

Fifth Ward: An enclave under seige

By PAUL DAVIS

Special to the Journal-Bulletin

NEWPORT — "Hey, Johnny!" Fred Quarry yells at a passing motorist.

The motorist waves and Quarry, 68, one of the city's oldest bartenders, nods.

He moves back into the darkened doorway of the private bar he owned in the 1940s, the Irish American Club, a big green paint-cracked building at the corner of Thames Street and Narragansett Avenue.

"Two out of three cars go by. I know who they are," says Quarry. "This is a real neighborhood."

It's not yet noon, but two men shoulder past Quarry for a drink inside.

Quarry remembers the time he once refused to serve three members of the National Organization of Women (NOW). Outraged, the women called the police; the police suggested they drink someplace else.

Quarry shrugs. In the old days, he says, after the St. Patrick's Day Parade, he let the police in through the back door and treated them to a few beers. "Not a bribe or anything; just to honor them."

Another car drives past. A New York license plate. The driver passes without a greeting. Quarry doesn't know many tourists.

★ ★ ★
THIS IS A TALE of two neighborhoods — one diminishing, one growing.

There is the old Fifth Ward — an Irish stronghold of two- and three-family homes, private bars and memories. Legally, it doesn't exist, but don't tell that to, say, the owners of Fifth Ward Liquors or Fifth Ward Video, both on lower Thames Street.

And then there is the "new Fifth Ward," more accurately the not-so-new Fourth Ward, established in 1930 to replace the old ward when officials reduced the city's voting wards from five to four.

Old-timers have no trouble identifying the Fifth Ward. The Fifth Ward is Narragansett Avenue. It is the Brian Broheme club on Thames. And it is the Hibernian Hall at 2 Wellington, with a photograph of Newport Police Chief Edward "Big Eddy" Sullivan on the wall.

In the old Fifth Ward, those who did not work for the summer millionaires cut *lee* from Lily Pond. Friday's meal was codfish, and houses had only parlor and kitchen stoves for heat in the winter. And it was where another name for a successful politician was a Democrat.

The Fourth Ward is tougher to define. It is the recent transformation of lower Thames Street, a condominium-dominated world of high-priced restaurants, T-shirt boutiques, nighttime noise and summer traffic.

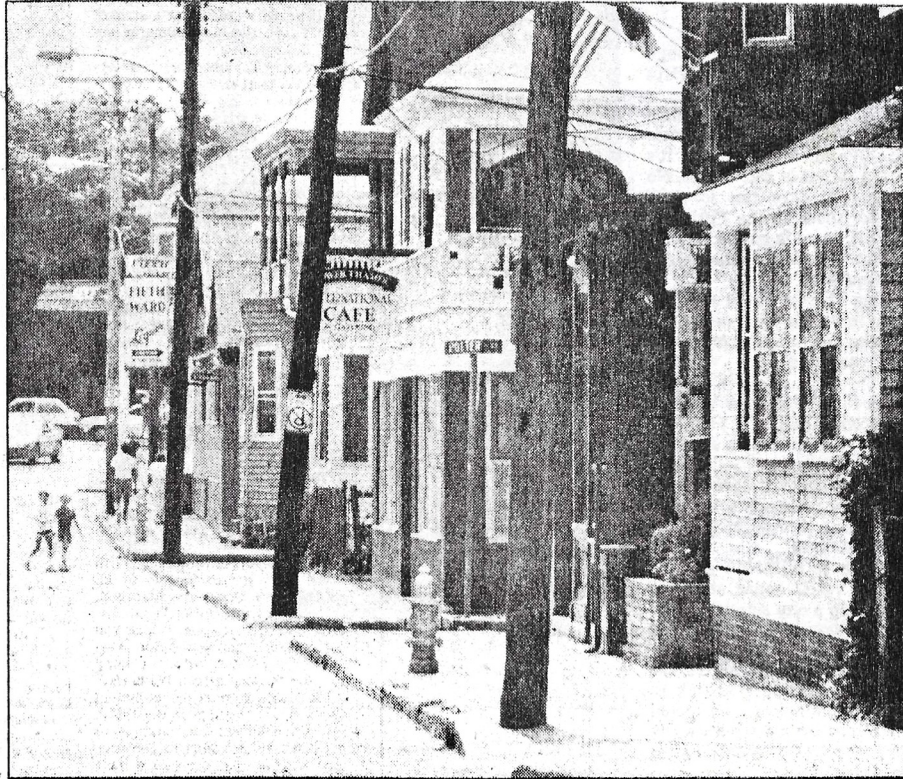
But the Fourth Ward is not just new development or a new name; it is a ward where time passes.

With every year the Fifth Ward grows dimmer; the Fourth brighter.

★ ★ ★
THE FIFTH WARD was first.

It was settled largely by the Irish, who came to Newport during the 1820s to work on Fort Adams or in the old Portsmouth coal mines, and during the 1840s to escape famine on the old sod.

The first wave settled on lower Thames Street, as close as possible to the Fort Adams construction site. The second wave joined them, expanding the L-shaped neighborhood along Newport Harbor. They established a Roman Catholic parish — Rhode Island's first — in 1828, St. Mary's.



—Journal-Bulletin Photos By RICHARD BENJAMIN

OLD FIFTH WARD: Above, a view of lower Thames Street in Newport. Below, Fred Quarry, bartender, stands behind the bar at the Irish American Club on Thames Street.

