



## **Picturesque America; or, the land we live in**

a delineation by pen and pencil of the mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, water-falls, shores, cañons, valleys, cities, and other picturesque features of our country ; with illustrations on steel and wood, by eminent American artists

**Bryant, William Cullen**

**New York, 1872**

Newport.

---

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-65789](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-65789)

## NEWPORT.



The Walk on the Cliff.

THE original name of the island on which Newport stands was Aquidneck, or the "Isle of Peace," and the present title was given to it because of its natural resemblance to the Isle of Rhodes, in the Mediterranean. It is hard to believe that, more than a hundred years ago, this was, with one exception, the most important port of entry in the American colonies, with two hundred vessels engaged in foreign trade, three or four hundred more employed in distributing the products landed here along the shores of our own land, from Massachusetts to Virginia, supplying the wholesale merchants of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, with their various stores, and with a regular line of packets running between Newport and London—not less than twenty-two hundred seamen at one time sailing from this harbor. As long ago as 1728, Bishop



Berkeley writes that "Newport is the most thriving place in all America for bigness. I was never more agreeably surprised than at the sight of the town and harbor." In those days New-Yorkers were sometimes admonished that, if they only had the enterprise of the Newporters, with their natural facilities, they might, in process of time, become a formidable rival in trade and commerce!

Merchants built stately mansions by the water-side, some of which may still be seen, with their wainscoted walls, mahogany stairways, marble mantels, and tiled fireplaces, indicative of a period when the warehouses were not sufficient to contain the wealth of products that was discharged at these wharves, and the streets and sidewalks were — a sore temptation this must have been to the boys of the period—often lined for days with the tropical fruits of the Indies. Gentlemen of wealth and culture had their country-seats in the vicinity of the town, surrounded by flower-gardens, and orchards, and fish-ponds, and winding walks, and



Newport, from the Bay.



other features of luxurious rural elegance, where the rich and fashionable gathered and kept high revel.

People were attracted to the town, not only because of the salubrity of the climate and the beauty of the scenery, but also by the fact that liberty of conscience ruled supreme in Newport. Quakers lived unmolested there; Baptists built their first meeting-house there; Calvinists preached their sternest doctrines without offence; Hebrews crowded their commodious synagogue; Moravians opened their love-feasts to all who would pay their fourpence-ha'penny, distributing to each his sweet buns and cup of choc-



View from Fort Adams.

olate; and Churchmen prayed fervently for the king and all the royal family. The synagogue, built in 1762, stands to-day in as good repair as it ever was, although its doors are rarely if ever opened for public worship; and old Trinity Church, erected nearly a century and a half ago, with its crown-surmounted spire, and huge, square pews, with the wardens' poles indicating where the dignitaries sit, and lofty pulpit, with its hexagonal sounding-board, and reading-pew and clerk's seat planted far down the aisle, and ancient organ, presented by Bishop Berkeley, adorned with crown and mitre, and the little chancel, denuded of nothing but the lion and unicorn, which were taken from the wall after the Revolution and burnt by patriotic hands—every thing looking



just as it did when ancient gentlemen in scarlet coats, and laced ruffles, and silver buckles, and curled wigs, and ladies in their rich brocades, crowded the edifice, and reverently knelt while the priest prayed, and the sonorous clerk acted as their proxy in the response. One portion of the structure, we are glad to say, was long ago removed—the two pens in the organ-loft, pierced with little funnel-holes, through which the poor negroes deposited there might see, without being seen.

Fifty years ago Newport was a torpid, quiet place, its trade extinct, the streets deserted; wharves that were once vocal with busy traffic mouldered away and sunk out of sight under the waters; land of no value; population reduced; strangers rarely find-



The Drive.

ing their way to this old, forgotten town by the sea; the houses weather-worn, unpainted, and falling to pieces—who would then have thought of investing his money in the desolate acres that fringed the borders of this forlorn, dilapidated little village?

The Revolution seemed to have ruined Newport beyond redemption; when the British troops evacuated the place, and the French fleet under D'Estaing entered the harbor in 1780, it was a desolation. In the course of a few years the business of the town had somewhat revived, and, at the beginning of the present century, we find the names of several eminent merchants engaged in commerce there, the house of Gibbs & Channing wielding what in those days was regarded as an immense capital; but the



second blow which Newport received by the embargo and the War of 1812 proved fatal, and from that period her commercial doom was sealed.

