen of the summer colony as owning real estate. These were the pioneers in transforming farmland into elegant estates. However, in 1860 there were still twenty-seven farms within city limits, with a median evaluation exceeding \$25,000.

As the 1860's and 70's wore on land values soared. In his 1875 weighty twelve-pound tome, "Newport and its Cottages," G.C. Mason described forty-two principal dwellings, more than half owned by New Yorkers. Actually at the time the City contained about five hundred cottages of which a goodly percentage were available for summer rental at prices in the thousands of dollars. Post Civil War prosperity!

Smith did not restrict his real estate activities to Newport; the whole island was his territory. In 1850 Middletown was still farm land, with a population of only 832. In an April 1868 advertisement in the *Newport Mercury* he listed as available for sale a 270 acre Sachuest Farm including Hanging Rock overlooking Second Beach. And, according to Maud Howe Elliot, in 1852, Smith smooth-talked her father into buying an estate in Portsmouth's Lawton Valley.

Newport's population was growing apace. In 1885, a year before Smith's death, it reached 19,556; fifteen years before it had been 12,521. Large houses were being built in the Ochre Point area — Beaulieu, Beechwood, Ochre Court, Wakehurst, Rough Point — and others without name. Prominent architects like Calvert Vaux, Henry H. Richardson and Richard Morris Hunt were involved in their construction or remodelling.

In an 1874 *Harper's Magazine* article it was said "Smith has become the chief of real estate agents in Newport, nearly all the transactions of the vicinity being made through him or his firm, Alfred Smith & Son." Elsewhere it was written that he was one of the most successful real estate brokers in the United States. The Newport City Atlas of 1876 shows three properties held individually by Smith, nine with Joseph Bailey and three with Smith's title shared with Estates. Many of these lots were in the southern Coggeshall Avenue neighborhood but there were others around Catherine, Redwood, and Ayrault Streets, Greenough Place and Rhode Island Avenue. By April 5th of the 1872 season he had rented 106 furnished homes for \$464,000. During his career his sales aggregated over \$21,000,000.

Smith's business tactics were intense, exact and prompt. He would say he intended to settle his estate daily. If he owed anyone, he paid at once; if anyone owed him, he expected payment just as promptly. He had a selling technique of getting a customer into his conspicuous one-horse chaise and not letting him out till a deal had been struck.

The so-called Spink case illustrates the stern tactics used in his

becoming a millionaire. Spink had authorized Smith to sell his property. Five years later the house was sold through another broker. Smith thereupon put an attachment upon the place and forced Spink to pay a double commission.

Smith also realized the importance of keeping a neighborhood fashionable. He was ever alert in protecting his past patrons by excluding unwelcome intending purchasers, and therefore his customers had no fear of an undesirable neighbor. When he turned down a would-be client, no amount of money offered could induce him to change his mind. It was owing to this confidence in him that few transactions for the building of summer residences were made except through Smith. He always kept in mind the importance of maintaining high prices and frequently allowed cottages which he owned and which had fallen into his hands through mortgage foreclosure to go unrented rather than have it said they were let for a less sum than he deemed reasonable—for Newport, that is.

Nonetheless, Smith could combine generosity with business. In 1865 the Redwood Library needed more space. An estate to the east had come on the market for \$15,000. Shareholder Smith contributed \$500 toward the purchase and then gained the commission. He also contributed a chime of nine bells, reported to be the best in the country, to Channing Memorial Church (Unitarian). The largest bell weighed three thousand pounds.

Until his last years Smith rarely bought land for himself, preferring to act as agent. He would loan money to prospects to buy real estate always charging 7.3% interest. This rate, he calculated, would bring him a return of 2 cents a day. To explain, an investment of \$100 would bring \$7.30 annually. Divide this amount by 365 days in a year and the result is 2 cents a day revenue.

Although he never held political office, Smith was close to City Hall. In 1855 Mayor Cozzens appointed him agent to mediate a dispute between the City and the owner of Dyer Farm regarding a right of way to Coaster's Harbor Island, a bridge being contemplated. Smith's recommendations were accepted with withdrawal of the lawsuit.

By the early '80's business was so good that Smith was compelled to move his office to larger quarters in the Muenchinger Building at 57 Bellevue Avenue. Among the office's adornments was a life-sized crayon portrait of the real estate king. Unfortunately, its current whereabouts

are unknown.

The last several years of Smith's life were unhappy ones. On February 28, 1884, his wife of forty-one years died. She was a modest person, constantly occupied with charitable deeds, and like her husband was invulnerable to the high life of the summer cottagers. Her funeral at Channing Memorial Church was one of the most impressive and largely attended ever solemnized in Newport.

In October of the next year Smith was stricken with paralysis on his right side. As his mind was also affected his son-in-law, Colonel A. Prescott Baker of Boston, was appointed guardian of the estate. An appraisal showed his total worth to be \$1,986,928, of which \$1,610,358 was personalty and \$376,570 was realty. Many were surprised to see that he owned so much real estate, which was taxable by the city. Toward the end of his life he had made some bad loans and had to foreclose on a number of villas on Bellevue Avenue. His personalty was largely invested in tax-exempt U.S. Government bonds and National Bank stock., which is why his annual tax assessments were on property never exceeding half a million dollars. Some thought the low figure was unjust; the local tax authorities differed.

Smith died October 26, 1886 intestate leaving his four children as heirs at law. Col. Baker was granted letters of administration. A month later 12 Mt. Vernon Street including the stable and greenhouse and a right-of-way was conveyed to Smith's only son, Howard, who died in Palm Beach March 29, 1901. Many years later the house was restored by a subsequent owner.

It is true that Alfred Smith was a speculator counting on rising land values. But at the same time he was an intelligent developer of vision and conviction with an eye for horticultural beauty always cognizant of the best interests of his beloved Newport. Smith understood the importance of highways in easing traffic congestion and providing access to remote areas. No other man over a forty year period did so much to promote the growth and business prosperity of the city as he, making Newport known as a superb vacation land throughout the fashionable world.

At the time of his death the titans of American industry — Astors, Goelets, Havemeyers, Vanderbilts and numerous others — were already summer cottagers living in comparatively modest residences on Bellevue Avenue or the "Cliffs". The great mansions, like Marble House, the

second Breakers, Belcourt, Rosecliff, and the Elms, were to be built in the next two decades.

Smith was largely responsible for attracting many significant persons to settle in Newport, but his great financial success never altered his own simple lifestyle. If there were ever the right man in the right place at the right time it was he, Alfred Smith.