



Catskill Mountain House, 1846, by Thomas Cole

Historical Context by Gregory Balan

Though his family immigrated from England shortly after the War of 1812, Thomas Cole became the founder of America's first, and one of its most enduring, art movements—The Hudson River School. Cole's fascination with, and ability to capture, the majesty of America's wilderness caught the attention of American and European elites, who commissioned works ranging from the historical commentary of *The Course of Empire* to the spiritual journey of *The Voyage of Life*. Cole's great passion, however, was for the scenic beauty of the Hudson River Valley. His unique and iconic paintings of the rugged splendor of America rapidly gained recognition as one of the first truly American art styles. Though he moved around quite a bit in his youth, the small New York town of Catskill nestled in the Catskill Mountains, with its picturesque peaks and stunning views, would be where Cole would spend much of the rest of his life from 1835 until his death in 1848. A year before Cole's first visit to the area, the grand Catskill Mountain House hotel opened on nearby South Mountain. This towering manmade edifice stood watch over the scenic Catskills, and embodied the promise and tension found between nature and man's earthly pursuits. That tension was as big a point of consternation for Cole, as the natural beauty of the land itself was an inspiration for Cole.

The Catskill Mountain House was originally the brainchild of a group of wealthy local merchants, who envisioned the social elites of New York, from New York City to the capital of Albany, enjoying their leisure time atop a mountain perch that offered the most breathtaking views of the Hudson River valley. Built at the end of the Era of Good Feelings, which encompassed James Monroe's presidency, the Catskill Mountain House seemed to embody everything promising and majestic about the young nation. Hot off a second victory over the British Empire in the War of 1812, and amidst a period of general political unity with only a single party of national significance, the United States was as optimistic and unified as it would ever be before, and perhaps ever after the Civil War. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 seemed to temper the growing sectional crisis over the expansion of slavery and opened the prospects of rapid and peaceful settlement of the western frontier. European acceptance of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 only added to the sense of national pride and importance, as the United States graduated from upstart, rebellious colonies to a hemispheric power. The Era of Good Feelings also saw rapid technological gains, which saw a flurry of business opportunities open in the burgeoning capital of American commerce, New York City. With wealth exploding in southern New York, and with the emergence of steam boats and our earliest train systems, the social elites of the Northeast had the time and the means for leisurely excursions into the rugged mountain country of central and northern New York.

The transition of the United States from a largely agrarian nation to a commercial and industrial nation was a lengthy process that greatly accelerated after the Civil War. However, the first shoots of the industrial and technological advances that would make the United States a global superpower a century later were already becoming apparent in the northeastern states. Traditionally, Americans tended to spend

their leisure time in their communities or in their own homes. However, this began to change as transportation technology made travel considerably easier and more efficient. The significant increases in wealth derived from the early commercial and industrial successes of many Americans in this period also encouraged a change in leisure habits. While Americans in the Northeast were more demure about leisure than their antebellum Southern counterparts, the elites of the Northeast enjoyed various distractions nonetheless. Many leisure activities saw women gathering indoors, while men went outdoors. The Catskill Mountain House provided space for both in one of the most impressive landscapes found anywhere in the world.

Following an economic crisis in the mid-1840s, the proprietors of the Catskill Mountain House defaulted. The property was purchased by Charles Beach, son of the owner of the successful stage coach service that brought wealthy guests up to the hotel from the nearest train station at the bottom of the mountain. Beach made the Catskill Mountain House into the iconic vacation destination of the Catskills region. He remodeled the original Federal style architecture of the hotel into a Neo-Classical style that evoked a Greco-Roman temple or palace. Even though he had frequented the hotel before the remodeling, it was this version of the Catskill Mountain House that Thomas Cole immortalized in his painting. The 13 columns of the pediment and the gleaming white façade of the building were symbolic of Cole's adopted country—the 13 Colonies, the Shining City on a Hill, the beacon of freedom and opportunity. These were the things that Cole loved and felt so much pride in. However, Cole was also very concerned about the changing nature of American society. The Era of Good feelings came to a crashing halt with political and sectional divisions mounting from the late 1820s until their ultimate explosion in 1861.

In addition to the political rancor that plagued the once happy nation, Cole lamented the manner in which Americans were exploiting their generous land. For this, Cole is often seen as one of America's earliest environmental conservationists. Technology and commerce brought great benefits to society, and Cole did not begrudge Americans for their material pursuits, but he felt such pursuits were being done recklessly and without regard for the beauty of nature. For Cole, the railroads, which were only beginning to stretch across the northeastern US, were a prime example of where humans had gone wrong. The thick black smoke billowing from a train engine, the raucous din of the train, and the screech of the rails, were all a travesty for Cole. He felt that Americans could and should pursue their economic goals while respecting the natural world and improving its accessibility so that all people could enjoy the quiet tranquility of virgin lands.¹ Cole found himself standing astride a widening chasm separating what America had started as, and what our nation was to become. Even as hardy pioneers ranged into pristine lands west of the Mississippi and the prospect of a bicoastal nation emerged with the growing conflict with Mexico, Cole witnessed his beloved Hudson River valley inexorably transform into something unrecognizable from the scars of human ingenuity. Perhaps fortunately, Thomas Cole did not live to see the massive changes wrought by the ever-accelerating Second Industrial Revolution in the latter half of the 19th century, nor the fall of the Catskill Mountain House and similar hotels into utter disrepair and ruin in the first half of the 20th century. Changes in economic interests rendered the Catskill Mountain House and its competitors obsolete, and Cole would have perhaps been happy to see that some of the material

¹ See August 1, 1836 entry in Thomas Cole's Journal. <https://thomascole.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-PDF-for-Website-2022.pdf> p. 23-24 of pdf.

wealth of New York was used to burn the dilapidated hotels to the ground and return the sites to their natural state over a century after his death.