What Newport is *to-day* all the world knows. One or two of these desolate, rocky acres is now a fortune to their possessor. A combination of attractions exceeded by no other watering-place on the continent has once more drawn the inhabitants of our towns and cities to this spot, not for purposes of traffic, but for health and recreation; men of culture and of wealth, foreign ministers and noblemen, authors and politicians, clergymen and actors, high-bred women of the old school and fashionable women of all schools, gather here every season; some to lead a quiet, rational, domestic life, and some to display their finery; spacious hotels are crowded with visitors, *cottages*—every thing here is called a cottage—of every variety of architecture, Swiss, Gothic, French, Elizabethan, and American, and of every degree of cost, from the humbler structure that is rented for a thousand a year up to the stately mansions in which hundreds of thousands are invested, line the spacious avenues, or nestle among the foliage in the more retired and quiet streets; the grandest steamers in the world land their passengers here every morning, and smaller craft ply all the day up and down the Narragansett shores; every afternoon Bellevue is a whirl of splendid equipages; night and morning, bands of music fill the air with melody, and "all goes merry as a marriage-bell." When the chill winds of autumn drive these summer residents back to their city homes, the old town relapses into its winter sleep—not as profound a slumber as it slept for some two or three generations, for there is always work to be done in preparation for the next campaign—still it is very quiet; windows are boarded up, gates locked, some of the more fashionable shops closed, and horses and carriages are seen no more on the broad avenues.

This is, in brief, the *threefold* aspect which Newport has presented during the last hundred and fifty years. We now turn to the special points of attraction, as indicated by our artist.

In entering Newport Harbor, Fort Adams, forming an angle on the right-hand corner, presents to the eye a singularly beautiful and picturesque appearance. Fortress Monroe is the only structure of the kind in the United States that exceeds it in size and cost, and a few years ago it would have seemed as if its massive walls must be strong enough to resist any assault that could be made upon them, and its multitude of ponderous cannon have been too formidable to allow the passage of any ship that floated into the waters of the Narragansett Bay. But guns have recently been constructed that would send this granite pile, with its bastions and battlements, flying into the air like broken crockery; so that its use, as a citadel of defence, is at an end. At the same time the necessity of such a protection against the attacks of a hostile fleet has ceased; just under the guns of the fort lies what is known as Torpedo Island, where scientific men are now making and testing a new submarine projectile,





ON THE BEACH.

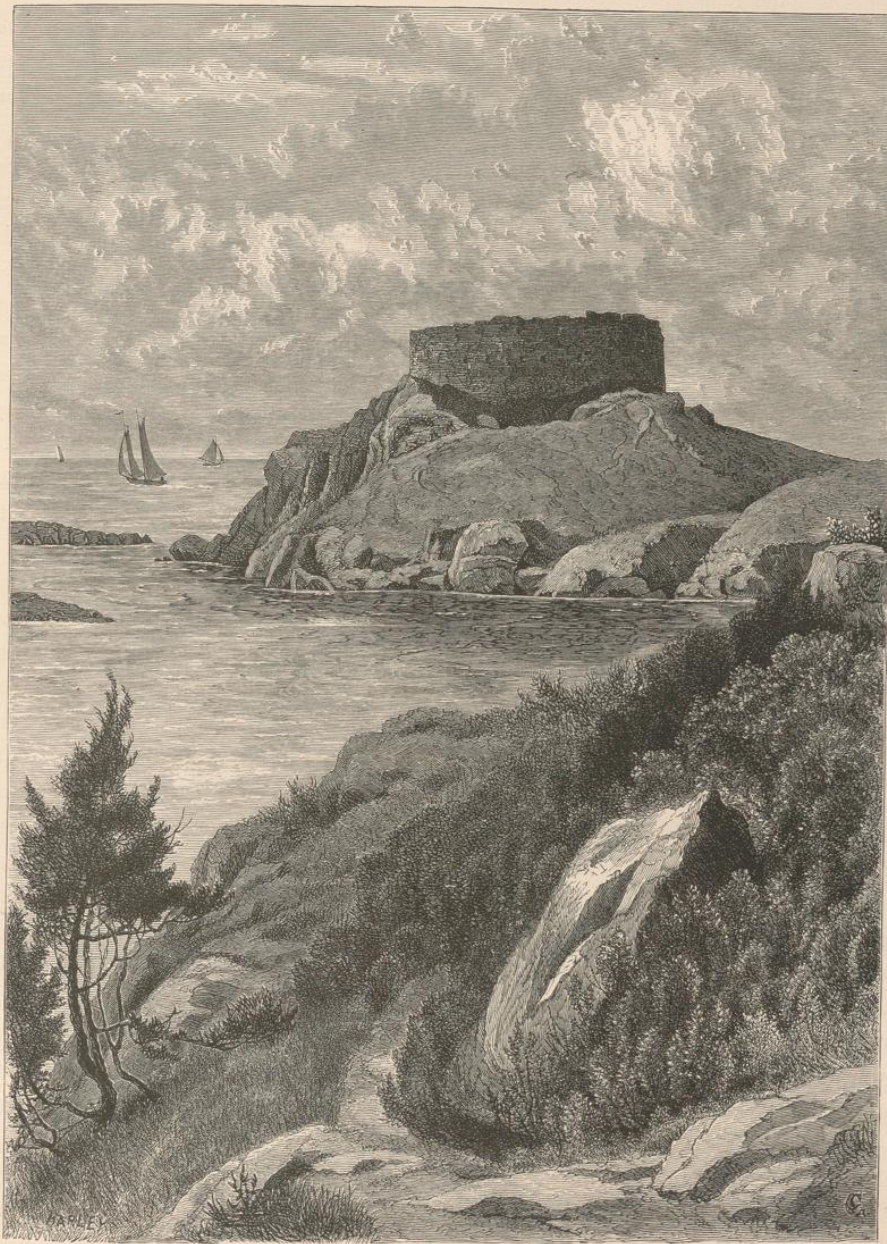


which no precaution can hinder from finding its way to the keel of any ship that ventures near the shore, and blowing it to fragments. The morning and evening gun may continue to salute the break and the close of the day for many years to come, the Stars and Stripes to float over the fortress, the soldiers to keep watch and ward upon the walls, but it will no more be regarded as a stronghold of defence—only as an interesting relic of the past.

