

The Catskill Mountain House: An Absent Presence in the Landscape



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The Catskill Mountain House, a once-great source of the American landscape experience, is now lost or unknown to many. At the current Mountain House site, now the North-South Lake Campground, the old hotel itself is gone, but remains a ghostly presence in the landscape.¹ The magnificent Corinthian-style building haunts the grounds as an absent presence at this crucial place in landscape history. This paper will be a narrative that speaks to elements of presence and those of absence in the Mountain House landscape, of loss and of discovery. Traces of the hotel are uncovered on the landscape itself, found in guidebooks and maps, artwork, and told through first-hand accounts from people who stayed at the house, allowing the past and the present to interact and they reveal one another.

There is another narrative at work here—that of my family’s Catskill history, which can be woven into the history of the Mountain House landscape. My family was created by the interaction between country and city, the same dynamic that created the Catskills as we know—or do not know—them today.² My paternal grandmother was born and raised in the Catskills, and my paternal grandfather was a boy from Harlem who spent his summers in the mountains. She was from the wilderness, and he from the city. They met at a swimming hole called Rock Cut, on the Esopus Creek (which famously connects New York City to the Catskills as the city’s dominant water supply). The two were married in Phoenicia, and then moved to New York City, but were always drawn back, bringing their kids—my father and his sister—to the house in Mount Tremper where my grandmother grew up. I experience the layers of presence and

¹ The landscape discussed in this paper is represented in U.S. Geological Survey maps; see USGS Kaaterskill Clove Quad 1903 – Product Number 290128; 1946 – Product Number 292527; 1980 – Product Number 295451; 1997 – Product Number 84833; 2016 – Product Number 506049. Available for download at <http://store.usgs.gov>.

² See David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), xxxiii.

absence of the Catskills because my family has slipped in and out of the Catskill mountains for generations.

The history of the Catskill Mountain House begins with a scene from which it was absent. In 1819, before the building existed, there is record of the first camping trip to what would soon be the domain of the Mountain House. It was “a pleasure party of ladies and gentlemen” who “made their beds upon the rock, and spent the night under the stars.”³ That visit would entirely transform the site, when in 1824 the Catskill Mountain House was built on the spot, at the edge of Pine Orchard, atop an escarpment overlooking the Hudson River Valley, on the eastern edge of the Catskill Mountains. This stately resort hotel offered a view of “all creation” to those who had the means and the time to reach its lofty perch by all night-steam boat and uphill stage-coach rides.⁴ The Catskills were the frontier of the North Atlantic seaboard, and the Mountain House, a destination for the romantic frontiersman. It called to intellectuals, artists, and elites who were swept up by the promise of a return to the sublime American wilderness.

The Mountain House was in business continuously until 1942. It thrived until the late 1800s, and then began a struggle for its existence. The empty hotel was battered by winter storms, and a hurricane which broke the columns off a facade which was already close to ruins. Early on January 25, 1963 the Catskill Mountain House was tragically burned to the ground by the New York State Conservation Department.

³ *History of Greene County, New York: With Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men* (Franklin OH: J.B. Beers and Co., 1884), 78. This passage is posted at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nygreen2/beers_history_of_greene_county_the_catskill_mountains.htm (last visited November 20, 2016). There is also something accidental about the first published mention of the hotel in Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Albany NY: B.D. Packard, 1824) 245, 414-15, posted at https://archive.org/details/gazetteerofstate00spaf_0 (last visited November 20, 2016).

⁴ “All creation, lad,” is what Leatherstocking sees from the spot in James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna: A Descriptive Tale* (New York: Charles Wiley, 1823) chap. 26.



