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## Editor's Note

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*Newport Historical Society*

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## Editor's Note:

In this issue of *Newport History*, Gary Scharnhorst examines Bret Harte, an elusive literary figure who made a brief but lasting impact on Newport society and letters. Harte established his reputation as a writer in California with western tales like "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Heathen Chinee." He moved to Newport in 1871 in an attempt to remake himself into a "respectable" author and poet on the East Coast. Scharnhorst writes, "Inevitably, given the nature of Harte's early success, the Newport experiment ended in failure...Like a transplanted piñon tree, he failed to take root and flourish in unfamiliar soil." One notable, though criticized, poem emerged from his tenure here: "A Newport Romance," which is reproduced in its entirety at the end of Scharnhorst's article.

The publication of "Round Church or Windmill? New Light on the Newport Tower," by Danish archaeologist Johannes Hertz, in issue #235 of *Newport History*, has reopened the debate over that enigmatic building. Particularly controversial were the results of carbon-14 testing of mortar samples from the Old Stone Mill, which placed the date of construction of the tower at about 1665.

Carbon-14 is formed in the upper atmosphere when an atom of nitrogen-14 absorbs cosmic rays from the sun. Mortar is formed by mixing "burnt lime" with sand and water. As it "sets," or hardens, it absorbs carbon-14 from the atmosphere. After hardening, the mortar begins to lose its C-14 at a fixed rate from slow radioactive decay. This decay can be measured to ascertain the year in which the mortar was produced. However, in "On the Carbon-14 Analyses of Mortar from the Newport Tower: Theoretical Considerations," Andre J. De Bethune claims that the process of dating mortar through carbon-14 testing has inherent flaws. Until these questions can be resolved, according to Bethune, "a pre-Columbian origin for the Newport Tower cannot be excluded."

Gary Scharnhorst is Professor of English at the University of New Mexico, co-editor of *American Literary Realism*, editor in alternating years of the research annual *American Literary Scholarship*, and past president of the Western Literature Association. His edition of *Selected Letters of Bret Harte* was published last year by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Andre J. De Bethune was born in Brussels in 1919, and came to the United States with his family in 1928. He graduated from St. Peter's College in New Jersey in 1939, and earned a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Columbia University in 1945. During World War II, he worked for the Manhattan Project on isotope separations of hydrogen and uranium. A Research Fellow at Yale and M.I.T., in 1947 he joined the Chemistry Faculty of Boston College, where he taught for forty-one years. His research interests lay in the areas of porous media, theoretical and experimental electrochemistry, and bioethics. He is the author or coauthor of more than seventy scientific papers and two monographs. Currently, he is a Scholar of Salve Regina University in Newport. He and his wife Peggy live in Portsmouth, R.I., and have ten children and twelve grandchildren.

Finally, "From the Collections" examines the use of family history newsletters in genealogical research.