By 1850 the streets and avenues that are the heart of the Fifth Ward had been developed: Dennison, Dearborn, Perry, Lee and Narragansett. By 1878, there were more: Newton, Underwood and Hunt Courts; Wellington and West Narragansett Avenues, and Dixon, Hammond and McAllister Streets.

Dean, Harrington and Richmond Streets were added between 1883 and 1907, during the height of Newport's fame as a summer resort.

With the completion of Fort Adams, the Fifth Ward Irish looked to the Bellevue Avenue millionaires, "The Four Hundred," and summer visitors for work — all of whom were Fifth Warders, but living closer to the Atlantic.

The Irish took jobs as seamstresses, maids, carpenters, gardeners and cooks.

★ ★ ★
"IT WASN'T EASY," says Roy McPoland, who lived with his family on the first floor of a three-family tenement house at 2 Carey St. "At that time the money wasn't plentiful."

McPoland, who lived on Carey Street during the early 1900s, worked a number of jobs as a boy. On freezing January nights he shoveled the snow off Carey Street for \$1.50; in the summer he hauled water for polo ponies.

Before school, he delivered milk to houses on Carey and Webster Streets; in the evenings, he lighted the gas lamps on those same streets.



In summer, his father worked as a stableman for the Vanderbilts; in winter he charged passengers a nickel to ride across town in his Model A Ford. And his mother cooked for the family of John Nicholas Brown.

It wasn't all work, though. "We had cookouts at Gooseberry Beach and feasted on hot dogs. If a hot dog fell

on the ground, you just wiped it off. And we played basketball at Fort Adams."

On Saturday nights, the Bellevue Avenue servants and other Fifth Warders made their way down to the moonlit Forty Steps on Cliff Walk. There, within sight of the Breakers, Jimmy "The Wistler" Sullivan and a handful of other

Turn to **WARD**, Page 2.

Ward

Continued from Page 1

violin- and harmonica-playing Sullivans played "My Wild Irish Rose" and "Memories" while everyone danced.

"The place was packed, you couldn't move. At the end of the season, the summer people would join."

★ ★ ★

TALK TO ANYONE long enough and they will tell you: the Fifth Ward is a state of mind.

"It's like Camelot," says William Nagle — a Fourth Ward city councilman. "It's an identification. It's something different and unique. No one seems to have ties to their wards like those in the Fifth."

If the old ward is now a state of mind; even the old landmarks are fast disappearing.

Creeping Thames Street development has increased rents and property values in a neighborhood traditionally described as working class.

A three-family house on Webster Street recently sold for \$100,000. Realtors now call streets like Lee Avenue "in-town sites" — pockets of gentrification, where older working class residents are giving way to young professionals.

★ ★ ★

LIFETIME RESIDENTS say the Fifth Ward really began changing in 1979, when a city smarting from the loss of Navy dollars embraced tourism.

Suddenly, say Fifth Warders, the waterfront had a fence around it. Hotels, condominiums and retail shops replaced the old wharves and factories where Fifth Warders once strolled.

The loss of the waterfront revitalized the old Fifth Ward Improvement Association, which spends much of its time fighting development.

"We're trying to protect the Fifth Ward from encroachments of all kinds," says Genevieve Mathison, secretary of the Fifth Ward Improvement Association. "Once you could walk from Wellington Avenue to Long Wharf without coming back to Thames Street. No more."

Mathison, who began attending City Council meetings in the 1950s, says she has examined hundreds of old deeds in an effort to convince city officials that developers have illegally built on city streets, blocking access to the water.

Mathison says she has even talked to developers. "I've been



—Journal-Bulletin Photo By RICHARD BENJAMIN

LIVED IN FIFTH WARD: Roy McPoland lived on Carey Street in the early 1900s and worked a number of jobs as a boy.

told that I'm obsessed with rights-of-way and I come from a ward that doesn't exist."

Development has also produced another problem: Long lines of traffic as tourists jam the ward's two major arteries, Thames and Spring Streets.

"Traffic is a real concern of the people down here," says Councilman Nagle, who grew up on South Baptist Street. "Much more so than other wards."

Finally, five-year-old census figures show that of the roughly 3,840 people living in the Thames Street area in 1980, 36.1 percent lived somewhere else in 1975, a third of those in another state.

In 1980, only 832 residents claimed Irish ancestry — a far cry from the century before, when an

1873 City Directory listed 120 Sullivans alone.

"There are still a few of us around," says a man at the bar of the Hibernian Hall, built in 1888 to help new arrivals find jobs. "There's still a good sprinkling of Sullivans and Murphys."

★ ★ ★

THE ANCIENT ORDER of Hibernians — about 370 members — meet at the hall once a month, but the hall is usually open in the afternoons.

The bar is operated on the honor system, at 90 cents a beer. In the afternoons, members can hear the construction noise from the Wellington Yacht & Racquet Club project a hundred yards away. When completed, the complex — pools, condos and tennis courts — will

encompass the hall on three sides.

"I used to keep a list of the all the old-timers who passed away," Quarry says back at the site of his old club. "It's all young kids now. Most of the old-timers have transferred to the Hibernian Hall or the Elk's Lodge."

"The young kids like rock 'n' roll. They come in, I've got the radio tuned to someone like Nat King Cole or Glenn Miller, and they say 'Gee, Mr. Quarry, that music is putting us to sleep. That music belongs in a dentist's office.'"

Quarry waves at another motorist.

Other things have changed, too. Five years ago, the new manager of the Irish American Club opened the bar to women.