THE PARLOR IN THE WILDERNESS: DOMESTICATING AN ICONIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPE*

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ABSTRACT. Thirty years ago D. W. Meinig argued that certain landscapes “are part of the iconography of nationhood.” From the earliest European settlement, the North American “wilderness” forged the crucible that shaped U.S. culture. By the early nineteenth century romantic aesthetic theories and nationalistic patriotism influenced American perspectives on the emerging cultural landscape. Artists, writers, and travelers sought out places for their healthful and scenic qualities as well as for moral instruction from nature. The locus of this confluence of politics, philosophy, and art was the Hudson River Valley of New York State. Guesthouses and hotels, especially in and around the Catskill Mountains, accommodated these travelers. This article examines the cultural basis of the mountain resort in its appropriation and marketing of a regional landscape and its incorporation as a national icon, with a specific history of the development of Mohonk Mountain House by the Smiley family from 1869 to 2008. Keywords: Catskill Mountains, historic landscapes, Hudson River Valley, Mohonk Mountain House, tourism, wilderness.

In his essay on “Symbolic Landscapes,” D. W. Meinig argued that certain landscapes “are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together” (1979b, 164). He identified three “symbolic” landscapes, described historically. The first comprised the seventeenth- through nineteenth-century New England village with its central green, or commons, Protestant church, and meeting house. This humanized landscape, according to Meinig, identified American values of democracy and community and the role of religion in shaping the foundation of the nation. As northeastern and midwestern villages and towns grew in the nineteenth century, their Main Streets dramatically represented the growth of commercial interests in the economy. They remain in story and memory today as the nostalgia of small-town community life, and their architecture of marble or granite bank facades and red-brick retail shops gave form to the concept of progress as economic, even as the county courthouse represented the role of law in an emerging society. Finally, Meinig identified the Southern California suburb as the defining landscape of twentieth century America: the single-family house on a small lot, an automobile-centered society of nuclear families, an antiurban spatial rearrangement where race and class were in tension between the former American values of independence and community.

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All three symbolic landscapes were cultural landscapes; that is, they were constructs of U.S. society, images of social, economic, and political forces on the land. Meinig’s choice of artifacts and images that constitute each of the three landscapes points to specific underlying themes in U.S. culture. Meinig described his interest in symbolic landscapes in an autobiographical essay, *A Life of Learning*:

I have paid particular attention to symbolic landscapes as representations of American values and generally tried to use the landscape as a kind of archive full of clues about cultural character and historical change that one can learn to read with ever greater understanding. At the same time landscape is always more than a set of data; it is itself an integration, a composition, and one tries to develop an ever keener appreciation of that. It is here that geography makes its most obvious connection with aesthetics, with writers and poets and painters and all those who try to capture in some way the personality of a place, or the mystery of place in human feelings. (Meinig 1992, 16)

The power of Meinig’s descriptions enables the reader to conjure up an identifiable image and recognize its symbolic value. These landscape images continue to influence America’s understanding of itself and of the conflicting values that shape social and political policies.

Perceptions of the natural landscape, however, have equally formed U.S. culture and shaped social, political, economic, and environmental policies. A discourse on nature and its social representation framed America’s historical narrative. Perceptions of and meanings attached to nature and landscape have changed over time. As both Donald Meinig and David Lowenthal observed, “any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but lies within our heads” (Meinig 1979a, 34; see also Lowenthal 1961; Meinig 1992, 16).

Landscape as nature is but one “version” of landscape, according to Meinig. In “The Beholding Eye” he offers ten versions of landscape that describe “the essence” and “the organizing ideas” that “make sense” out of what is seen (1979a, 34). Landscape as nature is the initial version in Meinig’s typology. It is closely followed by landscape as habitat, artifact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, place, and aesthetic.

In this article I suggest that “landscape as nature” formed America’s other symbolic landscape and that its transformation to a humanized landscape reflected perceptual manifestations of the idea of landscape as characterized by Meinig’s ten versions (1979a). In particular, I examine how the natural landscape, initially perceived as wilderness, began to be domesticated and redefined in the nineteenth century and formed the basis for a national culture by artists, writers, tourists, innkeepers, commercial marketers, conservationists, and scientists. These changing perceptions of landscape occurred in the mountains of the Hudson River valley in New York State.

*Nature and Culture in Nineteenth–Century America*

From the earliest European settlement a view that the land and forests were a wilderness became the crucible that shaped a new, vibrantly American, culture. Yi-Fu Tuan considered “America’s infatuation with wilderness” as “the belief that in
wilderness lay the ultimate source of health and well-being for a nation. . . . So long as there was wilderness, America, no matter how dire her mistakes in world-making, could always be restored to health, gain new energy” (2002, xix). Art and literature in the early days of the newly independent republic would transform the image of a “howling wilderness” into an iconic symbol of American independence from Europe and would constitute the underlying project of an emergent nationalism (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Daniels 1994; Nash 2001; Olwig 2002).

