The Most Elegant House
The photo of "Villa Marina" at left was taken about 1923. The above, from the opposite side, is how it appeared last summer.

Newport, August 9, 1870, Boston Mechanism: 1

"The most elegantly finished house ever built in Newport is that of Mr. Milton H. Sanford just completed. . . The location is on the Point and the lawn has a water front and sea wall, built at great expense. The house is rather plain on the exterior, of the bar finish, with French roof and wide piazzas on three sides. The interior finish is hardly to be described."

The interior is indeed hardly to be described, since great pains were taken to make this house unique and perfect in every manner. Great pains were taken to make each room different from any other. Oak, ash, cherry, hard pine, maple, black walnut, butternut, and ebony woods were used in fancy patterns for the floors, panels and trim—none of it varnished, but hand-waxed and polished, even to the insides of the closet doors.

The walls are frescoed in the Pompeian style, done in oils in terra cotta, blue, gold, and green colors. Only one
The Most Elegant House in Newport

At right is a 32-foot view up to the 3rd floor ceiling. Above is the room into which the present Mr. Covell's uncle rushed with news of the Titanic's sinking. Mr. Covell, then eight, remembers it well—since it was also the night of his grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary celebration. Most of the furniture shown here is the original.

room, however, is papered. The dining room, finished in black walnut, is papered in expensive green and gold imitation leather.

All of the furniture, too, has been custom-made in the same fine manner. All pieces are hand-waxed and oiled, and are of woods equally as fine-grained as the flooring and panels.

Perhaps the most charming feature of this house is its spectacular hall and stairway reaching 32 feet from floor to ceiling. A polished rail winds upward, and at each floor are projecting balconies with bronze and glass fixtures. At the top landing is a lovely stained-glass window. Also on this third floor is the room that belonged to Miss Kate Field, niece of Mrs. Sanford. The room overlooks the bay and harbor, and the bay window was so engineered that, with the aid of mirrors on either side, one could lie on the window couch and see everything for miles without ever getting up to look out.

After the death of Mr. Sanford, the house was put up for sale by his heirs. In 1894, Mr. William King Covell, Jr. made an offer to purchase the house. Mr. Covell had always wanted a waterfront house, and this one was the first to become available; so when the quoted price was too high, Mr. Covell waited. Finally, in September 1895, Mr. Covell bought "Villa Edna" ² (as it was called by the Sanfords) at public auction.

With the purchase of this house, a great (continued on page 128)
South wall of Kate Field's room, with fascinating collection of brass gauges, whistles, and other fittings Mr. Covell has acquired from steamships of bygone years.

THE MOST ELEGANT HOUSE

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history and love of the sea were brought to it. As with most sea-loving families, there were times of tragedy; but it would always be their lifeblood. In 1819 the first William King Covell was "bound out as an apprentice . . . to learn the Art, Trade or Mystery" \(^3\) of boatbuilding. For four years William learned to use the tools of his trade. At the age of 21 he began building his own boats.

The second William King Covell (son of William King Covell and Ann Williams), at the age of 15, set out for Wilmington, North Carolina to learn the ship chandlery business. In 1855, at the age of 22, William bought the ship chandlery business from his former employers. At the start of the War Between the States, William returned home to Newport, and in 1862 married Sarah Walton Remington. William suffered heavy business losses during the war. He and Sarah also lost a child. William nevertheless rebuilt his business and settled down permanently in Newport at the family home on Farewell Street.

In 1912, William and Sarah celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. On April 16, the grand celebration was held. One of the grandchildren, William King Covell III, remembers that evening with some excitement and sadness. His uncle rushed in early in the evening with an armful of newspapers that gave the sad and horrifying news of the sinking of the Titanic.

Seven years later, William and Sarah died within two months of each other, and like the first William King Covell who died in 1890 at the age of 88, they were "healthy and happy to the end." \(^4\)

In the early 1920s, "Villa Marina," as the Covells renamed the house, was winterized and electricity installed so that it could become their permanent home.

For 23 years, the Covells could see the side-wheelers and steamboats pass by their doors in the summers—now it was theirs for the year around.

Today, Villa Marina is owned and maintained by William King Covell III, son of William Walton Covell and Elizabeth Greene. Mr. Covell is a very charming, scholarly man surrounded by his deep interests and the things he loves. Mr. Covell speaks of Newport as an "architectural museum," and as a student of architectural history, living in Newport and Villa Marina.
Mr. Covell at his organ, formerly in a church in East Greenwich, R.I.

served to bring his studies into more personal light. While studying in Europe, Mr. Covell had the opportunity to collect many books on architecture and his other interests. With further collecting, he now has from 3,000 to 4,000 volumes in his library.

As a child, he saw the steamboats and the sidewheelers each day, knew them by name, and all their characteristics; as a grown man he naturally followed this early love to more depth. Seven friends (including Mr. Covell) met once a month in New York in 1925 and decided to establish the Steamship Historical Society of America. Today its members stretch across the country. The upper rooms of Villa Marina are now filled with prints, pictures, bells, a newel post, and other memorabilia of steamboats. To supplement his studies, Mr. Covell has been making photographs for over 40 years. These include many old glass negative plates.

As a student of organ building and music, Mr. Covell has brought the greatest treasure into his home—a pipe organ. In 1953, this 120-year-old organ was brought to his attention. It was dismantled from its site in a church in Newport, and over a period of six weeks the pieces of the organ were transported to the Covell house, where they were

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reassembled, and it now resides in the front parlor, which is called the music room.

Following where his father left off, Mr. Covell has attempted to recover as many of the original furnishings of his home as possible. Sprinkled among these are the clocks that Mr. Covell has collected over the years. They tinkle softly and remind one of lovely summer days.

From the human generations which have lived in this Newport house, it has assumed a quiet, unobtrusive role in the architectural history of the area. On the other side of the city lies Bellevue Avenue and its great mansions with sprawling acres. The lovely Colonial Hunter House is but a short way down the street. The waters of Narragansett Bay are busy and sparkling as before, although the colorful Fall River Line steamers have long since departed. There's excitement added to the area by virtue of this season's America Cup Trials and Races.

Villa Marina has weathered sun and storm for 96 years, when it was acclaimed "the most elegantly finished house ever built in Newport." A little sedate, but unique, this is the house on Washington Street.

1 From a scrapbook at the Newport Historical Society: "Newport Letters, 1869-71" by Margery Deane (Mrs. T. T. Pitman), Correspondent of the Boston Journal.

2 Miss Edna Barger, niece of Mr. Sanford, lived in her summer home "Edna Villa" for many years, at Bellevue Avenue and Perry Street, where the bust of Mr. Sanford was acquired.

3 The Two Williams by Elizabeth Greene Covell; c. 1954; University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Privately printed edition courtesy of Mr. William King Covell.

4 The Two Williams by Elizabeth Greene Covell.