Fort Adams is a favorite place of resort with the summer residents of Newport, especially on the afternoons when the regimental band plays, and the dashing down of carriages and the clatter of hoofs over the steep, stone declivity under the frowning archway which opens into the spacious parade-ground, covering a space of eleven acres, and the roll of vehicles around the broad, circular drive that surrounds the enclosure, make a pleasing change from the somewhat dull and monotonous military routine to which the officers and soldiers are subjected. The amount of money that has been expended here by the government—more than a million and a half of dollars—makes it a very costly place of amusement, and might have been spent more profitably; but amusement is better than carnage, and, if these modern improvements in the science of war should put an end to all strife, none will mourn.

Entering the harbor, on the left your eye rests upon a small, oval fort, gray, time-worn, and dilapidated, standing on the island of Conanicut, and known by the somewhat inexpressive name of "Dumpling." A controversy is now pending in regard to the date of its erection, some persons contending that it was built long before the Revolution, while others believe that it was thrown up by the British at the period when their troops occupied Rhode Island. The first historical notice of its existence is found in a letter addressed by General Pigot, commander of the English forces, to Sir Henry Clinton, in which he says that "the guns of Beaver Tail and Dumpling are unserviceable, as the French fleet entering the harbor would cut off communication with Conanicut." The date of this letter is 1778. The fort has been left for many years to the corroding wear and tear of the elements, but, while the interior works have been gradually destroyed, the outer walls remain as complete and firm as they ever were. As a means of defence it would be of little service in these days, however thoroughly it might be manned, for one of our modern shells dropped into the centre would blow the whole affair to fragments. Compared with Fort Adams, one of the largest and most completely equipped defences on our shores, which, with its massive walls and long rows of guns, frowns upon Dumpling from the opposite side of the bay, this little tower looks somewhat insignificant; but, as a picturesque *ruin*, it has its charms, and has become a favorite place of resort for pleasure-parties, who cook their fish and bake their clams on the spot that once resounded to the thunder of artillery. For a century the winds have beat upon the old fort; the Cross of St. George has waved over it; the French fleet swept round it as the vessels moved up to their winter-anchorage in the harbor; the





OLD FORT DUMPLING.



Stripes and the Stars long ago supplanted the British ensign; it is more venerable than the Republic; and we trust that it will be left undisturbed for ages, as it is one of the few memorials in existence of our early history, and may do something to take away the reproach brought against us by our brethren over the sea that we have *no ruins* in the United States.

