

Alumni Newsletter

SPECIAL EDITION

Issue 66
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The Victorian Society in America (VSA) and the Alumni Association (AA) of the Victorian Society Summer Schools convey their deepest gratitude to Prof. Richard Guy Wilson for his outstanding service to the Newport Summer School.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Richard Guy Wilson (known to all as “RGW”) received his Ph.D. on the work of architect Charles F. McKim at the University of Michigan. He taught at Michigan and Iowa State University before moving in 1976 to the University of Virginia, where he served for many years as Commonwealth Professor of Architectural History. Richard’s research and writing have focused on American architecture from the 18th through the 20th centuries. He has authored, co-authored, or edited many books, and became a “celebrity” as the host on the popular A&E Network program *America’s Castles*. RGW has been accorded numerous honors including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Visiting Fellowship to Cambridge University, the outstanding professor award at University of Virginia, prizes for his distinguished writing, and an honorary membership of the American Institute of Architects.

RGW served as Director of the Victorian Society’s Summer School in the U.S. for 43 years, beginning with programs in Boston and Philadelphia, then focusing on Newport from 1987. The verbal tributes and photographs presented in this special edition of the Alumni Newsletter reflect the profound respect and affectionate gratitude that almost a thousand Newport Summer School alumni feel for his creation and leadership of this prestigious program.

On June 1, 2025, a large crowd of RGW fans gathered at the Isaac Bell House—a site he helped save from destruction—to salute him. Kindly hosted by Trudy Coxe, CEO and Executive Director of the Preservation Society of Newport County, that celebration included a presentation to Richard of a beautifully bound volume of photographs from past Newport Summer Schools, snapshots contributed by admiring alumni from around the world. Those same photographs appear in the present document, now accompanied by more than 20 verbal tributes.

Today we raise a virtual glass to RGW and to the marvelous community of kindred spirits that his inspired leadership has generated for more than 40 years.

With kindest regards,

John Simonelli, Newport 1996, and Tina Strauss, Newport 2005
Co-Chairs, Summer Schools Committee
Victorian Society in America

The following letter by Jackie Spainhour (Newport 2013), VSA President, was read aloud at the June 1, 2025 reception honoring RGW at the Isaac Bell House.



June 1, 2025

Thank you all for being here tonight to celebrate the legacy of Richard Guy Wilson. Although I cannot be with you in person, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on the impact Richard Guy Wilson – known to all as “RGW” – has had not just with the Victorian Society and its hundreds of students in Newport, but on my personal journey.

I was one of the lucky people chosen to participate in the Newport Summer School in 2013, just one year after I had finished my master’s degree in history. I applied to strengthen my knowledge of Victorian interiors to aid me in my role at a local historic house museum. I arrived expecting a series of tours and lectures but left with an entirely new appreciation for the work I did and its place in the world.

RGW’s ‘March Through Newport’, as the students dubbed it, quite literally changed my life. It inspired me to reach new professional heights, including writing a local history book, becoming the Executive Director of that house museum, and eventually joining the board of directors of the Victorian Society in America. I am now entrusted with supporting two of our nation’s most sacred nineteenth century spaces, the Gettysburg Battlefield and Soldier’s National Cemetery, as a direct result of the confidence and clarity of purpose RGW inspired in me. RGW was the catalyst for my career, and I cannot thank him enough.

If you have also been a student of RGW, and have been similarly impacted, I invite you to join me in offering your gratitude today and in the days that follow. Richard Guy Wilson, thank you for all you have done!

