

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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