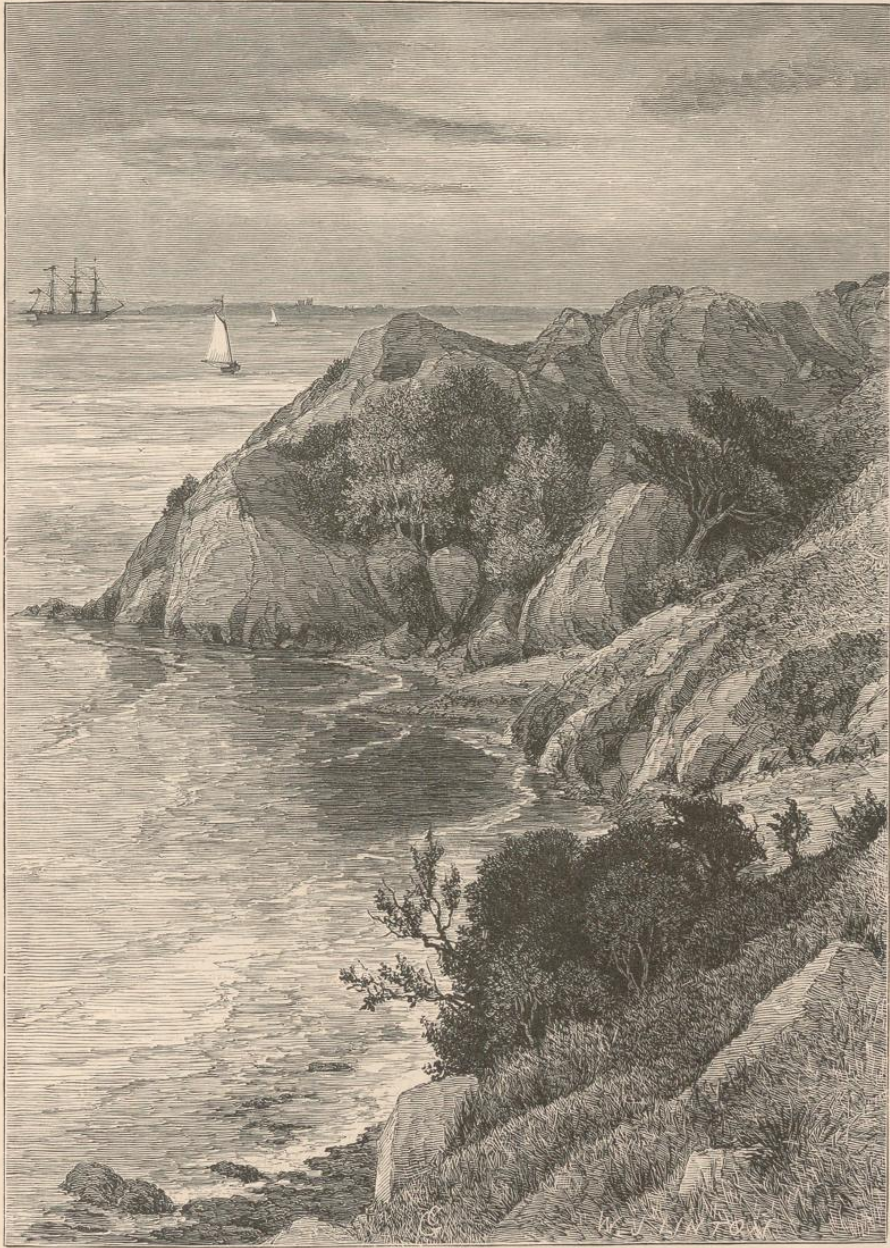
Brenton's Cove is approached by a causeway leading to Fort Adams, and affords one of the finest views that can be obtained of Newport: "The tall and delicate spires of the churches cut sharp against the blue sky; the public buildings stand out in noble relief; and the line of houses, as they rise one above another on the hill-side, is broken by open grounds and clusters of shade-trees. Each spot on which the eye may chance to rest recalls some event that happened there in earlier times." Looking out from this cove, you might once have seen poor Burgoyne sailing for England after his sad defeat; Cook's famous ship *Endeavor* was condemned, dismantled, and left to decay upon these shores; the *Macedonian*, prize of the frigate *United States*, was brought to anchor here; the British fleet, under Lord Howe, and the French fleet, under D'Estaing, both sailed by this rocky cove, one bringing misery and the other joy to the hearts of the old inhabitants of Rhode Island.

Taking the road leading west, we pass what remains of the house built by Governor William Brenton, through grounds that were in his day "adorned with rare and costly plants, gravel-walks, groves and bowers, and all that wealth and a refined taste could furnish," until we come upon the southern shore, where Brenton's Reef stretches for a mile or more into the sea.

In the picture all is placid and serene; but, when the breakers dash upon that fatal reef, and the strong waves whiten its jagged ridge, it is a place of terror. Many a vessel has been wrecked there; and the mouldering gravestones along the edge of the ocean show where the bodies of the drowned sailors were once buried. Why they should have been deposited there, where the winds and the waves sound a perpetual dirge, and the spray of the ocean always dampens the sods which cover them, instead of being taken to some rural ground, where the birds sing and flowers bloom, we do not know. No doubt they were buried by the hands of strangers, and perhaps, after all, this was the most fitting place for their bodies to rest; and many a solemn thought has been suggested by these humble memorial-stones to the gay crowds who drive by, as the summer sun is sinking in the horizon.

Following the southern shore, we next come to what is known as the Spouting-Rock. After a southeasterly storm, the apparatus is in working-order; and, during the "season," multitudes assemble there to see the intermittent fountain play. The construction of the opening beneath is such that, when it is nearly filled and a heavy wave comes rolling in, the pent-up waters can find relief only by discharging themselves through a sort of funnel into the air. It is, however, a somewhat treacherous operator:





BRENTON'S COVE.



for a long time there may be no spouting done; and, even when the waves roll in from the right quarter, it is not easy to tell just when the horn intends to blow. If the interesting couple depicted in our sketch remain standing much longer where they are, before they know it the fountain may spout up some forty or fifty feet, and they will go home with drenched clothes and a wet skin. But the ocean-view is, at this spot, so indescribably grand after a storm, that the temptation to linger as near the edge of the rocks as possible is almost irresistible, and we have seen many a gay company pay the watery penalty.

Beyond the bathing-beach, where hundreds of fashionable people may be seen dashing about in the waves on every pleasant day, rise the precipitous rocks, with the deep and sharp-lined fissure, known as "The Purgatory." How it ever came to be called by this singular name, tradition does not inform us. A little beyond this chasm, there is a pleasant spot, shaded by trees, and commanding a beautiful view, which is known as "Paradise"—so that, when a stranger in that region asks the way, he is likely to be told that he must pass by Purgatory to Paradise.