Warm regards,

Jackie Spainhour, Newport 2013
President, Victorian Society in America



ALUMNI ASSOCIATION
OF THE
VICTORIAN SOCIETY SUMMER SCHOOLS
*A Chapter of the Victorian Society in America supporting the Summer Schools
through scholarships, fundraising, and engagement with alumni.*

May 31, 2025

Dear Richard,

I am honored, privileged, and humbled to have this opportunity to express sincere appreciation on behalf of the hundreds of students whose lives you most positively influenced as Director of the Newport School for the past 43 years. Your lectures were filled with information and wit which, combined with your sharp eye as we toured the front streets and back alleys of Newport, provided the spark of curiosity which led to careers for the younger students and fulfillment for us Chapman Scholars. You were never aloof, but always with us step-by-step passing along tidbits and insights, teaching us to have an educated and alert “eye”, and always being sure to look up! And at the end of the day, you were right there with us still teaching and enjoying a glass of wine as we reflected on what we had seen and what was still to come.

Your dedication to the mission of the Victorian Society in America extended beyond Newport, helping the Society maintain the standards of excellence for which it is now known in all three programs. And on a personal note, I'll never forget the kindness you showed me introducing me to your wife and daughter as we toured the exhibit you curated at UVA.

You have always been most thoughtful, cooperative, and considerate of the Alumni Association, writing articles for our newsletter, passing out information to the students about the Alumni Association, being the featured speaker at recruitment events, and talking up the crucial role that the Alumni play in the continued success of the VSA.

All good wishes to you and your family. I and all the other alumni look forward to seeing you as our lives cross in the future be it in Newport or other stops along the way.

Most sincerely,

David Lamdin, Newport 2016
President

PS. I invite you to search the publications archives on the Alumni's website vsaalumni.org where you will find more pictures like this!



Salute to Richard

Written by the VSA Education Committee: Bill Dane, Sibyl Groff, Pauline Metcalf

On the occasion of the final party on June 8, 1996

With thanks to Cole Porter's 'You're the Top'

*At Words Poetic, we're quite pathetic
And we're certainly 'Retardere'
But if this ditty seems Oh! So Silly
At least it will tell you
How Great You Are!
You're a Star!
You're the Summer School Leader
You've Survived!
As a Ten-Year Preacher
You're A Vic Soc Champion
McKim's Companion
You're Swell!
You're A Fast-paced Walker
An Informative Talker
You're Edith's Man!
You're a Chair
You've that Quality rare
In New-Port
You've established A Court
But we think this ditty
Is not too witty –So we'll Stop!
And so- Richard! You're the Greatest!
You're the Tops!*

I first called Richard when I was researching the architect of the historic Lucknow estate in 2005, and had no idea that our initial contact would turn into many years of friendship and field trips in New Hampshire and beyond! I was delighted to join the 2016 Newport course, learning so much and enjoying all of it, including an unforgettable visit to the company occupying loft space in the Durfee Mills. I'll look forward to continued adventures around New England, and I am truly grateful for Richard's inspiration and support of my ongoing work in historic preservation.

Cristina Ashjian, Newport 2016

The profession of architectural history has been strengthened and broadened by your work, your dedication, and your delight. Thank you.

Warren Ashworth, Newport 2006

What a great run it's been, and hands-down spectacular what you have accomplished. You have brought to life the excitement and joy of Newport's history, architecture, and decorative arts for—guessing here—more than a thousand students. And, over the decades, your keen regard has undoubtedly instilled even greater pride among the site managers and homeowners you have built relationships with. Lucky us, who have been in your orbit to witness it. It's now your happy task to savor our appreciation and gratitude as we honor your legacy and salute your tenacity in making the program so engaging from year to year. It was a privilege and a pleasure to finally participate as a student in 2018 (after years so professionally full I couldn't do more than write letters of recommendation for others), then later to serve as your assistant in 2022, '23, and '24. The Newport sessions under your guidance have left an indelible love of an amazing place, and a deep and rich mental well to dip into, often, and to cherish. Thank you.