In the early nineteenth century, the transcendentalist movement of writers, artists, and philosophers emerged from within the very heart of the New England village, Meinig’s first symbolic cultural landscape (1979b, 165–166). Transcendentalists saw the relationship between wild nature and society as the spiritual core of a New World culture. The movement’s leading philosopher, the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote, “In the woods we return to reason and faith” ([1836] 1985, 39); later, his student Henry David Thoreau declared, “In Wildness is the preservation of the world” ([1862] 1989, 206).

By the 1830s, however, the nation had entered the modern era through the economic forces of capitalism and industrialization (Meinig 1993). Urbanization was creating a vastly different settled landscape, and time and space were collapsing under the swift technological changes in transportation and communication. Published in the same year as Emerson’s essay “Nature” ([1836] 1985), Thomas Cole, often referred to as “America’s first landscape artist,” painfully observed: “In this age, when a meager utilitarianism seems ready to absorb every feeling and sentiment, and what is sometimes called improvement in its march makes us fear that the bright and tender flowers of the imagination shall all be crushed beneath the iron tramp, it would be well to cultivate the oasis that yet remains to us, and thus preserve the germs of a future and a purer system” (1836, 3).

“Improvement” was changing the face of the land; Cole saw it as a problem: “The ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation” (1836, 12; see also Meinig 1979a, 39–40). Natural landscapes became cultural landscapes as habitat and artifact (Meinig 1979a, 35–37). A land that had formerly been judged limitless began to suggest boundaries, landscapes of wilderness domesticated, and a middle landscape deemed of moral virtue (Marx 1964).

Seeking Nature

To European travelers, as well as to some in the emerging U.S. cultured class, America’s roughness may have seemed problematic. However, a distinctly American philosophical narrative on the relationship of humans to the natural world became a focus for national pride and artistic accomplishment (Zelinsky 1973, 36–37; Lowenthal 1976). As part of this discourse, an American grand tour soon evolved for both European and American travelers (Flad 2000, 2001). The itinerary incorporated the landscape of nature more than the landscape of historical or cultural association, for it was to nature that Americans would look for their identity
The beauties and power of the natural landscape differentiated America from that of the "immoral," tired Old World.

Nineteenth-century tourism in America reflected this emerging social and political engagement with nature. Artists, essayists, poets, gardeners, and architects developed the rhetoric for a growing middle class, eager to be educated in the arts of refinement (Bushman 1992; Myers 1993). As opportunities for leisure activities increased, new landscapes accommodated them. An early example was the particular role of the mountain-house resort in the development of tourism and the representation of nature during that century.

The turn to natural surroundings, including wilderness, for physical or psychological healing is as old as human history. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers in North America carefully noted the locations of mineral springs, such as West Virginia's White Sulphur Springs, and soon entrepreneurs marketed the waters and the places as spas (Sears 1989, 176; Corbett 2001, 9). Saratoga Springs in New York State is just one of hundreds that were promoted heavily during that time, and, although most have declined in importance, the village of Saratoga Springs is still a tourist destination (Corbett 2001). Of even greater significance than the medicinal waters were the mountain regions, where the air was refreshing and pure (Blackmar 1979, 77). The Adirondacks and Catskills soon held sanatoriums for the alleviation of tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases.

"Taking the waters," breathing pure air, or even drinking fresh milk offered acceptable reasons for Americans to travel, especially those who lived in cramped, smoke-filled, dirty cities, and travel for edification and refinement in taste could be justified as morally acceptable (Aron 1999). The fact that such recreational activities might also assist in one's climb upward in the social hierarchy eventually became reason enough to travel to resorts (Dulles 1940). They were public spaces where private acts could be less restrained and where lives might be transformed.

Socially Constructed Landscapes

Resort architecture was designed to accommodate these recreational pursuits. These were places for performance and display. The largest hotels boasted of the size of their expansive ballrooms, concert halls, and dining rooms, even as they hailed the medicinal properties of the mineral springs. Long, open verandas, two or three stories high and held up by massive Corinthian columns, were designed for evening promenades or social encounters (Flint 1826/1932; Hone 1927; Blackmar and Cromley 1982).

The buildings and the carefully landscaped grounds became a parlor in the wilderness. Women dominated the veranda as social space. Though a symbol of middle-class domesticity in the wilderness, it was public rather than private space, where competition for class status was acted out. Rituals of courtship were performed under the watchful eyes of family members, while grandmothers rocked and gossiped (Blackmar 1979).
The development of “taste” required more than gossiping on hotel verandas, however. For Cole, one had to experience nature. As he observed about the role of the natural landscape and of art and artists in his 1836 “Essay on American Scenery,” “And now, when the sway of fashion is extending widely over society—poisoning the healthful streams of true refinement, and turning men from the love of simplicity and beauty, to a senseless idolatry of their own follies—to lead them gently into the pleasant paths of Taste would be an object worthy of the highest efforts of genius and benevolence” (p. 3).

