

by Martin J. Murphy, *JA*



John T. Hegf

The Party That Wasn't

Below Kay Street, extending to the southern tip of Aquidneck Island, are scattered, opulent, beautiful mansions. Until the middle of this century, one was conspicuous. At the corner of Rhode Island Avenue and Catherine

Street an overgrowth of vegetation reached over a white stucco wall. The wide entrance to an estate was flanked by columns whose welcoming lights had been smashed. The circular driveway was full of weeds, leaves, and debris. Those who walked up the drive were greeted by what once had been considered one of the finest homes in Newport. Built to resemble a southern mansion and surrounded by lush gardens, it bore grim evidence of years of neglect and vandalism. This was what was left of Whitehall.

Of all Newport's estates, why did fate

single out Whitehall for desolation?

The mansion was originally known as the Dexter Bradford estate. In 1894 it was sold to David H. King, Jr. for \$40,000. From 1901 to 1903, the house was rented to Mr. and Mrs. Louis L. Lorillard. In 1903, Brown University, which held the mortgage on the property, sold the estate at auction to James J. Coogan in the name of his wife, Harriet G. Coogan, for \$42,100, which was one hundred dollars more than the university bid.

The Coogan family lived in Manhattan at

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The Party That Wasn't

599 Fifth Avenue.
With such an address, it was only fitting they

should have a Newport address. And now they did. In residence during the "season," and listed in the Newport Social Index, were the following: Mr. and Mrs. James J. Coogan, Mr. Jay Coogan, Mr. Gordon Coogan, Master Gardiner Lynch, and Miss Caroline Hall Purdy. Though no mention was made of their daughter, Jessie Coogan lived in Whitehall as well.

The Coogans spent a considerable amount to renovate their new home. The family also purchased property on nearby Everett Street where, presumably, the Coogans' twelve polo ponies and sixteen horses were kept. Once settled in, the family made every effort to mix with the world of Bellevue Avenue. Despite the fact that the Coogans could be found in the New York Social Register, they were not entirely successful in attracting the attention of Newport society's elite, known as the "Four Hundred." Harriet Coogan was not to be discouraged, however. In 1910, her daughter Jessie came of age, and her mother planned to both break the social ice and introduce Jessie to society at a large party.

Over three hundred invitations were sent to those spending the season in Newport. Though Whitehall's considerable staff included upstairs maids, cooks, butlers, a doorman, downstairs maids, grooms and gardeners, their ranks swelled as cooks, waiters and maids were hired for the occasion. For days, Whitehall buzzed with activity. Every speck of dust was banished from the house. No imperfection was tolerated: not a plate without a shine, nor a boot unpolished, a blade of uncut grass, nor a pebble out of place in the raked drive. Harriet Coogan meant to be recognized by the cream of Newport society. Once accomplished, she could then claim to be on the same social level as the best.

Harriet Coogan must have felt she had nothing to lose. Some individuals had mixed with the Coogans, at tea parties, tennis matches and other events that didn't require the stamp of approval from the most rarefied social strata. Having summered in Newport for six years, contacts had been made between the Coogans and a host of summer residents. If her party did not draw the *creme de la creme*, no damage would be done to those friendships that were firmly established.

The night of the affair, Whitehall blazed with lights. Waiters stood at attention, maids brushed imaginary specks off their

teen holes at the Newport Country Club, no one would recognize the defiant. No one would say, "come and join us."

Harriet Coogan was devastated, though she must have known in advance what would happen that night. Having sent her invitations, she would have received no replies, no enthusiastic acceptances, no polite refusals: society, having been directed to ignore the Coogan family, would have pretended the invitations did not exist. She may or may not have warned her family to expect the worst; in either case, she decided to see it through.

Local legend has it that Harriet Coogan gathered her family and walked out of Whitehall that night. The house was left as it was, the crystal and china, the elegant furniture and the costly art, all abandoned.

The Newport Social Index lists all summer residents and their whereabouts for the season. In 1911, the Coogans were reported "absent." The word appears until 1915, when the family was dropped from the index.

Meanwhile, all kinds of life ventured in and out of Whitehall, both animal and human. Unlawful parties were held, valuables were carried off, and the rooms were vandalized. One night in 1911, a fire started in the main part of the house. Sometime later, James Coogan arrived from New York to inspect the extensive damage, but gave no orders to repair or clean up the property.