Ted Bosley, Newport 2018



Above photos courtesy Cristina Ashjian

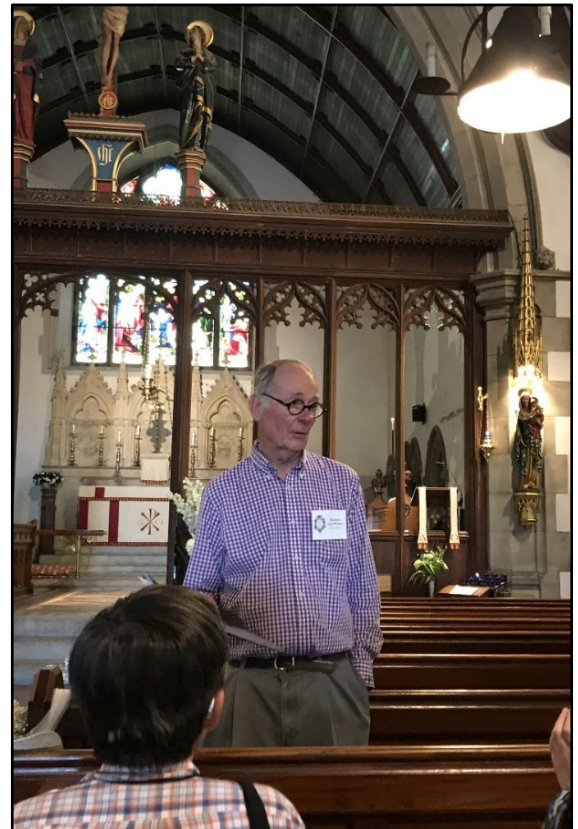


Photo courtesy Ted Bosley



*Kyle McGuire (Newport 2014) and Richard Guy Wilson
Photo by James Russiello, Newport 2012*

Photo courtesy Laura Cope, Newport 2015

I am confident that what I want to say to you has been said many times, over many years. It is simply Thank You – for indelible memories; for introducing whole areas of knowledge that have given me joy; for good times. My glass is raised to you (and it isn't plastic). You're the best! Cheers!

Pat Eldredge, Newport 2005

Let me count the ways Richard Guy Wilson impacted my life and inspired legions of Victorian Society Newport Summer School scholars:

- 1) Founder and Director of the Newport Summer School
- 2) Contacts in Newport and elsewhere who opened their homes and galleries
- 3) Onion-skin Newport analogy
- 4) Inspired countless, qualified students to apply to Newport
- 5) Dedicated scholar
- 6) Distinguished author
- 7) Inspired professor
- 8) Rousing lecturer
- 9) Historic preservationist
- 10) Wry sense of humor

Thank you, Richard. You are the best.

Nancy McAleer Golden, Newport 1998

I feel privileged to have met and spent time with "RGW." I learned (so much!) from him. I laughed with him and together traversed a whole lot of architectural miles. Like so many of us, I made friends that transcend the Newport School, especially as the bug he planted in us students means that we travel far and wide to experience the wonders of historical architecture basically in the same circles. I thank RGW for sharing and teaching his deep knowledge of Victorian architecture. I wish him huge happiness.

With fondness,
Merrily Gumpel, Newport 2018



Photos courtesy Merrily Gumpel



I can't begin to express how important Richard Guy Wilson has been to my career and my life. I earned my MA in Architectural History from the University of Virginia in 1997. Wilson was my thesis advisor as well as my professor for classes on early American architecture and Thomas Jefferson architecture. This put me on my current career path as a professional architectural historian. I was thrilled to attend the VSA Newport summer program in 2015, learning even more from RGW. I wish him all the best.

Susan Hellman, Newport 2015

You give the best lectures, bar none!

Nancy Kent, Newport 2003

I don't know where to begin. Congratulations on 43 extraordinary summers heading the Newport Summer School! I feel greatly privileged to have been connected to four of those summers: as a student in 2008, as an onsite guest lecturer in 2010 and 2019, and as a Zoom lecturer in 2023. (I still regret that I could not come in person in 2023, and that I was not able to accept your invitation in 2024 because of a conflicting engagement.)