Following Cole, a number of artists, subsequently called the “Hudson River School of Art,” went to the mountains to paint in a natural setting. They became known as America’s first “national” group of artists (Howat 1972; Novak 1980). They saw the natural landscape through at least two of Meinig’s lenses. Perceived as aesthetic, they described landscape in English romantic terms: “sublime,” “picturesque,” or “beautiful” (Meinig 1979a, 46–47; Flad 2000, 70–72). As Cole argued, “The most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness” (1836, 5). Viewed through an ideological lens, the landscape portrayed national identity (Meinig 1979a, 42–43). Reflected Nathaniel Parker Willis: “Certain it is that the rivers, the forests, the unshorn mountain-sides and unbridged chasms of that vast country, are of a character peculiar to America alone” (1840, v).

In similar nationalistic terms, Asher Durand, an artist friend of Cole’s and co-founder of The Crayon, a magazine of the arts published from 1855 to 1861, advised fellow artists: “Go not abroad then in search of material for the exercise of your pencil, while the virgin charms of our native land have claims to your deepest affection” (1855, 34–35). Rather, he advised them to document the fast-disappearing wilderness “yet spared from the pollutions of civilization” (p. 35).

Throughout the nineteenth century the North American wilderness was perceived and depicted in nationalistic terms (Miller 1993). Artists and essayists would create “a uniquely native culture . . . based on representations of specifically American places” (Lucic 2000, 47). At the end of the twentieth century the regional landscape of the Hudson River Valley and the Catskill Mountains where Cole and his fellow artists painted would be declared a National Heritage Area and “The Landscape That Defines America” (Flad 2001, 14). Historical and ideological associations established the region where events “took place” and where America constructed its national identity (Meinig 1979a, 42–46).

**Catskill Mountain House**

The setting was accessible to tourists who stayed at a mountain resort house. Catskill Mountain House, just west of Catskill, New York and approximately 100 miles north of New York City on the west bank of the middle Hudson River in the Catskill Mountains, was the best known of these establishments (Van Zandt 1966). Begun in 1824 at the Pine Orchard and perched 2,250 feet overlooking the Hudson Valley, it commanded a panoramic view and became an extraordinary success (Figure 1). It was within reasonable access to New York City by steamboat and a
four-hour stage ride up the mountain from Catskill Landing. Within an easy walk were unequaled vistas, craggy bluffs, deep forests, lakes, and tumbling streams, as well as Kaaterskill Falls, perhaps second only to Niagara itself in fame.

Following the lead of famous artists such as Cole, Durand, and Frederic Church, lesser painters and poets flocked to the same places to be inspired with the gifts of nature. Tourists from the emerging middle class also sought out similar aesthetic and recreational venues in their efforts at cultural education by taking their sketch pads into the forests and shadowy glens (Harvey 1998). By 1880, 70,000 visitors were making the trip each summer to Catskill Mountain resorts and boarding-houses to enjoy luxurious accommodations or a homelike atmosphere in a wilderness setting (Evers 1972).

The landscape they found, however, was not wilderness. Prospects from which to safely view the surrounding landscape were located, constructed, and often framed. Artists and writers sanctified many of the scenes; they were duly noted in guidebooks and on trail maps (Sears 1989; Schuyler 1995). The novelist James Fenimore Cooper wrote in *The Pioneers* that from the Pine Orchard prospect his protagonist Natty Bumppo declared that one could see “Creation, . . . all creation”—and that made the view internationally known ([1823] 1831, 322). Europeans, who had read Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* series and visited Catskill Mountain House, used the same romantic rhetoric to describe the scene. The landscape language of the romantic era would codify the viewscape forever in the national mind, symbolized in Figure 1 by an American flag waving over the Hudson Valley landscape.
Even in 1907, a century ago, an article in the American Geographical Society’s *Bulletin*, predecessor to the *Geographical Review*, could remark that the view from the Pine Orchard site could “easily claim to be one of the most inspiring views of the national domain east of the Rocky Mountains” (Heilprin 1907, 194). Here, in the landscape language of geography as ideology, we have poetic musing that the view was “inspiring” and political expansionism in viewing the “national domain” (Meinig 1979a, 42).

The landscape surrounding the mountain house was liminal space, continually redefined according to the interests of the hotelier and the perceptions of the guests. Visitors entered this culturally constructed “natural” landscape by footpaths, trails, and carriage roads, always keeping a visual and structural anchor to the hotel itself.

