

Hundreds flock to Newport to remember Kennedy wedding

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NEWPORT — Each year, when “Return to Camelot” is shown on September 12, hundreds of native Rhode Islanders and tourists from all over the U.S. pour into the City-by-the-Sea to relive a storied era, one filled with American royalty and optimism as the post-World War II era unfolded. Their focus is fixed on one of the most significant wedding anniversaries in America’s history.

Especially for U.S. history lovers, Sept. 12, 1953, wasn’t just another Catholic wedding in beautiful, sunny Newport at Holy Name of Mary, Our Lady of the Isle Roman Catholic Church, nicknamed St. Mary’s Church. It marked the start of a short-lived, bittersweet era led by a newlywed couple: Then-Senator John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Lee Bouvier. That era was known as “Camelot.”

In this way, the Diocese of Providence has deep ties to this beloved ten-year era which began with this wedding in ‘53 and ended with President Kennedy’s assassination on Nov. 22, 1963. Many describe this period as an era of perceived peace, security, and certainty, especially in contrast to the turbulent years that lasted through the ‘70s, which included war and many more significant tragedies.

A few current St. Mary’s parishioners were around during this time, including John Hirschbeck. He had the privilege of searching through countless Kennedy archives with old wedding videos and even interviewing one of Jackie’s close relatives. These tasks were crucial in producing a documentary called “Return to Camelot.”

“I was fascinated by the people who stopped outside the church

and took pictures of the Kennedy signs,” Hirschbeck said. “I did a little more investigation and found out that this really was the place where Jackie and JFK got married.”

Hirschbeck’s fascination with this discovery eventually led him and his wife to visit the JFK Library to do even more digging.

“They took us into a special room, we had to wear these white gloves,” he said. “One [archive] that struck me as somewhat unusual was of Richard Nixon. He was responding to a wedding invitation and said, ‘Sorry, I send my regrets. I’m playing golf with Ike this weekend.’”

As Hirschbeck continued to explain, “Return to Camelot” is unique in that it’s both Catholic-centric and interactive. In other words, it only truly makes sense while you’re watching it inside the church. That’s because at certain points of the film, there are pauses that allow for the original 1800s pipe organ to chime in live above everyone’s heads, bringing the wedding ceremony back to life. Hearing the echoes of the pipes as they bounce off the church’s walls can easily give the illusion that a 24-year-old Jackie Kennedy is walking down the aisle to “Here Comes the Bride.”

The 45-minute documentary goes into much detail on what it calls the “social event of the decade.” After all, it’s not every day that a sitting U.S. Senator gets married while in office, especially to a photojournalist from the Washington Times-Herald.

Neither JFK nor his wife were native Rhode Islanders. However, Jackie’s family had some significant ties to Rhode Island. Her stepfather Hugh Auchincloss owned Hammer-smith Farm in Newport, a sprawling estate with both the space and splendor for the wedding reception.

The film additionally cites that JFK’s father, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.,



FAMED PHOTO: This is a screenshot of the photo posted inside of St. Mary’s of JFK and Jackie appearing outside the church after the ceremony (it’s better without the glare.) The plaque underneath notes that Jackie’s dress was made by fashion designer Ann Lowe and consists of 50 yards of fabric. It’s still available to view at the JFK Library and Museum.

Photo: Lisa Larsen, Life, courtesy of St. Mary Church

is indeed tied to the Kennedy wedding, others are simply fascinated by the beauty and history of the church in and of itself. It’s the home of Rhode Island’s oldest Catholic parish, dating back to 1828. To put that in perspective, preparations are starting to be made for their 200th anniversary.

The structure and design of the church are modeled in a Gothic Revival style, featuring rough-cut brownstone walls, a steeply pitched roof, and incredibly precise ornamental detailing of the stained glass, vaulting, and woodwork surrounding the altar. The wall cavity that houses the tabernacle is outlined in gold, a callback to the Old Testament’s instructions from God on building the first temple.

Showing “Return to Camelot” has become quite the tradition at St. Mary’s, and it’s about to celebrate a decade. Since the film came out Father Mark A. Sauriol has become the new pastor of St. Mary’s. He said he’s been astounded by the droves of Camelot fans who show up to pay their respects year after year.

“I was being interviewed by the Rhode Show and they basically said, ‘People still keep showing up. Why do they show up? And I told them, ‘Because it was a time in history where America had an innocence.’”

held quite a lot of influence himself at the time as a prominent businessman in a wide array of industries. This resulted in a massive wedding guest list numbering about 1,000 people, and some of the invitations are still floating around eBay for hundreds of dollars. Meanwhile, the anticipation of this historic event

drew an estimated 3,000 uninvited guests who congregated outside of St. Mary’s all along the streets of Newport.

To this day, St. Mary’s continues to be one of the most popular places to celebrate Catholic weddings in the diocese. While some couples’ reasoning for getting married here

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