The opening in the cliff extends one hundred and sixty feet, and is fifty feet deep at the outer edge. It is from eight to fourteen feet wide at the top, and from two to twenty at the bottom. It was once supposed that the water at the base was unfathomable; but at low tide it is actually not more than ten feet in depth.

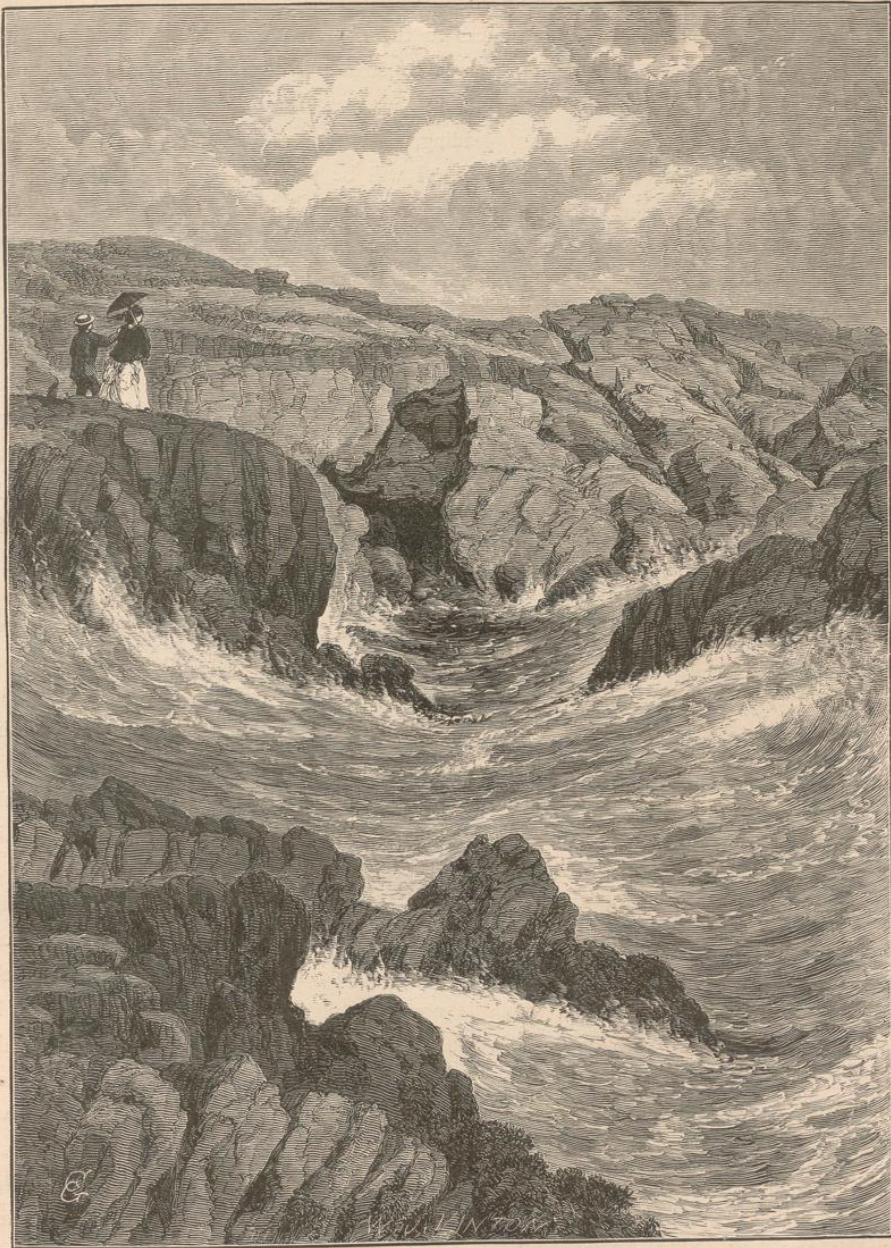
It was formerly the prevailing theory that this fissure was occasioned by a sudden upheaving of the rock; but, after careful examination, Professor Silliman came to the opinion that it was probably formed by the gradual eating away of the softer portions of the stone at a very early period.

Like most places of the kind, Purgatory has its legends.

Some little time after the settlement of the country by the whites, an Indian woman murdered one of the colonists, in revenge for certain wrongs inflicted upon her people. Walking, one day, near Purgatory, she was accosted by a person, appearing to be a well-dressed Englishman, who proposed to fight with her. The stout squaw was not unwilling to accept the challenge, and in the struggle she was gradually dragged toward the edge of the chasm, when her opponent seized her in his arms, and leaped into the abyss. At this moment the cloven foot appeared, his goodly garments fell off, and he was revealed in his true Satanic personality. Why the devil should have felt himself called upon to interfere in this way to punish the woman for the wrong that she had done to the English settlers, does not appear; but, as the print of his feet and marks of blood are still visible on the stones, it is not for us to gainsay the story. At any rate, it is easy to see that such a belief on the part of the Indians might have tended to promote general security.