**FIG. 2**—The piazza, drawn by Thomas Nast. Source: Harper’s 1866, 456.

**CONSTRUCTING THE EXPERIENCE**

Verandas framed panoramic views and scenic prospects. The veranda, or large front porch sometimes referred to as the “piazza,” became the architectural motif for mountain-house resort hotels: “The verandah was a defining trait of Victorian resorts. . . . In the mountains, the verandah worked not simply to identify the hotel, but also to beautify it and thus to enhance the ensemble of a-building-in-the-scenery for approaching travelers” (Blackmar and Cromley 1982, 52). From it, one could view the scene; it acted as a stage from which one could enter the natural landscape while remaining safely in the domesticated sphere. It was a social space that mediated between the outdoors and the inside, linking the natural setting with the social activity of the resort hotel (Figure 2). Its scale even allowed guests to confront the outdoors while remaining protected from the elements, so that brisk walks along its length could suffice for other healthful activities during inclement weather. Most especially, they were considered the platforms from which the prospect could be seen—the frame for the approved view.
Away from the hotel edifice, the places from which views might be taken were located, made accessible, and often given picturesque names, such as “Sunset Rock” or “Artists Rock.” Paths led to the most important views or landscape features, and wooden ladders or bridges facilitated access to difficult sites. Seasonality could be manipulated: Although a summer drought might dry up the stream, a tourist could have a waterfall by paying twenty-five cents to the keeper of the dam at the top of the cliff who would then let an allotment of water flow over to give the desired effect. The forces of nature, it seemed, could be harnessed, which itself was a providential tale of progress appropriated by the new nation.

Naming the landmarks was also a way of attaching an historical or romantic association to the landscape (Meinig 1979a, 43–45). Both Washington Irving in his Rip Van Winkle stories and Cooper in his Leatherstocking Tales began this process of consciously creating a cultural landscape. Mapmakers and guidebook salesmen presented this landscape with nationalist fervor. In the twenty-first century the mythological and fictional landscape of Irving and Cooper remains, helping to identify the region in the national mind; it continues to be marketed through names of motels, businesses, and golf courses.

Marketing nature and the Catskill Mountain landscape became big business. As railroads penetrated the mountains throughout the nineteenth century, numerous boardinghouses and hotels established accommodations for thousands of guests. Originally, most guests stayed for long periods of time—weeks, months, or “the season”—although later, as travel became easier and quicker, day visitors and weekenders became the source of greater income.

Different hostelries established their own styles and had different clientele. In the beginning, at Catskill Mountain House the proprietor maintained a solemn Sunday with Protestant religious observances; a quiet and contemplative day reflected the cultural milieu of his elite clientele as well as, perhaps, a bow toward the transcendental vision of nature. But paying guests began to demand more. Each of the mountain houses offered alcohol, gambling, dancing, music, and various “amusements,” although most maintained, to some degree at least, a relationship to their natural habitat.

Competition between mountain houses became intense by the end of the century. Kaaterskill Mountain House, built within view of Catskill Mountain House, claimed far more rooms and fancier interior furnishings. Others advertised their height above sea level, with cooler temperature in summer and, by virtue of assumption, purer air than the cities in the valleys. Railroads and steamboat companies published timetables and guidebooks filled with advertisements for the various establishments. By the end of the century hotels sold stereopticon views, engravings, lithographs, and eventually postcards to the guests and visitors; these souvenirs added extra income and also advertised their special charms (Davidson 2006). The natural landscape as national icon had not only been domesticated, it was an item for consumption as “wealth” (Meinig 1979a, 41–42).
Nevertheless, the magnetic pull of the mountains for both transcendental value and aesthetic inspiration continued. Many Americans wished to see art and nature harmoniously joined, and if they could adhere to these romantic ideals as well as make a profit, so much the better. In 1869 two Quaker twin brothers, Albert K. and Alfred H. Smiley, did just that, and their mountain-house resort continues into the twenty-first century with many of these ideals relatively intact.

**Mohonk Mountain House**

On an outing in the fall of 1869 Alfred Smiley chanced upon a small tavern on the shore of Lake Mohonk, nestled among the laurel and lichen-covered rocks of the Shawangunks. He and his brother Albert purchased the property and the next year remodeled the tavern to accommodate forty guests. One of the first was Schuyler Colfax, vice president of the United States, who spoke of it enthusiastically as reminding him of the “wonderful” rock and valley “scenery of Yo Semite [sic] Valley” in California (A. H. Smiley 1870, 3). Over the next few decades the Smiley brothers removed the small tavern and built an expansive hotel of locally quarried rock and timber (Smiley and LaBudde 2000). Constructed in thirteen major phases, the eclectic design reflects the wilderness style of the structures in and around western parks such as Yosemite and private lodges built in the Adirondacks during the late nineteenth century (Figure 3). These more informal styles and the use of natural materials integrated the structures into their wilderness landscapes, in contrast to the Corinthian-columned mountain houses in the nearby Catskills.