There are no physical remnants of the Catskill Mountain House itself today, save two small stone pillars on either side of the entry road, each with a threaded bolt on top, most likely to secure a lantern, and a length of retaining wall at the brink. On the cliff, there is one historic marker, erected by the State of New York's Conservation and Education departments in 1966, a sign about the hotel in art, and a bulletin board with maps and more

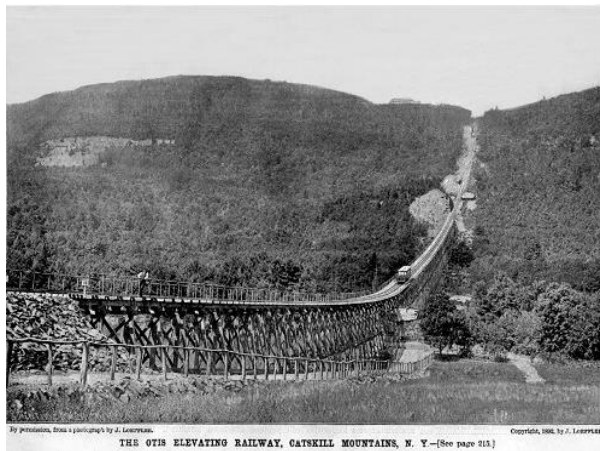
information about the house. Now, the grounds surrounding the Mountain House site have been converted back to a campground, returning the land to what it was 200 years ago. The current North-South Lake Campground offers campsites for RVs and tent camping, parking and facilities for day trippers, and access to the trails, which offer the same views Thomas Cole famously painted when the house still dominated the cliff face.



By exploring three areas of presence and absence—transportation, images, and accounts of “point of interest” or other natural features of the Mountain House landscape—it becomes possible to overlay what is absent onto what is present in the landscape.

The story of the Otis Elevating Railroad is the strongest example of how transportation makes a palimpsest of these mountains. The cog railroad had been built in 1892, in a bid to bring

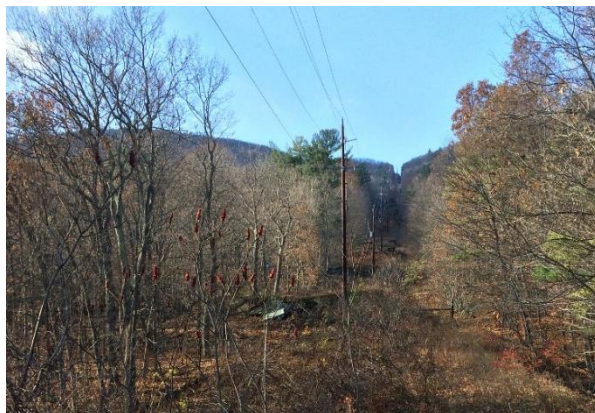
guests more quickly and dramatically to the Mountain House, another episode in the beneficial competition with the Kaaterskill Hotel, the Mountain House's majestic rival on South Mountain. The Otis Elevating brought visitors directly to the top of the mountain, and practically to the doors of the Mountain House (see images below). But in 1918, with the death of the last Beach (founding family of the hotel) and the demise of the Catskill Mountain Railroad and the Otis Elevating Railroad, the cog railway tracks were dismantled and sold off.⁵



then



In the current North-South Lake Campground landscape, electricity and waste treatment are discreetly hidden away. The old Otis passage was ingeniously repurposed for the power-lines bringing electricity to the campground. In this way, the past and present coexist. The train tracks are absent, but also made present by the repurposed path the elevated train once took.



now



⁵ Roland Van Zandt, *The Catskill Mountain House: America's Grandest Hotel* (Rutgers NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966) 288-89, 301-302.

The power of images accounts for the continued presence of the Mountain House in this landscape. Graffiti, one of the oldest forms of art and image, but commonly thought of as an



urban or modern art form, is another example of how the Mountain House site is haunted by remnants of its past. We see graffiti that was carved before the Civil War



and names cut during Obama's presidency. Names are carved at an angle to other names or even superimposed. The old hotel had its resident musicians, and



one of them immortalized his "Cornet Band 1866." It's a strange momentum that kept visitors carving their names in front of the hotel, long after the