On October 24, 1915, James Coogan died at age sixty-nine. Harriet Coogan and Jessie moved from their Fifth Avenue home to the Biltmore Hotel, and began what would be almost thirty-six years of a strange, reclusive life. All food was delivered to their rooms and left outside the door. Harriet Coogan ventured outside only at night, and then only to her office to manage her vast real estate holdings, which included the New York Giants' ball field and the polo grounds known as Coogan's Bluff. Jessie remained in seclusion with her mother, and after Harriet Coogan's death, carried on alone. ►

THE TRUTH BEHIND A NEWPORT LEGEND

uniforms, the cooks bustled in the kitchen. Harriet Coogan and Jessie stood frozen in the reception room, waiting for the arrival of the first guest. Minutes that seemed like hours slipped by. Slowly, the minutes turned to hours—and to the dismay of the Coogans and their help, no one appeared. Midnight passed into the early hours of morning.

No written evidence can be found that society was directed to avoid the Coogans' party, but the word must have passed from family to family. The defiant would have been finished socially. No longer would they be invited to the toniest social gatherings. No guests would appear at their own affairs. Sitting in their box at the casino during the tennis tournaments, sunning themselves at Bailey's Beach, sipping cocktails at the Reading Room or going eigh-

Shortly before her death, Harriet Coogan closed the most bitter chapter of her life. In 1946, at the age of eighty-six, she gave in to family entreaties and complaints by the city of Newport, and directed that Whitehall should be cleaned up and the property sold. Harriet Coogan had shown what she thought of Newport society—but at a great cost.

Although anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment was strong in America at the turn of the century, it is doubtful that Newport society snubbed Harriet Coogan on the basis of prejudice. Harriet Gardiner Lynch

The Whitehall snub may have been society's revenge on John Coogan, not his wife.

Coogan was the daughter of one of the largest property holders in New York, William L. Lynch. Her great-grandfather, John Lyon Gardiner, owned Gardiner's Island and an extremely large portion of upper Manhattan Island. Harriet Coogan was well-educated, poised, and by all accounts, beautiful.

John Coogan had no such pedigree. He began his career as a proprietor of a retail store in the Bowery. In 1888, he was nominated for mayor of New York by the Union Labor Party. Eventually, he became the first president of the Borough of Manhattan during the Tammany Administration of Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck, a position that doubtless gave him influence over taxes, job patronage, and fees. Possibly, he made enemies as his political decisions affected companies held by members of society. And perhaps he

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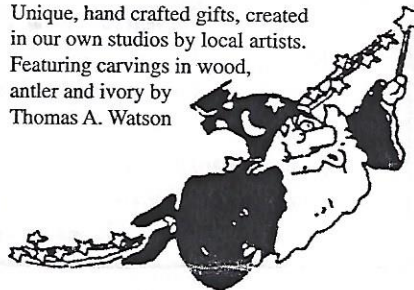
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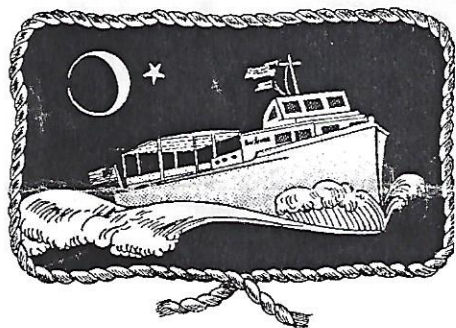
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The Party That Wasn't

was thought to
have married
above his station
in life. The

Whitehall snub may have been society's
revenge on John Coogan, not his wife.

If this is indeed what happened. The
Newport Journal of December 21, 1907 con-
tains this headline: "Young Couple Elope"
and the following information:

"W. Gordon Coogan and Miss Dorothy
H. Potter secretly married in New York. Son
of Mr. and Mrs. James J. Coogan and daugh-
ter of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Clarkson Potter
of Westchester. Both nineteen years old and
well-known in Newport. She was intro-
duced to society last summer in Newport.
Her mother was formerly Miss Emily
Havemeyer."

Dorothy Potter was a close relative of the
Episcopal bishop of Rhode Island, who lived
on Rhode Island Avenue, near Whitehall.
Most likely, the marriage was performed
outside the Catholic Church, and it could
be expected that Gordon Coogan gave up
that faith for the faith of his new wife. In
those days, interfaith marriages were rare.
Rarer still was the adoption of another faith
by Roman Catholics, whose sense of self
was closely linked to their religion. Harriet
Coogan, a devout Roman Catholic, would
have been deeply grieved by her son's
apostasy.

Could that have caused Harriet Coogan's
interest in society to wane, just four years
after the purchase of Whitehall, and three
years before Jessie's coming out party was
said to have taken place? Perhaps the death
of her husband triggered her complete with-
drawal into seclusion.

One of Harriet Coogan's grandsons re-
ports that to the best of his knowledge, his
grandmother never threw large parties.
Newporters, though, are quite certain that
she planned at least one, whose tale has
been passed from generation to generation.



Martin J. Murphy is a
freelance writer and visual artist.

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