From the very beginning the Smiley brothers envisioned a hotel and landscape that related intimately to its geological and forested setting. Mohonk Mountain House is situated atop the northern Shawangunks, a mountainous ridge of extremely resistant quartzite that is close to and parallels the Catskill dome; the ridge contains many rare and endangered species and unusual habitats, such as pine barrens, vertical cliffs, talus slopes, and sky lakes (Snyder 1981; Kiviat 1991). On the grounds of Mohonk, as in no other comparable example, one can see the representation of nature through the conscious construction of a landscape. The landscape was conceived as an artist’s canvas with romantic elements sought out, enhanced, or, if necessary, created. The immediate grounds had water in the lake, craggy white cliffs juxtaposed with a forest cover of deciduous trees and evergreens, enclosure, perspective, and extraordinary vistas. Gardens added color in the summer, and the laurel in the late spring and the autumnal shades of the maples, oaks, and birch gave brilliance in their seasons. The Hudson River School landscape painters Sanford Robinson Gifford, Worthington Whittredge, and Jervis McEntee painted in the area and felt at home there (Wilton and Barringer 2002, 163). The construction of the designed landscape was an immense effort that Albert Smiley likened to the work of a landscape artist on an immense canvas. Smiley’s comment reflected Church’s remark about his efforts at his magnificent villa, Olana. In 1884 Church wrote to a friend and fellow Hudson valley artist: “I have made
about three-quarters miles of roads this season, opening entirely new and beautiful views—I can make more and better landscapes in this way than by tampering with canvas and paint in the Studio” (Church 1884; see also Ryan 1989, 147). The art of landscape design applied aesthetic principles to the “natural environment.”

At Mohonk, artists recognized Albert Smiley's landscaping effort as aesthetic (Meinig 1979a, 46). Writing after spending several weeks at the lake in 1871, and using rhetoric of the period with reference to the aesthetic theories of John Ruskin, Daniel Huntington, president of the National Academy of Design for twenty-one years, described his impression: “Lake Mohonk is one of the most interesting places I have visited. Bold and savage features are combined with the gentle and picturesque in inexhaustible variety. Those huge masses of rock tumbled in wild confusion, contrasted with rich forest, distant views of mountain ranges and smiling valleys, with the clear lake reflecting at your feet, form together a scene most impressive and delightful, of which the artist and lover of nature can never weary” (p. 1).

In the nineteenth century art and science were intertwined in perceptions of the natural world. Thoreau studied geology and botany at his cabin during his sojourn at Walden Pond, as did Durand and other Hudson River School artists, in order to paint wilderness landscapes more naturalistically (Walls 1995). Church conscientiously followed in the footsteps of Alexander von Humboldt on his painting trip to South America (Bunkše 1981; Sachs 2006). At Mohonk Arnold Guyot,
professor of physical geography at Princeton University from 1854 until his death in 1884, spent the summer of 1871 at the lake. That winter he wrote a letter thanking his host:

Our reminiscences of Lake Mohunk [sic], are of the most charming kind. Few spots on our continent unite so much beauty of scenery, both grand and lovely, within so small a compass, to be enjoyed with so much ease. . . .

Not least vividly do I remember our rambles in the surrounding forests, to the summit of Sky Top, or along the rocky ridge to Eagle Cliff, & the labyrinth at its southern end; or at evening to Sunset rock. Each of these is but an easy walk for even a delicate lady, yet offering the rich reward of a view of the vast horizon which opens, from these high points, on the green fields of the Walkill & the Rondout Valleys, with the highest peaks of the noble chain of the Catskill beyond—a view hardly inferior to the most celebrated from the Catskills themselves.

Add to the pleasures afforded by these natural beauties the comfort of a pleasant Christian home & of a cultivated Society, such as we found under your roof, & you may well believe that we are anxious to repeat our visit to Lake Mohunk, as soon as circumstances permit. (Guyot 1872, 1–2)

**Landscape Architecture**

For the Smiley family, the relationship of the hotel’s buildings to the natural surroundings was as important as the structures themselves. In 1871 and 1872 the construction of many paths afforded access to scenic vista points, as well as to gloomy glens where “immense” hemlocks towered over walkers or “picturesque” rocks made the passages mysterious and romantically delightful (A. H. Smiley 1871a, 2; Meinig 1992, 16). Construction of the larger roads to carry horse-drawn carriages required the work of many hands, animals, and the use of explosives (Manning 1995). Grade level was an important consideration, especially for the main routes down from the 2000-foot ridge to the village in the valley; for all goods, including lumber and fixtures to build all the structures necessary, had to be hauled up the ridge (A. H. Smiley 1871b, 1). The design of narrower paths with steeper inclines and aligned through rocky outcrop areas and thick forests allowed access for those who wanted to commune with nature more directly. The gender of walkers also influenced design, as Alfred Smiley’s letter in January 1871 described the layout of nearby paths that were an “easy walk for ladies” (A. H. Smiley 1871a). Chestnut railings and bridges, built in a picturesque manner, made many of the more scenic areas safe and accessible.