Another legend pertaining to this spot is not quite so tragical, and perhaps can be better authenticated. A beautiful but giddy girl, heiress to a large estate, had for





THE SPOUTING CAVE.



some time received special attentions from a young man, in all respects her equal, and whose affection, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, she warmly reciprocated in her heart. But the passion for coquetry was so strong with her, that she could never resist the temptation to torment her admirer; and, one day, as they stood together on the brink of Purgatory, and he was pleading, with impassioned eloquence, for some pledge or token of love from her, she said, "I will be your wife if you will show the earnestness of your devotion to me, and your readiness to obey all my wishes, by leaping across this abyss." Without a moment's hesitation, the young man sprang to the other side of the rock, and then, politely lifting his hat, he complimented the beautiful girl upon her charms, told her candidly what he thought of her character, bade her final adieu, and she saw his face no more. After this, as the tale runs, she went mourning all her days.

It is not to be presumed that this is the scene which our artist intended to portray in his sketch; for, although the young damsel seen there is coquettish enough in her appearance for almost any thing unreasonable, the aspect of her companion is certainly not very suggestive of foolhardy courage—to say nothing of the absolute impossibility of his being able to leap the opening at the point which this interesting couple occupy.

"Berkeley's Seat" is in Paradise, within easy walking-distance of the house which he built and occupied nearly a century and a half ago. Out of regard to the memory of Charles I., to whom he was indebted for certain favors, he called his place Whitehall, one of the palaces occupied by the king. It is still standing, and in good repair. There is the room which he occupied as a study, with its tiled fire-jamb, and low ceiling, and undulating floor, and the little chamber where he slept; and it is pleasant to think that, in the sunny court-yard adjoining, he once walked—perhaps discussing with his friends the state policy of Walpole, or the probable future of the new Western land, "whither the course of empire" had already begun "to take its way," or the medical virtues of tar-water, or it may be some of the profounder problems of the soul which occupied his thoughts. When the weather was favorable, he betook himself to the sheltered opening in Paradise Rocks, which is now consecrated by his name. This he is said to have fitted up with chairs and a table; and tradition says that it was in this rocky cave he wrote his "Minute Philosopher." With the broad expanse of ocean before him, and its monotonous roll sounding in his ear, it may be that he was able to give his thoughts a wider range, and fix them more intently upon the subtle questions which he was so fond of contemplating, than was possible in the pent-up little room where he kept his books; and it may have been easier for him to bring his mind to the conclusion that there is nothing in the universe but *soul* and *force*—no organic substance, no gross matter, nothing but phenomena and relations and impressions—than it would be if he were shut in by doors and walls, and nearer to his kitchen.

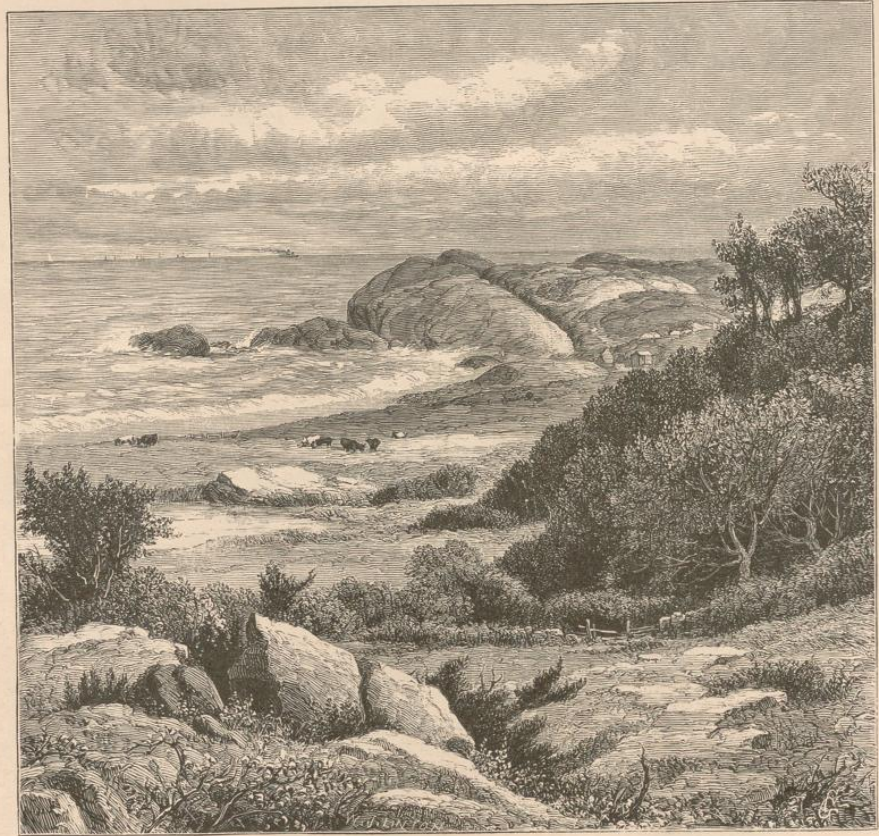




PURGATORY.