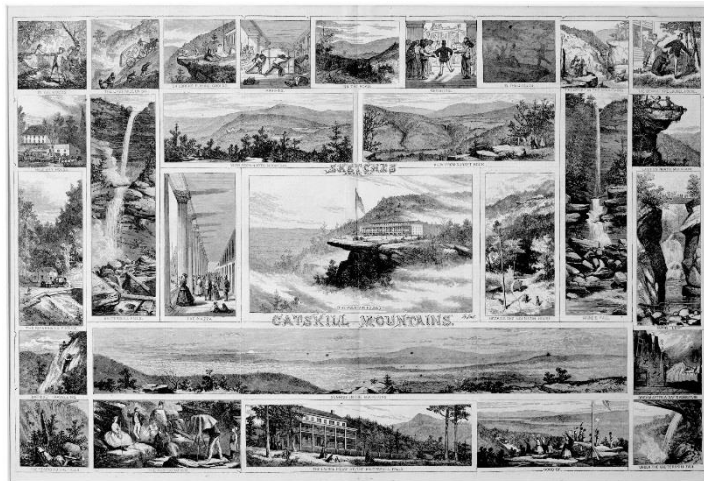
hotel was gone. Many of the carvers have followed the Mountain House into oblivion, and each of the names seems to announce the presence of a human being in the wild. Similar to the trend of painting oneself into the landscape, done by Thomas Cole and others at the Hudson River School, there is a need that transcends time, to announce one's presence in the wilderness.



The best signage in Rusk's "grand basin" are the signs on the Art Trail, a project of Thomas Cole National Historic Site, which also sponsors a book and a website.⁶ Arguably, there never was a better time to appreciate the artists that loved this landscape. During the long run of

⁶ Elizabeth B. Jacks, ed., *Hudson River School Art Trail Guide*, 2d ed. (Catskill NY: Thomas Cole National Historic Site, 2013); <http://www.hudsonriverschool.org>.

the Mountain House, it was a rare painting, like Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes*, that reached more than a few people. Museums and photography were in their infancy, and engraving could only do so much to convey the nature of Cole's paintings. Now we can come much closer, so in a way, the landscape of the Catskills, though lacking the house itself, is more present today because of the number of people who can access its beauty and influence through images. When campers make a side-trip to the scoured cliff-top where the Mountain House stood, only the astonishing view and the graffiti written on the landscape attest to its past. Yet the landscape is still inhabited by figures not unlike those in Thomas Nast's Catskill Mountain Sketches, seen here.⁷



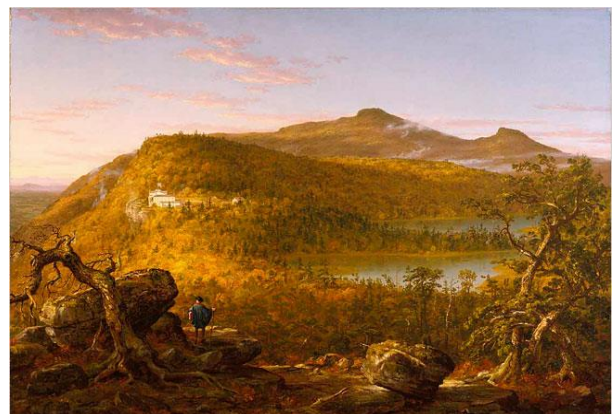
The final way in which presence and absence converse with each other in this landscape, and in this paper is through accounts, descriptions, and other text-based stories of the place through time. Guests came to the Catskill Mountain House for the view of what they called “points of interest” in “a vast landscape, stretching as far as the eye can take in the picture; a map of earth.”⁸ An English visitor to the Mountain House in its early days, Harriet Martineau, wrote

⁷ Thomas Nast, “Sketches among the Catskill Mountains,” *Harper’s Weekly*, July 21, 1866, posted at <http://www.mths.org/blog/65-thomas-nast-s-sketches-published-150-years-ago.html> (last visited November 20, 2016).