Albert Smiley was especially interested in developing flower gardens around the main house, although they came at much effort and expense (Partington [1911] 1970, 39–42). A lawn was ardously created in the English style, according to the theories and methods of the nineteenth-century landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing (R. H. Smiley 2004, 4). The Smiley library includes many volumes on gardening and landscaping, including works by Downing. Downing died before the outbreak of the Civil War, but his books remained in print throughout the
century, and his approach to landscaping country estates was so accepted that he has been called the “arbiter of taste” for domestic improvement in that period (Tatum and MacDougall 1989; Schuyler 1996; Sweeting 1996).

The last glacial period scoured the Shawangunk ridge clear of soil and vegetation. Ten thousand years later only a thin veneer of soil covered the conglomerate “grit.” To create the garden and a lawn, dirt was hauled in and placed on top of the quartzite rock, and grass seed was sowed (A. H. Smiley 1871a). The Smileys planted thousands of annuals and perennials, laid out garden paths, and built small benches and arbors (Figure 4). Engravings of the house and its immediately surrounding grounds show the lawn, plantings, and, by the latter part of the century, a golfing green, with horse carriages, women with parasols, and children playing.

The hotel had domesticated the wilderness by bringing the Victorian parlor, with its own library of picture books, such as William Cullen Bryant’s *Picturesque America* (1894), into the landscape itself. Nature could be enjoyed through a proper reading of art and taste (Sweeting 1996, 97–98).

Mohonk’s rustic summerhouses, also known as “gazebos,” are perhaps the most identifiable features of the constructed landscape. As if they were tiny fragments of the larger veranda, gazebos acted as outposts of domestication in the midst of raw nature. As described by one admirer, the location of Mohonk’s summerhouses among glacial boulders and talus or on cliff overlooks evoked romantic admiration: “Amid these powerful crags, the gazebos offer metaphorical safety. At the same time, their weathered and giddy stance on each precipice adds a romantic gloss to the view; see how the frail works of man stack up against eternity!” (Cromley 1979, 18).

Begun in 1871, by the end of the decade the gazebos were perched on rock ledges, along the shores of the lake, or at special vista points along carriage roads and paths, to allow walkers a place to rest and contemplate the view, to “watch the natural and social spectacle” (Cromley 1979, 18), or even become poetically inspired. Constructed of chestnut or cedar for the most part, with roofs initially of straw and later of split chestnut—because, according to a letter in October 1874, chestnut was more appropriate than straw for a wilderness effect—they became the leitmotif of Mohonk’s landscape (Matteson and LaChance 1998b). In and of themselves, they were picturesque and followed the dictates of Downing’s drawings for “gardenesque” benches or gazebos; but, even more important, they were sited where either interior or exterior views involved the onlooker intimately in the landscape. In both siting and design, the summerhouses helped to domesticate the wilderness. One letter in 1874 noted that the form of their roofs was much like a lady’s hat; they were certainly protective from sun or rain, and they framed the view as if through a parlor window.

**Viewscapes**

Extensive views, as from the earlier Catskill mountain houses, were primary in defining the relationship between Mohonk Mountain House and nature. The prospect from Mohonk’s western veranda is a panorama that sweeps westward across
the Rondout valley toward the Catskill massif in a blue haze on the horizon, and the hotel’s eastern porch looks over the lake and to the sheer cliffs up to the top of the ridge, appropriately named “Sky Top.” The two views frame separate examples of paintings by artists of the Hudson River School, such as Church’s panoramic vistas or Durand’s intimate woodland scenes, as in the lakeside perspective (Figures 5 and 6). As one observer noted, “The glacial lake site... is naturally dramatic because of the abrupt rock cliffs which frame the water. These cliffs, however, are domestically scaled, so the impression of wild sublimity is tempered by the landscape’s easily apprehensible size” (Cromley 1979, 9).

Early on, guests could view the panorama from the top of the cliffs. Among the very first roads built was one up to Sky Top, and one of the first outbuildings, completed in January 1870, was an “observatory” on the top of the imposing ridge. Over the next few years fierce winds blew down these early attempts, however. A new tower would quickly be constructed so that the viewer would have a 360-degree view, stretching across the Hudson Valley to the east or the Catskill Mountains to the west for tens of miles (Matteson and LaChance 1998a). In the twentieth century, scientists also used the tower for research; for example, Vincent Schaefer, director of the Atmospheric Sciences Research Center in Albany, New York, studied the composition of the air masses flowing across the ridge. Vista points along carriage roads and paths consciously also created a relationship of viewer to nature.
Viewscapes emerged as if they were paintings on the walls of a parlor. Cutting vegetation allowed the views; existing vegetation framed vistas. Vista sites encouraged foreground vegetation of laurel or other species that grew low to the ground, with attention paid to seasonal changes of color by different deciduous trees and shrubs as well as evergreens. Consistent cutting of trees was in the manner of coppice cutting of certain hardwoods as poles for use on the farms or for sale. Other trees were cut for firewood. Forestry management blended both functional and
aesthetic purposes and was articulated in the language of the landscape painter. As Alfred Smiley wrote to his brother Albert about clearing out vegetation on the road along the east side of the lake,