It is no exaggeration to say that studying under you in Newport changed the course of my academic trajectory. We first met at one of the Summer School networking events in New York in 2008 where I spoke about my experience with the London Summer School. I told you that I was applying to attend Newport that summer to research Catharine Lorillard Wolfe's Vinland. Before I even was accepted to the program, you invited me to present a paper on the topic at an upcoming symposium at Salve Regina University. And after the Summer School, you continued to connect me with every person in Newport who might be helpful. You were an inspiration for my dissertation on Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, and then (drumroll) at the absolute eleventh hour, you agreed to serve as an outside reader so I could defend and graduate. I will never forget that!

Of course, my story is no doubt replicated with many others who have been privileged to have known you!

I very much hope we meet up again – either in New York or in Newport. I haven't been back since 2019, and I would treasure the opportunity to see you again there one day.

My best wishes and congratulations.

Your forever student and fan,

Margaret R. Laster, Ph.D., Newport 2008



Photo courtesy Justyna Tucholska, Newport 2005

My long relationship with the Victorian Society and the Summer Schools began in Newport in 1996. When I attended the Summer School, you opened my eyes to the infinite variety of detail in 19th-century architecture and design, and enabled me to appreciate the eclecticism of styles and the ingenuity of craftsmanship and engineering employed during the Victorian period. It was something I had surveyed from afar, but hadn't begun to comprehend. You also introduced me to many of my closest friends and colleagues, and I am grateful for that, too.

You developed the Newport Summer School and brought it to the highest level of excellence. The relationships you've built with the Preservation Society, with property owners and hosts, and with guest lecturers are the enduring foundations of the program. Past, present, and future students are the beneficiaries!

With many thanks and best wishes,

Elizabeth Leckie, Newport 1996



Photo courtesy Bridget Maley

Thank you for everything you have done for the University of Virginia and for the Victorian Society in America. You have impacted the lives of so many students of architectural history. I have fond memories of my time on Grounds, especially the Halloween parties you and Ellie so happily hosted. After many years of saying to myself, "I have to do the Newport Summer School," I finally pulled it off in 2022. I am so grateful for that week, the new friends I met, and the bonus time with you, Richard. We even found an Ellie café in Providence! Enjoy your summer!

All the best.

Bridget Maley, Newport 2022

The following remarks were delivered at the June 1, 2025 reception honoring RGW at the Isaac Bell House.

Greetings! I am delighted to join the “RGW Admiration Society” gathered here tonight!

I am wearing a number of hats (as the expression goes) – from a longtime association with the Preservation Society of Newport County, to the Education Society of the Victorian Society in America, to participation in the Summer School programs – but it’s the Victorian Society that has really been the “thread” through which my friendship with Richard began.

In fact, among the many people here, I may be among those who have known you the longest, Richard. If my memory is correct, it all goes back to a Victorian Society conference in Philadelphia in the 1970s, when you gave a talk on Edith Wharton. At the time, I was researching a thesis on Ogden Codman, who, as we know, co-authored with Edith *The Decoration of Houses*, which became the “Bible” for classical design taste in Newport and elsewhere. Despite our different opinions as to who made the greater contribution to the book, it was the beginning of a long friendship, appreciation of 19th-century architecture and decorative arts, and mutual enjoyment of many aspects of 19th-century taste and design.

Prior to the establishment of the Victorian Society Summer School here in Newport in 1987, there were a couple of earlier programs – starting in Boston, then Philadelphia – in which I participated. For all of them, Richard demonstrated his full command of the 19th-century architecture in these places.

How the years have flown! For me, one key aspect of the Summer School has been the many friendships that have ensued. Especially in the early years, members of the Education Committee of the VSA worked hard to establish the program through recruitment events around the country and across the Atlantic, and most importantly through raising scholarship funds. I might add that this aspect of the Victorian Society certainly has not changed.

In the early years, as a Rhode Islander (though from the other side of the Bay), I helped Richard with a few personal contacts – for visiting some houses, R&R stops, and somewhat hidden places off Bellevue Avenue. The result has been an immersion in, and appreciation for, many aspects of history and culture, not only here but in other places, mostly in Rhode Island.