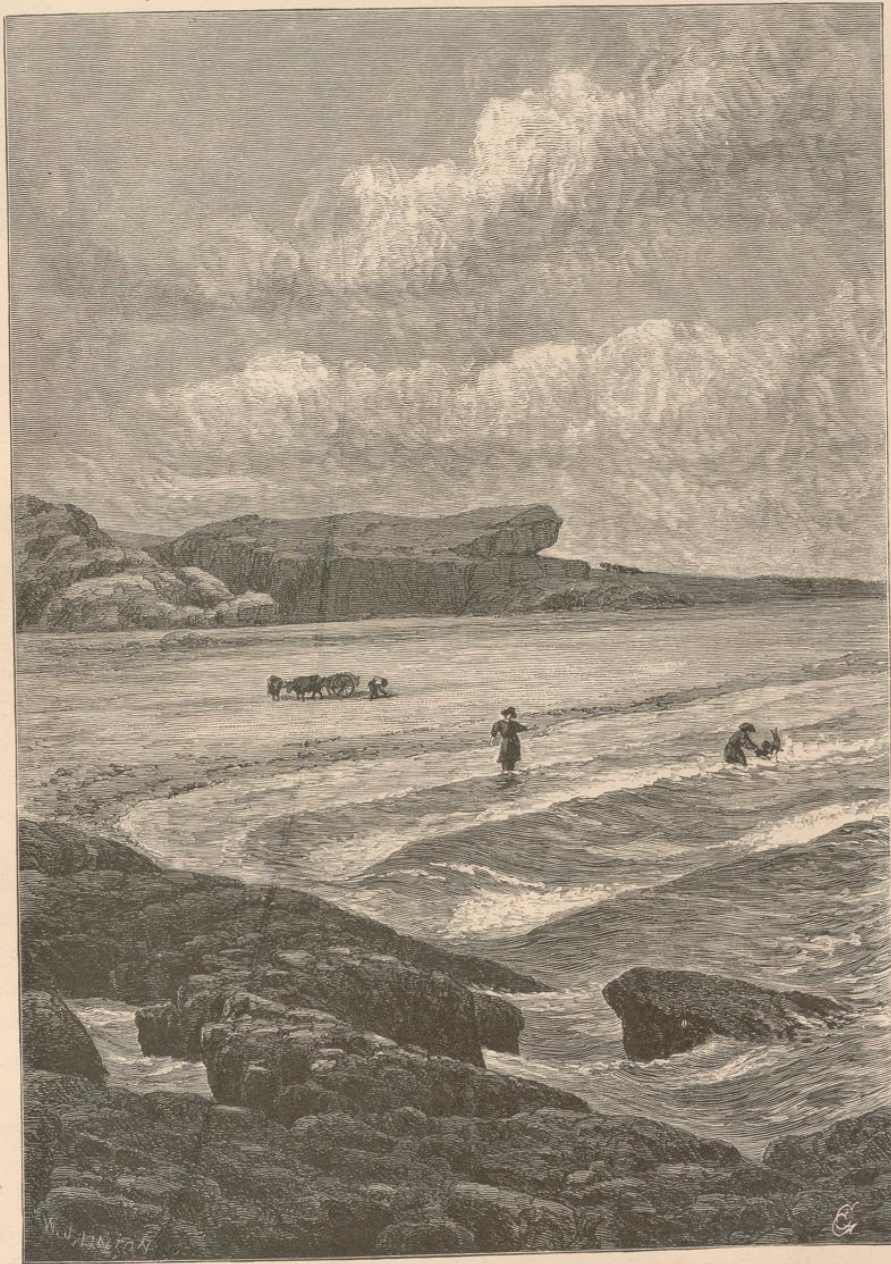
This portion of the island does not lie within the boundaries of the city of Newport, having been set off, many years ago, in order to avoid the taxes, and is now known as Middletown. It was, however, the Newport of Berkeley, chosen by him as a residence because of its superior fertility as well as natural beauty, for the good dean was something of a farmer as well as metaphysician. This southeastern shore has here-



Distant View of Purgatory.

tofore been little resorted to by strangers, and few persons have as yet made it their summer residence; but the recent opening of new roads leading directly to the town, and the construction of broad avenues which intersect the whole region, and which will soon be lined with shade-trees, must, before long, transform the scene, and make this a favorite resort for visitors. Here are three miles of drive over a rich and luxuriant sward, that does not require an inch of grading, bending down toward a shore diversi-





"BERKELEY'S SEAT."



fied by picturesque rocks and groves and sandy beaches, where you look out toward the southeast on the broad ocean, and northward upon the interior country—a combination of attractions found perhaps nowhere else upon our coast, and which, in process of time, will lead multitudes, who desire retirement and quiet, with all the pure delights that come of a salubrious atmosphere and beautiful scenery, to build their houses and plant their gardens here.