We have produced a very striking effect by opening a view from the road to cliffs. A part of that stone-free, laurel-covered, pine-crowned hill or mound in foreground, large rocks in middle ground & high cliffs in background. I propose to remove that miserable scrub oak for some distance on either side of the road, exposing the beautiful masses of laurel growing amongst it—cutting an opening to the crevice—leaving the trees to stand pretty thickly with fine laurel under them. This it seems to me will cheaply produce a striking and beautiful effect without interfering with any of thy plans for the future. (A. H. Smiley 1872b)

Landscape management continued into the twentieth century to retain the concern for aesthetics and for certain "utilitarian" uses, such as firewood. Daniel Smiley, a third-generation descendant, maintained a complete record of the property's changing natural history (Burgess 1996). These detailed longitudinal records have become basic for ecologists studying ecosystem dynamics and other researchers examining climate change in the twenty-first century (Meinig 1979a, 37–39).

Social Consumption of Nature

Alfred and Albert Smiley's plans for the future, of course, also included running a profitable business (Meinig 1979a, 41–42). Archival records indicate their constant concern for balancing costs to income and ways to increase the latter. One way was through advertising. Initially the brothers sought to spread the word about their venture through circulars and handbills distributed to "houses in some of the better streets of Brooklyn, Philadelphia & N. York." Image was everything if one desired the right clientele, so great care was taken to have proper engravings show the hotel and its surrounding landscape. As Alfred Smiley noted in 1872, "The fine picture on the envelope would give an air of respectability to the thing & would prevent them from being treated like common play bills &c."; and although "the cost would be greater," it would be worth it to "secure respectful attention" (A. H. Smiley 1872a, 4). Advertisements were placed in selected guidebooks and journals, for example the Illustrated Christian Weekly in 1872, because "the paper circulates amongst the very class we want." As an advertisement in 1893 promised (see Figure 4): "Here upon the lofty border of this pure lake, among the wooded and rocky cliffs and heights, with rustic arbors and romantic walks, the company—only the best of people, quiet, intelligent, and well-to-do—love to dwell; always cool and comfortable without a bar or ball room." The Smileys targeted a social class of the educated elite and the cultured middle class that, for years, constituted Mohonk's guest list.

The Smileys located themselves in a Protestant Christian–based Quaker tradition. Quakers had a long tradition of tolerance in the Hudson River Valley: Many were involved in antislavery movements such as the Underground Railroad. In the
late nineteenth century Mohonk became known for its conferences on the “Indian Question” that subsequently led to reforms in government policy toward Native Americans (Burgess 1980, 29–33). Global issues became the focus after World War II, with various meetings of United Nations diplomats and the International Peace Academy; and sustainability has entered the lexicon of concerns for Mohonk Consultations in the twenty-first century.

In the late nineteenth century, however, nativist concerns over immigration, especially to New York City, spilled over into the emerging tourist landscape of the Catskills (Evers 1972). A great many of the boardinghouses and hotels in the Catskills developed anti-Semitic policies in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, even including phrases such as “No Hebrews Taken” or code words such as “Christian Management” in their advertising (Stradling 2007, 105). By the 1930s, however, numerous resorts had opened that catered exclusively to a Jewish clientele in a westward extension of the mountain region into Sullivan County. These “new Catskills” were a perceptual expansion of the original Catskill toponymic landscape and would even enjoy nicknames, “used both affectionately and derogatorily” as the “Borscht Belt” and the “Sour Cream Sierras” (Stradling 2007, 185). At Mohonk, east of the Catskill massif on the Shawangunk ridge, the Smileys held simple religious services every Sunday, where quiet was the rule.

The most significant difference between the Smileys and other mountain-house hoteliers that evolved from their Quaker tradition was their respect for nature and loving cultivation of their landscape. The Quaker tradition did not allow for the “pursuit of pleasure,” as had begun to be the norm at other mountain houses, and the Smileys adjusted to the “modern age” quite slowly. Through the 1930s, Mohonk neither served alcohol nor allowed dancing or card playing in the public rooms (Burgess 1980, 43). Some building and landscape improvements, such as tennis courts and a nine-hole golf course, were in place by the early twentieth century, as was limited automobile parking, although cars were not allowed to be driven up to the mountain house by their owners until the 1950s. As a Smiley family member wrote “reprovingly” in 1929, “Automobiles are kept out because they do not contribute to quiet and restfulness. To banish from this mountain noise and dirt and disorderliness, to keep the atmosphere sweet and clear, has been, and is, a primary aim requiring vigilance and labor and expense beyond belief” (Burgess 1980, 66).