Alas, I feel I must mention some of the special Victorian Society members involved in the Summer School’s earlier years who are no longer with us – Billie Britz, Bill Dane, Gwen Koch – and who helped make the program so enjoyable. The many years in which Richard directed the Newport experience have provided great memories for many who continue to partake in the program.

In brief, Richard, it is your enthusiasm and appreciation of the life, culture, and history of Newport that has made this program a special experience for all of us. Thank you, and here’s hoping it will continue for years to come!

Pauline Metcalf



Cheers to your 43rd year leading the Newport Summer School, Richard! You have illuminated a coastal New England town's vast history by showcasing architectural features, decorative arts, and stories of the people who made Newport quintessentially American. With whimsy, humor, grace, grit, and educational prowess, you have developed this graduate-level program into a much-coveted right-of-passage for museum employees, architects, historians, and preservationists. I am forever thankful for the lessons learned during the 2016 Newport Summer School and for the colleagues-turned-friends that I made in the process.

Sarah Mezzino, Newport 2016

Photo courtesy Sarah Mezzino

I am writing to extend my heartfelt congratulations to you for your outstanding contributions to the field of architectural history and preservation. Your inspiring leadership and vision have profoundly impacted countless individuals, myself included. Thanks to your dedication, hundreds of participants have gained a deeper understanding of Newport's architecture, fine arts, decorative arts, design, landscapes, and the rich history of preservation.

It was an honor to have you as a professor, and I truly feel privileged to have discovered America's architectural heritage under your guidance. Your expertise and passion for the subject have not only broadened my knowledge but also sparked a lasting interest in the preservation and appreciation of historical structures. Your ability to bring history to life through your lectures and tours is remarkable. You have created an environment where learning is not just about facts but about connecting with the past in a meaningful way. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have learned from someone so passionate and skilled in the field.



Photo courtesy Tatiana Monteiro

Once again, congratulations on your many accomplishments, and thank you for your inspiring work. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to be one of your students.

Warm regards,

Tatiana Monteiro, Newport 2024

Perfect ratios. Order. Geometry. The wisdom of the ancient world. Architectural genius. No, not Palladio! We're talking about Richard Guy Wilson. Three cheers to a jolly good fellow!

xx

Anna Rasche and Will Canup, Newport 2016



Photo courtesy Anna Rasche and Will Canup

John (McHugh) and I attended the Newport School in 2018. We thought we'd better get it in because it could well be your last year to lead it. Luckily for those who came after, it was far from that. Our time there was so good in so many ways—I don't have space to list them all—but one aspect that particularly struck me was the respect and admiration that each and every homeowner and Newport resident showed you. It made us feel quite privileged to be part of the group. We were so lucky to be there. Best of luck to you. I'm quite sure, though, this isn't goodbye since we'll count on seeing you at the Victorian Society study tours, both domestic and abroad. We'll look forward to that!

Janet Self, Newport 2018



Photo courtesy Janet Self

Congratulations, Richard! Under your direction, the Newport Summer School has developed into an extraordinary educational experience that has enriched the academic, professional, and personal lives of all who have attended. I feel very fortunate to have been one of your students in Newport, as well as at UVa. Wishing you all the best!

Lori O. Thursby, Newport 1998



Photos courtesy Lori Thursby



Forty-three summers at Newport... incredible! Huge congratulations on all that you have accomplished as Director of the Summer School, and thank you for all of your hard work.

Back in the spring of 2005 when I was applying for the course, I recall thinking, "Gosh, I'd better hurry because Richard might retire soon!" Fortunately for me and 20 subsequent cohorts of lucky program participants, that was not the case. I remain deeply grateful for your knowledge, insight, and collegiality.

Very best wishes, and congratulations again.

Peter Trippi, Newport 2005



Photo courtesy Heather McMahon, Newport 2013