⁸ Elizabeth Fries Ellet, “The Fourth at Pine Orchard,” in *The Scenery of the Catskill Mountains As Described by Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Willis Gaylord Clark, N. P. Willis, Miss Martineau, Tyrone Power, Park Benjamin, Thomas Cole*,

of the view from the Platform, “I was more moved by what I saw from the Mountain House than by Niagara itself... I shall never forget, if I live to a hundred, how the world lay at my feet one Sunday morning.” But she was also impressed by the Mountain House itself in its landscape. When she was traveling to the hotel, it seemed “like (to compare great things with small) an illumined fairy palace perched among the clouds in opera scenery.”⁹

Visitors remarked on the geographical wonders of the landscape, which are still just as remarkable today. “There are numerous lovely walks in the vicinity, chief among which are those upon the South and North mountain.”¹⁰ Guide books were written to respond to and encourage the interest in hiking trails. A pamphlet written during the Civil War advises that from a rock on North Mountain, “a fine view can be had of both lakes— [and] Round Top and High Peak.”¹¹ Those are the mountains (High Peak is on the left) behind me in this 2007 photograph, and in Cole’s 1844 painting, *A View of the Two Lakes and Mountain House, Catskill Mountains, Morning*.



Bayard Taylor (Catskill NY: Recorder Steam Printing House, 1876) 25, posted at <https://archive.org/details/sceneryofcatskil00mari> (last visited on November 20, 2016).

⁹ Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, Vol. 1 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838) 81-82, 84, posted at <https://archive.org/details/retrospectweste06martgoog> (last visited November 20, 2016).

¹⁰ Ellet, *ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ *Guide to Rambles from the Catskill Mountain House by a Visitor* (Catskill NY: J. Joesbury Book & Job Printer, 1863) 1, posted at <https://archive.org/details/guidetoramblsfr00cats> (last visited November 20, 2016).

Samuel Rusk's practical guide notices the hotel in this landscape: "To the south appear the Mountain House resting against South Mountain, with High Peak and Round Top looming up in the distance."¹² So does Walton Van Loan:

the view takes in both lakes, the Mountain House, South Mountain, High Peak and Round Top, the grand basin formed by the curve of North Mountain and the distant valley of the Hudson, backed by the more distant mountains of New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. By many this is thought to be the grandest combination of mountain scenery to be met with here or elsewhere.¹³

While the center of gravity in the Mountain House landscape has shifted from the grand hotel to activity centers around the lakes and the campsites. These guidebooks are part of a continuous tradition down to the present day, and now that the Mountain House no longer presides in the landscape, it remains present in text, through accounts of the site by people who went for the views and the walks, and trail guides written for these people, and people today who continue this tradition.

Even more than other places, experiencing the Mountain House landscape requires that we do landscape history. We need the paintings and engravings, the photographs and the long tradition of guidebooks and maps, to comprehend what we've otherwise lost. Maybe more than any other American space, the Mountain House landscape is a composite of all the images and accounts it inspired. The destruction of the old hotel has summoned up a kind of community of remembrance for the absent, allowing it to become present again. The old Mountain House was commemorated extensively in art and personal accounts. Those commemorations fuse in our

¹² Samuel E. Rusk, *An Illustrated Guide to the Catskill Mountains with Maps and Plans: A Book of Facts* (Catskill NY: Samuel E. Rusk, Publisher, 1879) 85, posted at <https://archive.org/details/illustrateguide00rusk> (last visited November 20, 2016).

¹³ *Van Loan's Catskill Mountain Guide, with Bird's Eye View, Maps, and Choice Illustrations* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1882) 17, posted at <https://archive.org/details/vanloanscatskill00val> (last visited November 20, 2016).

thoughts, feelings, and memory with the landscape as it now is. What results is both a sense of this particularly intricate place, and a changed sense of the American landscape, generally. The changes that occurred on the landscape itself: the house, the railroad, the graffiti; the accounts of the place, personal and published in trail guides; and the personal family connection to the Catskills are all permeated with a sense of loss, or absence and connection or presence.



This Place Paper is dedicated to my grandmother, Adele Desilva, whose Portuguese name comes from the Latin for “forest.”, and for whom my brother and I are named, and also to my Dad who visited the Catskills this November, when I could not, and took over 200 pictures that allowed me to experience and read the landscape from afar.

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**Embedded photographs were taken by my Dad during his most recent trip to the Catskills.*