In the following strains Mr. Longfellow tells how “the Viking old” found his way from “the wild Baltic’s strand” to our strange shores, and built here “the lofty tower” by the sea, commonly known as “the old stone-mill :”

“Three weeks we westward bore,  
And, when the storm was o’er,  
Cloud-like we saw the shore  
Stretching to leeward ;  
There for my lady’s bower  
Built I the lofty tower,  
Which, to this very hour,  
Stands looking seaward.”

We wish that we could believe in our having so respectable a piece of antiquity in Rhode Island. Inasmuch as this interesting and unique structure dates back to the prehistoric times of the colony, no record of its construction being in existence, and, still further, as it has a close resemblance to certain edifices still existing in Northern Europe, many have been willing to accept the tradition that it must be of Danish origin. One theory is, that this old ruin was originally an appendage to a temple, and used for religious offices, as a baptistery. Others suppose that it was erected as a tower of defence, and that, after the walls had crumbled until they were reduced to their present height, a wooden mill was erected on the summit.

The first authentic notice of the edifice is found in the will of a Mr. Benedict Arnold, dated 1677, in which he bequeaths his “stone-built windmill” to his heirs. About the middle of the last century it was surmounted by a circular roof; and one of the old inhabitants, in a deposition signed in 1734, says, “It is even remembered that, when the change of wind required that the wings, with the top, should be turned round, it took a yoke of oxen to do it.” There is abundant tradition to show that it has been used for various purposes; and a hundred and fifty years ago it was known as the Powder-Mill—the boys, as late as 1764, sometimes finding powder in the crevices; and, at a later period, it was used as a hay-mow. It is somewhat singular that such a substantial and peculiar structure should have been erected simply as a windmill, but this may be explained by the facts that the first wooden mill was blown down in a great storm that occurred in 1675; that Governor Arnold was unpopular with the Indians, and would be likely to build a mill that would withstand both storm and fire, and *look* like a fort at



least; and, still further, he may have seen old mills in England of the same style—there being an engraving in the *Penny Magazine*, of 1836, of one near Leamington, which is the very counterpart of the Newport mill. The various traditions connected with this old relic impart to it a special interest; and, unless it is upheaved by the earthquake or demolished by lightning, it is likely to stand for many generations.



Commodore Perry's Statue and the "Old Mill."

At a little distance from the old Stone Mill, on the easterly side of the public square, stands the statue of Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, erected by his son-in-law, Mr. Belmont. The material is bronze; and the accurate proportions, the graceful attitude, the well-disposed drapery, and the speaking likeness, combine to give this statue a high place among our works of art. It would be well if Mr. Belmont's example should be followed by other wealthy citizens of our republic.



We have now glanced at Newport as it was a hundred years ago, as it was fifty years ago, and as it is to-day. What will be its appearance fifty years hence? The streets of the older part of the town may continue to be as narrow as ever; and, unless a wide-spread conflagration should sweep them away, the ancient wooden houses may crowd upon the gutters, as they have always done; the venerable stone-mill will stand in its place, a monument of the prehistoric ages of Newport; Trinity Church, we trust, will be undisturbed, whether the congregation abide by its courts or not; the Jewish Synagogue is secured from ruin by a perpetual endowment; the port-holes of Fort Adams may still show their iron teeth, unless, indeed, the advance of military science should have made all such stone fortresses unserviceable, or the universal dominion of the doctrines of peace—which God, in his mercy, grant!—have swept them all away.

The natural features of the region will remain unchanged; the same rocks will frown upon the sea; the same purple haze rest at eventide upon the land-locked harbor; the same veil of ocean-mist temper the brightness of the noontide sun, and tide rise and fall on the sandy beach with the same rhythmical flow; the storm thunder with the same loud turbulence; but, meanwhile, what changes will the hand of man have wrought? Within the last twenty years miles upon miles of barren pasture, have been converted into lawns and gardens and verdant groves; millions have been expended in the erection of beautiful villas and stately palaces; the tide of population has set in like a flood; and such are the peculiar advantages which Nature has bestowed upon this lovely spot, that no caprice of fashion can ever turn back or arrest the flow of its prosperity. Regions now unoccupied will soon be covered with habitations; the summer population will spread itself all over the southern portion of the island, from east to west, and then crowd back into the interior, until the whole area from south to north is made a garden of beauty. Newport will never again become a busy mart of traffic; its ancient commerce will never return there; the manufactures which have made "the Providence Plantations" so rich will never flourish in "the Isle of Peace," for the soft and somewhat enervating climate is not conducive to enterprise and activity; but those who need relief from the high-strung excitement of American life, the merchant who wants rest from his cares, statesmen and writers who would give their brains repose, will find it here. The men of our land, above all others, require some such place of resort, to allay the feverish activity of their lives—a place where they may come together periodically, not for debate, and controversy, and labor, and traffic, but for pleasant talk, and rational recreation, and chastened conviviality. They need to dwell where, for a part of the year, they can see the sun rise and set, and scent the flowers, and look out upon the waters. This green island seems to have been made by a kind Providence for such uses as these, where men may forget their cares and cease from their toils, and behold the wondrous works of God, and give him thanks.