Mohonk’s management throughout the twentieth century did not compete for the same trade as most of the other large mountain hotels, especially those in the Borscht Belt. Those hotels began to remove themselves from their natural environment with additional “attractions.” For example, where previously guests had swum in a natural lake, guests at the newer hotels preferred the indoor pool, and ice skating and tennis often moved inside as well. “Capped by an evening in the casino, a day at one of the major resorts could leave guests without any contact with the mountain environment at all, save the fresh air. By the 1970s, even the fresh air became less important, as glassed-in walkways allowed guests at some
hotels to move from building to building without having to go outside in inclement weather” (Stradling 2007, 198–199).

At Mohonk Mountain House swimming remained in the lake, as did ice skating, until the effects of climate change forced a creative response. A rink, built in a pavilion away from the main building, overlooks the lake; its open-air log construction maintains a natural presence in the outdoors, as well, quite literally, of fresh air. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century has seen more familiar adjustments. Wine is available in the dining room, and a lounge with a bar has opened on a lower floor; also, a spacious and luxurious spa added on to the main building has become extremely successful.

Over about a century and a half of its existence as a mountain-house resort, Mohonk Mountain House added numerous buildings and structures as well as modified its landscape for both functional and aesthetic purposes. Overall, the effort has been an attempt to humanize the landscape in harmony with nature—an approach in accord with the tenets of the nineteenth-century landscape designers Andrew Jackson Downing, Calvert Vaux, and Frederic Law Olmsted. Indeed, it can be argued that this ideology was central to the continued viability of the business, even as almost all other mountain resorts in the region declined in the post-war period and had closed altogether by the 1980s.

Mohonk Mountain House survived the dramatic changes in the regional tourist industry after World War II as the economy boomed and automobile ownership offered more travel options. The State of New York acquired the abandoned Catskill Mountain House to add to its public campgrounds at North and South Lake, burned the remains of the crumbling relic in 1963, and opened up the prospect view to the public.

In the following decades the state acquired another of the great mountain-house properties. In 1879, a decade after Alfred Smiley assisted his brother Albert to develop Mohonk Mountain House, Alfred opened the first of two hotels at Lake Minnewaska, on the Shawangunk ridge just 5 miles south of his brother’s establishment and linked to it by a well-traversed carriage road. By the mid-twentieth century, however, the Smileys of Minnewaska had sold the property and the hotels. By 1980 both of the Lake Minnewaska hotel buildings had burned down, and a decade later the state opened the property as a “park-preserve.”

The Smiley brothers’ legacy of open-space preservation and recreation management remained on the more than 8,000 acres of Mohonk Mountain House (Josephson 2002). In an effort to preserve most of its landscape as open space, in 1963 Mohonk created a private land trust of more than 5,000 acres that surrounded the 2,000 acres containing the hotel, gardens and lake (Stone 2007). Two decades later the land trust renamed itself as the Mohonk Preserve. With control of more than 6,500 acres, by the end of the twentieth century it constituted the largest private land preserve in New York State. And with more than 150,000 visitors a year and nationally known among climbers for its sheer rock cliffs and by hikers for its nineteenth-century carriage roads, the organization
developed a reputation as a significant site for ecological research and environmental education.

Mohonk Mountain House is a National Historic Landmark Hotel, and its surrounding 1,500 acres and the Mohonk Preserve are listed as historic landscapes on the National Register of Historic Places. As a historically managed natural and cultural landscape, Mohonk offers glimpses of many of Meinig’s perceptual versions, from nature to ecosystem, artifact to history, habitat to place, and ideology to aesthetics.

**Reimagining Wilderness and American Culture**

Examining the histories of Catskill Mountain House and Mohonk Mountain House provides a lens into both nineteenth-century culture and how the hotel’s owners and guests perceived its relationship to nature. This philosophical, artistic, and even religious relationship became a source for later American efforts in environmental conservation and historic preservation (Muir 1901; Runte 1987; Nash 2001). Many themes in environmental and social history have their roots in discussions in the parlors and on the verandas of mountain-house resorts. The parlor entered the landscape, and it was comfortable and cultivated from the very beginning. The city upon a hill tamed the wilderness.

In the twenty-first century the discourse on nature has continued to frame the image of American culture. The evolution from wilderness to a domesticated landscape is a process that has offered many competing views of change. Wilderness remains a powerful image, an image that, like Meinig’s three symbolic cultural landscapes, has been debated as to its meaning and its relationship to cultural values (Cronon 1995; Nash 2001; Sutter 2002; Zahniser 2004). The debate points to the power of wilderness as America’s other iconic landscape, and it is in the Hudson River Valley region that wilderness became the central motif in American culture.

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